

THROUGH THE EYES OF JUSTICE:
A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF LIBERATIONIST
AND WOMEN'S READINGS OF THE QUR'AN

*Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy*

by

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I certify that this thesis is the result of my own work
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I also certify that this thesis is 99,848 words.

ABSTRACT

Thesis Title: Through the Eyes of Justice: A Comparative Study of Liberationist and Women's Readings of the Qur'an

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Thesis Abstract:

The *shari'a*, or the inherited legal tradition, has tended to dominate discussions of contemporary Islam. Relatively little attention has been given to the Qur'an, however, despite its importance both in terms of Muslim theology, in which it is understood as the actual Word of God, and of Islamic reformist thought. Far from being marginal, the Qur'an has emerged as a rich resource for theological reflection and sociopolitical action. Specifically, it has become a source of empowerment, speaking to contexts of oppression. This thesis examines the commentaries of four Muslim intellectuals who have expounded the Qur'an as a liberating text – namely, the South African Farid Esack (b. 1956), the Indian Asghar Ali Engineer (b. 1939), the American Amina Wadud (b. 1952) and the Pakistani Asma Barlas (b. 1950) – supplemented by in-depth interviews. In so doing, this study seeks (i) to fill a major gap in the literature by offering the first comprehensive survey and analysis of their readings and (ii) to challenge common portrayals of justice-based exegesis as being an obscure, fundamentalist scripturalism; as being rooted in North America; and as being focussed primarily, even exclusively, on gendered oppression. Indeed, the centring of the Qur'an in Islamic thought, I argue, is an increasingly mainstream practice – a global hermeneutic – as Muslims throughout the world seek answers in scripture to the pressing problems of the present. Furthermore, justice-based exegesis has been holistic, addressing (in addition to patriarchy) poverty and racism, communal violence and imperialism. Liberationist and women's readings are significant, I conclude, for two reasons. Firstly, they shed new insights into the rise of 'thematic commentary' (*tafsir mawdu'i*) in Qur'anic exegesis. Secondly, their expressly political character exposes the hegemony of Islamism over our understanding of 'the political' and 'the radical' in an Islamic context, thereby forcing us to redefine political and radical Islam.

**In Memory of Malcolm X
(1925-1965)**

Dissident, Martyr, Teacher

A man asked Imam Ja‘far al-Sadiq [the sixth *imam* – or spiritual guide – of Shi‘a Muslims who died in 765], ‘Why does the Qur’an, despite the coming of new and passing of old generations, only increase in its freshness?’ The Imam replied, ‘Because God did not make it for one specific time or people, so it is new in every age, fresh for every people, until the Day of Judgement.’¹

(Al-Khatib Al-Baghdadi)

The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways;
the point is to change it.²

(Karl Marx)

¹ Al-Khatib al-Baghdadi, *Tarikh Baghdad* [A History of Baghdad] (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, n.d.), 6:115. My parentheses.

² Karl Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach*, as quoted in Francis Wheen, *Karl Marx* (London: Fourth Estate, 2000), 54-55.

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past two centuries the slogan ‘reform and renewal’ (*islah wa tajdid*) has swept through Islamic intellectual circles, as Muslims have sought to reinterpret their faith afresh in light of modernity. Insofar as Islamic texts are concerned, the vast majority of literature on contemporary Islamic reform has focussed on the *shari‘a*, or the inherited legal tradition.¹ Indeed, the law has dominated discussions of Islam in general. Relatively little academic attention, however, has been given to reformism based on the Qur’an,² despite the significance of this scripture both in terms of Muslim theology, in which it is understood as being the literal Word of God, and of the current state of Islamic thought. Far from being a marginal text, the Qur’an has emerged as a rich resource for theological reflection and sociopolitical action. Specifically, it has become a source of empowerment,

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¹ See, among others: Abbas Amanat and Frank Griffel eds., *Shari‘a: Islamic Law in the Contemporary Context* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009); Abdullahi an-Na‘im, *Islam and the Secular State: Negotiating the Future of the Shari‘a* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010); Abdullahi an-Na‘im, *Towards an Islamic Reformation: Civil Liberties, Human Rights, and International Law* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1996); Aziza Y. al-Hibri, “An Introduction to Muslim Women’s Rights,” in *Windows of Faith: Muslim Women Scholar-Activists in North America*, ed. Gisela Webb (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2000); Khaled Abou El Fadl, *Speaking in God’s Name: Islamic Law, Authority and Women* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2001); Khaled Abou El Fadl, *The Search for Beauty in Islam: The Conference of the Books* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006); Tariq Ramadan, *Radical Reform: Islamic Ethics and Liberation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Tariq Ramadan, *To Be a European Muslim: A Study of Islamic Sources in the European Context* (Markfield, Leicestershire: The Islamic Foundation, 1999); and Ziba Mir-Hosseini, *Islam and Gender: The Religious Debate in Contemporary Iran* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2000). There has also been a rising interest in re-introducing early Islamic scholarship related to legal reform. See, for instance, the following recently published translations of medieval juristic tracts: Muhammad al-Tahir ibn ‘Ashur, *Ibn Ashur: Treatise on Maqasid al-Shari‘ah* [‘the Objectives of the Islamic Legal Tradition’] (Herndon, VA: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2006) and Ahmad al-Raysuni, *Imam al-Shatibi’s Theory of the Higher Objectives and Intents of Islamic Law* (Herndon, VA: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2005).

² For surveys of contemporary Muslim engagement with the Qur’an, see: Part Three – “Contemporary Readings” – in Jane D. McAuliffe ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Quran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Rotraud Wielandt, “Exegesis of the Qur’an: Early Modern and Contemporary,” in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’an*, ed. Jane D. McAuliffe (Leiden: Brill, 2012); and Suha Taji-Farouki ed., *Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qur’an* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

speaking forcefully to contexts of oppression, from poverty and patriarchy to racism and communal violence. This dissertation will seek to fill a major gap in the literature by critically examining the Qur'anic commentaries of four leading Muslim intellectuals who have turned to scripture as a liberating text, a cornerstone of their radical, reformist projects. In particular, I will look at the readings of the South African scholar Farid Esack (b. 1956),³ the Indian scholar Asghar Ali Engineer (b. 1939), the Black American scholar Amina Wadud (b. 1952) and the Pakistani scholar Asma Barlas (b. 1950).⁴ Social justice has taken centre stage in their hermeneutics,⁵ both as a major theme in the Qur'an and a direct result of their own lived experiences of suffering and inequality. To be sure, some of these intellectuals have attracted widespread attention, especially Wadud, who is often (depending on the audience in question) celebrated or dismissed as becoming 'the first Muslim woman' to undertake a gendered reading of the Qur'an and, even more so, for leading the Friday Prayers in New York City in 2005 – an event that will be discussed at length later in this thesis. Yet there has been surprisingly little study devoted to their actual commentaries. How exactly do they expound scripture? What hermeneutical strategies do they employ? Which Qur'anic motifs and principles do they foreground? Hitherto, apart from several articles and book chapters – most of which focus solely on

³ The title of my dissertation – 'Through the Eyes of Justice' – is taken from a subheading in Esack's exegetical writings. See Farid Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation, and Pluralism: An Islamic Perspective of Interreligious Solidarity Against Oppression* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1997), 103.

⁴ While, strictly speaking, my thesis focuses on Qur'anic commentary, as opposed to a study of scripture itself, over the course of my research I have had to refer to the Qur'an as much as to the writings of these exegetes. As no single translation can definitively represent the original text, in this study I have drawn upon three English translations, supplemented by my own knowledge of Arabic, to arrive at, at least what I believe to be, the most accurate and faithful rendering of the text. Specifically, I have consulted the works of the Sunni scholar Ahmed Ali, *Al-Qur'an: A Contemporary Translation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); the Shi'a scholar Ali Quli Qara'i, *The Qur'an, with a Phrase-by-Phrase Translation* (London: Islamic College for Advanced Studies, 2004); and the Sunni scholar Muhammad Asad, *The Message of the Qur'an* (Bristol: The Book Foundation, 2003).

⁵ In this dissertation, I will use the term 'hermeneutics' in two distinct senses: the first as the *way* in which a text is interpreted and the second as the *study* of the strategies and problems of interpretation.

gendered exegesis – there has not been an in-depth, systematic exposition of their Qur’anic liberation theologies.⁶ A key contribution of this thesis, then, is that it is the first comprehensive survey and analysis of their hermeneutics.

Liberationist interpretation of the Qur’an is frequently portrayed as being part of an obscure, even fundamentalist, movement in contemporary Islam that is ‘Qur’an-only,’ eschewing the usage of all other Islamic texts – a problematic representation that will be discussed in detail shortly. Furthermore, such justice-centred exegesis is often reduced to women’s interpretation alone and to a North American context. The article by the Islamic scholar Juliane Hammer – “Identity, Authority, and Activism: American Muslim Women Approach the Qur’an” (2008) – is an illustrative example. As its title suggests, Hammer explores the relationship between women’s exegesis and personal identity, in terms of both gender and Islam; religious authority, as constructed within the secular academy and traditional Islamic settings; and, finally, the struggle to create a more sexually egalitarian society through activism.⁷ She examines the writings of three female exegetes, namely: Wadud, Barlas and the US-based Syrian scholar Nimat Hafez Barazangi.⁸ Though undoubtedly a fascinating read, one is left with the distinct impression that justice-based exegesis of the Qur’an is, essentially, an American Muslim feminist phenomenon.

Despite the manifestly global backgrounds of two of the exegetes – Barlas, as we shall

⁶ See, for example: Asma Barlas, “Amina Wadud’s Hermeneutics of the Qur’an: Women Rereading Sacred Texts,” in *Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qur’an*, ed. Suha Taji-Farouki (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Juliane Hammer, “Identity, Authority, and Activism: American Muslim Women Approach the Qur’an,” *The Muslim World* 98 (2008): 443-464; Chapter Seven – ““If you have touched women,”” Female Bodies and Male Agency in the Qur’an” – in Kecia Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam: Feminist Reflections on Qur’an, Hadith, and Jurisprudence* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2006); and Chapter Four – “The Qur’an and the Hermeneutics of Liberation” – which compares Esack’s and Wadud’s readings, in Massimo Campanini, *The Qur’an: Modern Muslim Interpretations* (London: Routledge, 2011). There is, of course, a voluminous and growing body of literature on gender and feminism in *Islam*. My point, however, is that there is not a single, sustained study that has concentrated on liberationist approaches to Muslim scripture.

⁷ Hammer, “Identity, Authority, and Activism,” 444.

⁸ For a brief biography of Barazangi and discussion of her exegesis, cf. pg. 42-44 in this chapter.

see in the fourth chapter, fled Pakistan and took political asylum in the US in 1983 (and thus when she was 33 years old) whereas Barazangi, who we will discuss later in this chapter, completed her schooling and undergraduate studies in Syria – they are framed simply as “American Muslim women scholars,” as “embedded in their American context and [who] thus need to be read and understood within this context.”⁹ Curiously, the short biographies that Hammer provides only list these commentators’ credentials and publications,¹⁰ and had it not been for the parenthetical afterthought below an uninformed reader might think that they were all born and bred in the US:

While Wadud, Barlas, and Barazangi come from significantly different backgrounds (Wadud is American born, African-American and a convert; Barlas was born and raised in Pakistan; and Barazangi immigrated from Syria), these three scholars share a deep concern about the Qur’an and its interpretation.¹¹

Nowhere in the article, moreover, is there any mention that such empowering readings of the Qur’an have also taken place amongst Muslims engaged in other struggles, such as those for economic and racial justice, and that gendered exegesis, therefore, is part and parcel of a wider hermeneutical project.¹² Hammer’s article is hardly an isolated account, but reflective of widely held assumptions about justice-centred interpretation of the Qur’an. In fact, I recall one feminist scholar in Canada, during an informal discussion, casually dismissing my research on Qur’anic liberation theologies as a dated ‘academic trend in 1990s North American Muslim feminism.’

⁹ Ibid, 459. My parentheses. To be sure, Hammer, at several points in the article, briefly mentions the global dimensions of women’s exegesis. For instance, she notes that Wadud travelled to South Africa and Malaysia, networking with likeminded Muslim women. But these observations are consigned to the edges of Hammer’s analysis; America firmly remains the geographical locus of gendered exegesis. See *ibid*, 458.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 444-445.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 445.

¹² The sole exception is her comment that Wadud has spoken on issues like the HIV/AIDS pandemic, and that, for Wadud, Muslim perspectives on HIV/AIDS on the one hand and “on human sexuality and violence against women” on the other cannot be separated. See *ibid*, 458.

As this thesis will show, while liberationist hermeneutics include the struggle for sexual justice, they cannot be reduced to questions of gender and most certainly cannot be restricted to the North American context. On the contrary, these radical readings have emerged in different parts of the world, in particular the South, and, although integrating gender into their discourses, focus on other issues like class and race, pluralism and imperialism. For example, Esack's principal context is apartheid South Africa, and it is this backdrop that acts as his point of departure when engaging the Qur'an. Likewise, Engineer's interpretation takes shape in the context of India, which has been plagued by communal violence between Hindus and Muslims. Indeed, we shall see that all the exegetes examined in this thesis – including Wadud and Barlas – have a thoroughly comprehensive approach to justice, expressing their solidarity with numerous struggles. It is important to note that my intention here is neither to downplay the gravity, the urgency of sexual oppression nor to dismiss the seminal contributions that women have made to inclusive understandings of the Qur'an. Rather, I wish to critique the reduction of justice-based exegesis to gender alone (as if gender can somehow be divorced from other webs of power relations) and to the privileged societies of the North. And this brings us to the underlying argument of the dissertation: that rather than being an obscure, scripture-only tendency or a dated mode of reading confined to a single struggle and rooted in a single geography, the centring of the Qur'an has become increasingly mainstream in Islamic discourse – a truly global hermeneutic – as Muslims throughout the world, living in multiple contexts and involved in multiple struggles, seek guidance in the sacred text. By adopting a comparative analysis, by bringing together liberationist and female exegetes into one study, I aim to underscore the acutely transnational and multilayered dimensions

of justice-centred Qur’anic exegesis.¹³ Furthermore, their readings are significant, as I will argue in the Conclusion, for two reasons. Firstly, they shed valuable new insights into the rise of ‘thematic commentary’ (*tafsir mawdu‘i*) in contemporary exegesis, which was traditionally defined by a sequential, verse-by-verse format (*tafsir musalsal*). Secondly, the overtly political character of their commentaries – I use the word ‘overtly’ because all discourses and practices are inescapably political – exposes the hegemony of Islamism over our understanding of ‘the political’ and ‘the radical’ in an Islamic context,¹⁴ thereby forcing us to redefine political and radical Islam.

This introductory chapter will expand upon the underlying argument of this thesis and, in so doing, set the stage for discussion. To appreciate the contribution of this study, it is necessary to have a sense of how these commentators and their scholarship have been received by different readerships. The first section, therefore, will examine how they have been portrayed by mainstream Muslims; non-Muslim Western audiences; and progressive / alternative Muslims. I will then discuss the origins and discourse of the Qur’an-only movement, which adheres dogmatically to scripture alone. My purpose is to demonstrate some fundamental differences between their readings on the one hand and those of liberationist exegetes on the other: specifically, that social justice is not a defining feature in Qur’an-only writings and that liberationist interpreters actually draw upon extra-Qur’anic texts insofar as they comply with Qur’anic values. That is, they *prioritize*

¹³ I do not mean to imply that there is a strict divide between ‘liberationist’ and ‘women’s’ readings. As we shall see in this thesis, the struggle for gender justice is an important part of Esack’s and Engineer’s Islamic discourses – they cannot conceive of social liberation as being genderless or sexually blind – while Wadud and Barlas, as mentioned earlier, stand in solidarity with other struggles. Although I place women’s exegesis in the wider category of liberationist exegesis, and often refer to it as liberationist, I use these two terms to signify the priorities of these commentators. For example, while Wadud and Barlas make connections with other forms of oppression, their focus remains squarely on sexual injustice.

¹⁴ In this thesis, I will define ‘Islamism’ as a type of religious activism that seeks to establish an Islamic state, whether through militant or peaceful, democratic means.

scripture, insisting that other Islamic texts need to be read through a Qur'anic framework. At various points in this thesis we will also see that liberationist exegetes draw extensively on experience, on lived realities of suffering as a crucial extra-Qur'anic 'text' that is to be reflected upon alongside scripture. Thus, these two hermeneutical tendencies – Qur'anic liberationist and Qur'an-only – cannot be collapsed. Esack, Engineer, Wadud and Barlas are not the only Muslim thinkers to have expounded the text in light of their own circumstances and problems. By briefly analyzing the writings of three additional exegetes, hailing from Egypt, the UK and Syria and who, significantly, also prioritize, rather than focus exclusively on, scripture, I seek to accent the centrality of the Qur'an in contemporary Islamic thought. This chapter will conclude by discussing my methodology and how I have structured the thesis.

Contested Receptions

Mainstream Muslims

As alternative Islamic voices that challenge inequalities and oppressive practices within the community, the exegetes examined in this thesis are at odds with mainstream Muslims and, indeed, are often maligned and attacked by them.¹⁵ These individuals thus belong to a class of intellectuals who, because of their expressly non-traditionalist approach to the interpretation of the Qur'an and Islamic sources in general, do not command a mass following amongst Muslims but rather exist on the edges of the community – a fact that is frequently invoked by conservative Muslims as a means of

¹⁵ Since the terms mainstream, conservative and traditional are quite broad, I would like to specify that in this discussion I use 'mainstream' / 'conservative' to signify those Muslims who do not critique unequal relationships of power – whether this is in terms of gender, class or race, among other factors – within the community; and 'traditional' to refer to an uncritical stance towards received understandings of Islamic texts and traditions like the *shari'a*, as well as towards their historic interpreters, the *'ulama*.

discrediting such thinkers.¹⁶ In a letter to Esack by an anonymous South African Muslim, and which Esack reprinted in his book – *On Being a Muslim: Finding a Religious Path in the World Today* (1999) – the author lambasts Esack for his reformist endeavours:

In truth, you and your like have placed yourselves outside tradition. ... There is a blatancy about the challenges that you throw out in your writings and utterances, which most of us sense and are unable to articulate, a sense of disdain for this community and its traditions without having the courage to abandon it. Instead, you hang around and subvert it from within.¹⁷

So instead of pushing for progressive change *as* Muslims, it would be preferable, at least for this author, that reformists leave the fold of Islam altogether. In so doing, they would pose much less of a threat to the existing status quo. To be sure, liberationist and female exegetes are keenly aware of their standing, or lack thereof, within mainstream Islamic circles. Barlas expresses grave doubts about the possibility of her gender-egalitarian reading replacing existing patriarchal discourses anytime in the foreseeable future.¹⁸ It is important to note that it is not just the Qur’anic interpretation of these intellectuals but also, and perhaps more significantly, their community activism, or the application, the translation of their justice-centred exegesis into daily Muslim life, that has gotten them into trouble. For instance, Wadud recounts that although she faced some resistance from Muslim conservatives with the publication of her Qur’anic commentary, she was never condemned and dismissed outright as being heretical.¹⁹ This stands in stark contrast to the international Muslim outcry that ensued from her leading of the Friday Prayers on 18 March 2005 in New York City. Despite the massive coverage in the Western media, the

¹⁶ Taji-Farouki, 6.

¹⁷ As quoted in Farid Esack, *On Being a Muslim: Finding a Religious Path in the World Today* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1999), 190.

¹⁸ Asma Barlas, “*Believing Women*” in *Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur’an* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 209.

¹⁹ Amina Wadud, *Qur’an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman’s Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), xviii.

prayer itself was a markedly modest affair.²⁰ Organized by progressive / alternative Muslims, the event was held, significantly, at a church – the Episcopal Cathedral of St. John the Divine – as several mosques rejected proposals to act as venues. Roughly a hundred Muslim women and men attended the prayer. Traditional scholars from around the world condemned Wadud’s actions, such as the influential Qatari-based scholar Yusuf al-Qaradawi, who attacked her character and intentions, denouncing her leading of men in prayer as being un-Islamic.²¹ Engineer has even been physically assaulted for his activism. In the second chapter we shall see that Engineer grew up in a tightly knit and closed community of Daudi Bohras – a Shi‘a Isma‘ili branch of Islam based largely in India – which had an entrenched and exploitative religious establishment. As a result of his opposition to the clerical hierarchy and his spearheading of an internal reform movement, Engineer has not only been officially ostracized since the 1970s, with no Bohra allowed to speak to him,²² but has also been badly beaten, most notably in Cairo (1983) and in Mumbai (2001).²³

²⁰ For a detailed account of the 2005 prayer, see Juliane Hammer, *American Muslim Women, Religious Authority, and Activism: More Than a Prayer* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012), in particular chapters one and two: “A Woman-Led Friday Prayer: March 18, 2005” and “Women Leading Prayers: Tracing the Debate,” respectively.

²¹ Khaled Abou El Fadl, foreword to *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women’s Reform in Islam*, by Amina Wadud (Oxford: Oneworld, 2006), vii. Though the original *fatwa* (religious edict) is no longer posted on Qaradawi’s website – IslamOnline.net – it can be found on *Islamopedia Online*, an academic-administered website that has an extensive collection of contemporary fatwas issued from all over the world. See “Dr. Yusuf al-Qaradawi comments on females leading co-gender Friday prayers and on women leading other women,” *Islamopedia Online: Translation, News and Analysis of Contemporary Islamic Thought*, accessed 21 October 2012, <http://www.islamopediaonline.org/fatwa/dr-yusuf-al-qaradawi-comments-females-leading-co-gender-friday-prayers-and-women-leading-other>. It is also worthwhile noting that Wadud faced opposition from conservative South African Muslims when she delivered the pre-Friday sermon lecture in Cape Town in 1994. In fact, they even staged a march on the Claremont Main Road Mosque – the venue of her pre-sermon address – the following Friday. See Esack, *Qur’an, Liberation, and Pluralism*, 246.

²² Jonah Blank, *Mullahs on the Mainframe: Islam and Modernity among the Daudi Bohras* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 232-233.

²³ Asghar Ali Engineer, *A Living Faith: My Quest for Peace, Harmony and Social Change: An Autobiography of Asghar Ali Engineer* (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2011), 62-65 and 71-73, respectively.

Mainstream Muslims have been highly suspicious of the scripture-centric nature of these intellectuals' discourses, portraying them as some sort of obscure 'Qur'an-alone' tendency that spurns all other Islamic texts and traditions. Their lack of interest in the *hadith* literature, or the reported actions and sayings of Prophet Muhammad, has been a particularly sore point of contention. The British convert and traditionalist Abdal-Hakim Murad, also known as T.J. Winters, has sharply criticized Esack for his questioning of the authenticity of the *hadith*, adding that to bypass the *hadith* is also to dismiss a key source of classical interpretation: namely, the 'Occasions of Revelation' (*asbab al-nuzul*), which catalogue the contexts in which various Qur'anic verses and passages were revealed.²⁴ Wadud has faced similar criticisms, constantly being asked why she gives little attention to the *sunna* ('prophetic precedent'), of which the *hadith* is part and parcel, in her work.²⁵ Indeed, the 'exclusive' focus on the Qur'anic text and 'rejection' of the *hadith* has been a core critique that traditional scholars have levelled against women's exegesis. Hasan al-Shafi'i – a senior scholar at al-Azhar University, the famous Cairo-based *madrasa* (Islamic seminary) – has issued a scathing review of gendered commentaries, titled: "The Movement for Feminist Interpretation of the Qur'an and Religion and its Threat to the Arabic Language and Tradition."²⁶ Shafi'i is especially offended by the attitude of female interpreters like Wadud and the Pakistani feminist Riffat Hassan, an important thinker whom we shall meet later in this thesis, towards the *hadith*, claiming that it is a largely

²⁴ Abdal-Hakim Murad, "Book Review of Farid Esack's *Qur'an, Liberation, and Pluralism*," personal website. Accessed 9 August 2012, <http://masud.co.uk/ISLAM/ahm/esack.htm>

²⁵ Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, xvii.

²⁶ Hasan al-Shafi'i, "The Movement for Feminist Interpretation of the Qur'an and Religion and its Threat to the Arabic Language and Tradition," translated by Sohaib Saeed al-Azhari, personal website (translator). Accessed 9 August 2012, <http://dialogic.ws/publications/>. An abridged version of this article, undertaken by the same translator, can also be found on the website of the Azhari-trained scholar and American convert Sohaib Webb: <http://www.suhaibwebb.com/ummah/women/the-required-response>.

fabricated body of work and, as a result, focussing on “the Qur’an alone.”²⁷ It is this lack of interest in, and expertise of, extra-Qur’anic texts that renders these intellectuals, in the eyes of traditional scholars, incapable of expounding scripture. According to Shafi’i, for example, Hassan lacks the requisite skills of a Qur’anic interpreter, such as a mastery of Arabic and of historic disciplines like *‘ulum al-hadith* (‘the sciences of the *hadith*’), *tafsir* (‘the commentarial tradition’) and *usul al-fiqh* (‘the roots of jurisprudence’).²⁸ “Under-qualification,” he concludes, is an underlying problem that plagues gendered exegesis.²⁹ In fact, it is precisely Esack’s grounding in classical Islamic sciences – as we shall see in the following chapter, he is the only interpreter in this thesis with schooling in a *madrasa* – that has shielded him from further criticism. Esack recounted in our interview that even when conservative Muslims in South Africa rebuked him, they still referred to him with the prefix *maulana* (literally: ‘our master’), an honorific title that he had earned from his traditional education.³⁰ Female exegetes like Wadud, Barlas and Hassan are thus clearly at a disadvantage, since the *madrasa* is a male-dominated space.³¹

In addition to criticizing their emphasis on the Qur’an, mainstream Muslims have characterized these exegetes as being fifth columns of the West, plotting to destroy Islam from within. This is a prevalent portrayal of gendered approaches to the Qur’an and Islam as a whole. Islamic feminism is often viewed with great suspicion by most Muslims, who

²⁷ Ibid, 8-9.

²⁸ Ibid, 9.

²⁹ Ibid, 13.

³⁰ F. Esack Interview, 2009.

³¹ That being said, other factors, in particular physical attire, have played a role in determining how female exegetes have been received within the broader community, reflecting the centrality of women’s bodies with regard to religious authority in Islam. Wadud has noted that, despite her radical discourse and practice, her wearing of the headscarf (commonly referred to as the *hijab*) and traditional dress has created a “specific symbolic legitimacy,” thereby creating a space, however limited it may be, to speak. See Amina Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women’s Reform in Islam* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2006), 170. That Barlas does not wear a headscarf has made it all the more difficult for her to be heard within mainstream Muslim settings. As she put it in our interview: “And people have told me publicly: ‘You know, sister, if you were wearing a *hijab* it might be easier.’” (A. Barlas Interview, 2009)

perceive its struggle against male privilege in religious thought and practice as “part of a broader Western enterprise to discredit and misrepresent Islam.”³² Wadud has been deeply frustrated in how her work has been swiftly dismissed by segments of the Muslim community on the grounds that it is “Western” and “feminist” and, thus, against Islam – a problematic argument since Wadud is at once an Islamic scholar and “a daughter of the West, born and raised American of African descent,”³³ thereby illustrating that Islam and the West are not hermetically sealed and incompatible categories, but also because, as I will show later in this thesis, neither she nor Barlas identify as feminists. A key obstacle, Barlas laments, is that most Muslims are hostile to the very language that she employs as an interpreter reading for justice in the Qur’an, viewing terms like “anti-patriarchal, sexual inequality, liberation, and even hermeneutics” as epistemological frameworks that have been imported wholesale from the West and are, therefore, foreign to Islam and Muslim experiences.³⁴ Sure enough, this is the principal critique that Shafi‘i – the senior scholar at Azhar that we just met – launches against feminist interpretation. For the entire field of hermeneutics, argues Shafi‘i, is inextricably tied to the development of Western thought and history, such as humanist philosophy, rationalism and the Enlightenment.³⁵ While the emergence of the discipline of hermeneutics was “in response to genuine factors within that context,” it is out of sync with the historical trajectory and experience of Muslims, who have long established their own distinctive modes of exegesis, embodied in classical Islamic sciences like *tafsir*.³⁶ The quest for sexual justice is not the

³² Sa‘diyya Shaikh, “Transforming Feminism: Islam, Women and Gender Justice,” in *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender, and Pluralism*, ed. Omid Safi (Oxford: Oneworld, 2003), 149.

³³ Wadud, *Qur’an and Woman*, xviii.

³⁴ Barlas, “*Believing Women*” in *Islam*, xii.

³⁵ Al-Shafi‘i, 5-6.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 6.

only struggle that is widely perceived as part of a Western colonial project to undermine Islam. As we shall see in the next chapter, Esack has written extensively on the Qur'an and pluralism, emphasizing the importance of embracing the religious Other. In a markedly similar fashion to conservative Muslim depictions of Islamic feminism, Esack's discourse on interfaith relations has been portrayed as "alien to Islam;" "an extension of areligious, even anti-religious, Western scholarship;" and, indeed, a cultural expression of "neo-colonialism."³⁷ This last description is clearly designed as a personal attack, since Esack is an outspoken critic of neo-colonialism and imperialism in general. And herein lies the distinguishing feature of mainstream Muslim responses to these commentators: polemics. Consider Murad's caricature of Esack as being a Muslim Trojan Horse for the missionary objectives of his "Christian tutors."³⁸ Referring to Esack's liberationist hermeneutic, and thus departure from traditional modes of exegesis, Murad claims:

Christian missiology has long recognised the need to secure such a paradigm shift in Muslim discourse. Attempts to debate with Muslims on Muslim ground, using Muslim categories, have an unnervingly poor record of securing conversions. Modern missionary establishments, nowadays politely wrapped in the veil of 'dialogue,' prefer to convert Muslims first to use the language of Western Christian terminology and concerns, after which, it is thought, formal conversion will follow naturally. And in Esack's case, the success of this approach is very striking.³⁹

As this passage reveals, mainstream Muslims have failed to engage liberationist exegetes seriously – the vast majority have never actually read their writings and rely on hearsay and secondary sources – viciously attacking their characters and commitment to Islam.

³⁷ As quoted in Esack, *On Being a Muslim*, 192.

³⁸ Murad. For the website address of this review, cf. fn. 24 on pg. 19 in this chapter.

³⁹ Ibid.

The Non-Muslim West

Yet despite the polemical nature of traditional Muslims' responses to liberationist and women's exegeses, their grievances with these alternative modes of interpretation, in particular with regard to the West, are not entirely unfounded. For in stark contrast to their controversial reception in the broader Muslim community, liberationist and female interpreters have been well received by non-Muslim Westerners. As the Islamic scholar Suha Taji-Farouki has observed, Muslim reformists who use contemporary hermeneutical theories have been embraced, even celebrated, in academic and media circles in Europe and North America.⁴⁰ There is nothing 'natural' in this abiding interest in reformist Islam. Rather, this fascination is informed by deep-seated assumptions about the current state of Islam and its relationship to modernity. To borrow Taji-Farouki's eloquent wording:

... Western enthusiasm for such thinkers – as an *avant-garde* of 'Islamic liberalism' or members of a new elite advocating an Islamic 'reformation' – expresses an underlying assumption that this is what Islam 'needs' to render it capable of existing cooperatively in the modern world.⁴¹

It is within this discursive context – of seeing Islam as 'backward' and in desperate need of lasting change, and of prescribing an evolutionary path (read 'reformation') along the lines of Christian European historical experiences – that we need to appreciate the West's championing of Muslim reformists like the Swiss scholar Tariq Ramadan and the Iranian Abdolkarim Soroush as the much awaited 'Martin Luthers of Islam.'⁴² Gender reform is a

⁴⁰ Taji-Farouki, 7.

⁴¹ Ibid, 8.

⁴² The famous proclamation of Paul Donnelly, a journalist at *The Washington Post*, reads: "Tariq Ramadan is a Muslim Martin Luther." See the back cover of Tariq Ramadan, *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). To be sure, Ramadan has also been vilified in conservative Western circles, particularly in France, as being a double-talking Islamist. For instance, see Caroline Fourest, *Brother Tariq: The Doublespeak of Tariq Ramadan* (New York: Encounter Books, 2008). Soroush has been hailed as an "Iranian Luther" by *The Guardian* and *The Los Angeles Times*. See Omid Safi ed., *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender, and Pluralism* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2003), 16. Notwithstanding Western tendencies to frame Islamic renewal as part of a wider reformation project, it is also important to note that Muslim reformists themselves, especially in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, have

crucial component of the call for an Islamic reformation. This concern for the suffering of Muslim women manifested itself in the extensive coverage that Western media outlets gave to Wadud's leading of the Friday Prayers in 2005, despite her disapproval of the media's presence.⁴³ The prayer was portrayed as a resounding victory for 'oppressed' Muslim women and a severe blow to 'patriarchal' Muslim men, as a watershed in the history of gender relations in Islam. It is also important to point out that the language of Muslim reformists resonates with the sensibilities of Western academia (particularly its liberal wing), which has been heavily influenced by the Enlightenment, due to a shared critique of tradition, of the past and, conversely, an emphasis on using one's own intellect and reason.⁴⁴ As we shall see in the second chapter, reason and rationality are themes that continuously resurface in Engineer's liberating exegesis. Furthermore, because these Muslim intellectuals have studied in secular universities – even Esack, who is the only scholar to have attended a *madrassa*, earned a Ph.D. from the University of Birmingham – they are recognized as accredited interlocutors for Western academics, who perceive them as their counterparts in the Muslim world.⁴⁵ That being said, one must be careful not

greatly admired the Christian Reformation and called for a similar transformation in Islam. These include such pioneering historical figures as the Persian scholar Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (d. 1897); the Egyptian scholar Muhammad Abduh (d. 1905); and the South Asian intellectuals Sayyid Ahmed Khan (d. 1898) and Muhammad Iqbal (d. 1938). In fact, many Muslim reformists saw the Reformation as an Islamization of Christianity, bringing it closer to Muslim values, such as a rejection of priestly hierarchy. See Charles Kurzman and Michaelle Browers eds., *An Islamic Reformation?* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2004), 3-4.

⁴³ Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 252. Though the NYC Friday Prayers received the most attention, Wadud recounts that there was also a considerable media presence during her delivery of the pre-sermon lecture at the Friday Prayers in Cape Town in 1994. See *ibid*, 168.

⁴⁴ Daniel W. Brown, *Rethinking Tradition in Modern Islamic Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 2-4.

⁴⁵ The Islamic historian Muhammad Qasim Zaman has argued that one of the reasons why Islamists have received so much attention in Western scholarship is because of their non-traditional educational backgrounds, being schooled in such lay fields as medicine and pharmacy, engineering and journalism. As a result, the '*ulama*' (or traditionally-trained Islamic scholars) have been written into modern history as being in 'decline' and increasingly irrelevant in Muslim life. See Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam: Custodians of Change* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

to simplify, to overstate Western interests in Islamic reform, for significant segments of European and North American societies are utterly convinced that Islam is a medieval religion incapable of sustaining reform, inescapably patriarchal, intolerant, exclusivist. For example, Barlas notes that non-Muslims and secular feminists often depict her, with her faith-based rereading of scripture, as being a “Muslim apologist.”⁴⁶ Thus, in their eyes – as for conservative Muslims – a gender-inclusive Islam is not *really* Islam.

This Western interest in ‘liberal’ interpretations of Islam has intensified following 9/11. As we shall see shortly, the exegetes examined in this thesis, in particular Barlas and Esack, are acutely aware of the politics of discussing Islam in the post-9/11 era. Barlas writes of how the US has appropriated Islam, drawing a simplistic distinction between “good” / “moderate” Muslims on the one hand and “bad” / “militant” Muslims on the other,⁴⁷ the former being pro-American, the latter anti-American. Esack parallels Barlas’ critique, pointing out that liberal Muslims themselves have played into this problematic language:

...liberal Muslims responded from the premise that “fundamentalism” was perhaps the single most important issue facing the world, and the events of September 11 the single-most important event that required a radical shift in Muslim responses to modernity and being in the world.⁴⁸

Indeed, as the post-structural anthropologist Saba Mahmood has argued in an insightful essay, “Secularism, Hermeneutics, and Empire: The Politics of Islamic Reformation” (2006), the US’s ‘War Against Terror’ has entailed not only new military campaigns into the Muslim world but also “an ambitious theological campaign” that aims to revamp the

⁴⁶ Barlas, “*Believing Women*” in *Islam*, xii-xiii. In the fourth chapter, we will see how her work has faced much hostility amongst secular feminists, especially in Pakistan, for whom Islam can only be patriarchal.

⁴⁷ Asma Barlas, *Islam, Muslims, and the US: Essays on Religion and Politics* (New Delhi: Global Media Publications, 2004), 26-27.

⁴⁸ Farid Esack, “In Search of Progressive Islam Beyond 9/11,” in *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender, and Pluralism*, ed. Omid Safi (Oxford: Oneworld, 2003), 82.

interpretive landscape of contemporary Islam, targeting “fundamentalist” understandings of the faith.⁴⁹ A cornerstone of this project has been encouraging hermeneutical strategies that are anti-literalist, especially historical criticism, which seeks to engage the Qur’an and Prophet Muhammad as a text and figure, respectively, that are inescapably rooted in a particular time and place, addressing the specificities of seventh-century Arabia.⁵⁰ By supporting historical criticism in Qur’anic interpretation, Mahmood argues, a key motive of US policymakers is to strip the Qur’an of any relevancy as a text that can forcefully speak to social and political problems in the present, reducing it, in a manner similar to the Bible in post-Enlightenment Europe, to a document that should “be appreciated for its cultural significance, as an object of aesthetic, poetic and spiritual appreciation.”⁵¹ The type of hermeneutic that the US is promoting, therefore, is markedly secular. That is, one in which Islam is confined to the private sphere, in which there is a strict divide between religion and politics, Church and State. As we shall see, Wadud and Barlas – two avowedly anti-literalist commentators – draw upon historical criticism extensively when rereading the text from a gendered perspective. The usage of historical criticism as a reading strategy is actually amongst Shafi’i’s principal objections to feminist exegesis, claiming that it reduces the Qur’an to a set of ethical principles, thereby casting “doubt on the authenticity and perfection of the Qur’anic text.”⁵² It is necessary to make two important clarifications here. Firstly, by historicizing the Qur’an, female exegetes do not seek to reduce it to a cultural document. On the contrary, they do so precisely in order to make the text speak to struggles in their own lives. They approach scripture, then, as

⁴⁹ Saba Mahmood, “Secularism, Hermeneutics, and Empire: The Politics of Islamic Reformation,” *Public Culture* 18 (2006): 329.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 334.

⁵¹ Ibid, 335-336.

⁵² Al-Shafi’i, 13.

believers; their hermeneutic is anything but secular. Secondly, I do not wish to give the impression that the interpreters in this thesis have connections with the State Department. In fact, they are outspoken critics of the US and its role in the world. Rather, my point is that a wider, ideologically driven language with regard to Islam has emerged since 9/11, and one of the reasons why liberationist and women's exegeses have been enthusiastically received in the West is because their non-traditionalist, anti-literalist and theoretically-informed approaches accord with this discursive context.⁵³

Alternative / Progressive Muslims

Though they do not enjoy a popular audience in the broader Muslim community, liberationist and female exegetes have secured devout followings amongst alternative and progressive Muslims. Taji-Farouki writes that non-traditional Islamic intellectuals have attracted a constituency base in select segments of the community, especially the youth, women and those who have received a Western education.⁵⁴ This observation should not be overstated, however, as traditional scholars and Islamists, too, boast sizable followings within these very constituencies. The commentators examined in this dissertation have been deeply influential in progressive Muslim communities, playing pioneering roles in expounding inclusive understandings and practices of Islam. Wadud, for example, has recently been honoured by a festschrift. In this volume, thirty-three Muslims, including both academics and community activists, pay their respects to Wadud and her seminal

⁵³ Interestingly, Mahmood notes that a number of Muslim intellectuals whom the State Department has listed as being "moderates" – none of whom, incidentally, include Esack, Engineer, Wadud or Barlas – are highly critical of American foreign policy, some even espousing a Marxist critique. This betrays the priority given to theology over politics, to transforming Muslim interpretations of Islamic texts over shifting their stances towards the US, in the American project of reshaping Islam from within. See Mahmood, 336-337.

⁵⁴ Taji-Farouki, 6.

contributions to Muslim women's studies and Qur'anic exegesis,⁵⁵ thereby reflecting the lasting impact and relevance of her scholarship and activism. But despite these intellectuals' formative influence on liberationist approaches to Islam, there has since been a disillusionment with the Qur'an as a source of empowerment, resulting in a number of Muslim progressives returning to the study of extra-Qur'anic texts and traditions like the *shari'a*, *hadith* and *sira* ('prophetic biography').⁵⁶ It has become somewhat fashionable over the past several years to criticize liberationist commentaries of the Qur'an as being apologetic. Some of these contentions have been nuanced and based on a careful reading of these writings. The most compelling critique, and one that we will engage at various points in this dissertation, is the Qur'an's androcentrism, or its tendency to address solely male audiences – an insight that was first forwarded, significantly, by Esack and, thus, by radical Qur'anic exegetes themselves.⁵⁷ Other criticisms, however, have been more sweeping, dismissive, even polemical. Firstly, liberationist and women's readings are commonly depicted as 'Qur'an-only,' as focussing exclusively on scripture, categorically and vehemently rejecting the *hadith* literature and

⁵⁵ Kecia Ali, Juliane Hammer and Laury Silvers, eds. *A Jihad for Justice: Honoring the Work and Life of Amina Wadud* (Akron, Ohio: 48HrBooks, 2012), e-book, 9-10. The three editors of this volume are academics, specializing in Islam, and Muslim converts who are actively involved in alternative / progressive Muslim circles.

⁵⁶ See Ahmed Elewa and Laury Silvers, "'I am one of the people:': A Survey and Analysis of Legal Arguments on Woman-led Prayer in Islam" *Journal of Law and Religion* 26 (2010-2011): 141-171; Kecia Ali, *Marriage and Slavery in Early Islam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010); Kecia Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam: Feminist Reflections on Qur'an, Hadith, and Jurisprudence* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2006); Omid Safi, *Memories of Muhammad: Why the Prophet Matters* (New York: HarperOne, 2009); Sa'diyya Shaikh, "Knowledge, Women and Gender in the Hadith: A Feminist Interpretation" *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 15 (2004): 99-108; and Sa'diyya Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy: Ibn 'Arabi, Gender, and Sexuality* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012). While Safi's book is not an academic study and addresses a popular audience, it seeks to reclaim prophetic biography as an invaluable source for Islamic guidance and reflection.

⁵⁷ Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam*, 112-113. Ali, a feminist scholar of Islamic law who has been critical of women's readings of the Qur'an, explicitly acknowledges Esack for this insight. For the original citation, see Farid Esack, "Islam and Gender Justice: Beyond Simplistic Apologia," in *What Men Owe Women: Men's Voices from World Religions*, eds. John C. Raines and Daniel C. Maguire (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001), 195-196.

the Islamic intellectual tradition. This is a sentiment that I have encountered on countless occasions in scholarly circles and conferences, as well as in non-academic contexts, and many a time by people who clearly have not read their commentaries, relying instead on second-hand accounts. In other words, there is a striking convergence in the receptions of these intellectuals' writings in both alternative / progressive communities and mainstream / traditional ones, in which, as we have just discussed, they are also presented as being 'Qur'an-only.' Secondly, their interpretations have been portrayed as 'fundamentalist.' This is especially salient in representations of women's exegesis. Take the progressive Islamic scholar Ebrahim Moosa, an ardent advocate of engaging the historic intellectual tradition. He claims that women's commentaries are guilty of "text fundamentalism," simplistically reading sexual justice into a scripture that, according to him, is outright patriarchal.⁵⁸ For Moosa, gender-inclusive exegesis is innately apologetic, describing its reading strategies as "nothing short of hermeneutical acrobatics or a hermeneutics of wishful thinking."⁵⁹

The Centring of the Qur'an in Contemporary Islam

Liberationist and Women's Exegesis: Qur'an Only?

These depictions of gendered interpretation, and of liberationist commentary as a whole, are problematic. Referring to these readings as 'fundamentalist' is misleading for a couple of reasons. Firstly, the word fundamentalism has acutely Christian connotations,

⁵⁸ Ebrahim Moosa, "The Debts and Burdens of Critical Islam," in *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender, and Pluralism*, ed. Omid Safi (Oxford: Oneworld, 2003), 125. Before criticizing gendered exegesis, Moosa concedes that several Qur'anic interpreters, such as the French-Algerian Muhammad Arkoun (d. 2010), the Egyptian Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd (d. 2010) and, notably, Esack, have adopted more critical readings. He makes this point in a rather condescending fashion, however, referring to their works as "attempts to introduce an element of complexity in the understanding of the Qur'an." See *ibid.*, 124.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 125.

emerging in early twentieth century American Protestantism as a movement to counter the rising appeal of discourses like secularism, feminism and Darwinism, calling instead for a return to ‘the fundamentals’ of Christian faith and life.⁶⁰ Christian fundamentalists contended that the Bible was the literal Word of God, which was a radical difference from contemporary mainstream Christianity, in which the Bible has been understood as a human construct, the historical product of individuals and communities inspired by God. The term fundamentalism, then, does not make sense in terms of the Qur’anic text, as all Muslims, irrespective of their sectarian differences and interpretative shades, believe that the Qur’an *is* the actual Speech of God.⁶¹ Secondly, fundamentalism implies a literalist rendering of scripture. Yet gendered interpretations, as we will witness throughout this study, are anything but literalist and simplistic. On the contrary, they are anti-literalist, emphasizing the larger ethical principles of the text and employing sophisticated reading strategies. In Chapter Four, for instance, we will see that Barlas uses theology – namely, God’s self-disclosure in the Qur’an – as her hermeneutical point of departure, concluding that if “God never does *Zulm* [oppression] to anyone, then God’s Speech (the Qur’an) also cannot teach *Zulm* against anyone [sic].”⁶² In other words, her exegesis privileges the theological over the textual. Furthermore, far from reading scripture in a vacuum, Wadud and Barlas consciously foreground their own contexts, underscoring the importance of interpreting for the present and of relating scripture to one’s own lived experiences and struggles. As we have just seen, another prominent portrayal of women’s and liberationist exegeses, one that exists in both mainstream and alternative Muslim circles, is that they

⁶⁰ Reza Aslan, *How to Win a Cosmic War: Confronting Radical Islam* (London: William Heinemann, 2009), 88-89.

⁶¹ Joel Beinin and Joe Stork eds., *Political Islam: Essays from Middle East Report* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 3.

⁶² Barlas, “*Believing Women*” in *Islam*, 14. The square parentheses are mine.

subscribe to a dogmatic *sola scriptura* hermeneutic, focussing on the Qur'an alone. But Esack, Engineer, Wadud and Barlas, this dissertation will demonstrate, do not sweepingly dismiss other Islamic texts, drawing on the *hadith*, prophetic history and the exegetical, theological and even mystical tradition. What they firmly emphasize, however, is that the Qur'an is the living Word of God and, as such, must act as the authoritative text of Islam, the chief criterion by which all other texts are evaluated. A more accurate description of their Islamic discourses, therefore, would be 'Qur'an First' rather than 'Qur'an Only.'

To be sure, there is a tendency in contemporary Islamic thought that calls for a 'return' to the Qur'an and the Qur'an alone, shunning other Islamic texts and the *hadith* in particular. Though this tendency is part of a broader reformist movement to return to the roots of the faith, as exemplified by the *salafiyya* (who seek to replicate the lives of the *salaf*, or 'the righteous predecessors,' referring to the first generations of Muslims),⁶³ the Qur'an-only movement also needs to be situated within the specific context of Islamic reformism based, ironically, on *hadith*. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, two scholars – Shah Wali Allah (d. 1762) in India and Muhammad al-Shawkani (d. 1834) in Yemen, respectively – sought to combat what they perceived as a growing moral malaise amongst Muslims by calling for the revival of the custom of Prophet Muhammad (*ihya' al-sunna*), claiming that the *hadith* was "the foundational science against which all knowledge must be tested."⁶⁴ By the mid-nineteenth century, their ideas had taken root in India, most notably in the *Ahl-i Hadith* ('the People of *Hadith*') – a reformist movement that bypassed the historic intellectual tradition and adhered to a literalist reading of the

⁶³ Brown, *Rethinking Tradition in Modern Islamic Thought*, 31.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 22-23.

hadith.⁶⁵ The roots of the Qur'an-only movement are to be found within this milieu of a staunchly literalist, *hadith*-centric Islam. Arising in the early twentieth century, the *Ahl-i Qur'an* ('the People of the Qur'an') were comprised of disenchanted members of the *Ahl-i Hadith* who not only had deep, ethical grievances with the content of various prophetic reports, but also believed that the *hadith* as a *corpus* had led Muslims astray from the original message of Islam as embodied in the Qur'an and, therefore, was a principal cause of the ills that had beset the global Muslim *umma*, or 'community.'⁶⁶ While the Qur'an-only movement has since spread to other pockets of the Muslim world and the West, this steadfast rejection of the *hadith* remains a core component of their discourse. According to its adherents, the Qur'an is a fully comprehensive source of guidance and, thus, the very existence of the *hadith*, which has no scriptural basis, is a challenge to the Qur'an's comprehensiveness.⁶⁷ It is necessary to appreciate the significance of this hermeneutical claim, as it is quite different from the arguments of the interpreters examined in this thesis, which call for a prioritization of the Qur'an, using its principles and teachings as a framework for engaging other Islamic texts. This is an unthinkable proposition in the Qur'an-only movement, which calls not for the critical re-evaluation of specific, explicitly problematic *hadith* reports but rather for the wholesale rejection of the *hadith* as a corpus.⁶⁸ Indeed, I recall attending a conference in Oxford (11-13 June 2010) that was organized primarily by Qur'an-only intellectuals and, during the Q&A session,

⁶⁵ Ibid, 27-28.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 38.

⁶⁷ Abdur Rab, *Exploring Islam in a New Light: An Understanding from the Qur'anic Perspective* (New York: iUniverse, 2008), 312; Edip Yuksel, *Manifesto for Islamic Reform* (Breinigsville, PA: Brainbow Press, 2009), 112; Khalid Sayyed, *The Qur'an's Challenge to Islam: The Clash Between the Muslim Holy Scripture and Islamic Literature* (Dooagh, Ireland: Checkpoint Press, 2009), 7; The Monotheist Group, *The Natural Republic: Reclaiming Islam from Within* (Breinigsville, PA: Brainbow Press, 2009), 14. These works cite a number of Qur'anic verses to substantiate this argument. For example, Sayyed points to Q. 6:38 and 16:89 while the Monotheist Group refers to 6:114. Cf. Appendix.

⁶⁸ Rab, 312; Yuksel, 112.

presenting this argument of prioritizing the Qur'an rather than wholly dismissing other Islamic texts which, I added, could offer invaluable insight into the Word.⁶⁹ My suggestion was squarely rejected by the panellist, as well as shot down by several members of the audience sitting directly behind me, who began chanting out loud: "God Alone! God Alone!" For these Muslims, then, using any texts alongside the Qur'an, even if in a subordinate role to it, was tantamount to *shirk*, or associating partners with God, thereby violating Islamic monotheism (*tawhid*).

Another significant difference between the exegetes examined in this thesis and the Qur'an-only movement is that social justice is not a fundamental part of the latter's discourse. This can be seen right from the very beginning of the Qur'an-only movement, as the *Ahl-i Qur'an*, like their *Ahl-i Hadith* counterparts, were preoccupied with ritual practice, such as how exactly one should offer the formal prayer (*salah*) according to the Qur'an and the Qur'an alone.⁷⁰ It is important to note here that this emphasis on ritual is different from Wadud's interest in women's leadership in prayer, which we shall explore in detail in Chapter Three, as she does not take issue with how the prayer is performed, but rather the privileging of men in this performance. When it comes to matters of justice, there are clearly conflicting stances within the Qur'an-only camp. With regard to the economy, for example, Khalid Sayyed argues that, according to the text, there is no private ownership since everything belongs to God (Q. 2:255) and that all surplus wealth, or that which is beyond one's immediate needs, must be surrendered to a higher authority

⁶⁹ The conference – titled "Critical Thinkers for Islamic Reform: The Way Forward" – was hosted by the Muslim Educational Centre of Oxford (MECO), a progressive Islamic organization based in the city.

⁷⁰ Brown, *Rethinking Tradition in Modern Islamic Thought*, 39. This obsession with ritual has continued to this day in Qur'an-only circles. The Monotheist Group, for example, argues that according to the Qur'an the formal prayer should be offered twice a day instead of five times, and that rather than consisting of a select number of cycles of standing, bowing and prostrating – a mainstream practice in both Sunni and Shi'a Islam – the formal prayer should only comprise of standing, ending with a single prostration. See The Monotheist Group, 200-209.

like the state – what he refers to as “the Qur’anic government” – which is responsible for redistributing this wealth within society (2:219; 7:199).⁷¹ The attainment of economic justice is thus an integral aspect of Sayyed’s exegesis. Abdur Rab, another Qur’an-only intellectual, has a very different approach to socioeconomic matters. While stating that the Qur’an supports an “exploitation-free egalitarian economic system,”⁷² he goes on to contradict himself by supporting a free trade arrangement and the dismantling of protectionist policies, such as tariffs, that inhibit the free flow of goods between countries.⁷³ The fact that neoliberal economics makes a preferential option for the wealthy – the exact opposite of liberation theology, which makes a preferential option for the poor – does not seem to figure into Rab’s thinking.⁷⁴ So whereas Sayyed is a radical when it comes to the economy, Rab, an economist himself by training, is staunchly liberal, even conservative. His lack of concern for social justice resurfaces in his discourse on international politics and world history. Approvingly citing the historian Bernard Lewis – whose essentialist claims about Islam as being in conflict with Western civilization will be discussed in the Conclusion – Rab claims that the Muslim world is in the dire state that it is today not because of Western colonialism and an increasingly unequal global economy, but rather primarily due to “attitudinal differences” between Muslims and Westerners, the latter having acquired a superior mindset as a result of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment.⁷⁵ This discourse stands in marked contrast to that of Edip Yuksel, a prominent Qur’an-only scholar from Turkey. The critique of colonialism

⁷¹ Sayyed, 94-95.

⁷² Rab, xvii.

⁷³ Ibid, 253-254.

⁷⁴ Liberation theology and its preferential option for the oppressed will be dealt with in-depth in the chapters on Esack and Engineer.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 370.

is a prevalent theme in Yuksel's political writings. Unlike Rab, he blames the West, and especially the US, as the principal culprits of widespread global suffering, consistently violating the sovereignty of other countries through either covert operations or outright invasion; buttressing brutal, undemocratic regimes; and consuming a grossly disproportionate amount of the world's resources.⁷⁶ Yuksel is also an outspoken critic of Israel, condemning its "brutal racist occupation" of Palestine.⁷⁷ Therefore, while social justice does play a role in the Qur'an-only movement, it is not an uncontested, defining feature. Rather, what brings them together and unites them is their hermeneutical emphasis on the Qur'an as the sole source of guidance.

This is not to give the impression, however, that there is a clear-cut line dividing those Muslims who espouse a 'Qur'an-only' approach and those who, like the commentators studied in this thesis, adhere to a 'Qur'an-first' one, as there is a certain degree of overlap between the two tendencies. In the conference that I mentioned above, for example, the presenters included not just Qur'an-only intellectuals like Sayyed and Yuksel, but also Engineer and Wadud.⁷⁸ In the third and fourth chapters on Wadud and Barlas, respectively, we will encounter the Qur'anic exegesis of the Pakistani feminist Riffat Hassan, in particular her reading of the Creation Story and the Events of the Garden.⁷⁹ For Hassan, the Qur'an, as the literal Word of God, ought to be "the primary source of normative Islam" and, while she does not dismiss the *hadith* altogether, she is

⁷⁶ Yuksel, 67.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 60.

⁷⁸ Due to last minute, familial circumstances, Wadud was unable to travel to the UK to participate in the conference in person and instead delivered her lecture via teleconferencing.

⁷⁹ Riffat Hassan, "An Islamic Perspective," in *Women, Religion and Sexuality: Studies on the Impact of Religious Teachings on Women*, ed. Jeanne Becher (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990), 101-106.

suspicious of this corpus, pointing out the controversies that surround its authenticity.⁸⁰ So this would place her in the so-called ‘Qur’an-first’ camp. Yet Hassan has written a foreword for Rab’s commentary – which is vehemently Qur’an-only – praising it as a “labor of love,” offering “valuable insights on a number of issues of interest and concern to contemporary Muslims.”⁸¹ This overlap, moreover, is not only evident in terms of people, but also in shared themes. Modernism, for instance, is a motif that continuously crops up in the discourse of the Qur’an-only movement, who assert that the Qur’an is in complete accord with modern science and the natural environment, exhibiting a rational basis.⁸² As we shall see in the second chapter, Engineer’s interpretation, too, is acutely modernist, juxtaposing enlightened reason with superstitious belief and claiming that the Qur’an is a divine message built on logic and rationality, which is precisely why, he adds, Prophet Muhammad refused to perform any miracles.⁸³ Criticism of religious hierarchy is perhaps the most important commonality. Like the exegetes studied in this dissertation, Qur’an-only exegetes argue that every Muslim has the right to interpret the text (and, in fact, has the solemn responsibility to do so), unfettered by the mediations of scholars, past and present. Far from being a complex, convoluted scripture, Qur’an-only exegetes

⁸⁰ Ibid, 93-94.

⁸¹ Riffat Hassan, foreword to *Exploring Islam in a New Light: An Understanding from the Qur’anic Perspective*, by Abdur Rab (New York: iUniverse, 2008), ix.

⁸² Yuksel, 111; Rab, 19. Sayyed’s apologetic denial of miracles in the Qur’an is a compelling example of the hermeneutical repercussions of such a modernist approach. See ‘Chapter Eight: ‘Miracles’ in the Qur’an’ in Sayyed, 117-131. Rab even goes so far as to contrast the scientific, enlightened nature of the Qur’an with the *hadith* which, to use his own words, “is against progress and modernity, and conflicts with scientific truth and reason.” See Rab, 340.

⁸³ Asghar Ali Engineer, *Islam and Liberation Theology: Essays on Liberative Elements in Islam* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1990), 32. In his rejection of the miraculous, Engineer parallels Qur’an-only exegetes. See the above footnote.

maintain that the text is clear, self-explanatory and easy to understand, and thus accessible to all readers, irrespective of their level of learning.⁸⁴

A Global Hermeneutic: Three Case Studies

The larger differences between the Qur'an-only movement and the commentators considered in this thesis are significant because they show that rather than being some sort of obscure and sectarian scripturalist tendency, direct engagement with the Qur'an is becoming increasingly prominent in Islamic discourse. As Taji-Farouki puts it:

In the contemporary world, millions of people refer to the Qur'an daily to justify their aspirations or to explain their actions, reflecting a scale of direct reference unprecedented in the Islamic experience.⁸⁵

Liberationist exegesis, then, is indicative of a progressively mainstream, indeed global, hermeneutic, in which the Qur'an has emerged as a central text of Islamic reflection. In this sub-section, I will offer three case studies – that is, in addition to the interpreters examined in this dissertation – of Muslim thinkers who have looked towards scripture as a principal source of guidance in tackling the challenges of the present: namely, the Egyptian scholar Gamal al-Banna (b. 1920), the British-Pakistani scholar Ziauddin Sardar (b. 1951) and the Syrian scholar Nimat Hafez Barazangi (b. 1943), whom we met earlier. I would first like to clarify, however, why I have not devoted separate chapters to these exegetes, who clearly merit attention and analysis. Firstly, due to constraints of space I was only able to examine, at most, four intellectuals, and thus had to single out those who I believed were the most representative, the best-known exponents of liberationist interpretation of the Qur'an. Secondly, Esack, Engineer, Wadud and Barlas focus their readings on questions of justice, as opposed to dealing with Islamic reform in general.

⁸⁴ Rab, 24; The Monotheist Group, 7-8; Yuksel, 5.

⁸⁵ Taji-Farouki, 20.

This accent distinguishes them from Banna and Sardar, who while certainly being concerned about justice have concentrated their intellectual efforts on the relationship between Islam and modernity, exploring a vast spectrum of topics. Conversely, although the Iranian scholar Hamid Dabashi (b. 1951) has written explicitly on Islam and liberation – in *Islamic Liberation Theology: Resisting the Empire* (2008) – I have not included him in a case study chapter because the Qur'an does not play a significant role in his thinking and, therefore, his work would not fit into a comparative study of scriptural exegesis.⁸⁶ In fact, the book has minimal engagement with Islamic texts, reading more like a progressive polemic on contemporary Muslim history and world politics than a piece of religious scholarship. The British-Pakistani scholar Shabbir Akhtar (b. 1960) has also written on the subject. However, I have chosen not to include him either because, while he has published on the Qur'an,⁸⁷ scripture does not figure prominently in his main work on liberation theology: *The Final Imperative: An Islamic Theology of Liberation* (1991).⁸⁸ So Akhtar, too, would be out-of-place in this analysis.⁸⁹

The youngest brother of Hasan al-Banna, the charismatic founder of the Muslim Brotherhood – a highly influential Islamist organization – Gamal al-Banna has continuously emphasized the importance of the Qur'an in any Islamic reformist project.⁹⁰ Banna never attended university, choosing to become a writer after high school. In his

⁸⁶ See Hamid Dabashi, *Islamic Liberation Theology: Resisting the Empire* (London: Routledge, 2008).

⁸⁷ See Shabbir Akhtar, *The Qur'an and the Secular Mind: A Philosophy of Islam* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2007).

⁸⁸ See Shabbir Akhtar, *The Final Imperative: An Islamic Theology of Liberation* (London: Bellew, 1991). A discussion of liberation theology can also be found in Shabbir Akhtar, *Islam as Political Religion: The Future of an Imperial Faith* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2011).

⁸⁹ I do not view this lack of emphasis on the Qur'an in their liberation theologies as problematizing my thesis, for I am not claiming that justice-based expositions of Islam must necessarily foreground the Qur'an. Rather, my argument is that there is a global hermeneutical trend in contemporary Islam in which the Qur'an has become a core text of reflection and guidance, especially in contexts of oppression.

⁹⁰ Unlike his older brother, Banna does not identify as an Islamist. His ideas are actually considered controversial, even heretical, in Islamist circles and amongst mainstream traditional scholars.

early career, he focussed his efforts on the burgeoning trade union movement in Egypt, translating into Arabic numerous international works on trade union history and working-class struggles.⁹¹ In 1981, he established ‘The International Islamic Union for Labour’ (*al-ittihad al-islami al-dawli li’l-‘amal*), which provided such translation services to labour movements in different parts of the Arab world, thereby keeping Arab workers abreast of the struggles and challenges of their counterparts elsewhere.⁹² In the 1970s, Banna began to devote greater attention to contemporary Islamic thought, and has since emerged as a major voice of Islamic reform in Egypt. According to him, the Qur’an, as the actual Word of God, must act as the central criterion for Islamic practice, constituting both the critical point of departure (*nuqtat al-ibtida’*) and the final objective (*ghayat al-intiha’*).⁹³ Justice is an important feature of Banna’s Islamic discourse, pointing out that social justice and egalitarianism are recurring themes in the Qur’an, which condemns tyrants like Pharaoh, expresses solidarity with the oppressed and calls for fair, equitable conduct in everyday commercial transactions.⁹⁴ Gender justice, too, figures prominently in his writings. In fact, Banna published a short book in response to the global Muslim outcry following Wadud’s leading of the Friday Prayers in 2005, arguing that it is completely acceptable in Islam for a woman to lead men in prayer.⁹⁵ An underlying grievance that Banna has with mainstream Islamic thought is that the Qur’an and its socially-engaged message have been brushed aside in favour of a conservative, juristic discourse rooted in classical schools of law. He laments that instead of using scripture as

⁹¹ “‘*An Gamal al-Banna* [About Gamal al-Banna],” in Gamal al-Banna, *Qadiyat al-Qubalat wa Baqiyat al-Ijtihadat* [The Issue of Kissing and Other *Ijtihads* (Exercises in Independent and Critical Reasoning)] (Cairo: Dar al-Fikr al-Islami, 2008), 245.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Gamal al-Banna, *Al-‘Awda ila al-Qur’an* [Returning to the Qur’an] (Cairo: Dar al-Shuruq, 2008), 10.

⁹⁴ Ibid, 24.

⁹⁵ See Gamal al-Banna, *Jawaz Imamat al-Mar’a al-Rijal* [The Permissibility of a Woman to Lead Men in Prayer] (Cairo: Dar al-Fikr al-Islami, 2005).

the standard with which to interpret other Islamic texts, Muslims have, over the course of history, reversed the order, subordinating timeless Qur'anic teachings to fallible human opinions.⁹⁶ This is a critique that, as we shall see, surfaces in the writings of all the exegetes examined in this thesis. As a result, the Qur'an "became a branch after being a root, a follower after it was followed, weighed against others when it was the measure."⁹⁷ Though Banna is sharply critical of the juristic tradition, which lacks "the liberationist spirit" (*al-ruh al-tahririyya*) that runs throughout the Qur'an,⁹⁸ he appreciates the value of an Islamic legal code as a practical necessity in daily affairs, such as legal disputes. To this end, he has produced a massive, three-volume work on Islamic jurisprudence that draws upon the Qur'an as the sole binding source and, thus, is not constrained by earlier juristic rulings, the exegetical tradition and the *hadith*.⁹⁹

Ziauddin Sardar is another compelling example of a Muslim who has reflected extensively on scripture in light of contemporary issues. Born in Pakistan, Sardar moved with his family to the UK when he was nine years old. He grew up in East London and attended the City University, studying physics and information science. An acclaimed public intellectual and cultural critic, he has written on a remarkably wide range of fields, including Islam and future studies, natural science and critical theory, film and literary criticism.¹⁰⁰ In 2008, Sardar wrote a series of weekly, online blogs on the Qur'an for the British newspaper *The Guardian*, which were later collected into a single-volume book:

⁹⁶ Al-Banna, *Al-'Awda ila al-Qur'an*, 17-18.

⁹⁷ Ibid, 18.

⁹⁸ Ibid, 24.

⁹⁹ See Gamal al-Banna, *Nahwa Fiqh Jadid* [Towards a New Islamic Jurisprudence], 3 vols. (Cairo: Dar al-Fikr al-Islami, 1995).

¹⁰⁰ Ziauddin Sardar, "Biography," personal website. Accessed 5 June 2012, <http://ziauddinsardar.com/ziauddin-sardar-biography/>

Reading the Qur'an: The Contemporary Relevance of the Sacred Text of Islam (2011).¹⁰¹

Like Esack, Engineer, Wadud and Barlas, Sardar (as the title of his work suggests) seeks to interpret the Qur'an for the present, for his own context.¹⁰² Eschewing any claims of objectivity or of putting forth an interpretation that is timeless, he emphasizes his own subject position as a British Muslim living in and for the twenty-first century. His commentary adopts a thematic approach – a mode of reading that we will examine in detail in the Conclusion – devoting separate chapters to scriptural topics like “Prophets and Revelation,” “Humanity and Diversity,” “Ethics and Morality,” as well as contemporary issues like “Freedom of Expression,” “Polygamy and Domestic Violence,” “Art, Music and Imagination.” Sardar has deep grievances with the format of traditional exegesis. Echoing Wadud, Barlas and the Pakistani scholar Fazlur Rahman, a pioneering thinker whom we will encounter throughout this thesis, Sardar argues that its linear approach – that is, the traditional reading practice in which one verse is expounded after another, commencing from the first verse of the opening chapter and continuing, sequentially, to the last verse of the closing chapter – “atomizes” the text, resulting in the exegete taking verses out of context and reading them in isolation of the text as a whole.¹⁰³ Yet, despite this critique, he does not dismiss classical commentary. On the contrary, he writes that there is much to be learned from the tradition, especially with regard to “the style and idiom of the Qur'an, its literal and metaphorical use of

¹⁰¹ Ziauddin Sardar, *Reading the Qur'an: The Contemporary Relevance of the Sacred Text of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), xi. For the original blog, see Ziauddin Sardar, “Blogging the Qur'an,” *The Guardian*, accessed 5 June 2012, <http://blogs.guardian.co.uk/quran/>

¹⁰² Sardar, *Reading the Qur'an*, xi. Though Sardar does not adopt an explicitly liberationist approach, his work has been well received by Muslim liberation theologians like Esack, who has contributed a glowing endorsement on the back cover of Sardar's commentary.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 60-61.

language.”¹⁰⁴ At various points in his commentary, Sardar draws upon the insights of earlier Qur’anic exegetes, such as Abu ‘Abdullah al-Qurtubi (d. 1273), Isma‘il ibn Kathir (d. 1373), and Muhyiddin ibn ‘Arabi (d. 1240), in addition to more contemporary commentators like the Egyptian Sayyid Qutb (d. 1966) and the Pakistani Abul A’la Mawdudi (d. 1979). In fact, the first part of Sardar’s book is, essentially, a tribute to the exegetical tradition. Titled “By Way of Tradition,” it offers a sequential reading of the first two chapters of the Qur’an (Q. 1:1-2:286). But instead of concentrating on one verse at a time, Sardar proceeds thematically, unpacking the main topics and lessons of successive clusters of verses.¹⁰⁵

Nimat Hafez Barazangi is yet another example of a Muslim thinker who has turned to the Qur’an as a primary source of guidance, relating scripture (like Wadud and Barlas) to her struggles as a woman in an unjust society. Barazangi was born and raised in Syria, studying philosophy and sociology at Damascus University. She then travelled to the US, receiving her Master’s in education at Columbia University and a Ph.D. in the same field at Cornell University, where she is currently a researcher in the Women’s Studies Program.¹⁰⁶ So just like Engineer, Wadud and Barlas, as well as Banna and Sardar, Barazangi does not have any formal, traditional training in a *madrasa*, but rather a lay educational background. She has written a commentary of the Qur’an, titled *Woman’s Identity and the Qur’an: A New Reading* (2004).¹⁰⁷ According to Barazangi, the “central issue for Muslim women is their lack of participation in the interpretation of the

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 25-26.

¹⁰⁵ So, for instance, the chapter that covers Q. 2:1-7 is called “The Qur’an and Doubt” while the next chapter, examining 2:8-20, is titled “The Hypocrites.”

¹⁰⁶ Nimat Hafez Barazangi, “Curriculum Vitae,” personal website (“E-Self Learning in Arabic and English”). Accessed 23 June 2012, <http://www.eself-learning-arabic.cornell.edu/>

¹⁰⁷ Nimat Hafez Barazangi, *Woman’s Identity and the Qur’an: A New Reading* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004).

Qur'an.”¹⁰⁸ But whereas Wadud and Barlas emphasize the necessity of reinterpreting the text itself, and thus do not give the exegetical tradition much weight, Barazangi argues that interpretation entails studying the Qur'an and the “early sciences of the Qur'an,” as well as the *sunna*.¹⁰⁹ In order for women to effect lasting changes in Muslim communities, they must partake in the exposition of these pivotal Islamic texts and traditions, or what Barazangi collectively refers to as “Islamic higher learning.”¹¹⁰ Though there are certainly parallels between Barazangi's exegesis and those of Wadud and Barlas, such as their shared hermeneutical emphasis on *taqwa* (‘piety’) as the sole criterion that will be used to differentiate between humankind irrespective of gender affiliation,¹¹¹ it is important to note that there are some fundamental differences in their discourses. Firstly, while Wadud and Barlas acknowledge the contextual basis of interpretation and, thus, the impossibility of reading the Qur'an from within a vacuum, Barazangi maintains that Muslim women should “interpret the text fairly and without presenting their own biases, whether their biases are based on gender, race, or class.”¹¹² This statement is surprising, especially given her express interest in woman's identity when approaching the Qur'an. Clearly, it betrays a lack of awareness not only of the innate contextuality of any reading, but also that the text has been understood for centuries through the framework of male identity. Secondly, Barazangi refuses to connect sexual inequality with patriarchy, claiming that there is not necessarily a linkage between female subordination and male privilege in seventh-century Arabia.¹¹³ The subtext here is

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 22-23.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, 2.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid, ix.

¹¹² Ibid, 25.

¹¹³ Ibid, 3.

that women can attain justice without having to criticize men. This argument stands in stark contrast to those of Wadud and Barlas, for whom patriarchy and sexual injustice are inextricably intertwined, the former being the root cause of the latter. Indeed, in this respect, Barazangi is at odds with all the commentators considered in this dissertation, who believe that injustice cannot be countered without identifying the oppressor and standing in solidarity with the oppressed against their oppressor.

Methodology and Chapter Outline

This introductory chapter will conclude with some discussion of how I have used my sources and how I have organized the dissertation. Comparative textual analysis is my prime methodology. The writings of these exegetes are readily accessible, appearing as book-length monographs, as individual chapters in edited volumes and as articles in both academic and non-academic journals. As such, when I refer to a respective intellectual's 'commentary,' a term that I use interchangeably with 'exegesis' and 'interpretation,' I am referring not to a physical book but to her/his Qur'anic *discourse*, which encompasses all of these media. At various points in this dissertation, however, I will reflect upon the format, the stylistics of their interpretations, especially in the Conclusion. When doing so, I will be referring to their principal monographs on the Qur'an: namely, Esack's *Qur'an, Liberation and Pluralism: An Islamic Perspective of Interreligious Solidarity Against Oppression* (1997); Wadud's *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* (1999); and Barlas' "*Believing Women*" in *Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an* (2002). Engineer is the only exegete who has not produced a single-volume text devoted solely to his Qur'anic commentary. Rather, his

hermeneutic is spread throughout a number of books and articles. Therefore, while I will use ‘commentary’ to denote their Qur’anic discourses, I will use ‘Commentary’ – that is, with an upper-case ‘C’ – to refer to their main exegetical monographs. In addition to engaging in a close reading of their publications, I have undertaken in-depth interviews with Esack, Engineer, Wadud and Barlas, all of whom have given their written consent to cite and quote the transcripts.¹¹⁴ I organized these semi-structured interviews into three sections – biography, interpretive methodology and discourses on justice – in order to mirror the layout of the chapters, which will be discussed in detail below. Once the interviews were completed, I transcribed them verbatim, thereby transforming them into textual sources. That being said, I have chosen to privilege these intellectuals’ publications. The intended function of the interviews was to play a supplementary role to their written works, such as clarifying and fleshing out vague aspects of their arguments and filling in gaps, particularly in terms of biographical and historical context. The interviews also proved fruitful in gauging the current trajectory of these exegetes’ thinking, in discerning changes and new directions in their hermeneutics that they have yet to put to paper. When discussing Barlas’ approach, for example, we will see that while in her Commentary she had called for a rethinking of the *shari‘a* in light of Qur’anic principles,¹¹⁵ by the time of our interview in 2009 she had become deeply disillusioned with the prospect of legal reform, asking why Muslims even need to reclaim such a blatantly misogynistic tradition.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴ Amina Wadud, email message to author, 21 October 2012; Asghar Ali Engineer, email message to author, 22 October 2012; Asma Barlas, email message to author, 22 October 2012; Farid Esack, email message to author, 21 October 2012.

¹¹⁵ Barlas, “*Believing Women*” in *Islam*, 75.

¹¹⁶ A. Barlas Interview, 2009.

The dissertation is comprised of four core chapters, each dedicated to a specific intellectual. Chapter One will focus on Esack; Chapter Two on Engineer; Chapter Three on Wadud; and Chapter Four on Barlas. I have commenced with Esack's and Engineer's exegeses in order to underscore both the global – as opposed to North American or Western – basis of liberationist engagement with the Qur'an and its multilayered character, encompassing economic and racial justice. The first part of each chapter will provide some contextual background on the exegete in question, such as key biographical information and a brief historical survey of the country from which s/he hails. The second part of each chapter will address issues of interpretive method: How exactly ought the Qur'an to be read? Who has the authority to expound the text? Why does scripture, as opposed to other Islamic texts, assume a central place in her/his Islamic discourse? What role do extra-Qur'anic sources like the *hadith* and the *shari'a* play in the exegetical enterprise? What are the principal hermeneutical strategies for the reinterpretation of the text? In the third section of each chapter, I will explore how the interpreter approaches liberation and its relationship to Islam: What does the Qur'an have to say about socioeconomic justice, gender equity and/or religious pluralism? How does one stand against oppression? That is, what modes of resistance are sanctioned by the text? What is the scope of the exegete's discourse on liberation? Does it extend to other struggles? This last section is especially germane to the underlying argument of this thesis because it will show that all the exegetes examined have a holistic approach to justice, thereby further problematizing the reduction of liberationist exegesis solely to contexts of patriarchy.

These questions, which will function more as general guidelines than rules, have been conceptualized broadly to allow for the specificities of the intellectuals' societal

contexts to come through. Because of their different subject positions, these exegetes emphasize certain struggles over others. As women, Wadud and Barlas foreground the struggle for gender equality, while questions of religious pluralism play a more central role in Esack's hermeneutic, as he resisted alongside non-Muslim activists in the anti-apartheid struggle. This is not to suggest that sexual justice is not an important part of Esack's thinking, but rather that one's priorities are determined by context. Indeed, it is precisely because of the centrality of contextuality in these intellectuals' writings that I have chosen to organize the chapters in a case-by-case format as opposed to a thematic one, with separate chapters devoted to topics like methodology, gender and pluralism. Throughout the dissertation, I will attempt to think comparatively, constantly contrasting and drawing connections between these thinkers. The Conclusion will unpack the wider significance of this study, which, as I have noted earlier, is two-fold. The first section will outline several new insights that liberationist and women's readings can offer with regard to the emergence of thematic commentary in contemporary Islamic thought, while the second section will argue that the expressly political character of their exegeses betrays the hegemony that Islamism has long exercised over our understanding of 'the political' and 'the radical' in Islam. This dissertation will end, therefore, by proposing an entirely new definition of political and radical Islam. Finally, I would like to point out that for the convenience of the reader I have provided a select glossary of terms and the full wording of all Qur'anic verses cited, including those cited in the footnotes. Where these passages are not supplied in the thesis proper they can be found in the Appendix, which is arranged in numerical order.

CHAPTER 1:

The Reading of Farid Esack

It is Our Will to bestow Our grace upon the downtrodden of the Earth, and to make them the leaders and to make them the inheritors of the Earth.

(Q. 28:5)

All of us are forced by the context of 9/11 to find a moderate Islam, a beautiful Islam, a gentle Islam. Why should the context of occupation not force us to find an angry Islam?¹

(Farid Esack)

Introduction

This chapter is devoted to the Qur’anic exegesis of the South African theologian Farid Esack. The first part of the chapter will focus on hermeneutical method: How does Esack read the text and how is his reading a departure from other interpretive methods, in particular historical criticism? Here, I will demonstrate that although the Qur’anic text certainly plays a prime role in Esack’s commentary, the experiences of the marginalized coupled with struggle against oppression constitute as important a text that is to be ‘read’ alongside scripture. This will then lead into a discussion of how Esack interprets justice in the text. According to Esack, the God of the Qur’an is not only a just deity, but is in solidarity with the marginalized – a preferential option that is embodied in the Exodus. In this section, I will offer a critique of Esack’s usage of the Exodus as the key paradigm in his liberationist exegesis, pointing to its centrality in Christian liberation theology and, in its stead, proposing a more ‘organic’ paradigm, one that can underline the distinctiveness

¹ F. Esack Interview, 2009.

of Muslim theology and experience. This chapter will then explore the scope of Esack's discourse on justice. I will argue that while the genesis of his radical theology lies in the South African struggle against apartheid, it cannot be reduced to this struggle. Indeed, to do so would undermine his very conception of justice. Esack's articulation of liberation is an utterly comprehensive one and cannot be confined to a specific struggle. 'Prophetic' – or a principled – solidarity, therefore, is a fundamental component of liberation and lies at the heart of a meaningful commitment to social justice. The final section of this chapter will deal with the wider significance of Esack's hermeneutic, which, I argue, is twofold. Firstly, his pluralistic reading of the Qur'an speaks to the potential of liberation theology, as an approach that is not only critical of power relations but built on the struggle against oppression, to act as an effective, interfaith alternative to the problematic and simplistic language of religious dialogue. Secondly, Esack's hermeneutic undermines any objective, disembodied claim to 'Islam.' In so doing, he forces Muslims to raise larger questions of whose Islam is being articulated in a given context and whose interests are being served by this particular understanding? This chapter will first set the stage for discussion by providing a short history of South Africa and some biographical background on Esack.

Historical Context

Over the course of its modern history South Africa became an increasingly racist state, as a white minority came to dominate an indigenous black majority, leading to an anti-apartheid movement that toppled the regime in 1994. The Dutch first arrived in South Africa as part of a shipping cartel in the late seventeenth century, followed by the

first wave of the British in the late eighteenth century.² The burgeoning White settler community confiscated land from the indigenous people and created a racially stratified society. Separation – or ‘apartheid,’ as it later came to be termed – between Coloureds and Whites became an integral part of the social order and was institutionalized in law.³ The Urban Areas Act of 1923, for example, made it illegal for Blacks to live in the cities.⁴ Three hundred years of White supremacy came to a head in 1948 with the electoral victory of the National Party, which sought to institutionalize racial hierarchy in every aspect of South African life.⁵ Though a mass resistance movement had existed since the early 1930s,⁶ it took on a more radicalized and militant colouring with the rise of the National Party.⁷ The anti-apartheid struggle gained great momentum over the second half of the twentieth century, despite the ruthless manner in which the state clamped down on activists, ranging from imprisonment to torture to outright murder. The internal liberation struggle was also strengthened by a formidable international solidarity movement, arguably the largest in world history,⁸ successfully calling for a global boycott of the South African state. In 1994, the regime fell and democratic elections were held, ushering in Nelson Mandela – the leader of the main resistance organization, the African National Congress – as president.

² Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation, and Pluralism*, 19.

³ For useful surveys of South Africa and its history of apartheid, see Leonard Thompson, *A History of South Africa* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000); Robert Ross, Anne Kelk Mager and Bill Nasson eds. *The Cambridge History of South Africa Vol. 2: 1885-1994* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); and William Beinart, *Twentieth-Century South Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

⁴ Bernard Magubane, “Introduction: The Political Context,” in *The Road to Democracy in South Africa, Vol. 1*, ed. South African Democracy Education Trust (Cape Town: Zebra Press, 2004), 8. This richly detailed chapter is part of a monumental six-volume work that offers an authoritative account of the South African liberation struggle from 1980 to 1996. Volumes 1, 3 and 4 have been completed thus far.

⁵ Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation, and Pluralism*, 24.

⁶ Magubane, 31.

⁷ Ibid, 29.

⁸ Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation, and Pluralism*, 240.

Trained in Qur’anic studies and active as a religious scholar, Esack played a leading role in the anti-apartheid struggle. He was born in 1956 in the Cape Town suburb of Wynberg,⁹ and experienced the racism of apartheid at a very early age. As a result of the Group Areas Act of 1961, Esack, his mother and siblings – his father had abandoned his mother when Esack was only three weeks old – were forced to move from their home, which was now rendered “White,” to the ghettos of the Cape Flats.¹⁰ It was here, in the coloured township of Bonteheuwel, that Esack was raised. He recounts vividly his experience of growing up in poverty: “Long periods passed during which we had no shoes and I recall running across frost-covered fields to school so that the frost could not really bite into my feet.”¹¹ These formative experiences led Esack to join the anti-apartheid struggle while still a child. Indeed, he was first detained by the South African Security Police at the age of nine. Esack was awarded a scholarship when he was seventeen to undertake Islamic studies in a *madrassa* in Karachi, Pakistan. Eight years later he completed his studies, specializing in *‘ulum al-Qur’an* (‘the Sciences of the Qur’an’). Upon his return to South Africa in the early 1980s, he and several friends formed the “Call of Islam,” which became the most important anti-apartheid organization in the Muslim community. The Call of Islam was deeply involved in the national struggle, working closely with the United Democratic Front,¹² a mass-based coalition of activists including students, workers and church leaders. After the fall of apartheid, Esack travelled to Germany to study biblical hermeneutics and then to the UK, where he earned a Ph.D. in Qur’anic hermeneutics at the University of Birmingham. Having studied in the

⁹ Esack (in discussion with the author) preferred that his full date of birth not be disclosed.

¹⁰ Esack, *On Being a Muslim*, 95.

¹¹ Esack, *Qur’an, Liberation, and Pluralism*, 2.

¹² *Ibid*, 6.

madrassa and the secular university, Esack is reflective of a growing class of Muslim scholars schooled in both systems of knowledge.¹³ He has taught at numerous seminaries and universities around the world, such as New York Theological Seminary and Harvard University. Esack returned to South Africa in 2009 and is currently Professor in the Study of Islam at the University of Johannesburg.

Interpretive Method

The Order of the Texts

Insofar as the textual sources of Islam are concerned, the Qur'an lies at the core of Esack's Islamic discourse. He focuses on the Qur'an because, as the literal Word of God, it is the only source of Islam that is deemed by all Muslims, irrespective of sectarian allegiance, to be completely authentic. Conversely, the *hadith* do not have a prominent place in Esack's Islamic discourse because they are highly contested amongst Muslims.¹⁴ He also finds the *hadith* difficult to negotiate due to the sheer number of prophetic reports – there are six canonical collections for Sunni Muslims and three separate collections for Shi'a Muslims – as well as the fact that the content of some of the reports are profoundly misogynistic.¹⁵ This is not to imply, however, that Esack rejects *hadith* altogether, but rather that he privileges the Qur'an as the supreme textual source of religious enquiry. As we shall see in subsequent chapters, the prioritization of the Qur'an – as opposed to the exclusive use of the Qur'an – is a common thematic thread running through the exegetes studied in this thesis. That the Qur'an-only movement has focussed more on polemicizing

¹³ Taji-Farouki, 5.

¹⁴ Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation, and Pluralism*, 15.

¹⁵ F. Esack Interview, 2009.

against *hadith* than engaging with the Qur'an poses a problem for Esack.¹⁶ For, in so doing, it has become more an anti-*hadith* movement than a Qur'an-only one. In fact, Esack makes use of prophetic reports in his work. In an article calling for compassion and solidarity with victims of AIDS, for example, he draws upon the following *hadith*, in which God, on the Day of Judgement, will address the believer who neglects the sick:

“O child of humankind, I was sick and you did not visit me!” I will say: “My Lord! How could I visit You when You are the Sustainer of the Universe?” And God will reply: “Did you not know that my servant so-and-so was sick and you did not bother to visit him? Did you not realize that if you had visited him, you would have found me with him?” (*Tirmidhi*, 2:438)¹⁷

It is telling that Esack's book, *On Being a Muslim: Finding a Religious Path in the World Today* – a deeply personal collection of writings – is prefaced not with a Qur'anic verse but a *hadith*, related to him by a dying friend afflicted with cancer, Shamima Shaikh. It reads, “If the Last Hour strikes and finds you carrying a sapling to the grove for planting, go ahead and plant it.”¹⁸ Every *hadith* is comprised of a chain of narration (*sanad*), which traces itself back to Prophet Muhammad, and the substantive content of the report (*matn*) – the former historically receiving far more attention in Islamic scholarship than the latter – and it is interesting to note that the chains of narration are almost always absent in the *hadiths* that Esack cites. This is not because who narrated what, and thus the question of authenticity, is irrelevant to Esack, but rather because what the text actually says is the most important issue. Indeed, when I asked him if the *hadith* literature would figure more prominently into his work if there were to be a systematic rethinking of the *hadith*

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Farid Esack, “Care in a Season of AIDS: An Islamic Perspective,” in *Restoring Hope: Decent Care in the Midst of HIV/AIDS*, eds. Ted Karpf, Jeffrey V. Lazarus, and Todd Ferguson (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 66.

¹⁸ Esack, *On Being a Muslim*, xi.

sciences – a scholarly shift from focussing on the chain of narration to the actual content of the *hadith* and how congruent this content is with the Qur'an – he promptly agreed.¹⁹

Just as Esack prioritizes the Qur'an over the *hadith* so, too, does he privilege the Qur'an over the historic intellectual tradition. Esack is at home with this immense corpus of knowledge, particularly the field of classical commentary, which is a direct result of his own traditional training.²⁰ In his textbook on the Qur'an, for instance, he cites such celebrated scholars as Abu Ja'far al-Tabari (d. 923), Abu al-Qasim al-Zamakhshari (d. 1144), Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (d. 1210), Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah (d. 1350) and Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti (d. 1505), as well as modern commentators like Rashid Rida (d. 1935) and Abu al-Qasim al-Khoei (d. 1992). Indeed, Esack's hermeneutical theory of "progressive revelation" – which will be discussed shortly – builds upon the exegetical writings of the eighteenth century Indian scholar Shah Wali Allah,²¹ an Islamic revivalist whom we met earlier on in the introductory chapter. Esack engages the tradition in a highly critical manner, however. The Qur'an reigns supreme in his thinking and where there is any conflict between the two, the Qur'an squarely takes precedence. As he succinctly sums it up, "You trump all other arguments with the Qur'an."²²

Contests over Contexts: From Scholarly Project to Liberating Exegesis

The question of context has become an increasingly salient feature of Qur'anic exegesis. This is quite a recent hermeneutical development, as classical commentators

¹⁹ F. Esack Interview, 2009.

²⁰ Jane D. McAuliffe, "Reading the Qur'an with Fidelity and Freedom," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 73, (2005): 629.

²¹ Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation, and Pluralism*, 55.

²² F. Esack Interview, 2009.

concentrated on the linguistic study of the text, such as its philology and grammar.²³ The Pakistani Islamic scholar Fazlur Rahman (d. 1988) played a pioneering role in raising the question of historical context in commentary, engineering an entirely new method in approaching scripture: namely, the “double movement theory.” It was historical criticism par excellence. The first “movement,” Rahman proposed, was an exhaustive examination of the immediate setting of revelation – that is, seventh-century Arabia – and thus a comprehensive study of the societal, cultural, political and economic milieu of Meccan life.²⁴ Broader socio-moral objectives would be extracted from this classical context and then, in the second “movement,” these general Islamic principles would be applied to the specificities of the present.²⁵ An interesting aspect of this interpretive strategy is that the ‘*ulama*’ (the traditionally trained and historic interpreters of the faith) and lay experts in fields of knowledge outside Islam like sociology, law, history and philosophy would have to work together in order to see both movements through.²⁶ This was a shared scholarly project, therefore, between lay and learned. Islamic scholars have built on this notion of a ‘shared’ *ijtihad*, or critical intellectual enquiry. The Muslim reformist Tariq Ramadan, for example, has classified scholars into two groups: ‘*ulama al-nusus*’ (“text scholars”), denoting specialists in Islam, and ‘*ulama al-waqi*’ (“context scholars”), or those who are

²³ Abdullah Saeed, *Interpreting the Qur’an: Towards a Contemporary Approach* (London: Routledge, 2006), 117.

²⁴ Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: The Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 6.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 7.

²⁶ Abdullah Saeed, “Fazlur Rahman: A Framework for Interpreting the Ethico-Legal Content of the Qur’an,” in *Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qur’an*, ed. Suha Taji-Farouki (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 58.

experts in other fields of learning.²⁷ And it is through the collaboration of both, Ramadan argues, that an Islam that speaks to the challenges of modernity can be articulated.

Esack's principal interest is not the classical context, however, but the immediate present. The historical criticism of Rahman denotes a certain distance, a rift between the average, contemporary reader and the Qur'anic text. The underlying assumption of his scholarly project is that the Qur'an, as a historical document, had a primary audience and that this was the Prophet's community in seventh-century Arabia. With the passing of generations, then, distance is inevitably created between the initial act of revelation and the present. The following description of the text by the Islamic scholar Bruce Lawrence, clearly conditioned by the logic of historical criticism, encapsulates this assumption:

The Qur'an as *written* in Arabic is less than the revelation given to Muhammad; it is a second-order revelation. The Qur'an written, then *translated* from Arabic into English, becomes a third-order revelation. Distance from the source handicaps us, yet we can still learn about Islam by engaging with the Qur'an, even as a written text, translated from Arabic into English.²⁸ [My italics]

The subtext here is that the most 'authentic' encounter with the text is as an essentially oral, Arabic discourse. There exists an enduring and inherent hermeneutical gap, rooted in time, which cannot be bridged. But where a connection can be made, however limited it may be, is through the mediation of the immediate audience of the text: the very first generation of Muslims to whom God revealed the Word. And it is precisely because the Qur'an, Esack interjects, is not speaking primarily to the community of Muhammad in seventh-century Arabia but to all of humanity,²⁹ that his key interest is the contemporary context of the reader. God speaks to the faithful directly, irrespective of time and place,

²⁷ Tariq Ramadan, *Radical Reform: Islamic Ethics and Liberation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 121.

²⁸ Bruce Lawrence, *The Qur'an: A Biography* (London: Atlantic Books, 2006), 8.

²⁹ Farid Esack, "Islam and Gender Justice: Beyond Simplistic Apologia," in *What Men Owe Women: Men's Voices from World Religions*, eds. John C. Raines and Daniel C. Maguire (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 2001), 195.

unmediated by the classical context of revelation. This is not to say that Esack ignores the conditions of seventh-century Arabian life. In fact, he devotes the second chapter of his textbook on the Qur'an, entitled "The Word Enters the World," to this topic, examining the prior circumstances and immediate social context of revelation.³⁰ Rather, my point is that the chief framework of Esack's hermeneutic is the here and now – not late antiquity – and that he consciously privileges the former over the latter.

It is worthwhile noting that Esack's emphasis on the present bears a striking resemblance to Islamist readings. Leading Islamist thinkers, such as the Egyptian Sayyid Qutb and the Pakistani Abu l'Ala Mawdudi, urged ordinary Muslims to read the Qur'an themselves – and, therefore, to bypass the accumulated scholarly commentary on the text – arguing that the Qur'an spoke directly to the believers, addressing their immediate circumstances and struggles.³¹ The following is an excerpt from a set of guidelines on how to read the Qur'an by Khurram Murad (d. 1996), a member of the Jama'at al-Islami – the most influential Islamist movement in South Asia – and a student of Mawdudi:

Be aware that you are always in Allah's presence.
Feel, as though you hear the Qur'an from Allah.
Feel, as though the Qur'an addresses you directly...
Consider each *aya* [verse] as relevant today, not as a thing of the past...
Reflect deeply upon what you read...
Take each passage of the revelation as addressed to you.³² [My parentheses]

In other words, scripture does not speak through the mediation of a primary audience (classical Arabia) to a secondary audience (the present). Rather, a direct hermeneutical link is forged between God and the faithful, transcending time and space. Another common characteristic between Esack's readings and those of Islamists, then, is their

³⁰ Farid Esack, *The Qur'an: A User's Guide* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2005), 56.

³¹ McAuliffe, 623.

³² Khurram Murad, as quoted in Ahmad Von Denffer, *'Ulum al-Qur'an: An Introduction to the Sciences of the Qur'an* (Leicestershire, UK: The Islamic Foundation, 2007), 179.

markedly lay character. South African Muslims engaged in the anti-apartheid struggle routinely came together in religious circles (*halaqat*) to reflect collectively on a translation of the Qur'an, asking one another what they felt the various verses meant and how these verses spoke to their experiences.³³ Such communitarian exegesis and direct access to the Qur'anic text – a hallmark of Islamist interpretation – stands in stark contrast to the elite manner in which sacred authority operated historically in Muslim societies, wherein the *'ulama* functioned as the main arbiters of Islam.³⁴ Unsurprisingly, these reading practices have been met with much antagonism by the *'ulama*, who have been quick to dismiss such readings as skewed, as lacking requisite exegetical skills. And it is this scholarly claim to *own* the Qur'an that violates, for Esack, the profoundly universal spirit of the text. He describes the *'ulama's* deep-seated reservations about direct access to the Qur'an as follows:

I think it has something to do with control. You have all of these barricades, all these walls, and they are not just walls. All these walls, all of these barricades have gatekeepers. And the gatekeepers derive their own meaning from their role as controllers or managers of the sacred. So once you say that, look, I want to parachute into the centre and seek an audience with the centre, all these people who have made their livings and have derived meanings from being interlocutors with the centre, you are threatening them. So they have sacralised all these borders, all these boundaries and so on, but it is also really about their authority. They will say we want to protect the centre.³⁵

An underlying problem that Esack has, therefore, with Rahman's approach is that it not only fails to speak to the present directly, but that it is also an essentially elitist enterprise. For if the classical context is to be hermeneutically positioned between the Creator and the contemporary reader then so, too, must religious authority be delegated to those very few people, traditionally trained or otherwise, who can partake in this scholarly project.

³³ F. Esack Interview, 2009.

³⁴ Taji-Farouki, 12.

³⁵ F. Esack Interview, 2009.

In Esack's reading of the Qur'an through the lens of the present, he consciously privileges the perspective of the poor and the oppressed. The following guideline from Murad's essay on how to approach the text betrays a key difference between the readings of Esack and contemporary Islamists: "Read the Qur'an with a mind free from bias and preconceived ideas, as otherwise you will read your own notions into the book."³⁶ There is no acknowledgement, therefore, that the reader brings a *pretext*, conditioned by class, religion, ethnicity, gender, time and place, to the text and that this contextual baggage constitutes an inescapable reality of reading. This is not to imply, however, that classical Islamic scholars acknowledged their own biases when approaching scripture. Within traditional exegesis – a dense body of knowledge built on the continuous accumulation of commentary over the generations – interpretations that lay outside the fold of orthodoxy were hastily consigned to the categorical dustbin of *tafsir bi'l-ra'y*, or "commentary by opinion."³⁷ In marked contrast to this lack of reflexivity, Esack is acutely aware that he cannot approach the Qur'an as a disembodied figure, appreciating that he brings to the text limited horizons rooted in his own reality.³⁸ And it is through this acknowledgement that all readings are contextual that he chooses to favour a specific context: that of the oppressed. The principal subjects of Esack's interpretation are not the powerful and the affluent, but the marginalized (*al-aradhil*) and the downtrodden (*al-mustad'afun*).³⁹ It is important to clarify here that he is not interested in merely including the perspective of the marginalized into a growing pool of existing accounts. Esack's hermeneutic is not one

³⁶ Murad, as quoted in Von Denffer, 180.

³⁷ Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation, and Pluralism*, 75.

³⁸ Esack, *The Qur'an: A User's Guide*, 192.

³⁹ Esack, "In Search of Progressive Islam Beyond 9/11," 81.

in which the discourses of the powerful and the powerless weigh in side-by-side. Instead, he privileges the vantage point, the experiences of the oppressed.⁴⁰

But Esack does not read from the perspective of the oppressed as a neutral and disinterested observer. Rather, he approaches the text as an ally actively engaged in struggle with the oppressed against their oppressor. Esack's understanding of Islam is one that emerges within the framework of struggle. His is a religiosity that is conditioned, indeed defined, by a deep-seated commitment to transforming society from a state of oppression to one of justice wherein everyone is equal.⁴¹ *Praxis* – the idea that the struggle against oppression ought to form the framework through which theology emerges⁴² – is a cornerstone of his exegesis. And it is precisely this overtly political aspect of Esack's reading that makes his hermeneutic a hermeneutic of liberation. The pioneering Christian liberation theologian, Gustavo Gutiérrez, sums up the difference between liberating and conventional exegesis:

...the theology of liberation offers us not so much a new theme for reflection as a new *way* to do theology. Theology as critical reflection on historical praxis is a liberating theology.⁴³ (My italics)

Theology and struggle, therefore, are inextricably interwoven into a dialectical paradigm of action, religious reflection and renewed action – a mode of reading sanctioned, Esack argues, by the very nature of the Qur'an's revelation. For the text never presented itself as a coherent and closed scripture, but as “a revealed discourse unfolding in response to the requirements of a society over a period of twenty-three years.” (Q. 17:82; 17:106)⁴⁴ God

⁴⁰ F. Esack Interview, 2009.

⁴¹ Esack, “In Search of Progressive Islam Beyond 9/11,” 80.

⁴² Christopher Rowland ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), xix.

⁴³ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1973), 15.

⁴⁴ Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation, and Pluralism*, 53.

was thoroughly immersed in the struggles of the early Muslim community, manifesting the divine presence, through the act of revelation, in response to various situations as they emerged. In other words, the seemingly insulated categories of text and context were collapsed into a hermeneutical circle of liberation: struggle, followed by revelation and introspection, followed by further struggle.⁴⁵ The Qur'an's revelation thus reflects a deity who engages history, intervening in and conversing with the affairs of humankind. Esack calls this Qur'anic commitment to *praxis* "progressive revelation" – a form of scriptural engagement that characterized the lives of the first Muslims. And it is because the text speaks to all times and places that the principle of progressive revelation, too, is utterly universal. Through this commitment to *praxis*, the Qur'an becomes alive and speaks in a liberating way to every generation of Muslims, who draw their own distinctive meanings and inspiration from the text.⁴⁶

It is misleading and simplistic to dismiss interpretations rooted in *praxis* as being 'politicized' or 'contextual,' for all readings are inescapably shaped by context and reflect vested political interests. Many contemporary Islamic scholars, traditional or otherwise, have hastily dismissed what they have deemed as politicized readings of Islam. Rahman is a compelling case in point. Operating on the assumption that there existed a pristine, apolitical state of being (which, of course, he himself occupied), Rahman criticized the mixing of religion and politics which, he argued, had led to disastrous consequences for Islamic thought.⁴⁷ What is even more problematic in Rahman's discourse is that at the same time that he was reluctant to partake in political activity, justice remained a core

⁴⁵ Esack, *On Being a Muslim*, 3.

⁴⁶ Esack, "Islam and Gender Justice," 206.

⁴⁷ Dale F. Eickelman and James Piscatori, *Muslim Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 53.

component of his exegesis, reiterating time and again that a key objective of scripture was the attainment of a socially just order.⁴⁸ This striking incongruence between Rahman's emphasis on Qur'anic justice on the one hand and his criticism of the mixing of religion and politics on the other – or, to put it another way, speaking of justice in purely abstract terms and thus divorced from specificity, from concrete contexts of oppression – raises larger ethical questions about those who preach justice but who are not, at the same time, engaged in struggle. The staunch refusal to locate oneself within a decidedly political context is not restricted to Rahman, however. During the anti-apartheid movement the *'ulama*, many of whom chose to remain silent and complicit in the face of oppression, kept an arms length from Muslim youth in confrontation with the state, dismissing them as having radicalized and politicized Islam.⁴⁹ Not only are 'detachment' and 'neutrality' hermeneutical impossibilities, but, within a context of manifest injustice, the claim to be apolitical, and thus to allow one's passivity to justify the existing status quo, constitutes the very foil of liberation: a theology of accommodation.⁵⁰

Indeed, within the expressly politicized discourse of liberation theology, *praxis* is a central 'text' that is to be read alongside the Qur'anic text. Most Islamic reformists who have sought to reread scripture in light of contemporary circumstances have, in spite of their differing methods, searched for the 'right way' to expound the text. Rahman, for instance, was pre-occupied with finding the "correct method" of interpreting the Qur'an, and this objective lay at the heart of his voluminous scholarship.⁵¹ His obsession with unearthing the proper methodology of Qur'anic exegesis, culminating in the celebrated

⁴⁸ Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes in the Qur'an* (Minneapolis, US: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1994), 37.

⁴⁹ Farid Esack, "Three Islamic Strands in the South African Struggle for Justice," *Third World Quarterly* 10, (1988): 478.

⁵⁰ Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation, and Pluralism*, 7.

⁵¹ Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, 1.

double movement theory, was premised on the deep-seated conviction that there existed concrete and unchanging principles within the text. The trick was simply to discern the universals from the particulars. And it is here that a fundamental divergence emerges between Rahman and Esack, for *whose* understanding of the universal gets universalized? As Esack exclaims: “It’s not just: Oh, the Qur’an must be studied in its context. Whose context?”⁵² The context and vantage point of the slave is radically different from that of the slave-master – a lived experience that will inevitably shape the type of exegesis that emerges. Thus, within a theology of liberation, lived realities of inequality and oppression constitute the interpretive point of departure, reflecting an embodied text (‘life’) that is as significant as the written text (‘scripture’).⁵³ Because context is never universal or stable, and because context is hermeneutically on a par with scripture, truth – what Rahman calls *the* underlying principles of the Qur’an – can never be singular and absolute, timeless and disembodied. Rather, through the process of *praxis* truth manifests itself, in complex and manifold ways, as an ever-unfolding discourse to those immersed in struggle.⁵⁴

Islam and the Task of Liberation

On Divine Justice

Justice is a crucial part of the Qur’anic message. In fact, it constitutes such an important component of the Qur’anic worldview that, Esack reminds us, justice is one of the reasons as to why God created the universe (Q. 45:22):⁵⁵ so that every human being, via the Day of Reckoning, will receive exactly what s/he sows and thus no soul shall be

⁵² F. Esack Interview, 2009.

⁵³ Rowland, 7-8.

⁵⁴ Esack, *Qur’an, Liberation, and Pluralism*, 111.

⁵⁵ Esack, *The Qur’an: A User’s Guide*, 177.

wronged. Justice, therefore, is a distinctly divine quality. God can never act unjustly. This is the natural state of the universe and humankind is obligated to act in a fair, equitable manner with others and to avoid partaking in oppression, as this would run contrary to the nature of God.⁵⁶ Moreover, humankind is commanded to establish an enduring, ethically based order on Earth,⁵⁷ thereby mirroring the divine justice of the Heavens. Action is thus located at the very heart of Islamic theology, for true faith is belief wedded to action. The Arabic word for faith in the Qur'an – *iman* – entails not only believing in God, but also observing righteous conduct, such as treating others in a just manner, giving charity and performing prayers.⁵⁸ The overwhelming emphasis on action in Esack's Islamic discourse – as we have just seen with regard to *praxis* – bears remarkable resemblance, yet again, to Islamist approaches to the text, in which Qur'anic reading is not an abstract, intellectual exercise but a solemn act of submission, of translating the Qur'an's teachings into one's daily life. Indeed, it is only through action, through putting the divine word into practice, that the text's meaning is unlocked to the reader. As Murad, the Islamist writer that we met earlier, cautions: "Do not forget that the real key to understanding the Qur'an is the practical application of its meaning."⁵⁹

But the Qur'an does not only mandate the believers to act justly, argues Esack, but expresses a preferential option for the oppressed and explicitly sides with them. Just as justice is a core theme, so is its antithesis: oppression (*zulm*), a ubiquitous term in the Qur'an. In fact, the linguistic root of *zulm* appears in various forms on almost every page

⁵⁶ Toshihiko Izutsu, *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur'an* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002), 18.

⁵⁷ Rahman, *Major Themes in the Qur'an*, 37.

⁵⁸ Michael Sells, *Approaching the Qur'an: The Early Revelations* (Ashland, Oregon: White Cloud Press, 1999), 37.

⁵⁹ Murad, as quoted in Von Denffer, 180.

of the text.⁶⁰ Upon making a clear distinction between the opposing states of justice and oppression, the Qur'an takes an unqualified stance with those who are being wronged – the downtrodden (*al-mustad'afun*) – over those responsible for such oppression (*al-mustakbirun*) who have therefore transgressed the bounds of just conduct (Q. 7:136-137; 28:5).⁶¹ It is important to note here that within a theology of liberation, God does not side with those who are oppressed but who, nonetheless, have faith and do righteous works. Rather, divine solidarity with the oppressed is unconditional, unqualified, complete: God stands with the downtrodden precisely because they have been wronged and exploited.⁶² The question of their belief or righteousness is irrelevant. This notion of God as exerting a preferential option for the oppressed became common currency amongst South African Muslims during the anti-apartheid struggle. Specifically, verses five and six of *Surat al-Qasas* ('The Chapter of the Story,' Chapter 28) became the most significant Qur'anic passages quoted time and again by activist Muslims of all ideological strands.⁶³ Referring to the ancient Israelites suffering under the yoke of Pharaoh's oppression, the verses read:

It is Our Will to bestow Our grace upon the downtrodden of the Earth, and to make them the leaders and to make them the inheritors of the Earth. And to establish them securely on the Earth, and to let Pharaoh and Haman and their hosts experience through them (the Children of Israel) the very thing against which they sought to protect themselves.

The commitment of God to the oppressed, then, is sacralised in a solemn covenant: that injustice, soon, will be dismantled through a radical reconfiguration of the existing status quo, wherein those who were at the very bottom of society will inherit the Earth.

⁶⁰ Izutsu, 164.

⁶¹ Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation, and Pluralism*, 98.

⁶² Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1999), 48.

⁶³ Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation, and Pluralism*, 101.

Esack and the Exodus: A Critique and a Proposal

Indeed, the Exodus is the central paradigm in Esack's liberation theology – an aspect of his Qur'anic hermeneutic that bears a striking similarity to Christian liberation theology. The Exodus is an exemplary model of interfaith solidarity with the oppressed, Esack argues, for it not only reflects a deity who sided with the enslaved Israelites against Pharaoh, but did so in spite of the Israelites' constant displays of disbelief (Q. 2:51; 2:55; 26:67), refusing to leave their side until they had reached the Promised Land.⁶⁴ God stood with the faithless Israelites, then, because they were being oppressed.⁶⁵ Yet as compelling as the Exodus is as a pluralistic model of liberation, it is important to note that Christian liberation theology, too, builds heavily on the Exodus experience. In addition to drawing great inspiration from the example of Jesus Christ as the struggle for justice personified,⁶⁶ Gutiérrez – a founding figure of Latin American liberation theology whom we mentioned earlier – drew extensively upon the Exodus when putting to paper his pioneering tract on liberation theology in the 1960s. In fact, according to Gutiérrez, the Exodus represented a “paradigmatic” event in biblical history, constituting a liberating hermeneutical lens with which to reinterpret the Old and New Testaments.⁶⁷ In other words, when reading Esack in light of Christian liberation theology, one wonders how organic an Islamic theology of liberation built upon the Exodus experience truly is? This is not to imply that the Exodus is an exclusively biblical event and, as such, Islamically ‘inauthentic.’ On the contrary, the Qur'an lays a powerful claim over all the Abrahamic prophets, embracing them as

⁶⁴ Ibid, 195-196.

⁶⁵ The faithlessness of the Israelites is further evidenced, as Esack points out, by Q. 10:83, which states that only a small group of them (*dhurriyyatun*) believed in the God of Moses. See *ibid*.

⁶⁶ Gutiérrez, 35.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 158-159.

part and parcel of the monotheistic call.⁶⁸ In fact, Moses is the most mentioned prophet in the text, his name surfacing approximately 140 times.⁶⁹

Rather, my argument is that because of the power differential that exists between Christianity and Islam, it is necessary to foreground the specificity of Islam in order to counter a universalizing Christian framework. As a result of over two hundred years of world dominance through colonialism and imperialism, Europe and North America have come to occupy very different positions within the global power structure than the rest of the world. This disparity, in turn, has had tremendous consequences in terms of modern knowledge production. As the South Asian historian, Dipesh Chakrabarty, sums it up:

...insofar as the academic discourse of history – that is, “history” as a discourse produced at the institutional site of the university – is concerned, “Europe” remains the sovereign, theoretical subject of all histories, including the ones we call “Indian,” “Chinese,” “Kenyan,” and so on. There is a peculiar way in which all these other histories tend to become variations on a master narrative that would be called “the history of Europe.”⁷⁰

In other words, Europe has become universalized as an intellectual frame of reference. Or, to put it another way, non-European histories have been stripped of their specificities, becoming homogenized in their incorporation as ‘backward’ into a grand narrative defined by (an idealized reading of) European historical experience. There is, therefore, an intellectual culture of inequality. Asian and African historians are often expected, for example, to refer to the histories of Europe and North America while European and North American historians seldom feel the need to cite the histories of Asia and Africa.⁷¹ And because Christianity in general, and the figures, stories and imageries of the Bible in

⁶⁸ Omid Safi, *Memories of Muhammad: Why the Prophet Matters* (New York: HarperOne, 2009), 196.

⁶⁹ Esack, *The Qur'an: A User's Guide*, 154.

⁷⁰ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 27.

⁷¹ Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 1.

particular, were – and to varying degrees remain – a major source of European culture,⁷² the language and experience of (Western) Christianity, too, has become universalized.⁷³ This phenomenon is particularly acute in the modern academic discipline of Religion, also known as Theology, which originated in Catholic and Protestant circles.⁷⁴ Within the field of Religion, students of Islam are expected to be familiar with Christianity, Christian debates and the Bible in a way that is rarely reciprocated by their Christian counterparts. Indeed, the very terms of discourse reflect a history rooted in a distinctly Christian past. For instance, the idea of religious tolerance, which is routinely used nowadays to refer to mutual understanding between different faith traditions, emerged in the aftermath of Europe’s wars of religion, seeking to underline the plurality of paths *within* Christianity.⁷⁵ In other words, just as non-European historians need to struggle against the grain of the European experience as an underlying, universalizing tendency in the discipline of History, so must non-Christian theologians struggle against the epistemic might of the Christian experience as a homogenizing force in Religion. And it is in this pursuit to craft an Islamic theology of liberation that becomes more than simply a variation on a master narrative called Christianity, I argue, that historical and theological difference – that is, the specificity of Islam and Muslim experiences – ought to be foregrounded.⁷⁶

⁷² John Riches, *The Bible: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 100.

⁷³ To be sure, the power differential between Islam and Christianity is not necessarily material, but rather epistemic. This is particularly true in the context of liberation theology, since Latin America has been the continental wellspring of Christian liberation theology. Radical exegesis of the Bible, then, has emerged from a region of the world that has been as economically exploited as Africa and Asia.

⁷⁴ Carl W. Ernst, *Following Muhammad: Rethinking Islam in the Contemporary World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 47.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 39–43.

⁷⁶ For a more extensive exposition of this critique, see Shadaab Rahemtulla, “Im Schatten des Christentums? Die Herausforderung islamischer Befreiungstheologie” [In the Shadow of Christianity? The Challenge of Islamic Liberation Theology], in *Gott und Befreiung. Befreiungstheologische Konzepte in Islam und Christentum* [God and Liberation: Concepts of Liberation Theology in Islam and Christianity], eds. Klaus von Stosch and Muna Tatari (Paderborn, Germany: Schöningh, 2012).

An alternative point of departure that may be more promising in conceptualizing an Islamic liberation theology that explicitly embraces this question of difference is that of *tawhid* – or the Divine Unity (the absolute Oneness) of God – and the ensuing social, economic and political implications of this central Islamic belief. This liberating idea that the Oneness of a just God must be paralleled by the Oneness of a single humanity, and thus that anything that divides the creation into hierarchies violates the divine unity of the Creator, was first articulated amongst Islamic radicals during the Iranian Revolution of 1978-79, in particular the Mujahidin-i Khalq.⁷⁷ Combining Islamic and Marxist teachings, the Mujahidin-i Khalq was a resistance group committed to armed struggle against the Shah’s regime.⁷⁸ Ali Shari‘ati (d. 1977) – a leading revolutionary figure and intellectual in Iran – became a chief exponent of the sociopolitical implications of *tawhid*. As a divine concept built on the intrinsic unity of all beings, argued Shari‘ati, *tawhid* cannot accept any “contradictions,” such as those of economic, social, legal, geographical or racial hierarchy.⁷⁹ Whereas Shari‘ati and the Mujahidin-i Khalq approached *tawhid* primarily from the perspective of class, two decades later gender activists would draw on *tawhid* extensively when critiquing patriarchy and male privilege. As we shall witness in the following chapters on Wadud and Barlas, Islamic monotheism is a core paradigm in sexually egalitarian rereadings of the Qur’an. This doctrine, therefore, has been invoked increasingly as a guiding hermeneutical principle in liberationist expositions of Islam.

⁷⁷ Esack, *Qur’an, Liberation, and Pluralism*, 83.

⁷⁸ The Mujahidin emerged in the 1960s as an outgrowth of the religious faction of the wider national struggle. Its members were initially part of the Freedom Movement of Iran, which underscored the compatibility between Shi’a Islam and modernity, and was thus largely liberal in scope. However, state suppression, especially in 1963, radicalized segments of the Freedom Movement and the origins of the Mujahidin are to be found in this transformation. See Nikki R. Keddie, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 220-222. For a classic study of the organization, see Arvand Ebrahmanian, *The Iranian Mojahedin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

⁷⁹ Ali Shari‘ati, “On the Sociology of Islam: The World-View of Tawhid,” in *Introduction to Islam: A Reader*, ed. Amina Wadud (Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt Publishing, 2007), 3.

Two points of clarification are in order here. Firstly, I do not wish to imply that *tawhid* is entirely absent from Esack's hermeneutic. In weaving together an Islamic theology of liberation, he redefines, in light of his own experience and struggles against apartheid, a number of Qur'anic concepts, such as *al-mustad'afun fi al-ard* ("the oppressed on the Earth"), *jihad* ("struggle and praxis"), *al-nas* ("the people," that is, in the popular sense of the word), *taqwa* ("integrity and awareness in relation to the presence of God") and *tawhid* ("divine unity").⁸⁰ And in his reading of *tawhid*, Esack echoes the earlier arguments of Shari'ati by unpacking the sociopolitical implications of this key tenet. But Esack consigns *tawhid* to the back of his theology and devotes far more attention to the Exodus, despite the fact that the language of *tawhid* became widely circulated amongst South African Muslims during the anti-apartheid struggle. As he himself notes, Islamic activists used terms like "tawhidi society" and "the sociological implications of tawhid" in their demands for a qualitatively different order, condemning apartheid as a form of *shirk* – the cardinal sin of associating partners with God and, thus, the theological foil of *tawhid* – since apartheid undermined the unity of God by dividing humanity into unequal racial camps.⁸¹ Secondly, I do not mean to suggest that contemporary Muslim thinkers have drawn upon *tawhid* in solely liberatory terms. Consider, for instance, the Wahhabi movement or, as they refer to themselves, the *muwahhidun* (literally: 'the monotheists'). *Tawhid* was a central aspect of the revivalist discourse of the Najd-based scholar Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab (d. 1792). Calling for a return to the Qur'an and *sunna*, he and his followers maintained that Islam needed to be cleansed from 'deviant' beliefs and practices – especially Sufi Islam and its

⁸⁰ Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation, and Pluralism*, 83.

⁸¹ *Ibid*, 91-92.

emphasis on saintly veneration, as well as heterodox sects like Shi‘a Islam – which, they claimed, were guilty of *shirk*.⁸² This sharply puritan, literalist approach to Islam, fixated on dogma and ritual practice and with little interest in questions of social justice, has attained global influence with the rise of Saudi Arabia as a major oil producer in the 1970s, exporting not only petroleum but also Wahhabi ideology and institutions throughout the Muslim world.⁸³ *Tawhid*, then, has become an increasingly prominent theme in contemporary Islam, and liberationists like Shari‘ati, Wadud and Barlas are a part of this broader trend while, at the same time, departing from it by reinterpreting monotheism in significant and unique ways.⁸⁴

What makes *tawhid* so provocative as a point of departure for a liberating Islamic theology is that it not only weds the struggle for justice to the single most important tenet in Islam, but also foregrounds the specificity of Muslim theology. Christ stands at the centre of Christianity in general,⁸⁵ and of Christian liberation theology in particular,⁸⁶ and the nature of the biblical text mirrors the distinctiveness of this theology. Indeed, it is not the Bible that is considered to be the Word of God but Christ himself. Rather, the Bible

⁸² There is a dearth of serious scholarship (as opposed to sensationalist writings) on the history and politics of Wahhabism. For two refreshingly sober and nuanced accounts, see David D. Commins, *The Wahhabi Mission and Saudi Arabia* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009) and Natana J. DeLong-Bas, *Wahhabi Islam: From Revival to Reform to Global Jihad* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). There are even fewer studies that focus on the life and writings of ‘Abd al-Wahhab, a notable exception being ‘Abd Allah Salih al-‘Uthaymin, *Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab: The Man and his Works* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009).

⁸³ On the global influence of the Saudi state, see Madawi al-Rasheed ed., *Kingdom without Borders: Saudi Arabia’s Political, Religious and Media Frontiers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), specifically Part III: “The Prospects and Limits of Religious Expansion.” Al-Rasheed has also written a definitive history of the Saudi state, from the origins of the House of Saud to the post-9/11 period: *A History of Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). For a critical analysis of Saudi Arabia’s oil industry and its close relationship to the US, see Robert Vitalis, *America’s Kingdom: Mythmaking on the Saudi Oil Frontier* (London: Verso, 2009), as well as the classic study by F. Gregory Gause III, *Oil Monarchies: Domestic and Security Challenges in the Arab Gulf States* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations Press, 1994), which, as its title suggests, has a regional focus.

⁸⁴ I am grateful to my supervisor James McDougall for this insight.

⁸⁵ Christopher Rowland and Jonathan Roberts, *The Bible for Sinners: Interpretation in the Present Time* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2008), 21.

⁸⁶ Boff and Boff, 4.

represents a collection of texts that reflect upon the example of Jesus and, as a sustained reflection, can never fully capture him, since the Son of God cannot be confined to a text. As T.S. Eliot succinctly phrased it, the Bible is “the report of the Word of God.”⁸⁷ To put it another way: the Bible is the word of God with a lower-case ‘w’. The roles of Prophet Muhammad and the Qur’anic text within the Islamic worldview, on the other hand, are markedly different. The Prophet of Islam holds no comparable position to the Christ of Christianity for, according to Muslims, Muhammad was a mere mortal man whose vocation was to deliver a divine message. The closest Islamic equivalent to the Christian Jesus is the Qur’an,⁸⁸ which is understood as the actual Speech of God. And it is precisely because Muslims perceive the Qur’an as being the literal, timeless Word that it is God, alone, who stands at the heart of the Islamic faith. The intrinsic value of *tawhid* as the conceptual framework for radical thought and action, then, is that it acknowledges the theological distinctiveness of Islam as a vigorously monotheistic religion. As Esack himself affirms, it is God and the belief in this single deity that comprises the crux of the Qur’anic call, receiving far more attention than any other topic in the text.⁸⁹

Towards a Comprehensive Justice: Prophetic Solidarity

A crucial aspect of Esack’s understanding of justice is its comprehensive character. Esack is usually equated with the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa. As important as this struggle was for Esack, however, his Islamic liberation theology cannot be reduced to it because, as a coloured South African, he had vested interests in seeing the struggle through. As integral as the commitment to the liberation of one’s own oppressed social,

⁸⁷ T.S. Eliot, as cited in Rowland and Roberts, *The Bible for Sinners*, 22.

⁸⁸ Esack, *The Qur’an: A User’s Guide*, 16.

⁸⁹ Ibid, 147.

religious or racial group is, warns Esack, a genuine commitment to morality lies in being moved not by one's own suffering but by the suffering of others.⁹⁰ This is the litmus test of the ethical, empathetic human being. Justice, therefore, must be comprehensive – encompassing racial, class and gender equality – and is the right of all of humanity, not a specific subsection of it. This notion of the intrinsic, sacred worth of every human being is captured in the Qur'an when God, at the time of creation, breathed the Divine Spirit into Prophet Adam (Q. 15:29; 38:72), the founding figure of humankind.⁹¹ Esack's sense of liberation, then, is utterly universal. The South African struggle acted as a critical point of departure for this understanding. His experience of growing up under apartheid not only allowed him, when travelling to Pakistan for Islamic training, to make connections with the discrimination of women in Muslim-majority societies,⁹² but also the second-class status of Pakistani Christians.⁹³ It is due to the sheer complexity, the multilayered basis of oppression that Esack's definition of liberation is equally complex and layered, entailing "the freedom of all people from all those laws, social norms and economic practices that militate against them developing their potential to be fully human."⁹⁴

Because Esack's understanding of justice is universal, solidarity – what he calls "prophetic Islam" – features prominently in his liberationist discourse. Simply translated, prophetic Islam is a *principled* practice of solidarity, whereby a Muslim stands with the oppressed while at the same time acknowledging that this analytical category – "the

⁹⁰ Farid Esack, "Open Letter," *Jewish Peace News*, accessed 3 September 2012, <http://jewishpeacenews.blogspot.com/2009/04/farid-esacks-open-letter-is-inscribed.html>

⁹¹ Safi, *Progressive Muslims*, 3.

⁹² Farid Esack, "Religio-Cultural Diversity: For What and With Whom? Muslim Reflections from a Post-Apartheid South Africa in the Throes of Globalization," in *Cultural Diversity in Islam*, eds. Abdul Aziz Said and Meena Sharify-Funk (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 2003), 167.

⁹³ Michael Wolfe ed., *Taking Back Islam: American Muslims Reclaim their Faith* (Emmaus, Pennsylvania: Rodale Press, 2004), 15.

⁹⁴ Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation, and Pluralism*, xi.

oppressed” – is not fixed or timeless but conditioned, and repeatedly reconditioned, by an ever-changing context, denoting different communities and individuals in different times and places.⁹⁵ Esack foregrounds this contextually contingent practice of solidarity since he has witnessed, at first hand, how an oppressed group can, with the passage of time, actually become the oppressing party: namely, the Afrikaners of South Africa. Initially the victims of the British, who placed them in concentration camps and destroyed almost a sixth of their population, the Afrikaners went on to consolidate their colonization of indigenous Black land, erecting a deeply authoritarian and White-supremacist state.⁹⁶ The case of European Jewry is another compelling example: the very people who experienced the horrors of the Nazi holocaust became staunch supporters of Israel – a settler-colonial state built on the ethnic cleansing of Palestine and that continues to occupy Palestinian land illegally.⁹⁷ A prophetic solidarity, therefore, is about being vigilant of the inherently fluid and dynamic nature of injustice. As Esack puts it:

While I can, for example, be in solidarity with a male black worker in respect of the exploitation that he experiences at work, I ought to be in solidarity with his abused wife in the home context. While I can be in solidarity with the Muslim male who is being racially profiled at airports, I can be in solidarity with the marginalized Christian who lives in the same Muslim country that the Muslim male comes from.⁹⁸

In other words, by avoiding sweeping affiliation with abstract, disembodied communities – ‘Muslims’ or ‘Blacks’ or ‘Workers’ – and instead constantly defining and redefining the categories of oppressor and oppressed within a complex, ever-changing web of power

⁹⁵ Farid Esack, “The Contemporary Democracy and the Human Rights Project for Muslim Societies: Challenges for the Progressive Muslim Intellectual,” in *Contemporary Islam: Dynamic, not Static*, eds. Abdul Aziz Said, Mohammad Abu-Nimr, and Meena Sharify-Funk (London: Routledge, 2006), 125.

⁹⁶ Esack, “Open Letter.”

⁹⁷ The underlying purpose behind Esack’s reflection on the Afrikaner experience and their transition from oppressed to oppressor is to make a wider analogy between apartheid South Africa and the state of Israel, as this reflection commences an open letter that Esack wrote to the Palestinians in solidarity with their national struggle (see *ibid*). The letter will be discussed shortly.

⁹⁸ Esack, “The Contemporary Democracy and the Human Rights Project for Muslim Societies,” 125.

relations, the progressive Muslim intellectual is able to pre-empt the reproduction of the very inequality that s/he seeks to critique. Prophetic Islam and the type of principled solidarity that it espouses, then, is built on a keen sense of *vision*: that whatever struggle one may be engaged in at the moment, the ultimate objective is the establishment of a genuinely inclusive social order wherein all people are equal.⁹⁹

Fitra, or human nature, is an interesting aspect of Esack's discourse on solidarity with the oppressed. Muslim theologians have often described Islam as *din al-fitra*: a religion based on the natural disposition of humankind.¹⁰⁰ Specifically, *fitra* is the innate inclination of every human being, from the very beginning of time when God fashioned Adam, to yearn for goodness.¹⁰¹ The presence and persistence of injustice constitute a threat to this natural state of being, and thus one's *fitra* (what Esack refers to as one's "humanity") is fundamentally compromised if one does not act.¹⁰² Esack, therefore, has an acutely communitarian sense of selfhood, for his *fitra* is wedded to the well-being of those around him and by standing for others he is, in fact, standing for himself. The idea that the liberation of the Self is intrinsically tied to the liberation of the Other – that *I* am lacking because *you* are suffering – has deep roots in Islam. The *zaka*, or annual almsgiving, is one of the five pillars of the faith. Yet the actual definition of *zaka* is neither almsgiving nor charity. Literally, *zaka* means "purification," referring to the idea that when a Muslim gives a portion of her/his accrued wealth to the needy, the remaining amount is purified in the eyes of God.¹⁰³ The concept of *fitra* is especially salient to solidarity and activism because it provides an alternative, theoretical framework to the

⁹⁹ F. Esack Interview, 2009.

¹⁰⁰ Esack, "Islam and Gender Justice," 189.

¹⁰¹ Kecia Ali and Oliver Leaman, *Islam: The Key Concepts* (London: Routledge, 2008), 40.

¹⁰² Esack, *On Being a Muslim*, 81.

¹⁰³ Ali and Leaman, 19.

patronizing discourse of benevolence and charity. Standing in solidarity with others, through the framework of *fitra*, is not about doing a favour to the less fortunate, for the favour, by affirming one's own humanity through the act of standing, is done to oneself.

As Esack describes it within the context of gender justice:

This is not a favour that I am doing for women. I have often used the analogy that if I am holding someone down, I am not free to be myself. I can't grow, I can't enjoy the sun, I just can't *be*.¹⁰⁴

It is important to appreciate the significance of this point, as it raises crucial questions concerning the complex power dynamics at play in solidarity work. Is a White American activist's humanity fully intact if s/he, whilst standing in solidarity with Black Americans, reproduces racial inequality by speaking over the voices of the very people that s/he is standing with? Is a male feminist's humanity wholly intact if he, when articulating an anti-patriarchal platform, does so with a voice louder than the very women that he is in solidarity with? By acknowledging one's own complicity in complex systems of oppression, the concept of *fitra* forcefully shifts the battleground of liberation from the Other to the Self. In so doing, it undercuts the consignment of the oppressed to the role of passive objects – that are to be pitied and patronized through benevolent acts of charity – encouraging, in its stead, reflexivity and humility.

Esack has been extensively involved in solidarity work, such as supporting the Palestinian cause and working with South African Muslims who have HIV and AIDS. He has visited Palestine numerous times and has been a prominent participant in the international solidarity movement, regularly speaking at educational events like Israeli

¹⁰⁴ F. Esack Interview, 2009.

Apartheid Week.¹⁰⁵ Most recently, Esack wrote an open letter to the Palestinians, outlining the striking similarities between the Israeli occupation of Palestine and the oppression of Blacks under the apartheid regime in South Africa.¹⁰⁶ This letter was then spray-painted in large font on the so-called ‘Security Fence’ in Palestine, running for over two and a half kilometres. Drawing on his understanding of a prophetic Islam dedicated to the attainment of justice for all peoples, Esack describes his connection as a South African to Palestine as follows:

Indeed, for those of us who lived under South African Apartheid and fought for liberation from it and everything that it represented, Palestine reflects in many ways the unfinished business of our own struggle.¹⁰⁷

Here, again, liberation – although being waged in solidarity with the Other – is located within the Self. Esack’s own humanity (*fitra*) is under siege so long as Israel continues to brutalize the Palestinians. He has also worked extensively with Muslims who are HIV-positive or have full-blown AIDS. Along with a number of colleagues, he established an organization in 2000 called ‘Positive Muslims.’ In addition to creating a support network for victims, the group seeks to challenge dominant Muslim attitudes towards HIV/AIDS, exposing Muslim complicity in the stigmatization of those afflicted with the disease.¹⁰⁸ In his struggle to combat AIDS, Esack has repeatedly emphasized the socioeconomic roots of the pandemic. A meaningful struggle against AIDS, then, must include the critique of

¹⁰⁵ Israeli Apartheid Week (IAW) is a weeklong series of lectures and activities held every spring that raise awareness about the Israeli occupation, promoting the global Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) campaign against the state of Israel. Initiated by Palestinian students at the University of Toronto in 2005, IAW has since spread to over fifty cities across the world and has aroused the ire of Zionist groups and conservative forces. See www.apartheidweek.org

¹⁰⁶ Esack, “Open Letter.”

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Farid Esack, *HIV, AIDS and Islam: Reflections based on Compassion, Responsibility and Justice* (Cape Town: Positive Muslims, 2004), 5-6.

a cruel economic establishment that prioritizes profit over human welfare.¹⁰⁹ Capitalism, Esack laments, is a principal cause of global suffering, effectively cleaving the world into two unequal halves: the affluent North, comprising Western Europe and North America, which continues to become exponentially wealthier at the expense of the impoverished South – Africa, Asia, Latin America – leading to immense suffering for the vast majority of the Earth’s inhabitants.¹¹⁰

It is the struggle for sexual justice, however, that is most intimately tied to Esack’s own liberation. Growing up in a single-parent family – recall that his father had abandoned his mother when Esack was only three weeks old, leaving her to raise six children on her own – Esack discerned the demons of patriarchy at a very young age. Furthermore, he experienced firsthand the close collusion of patriarchy, racism and capitalism, as his mother laboured long hours everyday as an underpaid factory worker, eventually succumbing to her crippling circumstances.¹¹¹ Indeed, the roots of Esack’s liberationist discourse are to be found in this painful, formative period. Due to the efforts of South African Muslim feminists, including Esack, gender equality became an integral component of anti-apartheid discourse within the Muslim community. Wadud, whose hermeneutic we will explore in the third chapter, visited South Africa in 1994 and was struck by the centrality of gender justice amongst Muslims, who were even talking about the possibility of women leading ritual worship.¹¹² The following passage captures the critical linkages Esack draws between racism and patriarchy, underscoring their common denominator of inequality:

¹⁰⁹ Farid Esack and Sarah Chiddy eds. *Islam and AIDS: Between Scorn, Pity and Justice* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009), 7.

¹¹⁰ Esack, “In Search of Progressive Islam Beyond 9/11,” 91.

¹¹¹ Esack, *Qur’an, Liberation, and Pluralism*, 2.

¹¹² Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 166.

Every single argument, religious or cultural, that is employed to keep women in the kitchen or in the house has a parallel in racist discourse. ‘Our traditional way of life,’ ‘Allah made them inferior,’ ‘No they are not inferior, merely different,’ ‘What would happen if women were to control the world?’... ‘Of course women can govern, if they are capable.’¹¹³

In other words, to call for racial or economic justice without at the same time taking a firm stand against patriarchy (and vice versa) is hypocrisy. Inconsistency – the selective application of justice, restricting it to only certain struggles – is an act of *injustice*.

The realm of gender relations is illustrative of how, within Esack’s hermeneutic, *praxis* constitutes as important a text that is to be read alongside the text of scripture. As central as the theme of justice is within the Qur’an, Esack is wary of idealizing the text. In particular, he notes that with regard to social and legal matters, the Qur’an presupposes male control over women, in that women are to be economically maintained and protected by men, scolded and even beaten if they are disobedient.¹¹⁴ The literal wording of the text, then, is essentially androcentric: a number of passages like Q. 4:34 – the so-called ‘Beating Verse,’ which we will engage in detail when examining women’s exegesis – clearly address men and speak of women in the third person, and therefore as objects to be acted upon by men.¹¹⁵ Q. 4:34 reads:

Men are the guardians of women, because of the advantage God has granted some of them over others and by virtue of their spending out of their wealth. So righteous women are obedient, caretaking in the absence (of their husbands) of what God has enjoined them to guard. As for those wives whose misconduct you fear, (first) advise them, and (if ineffective) keep away from them in the bed, and (as a final option) beat them. Then if they obey you, do not seek any course (of action) against them. Indeed, God is most High, most Great.

This rather critical take on the Qur’an stands in contrast, as we will see later in this thesis, to the exegeses of Engineer and Barlas, who insist that the text affirms the complete

¹¹³ Esack, *On Being a Muslim*, 127-128.

¹¹⁴ Esack, “Islam and Gender Justice,” 193.

¹¹⁵ Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam*, 125-126.

equality of women and men. It is necessary to clarify here that Esack does not view the Qur'an as an obstacle to gender justice. He writes that the text "contains sufficient seeds for those committed to human rights and gender justice to live in fidelity to its underlying ethos."¹¹⁶ But this does not entail partaking in, Esack stresses, simplistic apologia. He thus seeks to navigate a complex middle way between what he sees as two interpretive extremes: classical commentators who read far more patriarchy into the Qur'an than there actually was and, now, modern-day apologists – women and men alike – who are reading absolute gender justice into the Qur'an despite the fact that several verses presume male listeners and male control over women's bodies.¹¹⁷ These are verses, argues Esack, which ought to be confronted, not ignored. And in this hermeneutical endeavour contemporary standards of justice, as defined through *praxis*, need to be taken as seriously as scripture itself. There are, then, two principal texts – the text of the Qur'an and the text of *praxis* – that must be reconciled through various reading strategies, one such strategy being an emphasis on the spirit over the letter: that whenever a seeming contradiction may emerge between scripture and *praxis*, the Qur'anic spirit, or what he refers to as "its underlying ethos," is privileged over the Qur'anic letter. In so doing, Esack is able to acknowledge unapologetically the androcentrism of the text while, at the same time, using its gender egalitarian spirit to uphold contemporary understandings of justice.

¹¹⁶ Esack, "Islam and Gender Justice," 203.

¹¹⁷ Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam*, 126.

Interfaith Solidarity and a Commitment to the Margins

Beyond Dialogue

In this final section, I will reflect upon the significance of Esack's hermeneutic, beginning with its implications in terms of religious pluralism. The interfaith character of the anti-apartheid movement forced Esack to raise larger questions concerning the very nature of salvation. Solidarity amongst Muslims, Christians and other religious groups became an integral component of the collective struggle, especially during the uprisings of the 1980s.¹¹⁸ To be sure, not all South African Muslims resisted alongside the religious Other. For instance, Qiblah – a Muslim organization inspired by the Islamic revolution in Iran – was set on the idea of replacing the racist regime with an Islamic state,¹¹⁹ despite the glaring fact that Muslims comprised just over one percent of the population. Though one segment of the Christian community – the Dutch Reformed Church – was complicit in providing scriptural support to the status quo, other Christian elements were actively engaged in the struggle against apartheid. The Kairos Document is a classic case in point. Published in 1980 by Christian clergymen, it argued that the moment of truth (*kairos*) had arrived for the Church and that it was an ethical obligation for every Christian to partake in the struggle to create a just society, calling for civil disobedience to undermine the regime.¹²⁰ The deeply moving experience of standing with the religious Other, while a number of his own co-religionists chose silence in the face of oppression, compelled Esack to question the exclusivist notion that Muslims alone would achieve salvation. Indeed, being born into the fold of the faith is, for most Muslims, sufficient to be

¹¹⁸ Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation, and Pluralism*, 8.

¹¹⁹ Esack, "Three Islamic Strands in the South African Struggle for Justice," 484-485.

¹²⁰ "The Kairos Document," as cited in Andrew Bradstock and Christopher Rowland eds., *Radical Christian Writings: A Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 303.

included amongst the ranks of the *mu'minun* (literally, 'those who believe').¹²¹ It is important to note that the anti-apartheid movement was not the first time that Esack was touched by the humanity of non-Muslims. Growing up in Bonteheuwel, an impoverished, coloured township in the Cape Flats, many a time it was Esack's Christian neighbours, themselves struggling to make ends meet, who helped out his family when there was no food on the table.¹²² This heartfelt experience was reaffirmed in Esack's youth, when he became close friends with the marginalized Christian community in Pakistan.¹²³

As a result of this deeply moving encounter with the religious Other, pluralism and universal salvation constitute an intrinsic part of Esack's Qur'anic hermeneutic of liberation. Islam is simply one way of responding to the divine call. Genuine pluralism must entail, then, not the mere toleration of other religious communities, but the humble acknowledgement that there exist multiple paths to salvation.¹²⁴ In fact, in the Qur'an the words *islam* and *muslim* ('submission' and 'submitter,' respectively) are not used to refer solely to those who accept the Qur'an as the final revelation and Muhammad as the last prophet. Rather, they encompass all those who have submitted themselves to God via the earlier prophets, who preached the same monotheistic message.¹²⁵ This acknowledgement of the *iman* ('faith') of those who received scripture before Prophet Muhammad speaks to the utter universality of the Qur'anic worldview. To restrict salvation to Muslims, Esack argues, is to reduce God from a universal, indeed unfathomable, entity to one confined to the contextually contingent imagination of a specific socio-religious community.¹²⁶ Just

¹²¹ Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation, and Pluralism*, 124.

¹²² Esack, *On Being a Muslim*, 150.

¹²³ Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation, and Pluralism*, 5.

¹²⁴ Ibid, xii.

¹²⁵ Safi, *Memories of Muhammad*, 202-203.

¹²⁶ Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation, and Pluralism*, 125.

as faith is a highly fluid and dynamic term in the Qur'an, so too is its counterpart: *kufṛ*, frequently translated as 'disbelief.' But the meaning of the term is multilayered, Esack points out, as the linguistic root of *kufṛ* (*k-f-r*) denotes not simply disbelief but the notion of rejecting a gift, of being ungrateful for God's blessings and, as a result, exhibiting arrogant behaviour.¹²⁷ By underscoring the fluidity of Qur'anic concepts like *islam*, *iman* and *kufṛ*, and thereby creating a theological space for the religious Other, Esack is able to shift the key criterion of salvation from membership in 'the right' religious community to righteous conduct. Faith in and of itself is insufficient, for faith must be wedded to *praxis*. It is precisely because of the overwhelming Qur'anic emphasis on action as an integral component of faith that one scholar of the Qur'an, Michael Sells, has translated *iman* as "keeping the faith," and thus as a verb instead of a noun.¹²⁸

Religious dialogue, particularly between Muslims and Christians, has become increasingly popular in recent years. In addition to hundreds of academic conferences and thousands of smaller meetings held by faith groups, entire centres have been constructed to promote religious dialogue. The Centre for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations at the University of Birmingham; the Prince Alwaleed bin Talal Centre for Muslim-Christian Understanding at Georgetown University in Washington, DC; and the Duncan Black MacDonald Centre for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations at Hartford Seminary in Connecticut are a few cases in point.¹²⁹ Eager to emphasize the scriptural similarities between Christianity and Islam, scholars of both religious traditions

¹²⁷ Ibid, 137-138. Here, Esack draws upon the earlier work of the Qur'anic scholar Toshihiko Izutsu, who cites a number of verses wherein *kufṛ* is used in this particular sense, such as Q. 14:34 and 26:18-19. See Izutsu, 120-121.

¹²⁸ Sells, 37.

¹²⁹ Hugh Goddard, *A History of Christian-Muslim Relations* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 185.

argued that it was necessary to foreground this theological common ground to counter the state of “crisis” that had beset the world.¹³⁰ Another important factor behind the rise of religious dialogue was the radically changing demographics of European and North American societies, which now witnessed sizable religious minorities in their midst.¹³¹ Religious dialogue has not been spearheaded by state bodies and Christian communities alone, for Muslims too have been actively involved. “A Common Word between Us and You” is an illustrative example. Issued in October 2008 to the Pope by over a hundred Muslim scholars across the world, Common Word was a statement of unity, underscoring the shared heritage of the two monotheistic religions and claiming that Christian-Muslim harmony was paramount in order to avert global crisis and ensure world peace.¹³²

As the above statement suggests, the discourse of dialogue emerged largely as a response to the idea that a ‘clash of civilizations’ between Islam and Christianity was imminent. Although popularized in the immediate post-9/11 environment, the Clash of Civilizations was a theory put forward by American political scientist Samuel Huntington in the 1990s. It posited that non-Western civilizations were growing in strength and Islam in particular, which was “exploding demographically,” was on a collision course with Western civilization and its core values,¹³³ especially democracy. Huntington’s thesis was not uncontested. Countless voices spoke out in protest to this simplistic paradigm, and the phenomenon of religious dialogue needs to be situated within this distinct, discursive context. John Esposito – a scholar of Islamic studies and director of the Prince Alwaleed

¹³⁰ Kenneth Cragg, *A Christian-Muslim Inter-Text Now: From Anathemata to Theme* (London: Melisende, 2008), v.

¹³¹ Goddard, 182.

¹³² “A Common Word between Us and You (Summary and Abridgement),” *Common Word*, accessed 3 September 2012, www.acommonword.com/index.php?lang=en&page=option1

¹³³ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order* (London: Touchstone Books, 1998), 20.

Bin Talal Centre for Muslim-Christian Understanding – is a representative example. He countered that the vast majority of Islamists worldwide worked through the democratic system, and thus that Islam and democracy were fully compatible categories.¹³⁴ Richard Bulliet, a historian of Islam at Columbia University in New York City, offered another noteworthy critique of the Clash of Civilizations thesis, proposing that the primarily Muslim societies of the Middle East and North Africa and the predominantly Christian societies of Europe and North America comprised a single historical complex – what he coined, “Islam-Christian civilization” – and, therefore, that an imminent clash between the two was actually a definitional impossibility.¹³⁵

So rather than unearthing the essentialism underlying the term ‘civilization’ or questioning the universalist assumption that Western democracy was *the* political model that the whole world had to follow, most mainstream critics called for ‘religious dialogue’ and ‘peaceful co-existence.’ Though most of these accounts usually cited American foreign policy in the Middle East as a key reason as to ‘why they hate us?’, a larger critique of global power relations was strikingly absent in the dominant discourse: specifically, that of American imperialism. Indeed, the US is not only deeply resented in the Middle East, but throughout the global South like in Latin America,¹³⁶ where US foreign policy has a far worse track record. Thus, the Clash of Civilizations paradigm was not challenged by mainstream critics as an ideological tool for the advancement of empire, despite the well-known fact that Huntington had a long history in the American

¹³⁴ Zachary Lockman, *Contending Visions of the Middle East: The History and Politics of Orientalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 221-222.

¹³⁵ Richard W. Bulliet, *The Case for Islam-Christian Civilization* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 11.

¹³⁶ Esack, as cited in Wolfe, 17.

foreign policy establishment, such as when he argued in favour of “free-fire zones” in Vietnam to justify the US military’s carpet-bombing of the countryside.¹³⁷

The significance of Esack’s hermeneutic, then, is that it speaks to the potential of liberation theology, as a contextual approach rooted in the realities of oppression and inequality, to act as an alternative, interfaith model to the discourse of religious dialogue. Because of his experience as a South African living under apartheid, Esack is wary of sweeping statements of peace and co-existence that do not take into account questions of power. The apartheid regime, when it realized that the country was going up in arms, openly called for “peaceful co-existence” in order to maintain the status quo and thus resistance fighters, like Esack, saw it as their duty to make the state as ungovernable as possible.¹³⁸ In other words, within contexts of manifest inequality a stabilizing language of peace becomes the favoured discourse of the oppressor and, conversely, a subversive language of militancy that of the oppressed. And it is this appreciation of the profoundly political nature of dialogue that is largely missing from mainstream interfaith discourse. Common Word is a classic case in point. Despite its ceaseless calls for global peace and Christian-Muslim unity, nowhere in the document is there to be found a critique of power relations, an effort to locate the root source of “global crisis.”¹³⁹ In so doing, Common Word only reinforced the discursive strength of the status quo by toeing the simplistic logic that peace and order are good, militancy and violence bad. By using a framework of social liberation, however, Esack is able to shift the discourse effectively from religious dialogue to interfaith solidarity against oppression:

¹³⁷ Lockman, 142.

¹³⁸ Esack, “Religio-Cultural Diversity,” 167.

¹³⁹ “A Common Word between Us and You.”

A theoretically postulated, dislocated or decontextualized passion for diversity and pluralism often becomes an excuse for not taking sides. This is the perfect ideology for the modern bourgeois mind... Interfaith and cross-cultural dialogue is empty without a firm grounding in solidarity with the oppressed and dispossessed.¹⁴⁰

To be sure, Islamic scholars and community activists involved in interfaith exchange have also called for collaborative action in social justice works and solidarity with the marginalized, as opposed to meeting solely in a seminar setting.¹⁴¹ The crucial difference with Esack's approach, however, is his emphasis that religious pluralism must be built on a principled, prophetic solidarity with the oppressed. The collective struggle against the unjust status quo, then, becomes *the* point of departure for all interreligious interaction.

Islam as a Theology of the Margins

Esack's exegesis is also significant because he forces Muslims to reconsider the context in which they articulate understandings of Islam. Since the 1990s, the question of whether Islam and Islamism are synonymous with terrorism has taken centre-stage in public discourse in Europe and North America.¹⁴² The attacks of 11 September 2001 have entrenched this discourse further. As we discussed in the introductory chapter, 9/11 has become the overwhelming backdrop in which contemporary Islamic thinking has taken shape, with Muslim spokespeople and intellectuals eager to 'prove' the compatibility of a peaceful, tolerant Islam with Western values. To quote Esack's eloquent words:

All of us are forced by the context of 9/11 to find a moderate Islam, a beautiful Islam, a gentle Islam. Why should the context of occupation not force us to find an angry Islam?¹⁴³

¹⁴⁰ Esack, "Religio-Cultural Diversity," 184.

¹⁴¹ Tariq Ramadan, *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 212.

¹⁴² Lockman, 223.

¹⁴³ F. Esack Interview, 2009.

Common Word needs to be located within this larger post-9/11 project of presenting a ‘good Islam’ – one that does not challenge the powers that be but simply affirms empty expressions of religious tolerance, world peace, greater understanding – in juxtaposition to a ‘bad Islam,’ which is confrontational, anti-imperialist, militant. This is not to imply that deep-seated misconceptions about Islam do not abound. Islam is often portrayed by Islamophobes as a violent, authoritarian faith of fear, as opposed to Christianity, which is presented as a religion that promotes love and tolerance.¹⁴⁴ Rather, my point here is that, for Esack, the most important question is: In *whose* context do we approach Islam? In a global context of manifest injustice, a friendly, law-abiding Islam projected through the lens of the powerful will inevitably devolve into a theology of accommodation, toeing the simplistic lines of peace and dialogue, while an Islam channelled through the experiences of the oppressed will take on a fundamentally different character. In fact, Esack writes, if one’s eyes are those of the world and not of the US, then it is capitalism, not religious fundamentalism, which represents the most devastating form of terrorism.¹⁴⁵ The very fact that one country – the US – consumes half of the world’s natural resources speaks volumes about the glaring maldistribution of wealth.¹⁴⁶ It is this stark reality of economic deprivation, in which the affluent North rides with complete impunity on the broken back of the South, that forms the principal context through which Esack articulates his faith.

Questions of authenticity are central to theologies that seek to accommodate the unjust status quo. In their hermeneutical quest to present a peaceful, passive and beautiful Islam, critiques Esack, liberal Muslims persistently claimed that their reading of Islam was the only authentic one, that they alone adhered to “true Islam” while other Muslims,

¹⁴⁴ Sells, 23.

¹⁴⁵ Esack, “Religio-Cultural Diversity,” 184.

¹⁴⁶ Esack, *On Being a Muslim*, 105.

particularly Wahhabis and militant oppositional figures like Osama Bin Laden, were not really Muslim, did not really practice Islam.¹⁴⁷ This desire to claim authenticity, however, is not restricted to post-9/11 liberal Muslim discourse, but is a signature trademark of accommodationist theology, which posits its understanding and practice of religion as the ‘correct’ one.¹⁴⁸ Conversely, radical interpretations rooted in protest and the struggle for liberation are Othered within theologies of accommodation as inauthentic. As we noted in the introductory chapter, a recurring frustration for Barlas was that the language that she used in her gender-sensitive rereading of scripture – terms like “anti-patriarchal,” “sexual inequality” and “liberation” – were hastily dismissed by mainstream Muslims as Western concepts alien to Islam.¹⁴⁹ Interpretations in confrontation with capitalism, too, have been disregarded by most Muslims as being nothing more than socialist and Marxist ideologies cloaked in Islamic garb,¹⁵⁰ and thus lacking genuine authenticity. Yet the fact that these very Muslims, by being complicit in and even actively promoting free-market policies, are as ideological in their (neoliberal) economic thinking does not seem to problematize their own incessant claims to authenticity.

On the contrary, a radical commitment to justice and economic equality has deep roots in the history of Islam. Esack does not claim to be an innovator. Rather, he argues that progressive Islam – one dedicated to the task of liberation for all of humanity – has

¹⁴⁷ Esack, “In Search of Progressive Islam Beyond 9/11,” 83.

¹⁴⁸ I do not mean to suggest that rhetorical claims of authenticity are the preserve of accommodationist theology, as dissident figures and groups routinely present themselves as the most ‘authentic’ and ‘genuine’ spokespersons of the faith. I am grateful to James McDougall and Paul Joyce (in discussion with the author) for this insight. That being said, I would argue that such dissident actors make assertions of authenticity precisely in order to challenge the entrenched authenticity claims of the status quo, which exercises hegemony over what constitutes truth.

¹⁴⁹ Barlas, “*Believing Women*” in *Islam*, xii.

¹⁵⁰ Safi, *Progressive Muslims*, 7. To be sure, Muslim Marxists have not made serious attempts to interpret Islamic texts, such as the Qur’an, in light of their ideological commitments. As Safi – a progressive Islamic scholar – observes, their lack of engagement with religious texts and traditions is one of the reasons (though not, in my opinion, the main reason) why they have failed to attract mainstream Muslim audiences.

been present, albeit in the shadows, right from the very beginning of Islamic history,¹⁵¹ tracing all the way back to the practice of Prophet Muhammad. Having little interest in securing an audience within the Meccan corridors of power, Esack writes, the Prophet condemned wealth accumulation and spent his life serving the neglected, praying to God “to let him live, die and be raised on the Day of Judgement with the poor.”¹⁵² Indeed, the emergence of Islam represented a formidable challenge to the socioeconomic practices of seventh-century Mecca,¹⁵³ which was a rigidly stratified society. Intrinsic to the Islamic call was a comprehensive reconfiguration of the existing order, and it was because of the profound socioeconomic implications of Muhammad’s monotheism that the Meccan elite rejected his prophecy.¹⁵⁴ In looking towards the formative period of the faith as a model of emulation, Esack’s thinking needs to be located within the broader trajectory of *salafi* Muslim thought, the reformist movement that we mentioned earlier on in this thesis, which turns towards the first generation of Muslims (*al-salaf*) as a normative community to be followed.¹⁵⁵ Islamic liberation theology, therefore, is part and parcel of this larger reformist project. But a liberating practice, Esack continues, was not just characteristic of Prophet Muhammad, but of all the prophets of God. Like Muhammad, the prophets of the Qur’an were firmly committed to the oppressed and their own social origins were almost always humble, coming from peasant or other lowly backgrounds.¹⁵⁶ In other words, a radical religiosity devoted to justice is, insofar as Qur’anic and prophetic precedence is concerned, far more orthodox than the very orthodoxy that dismisses it.

¹⁵¹ Esack, as cited in Wolfe, 15.

¹⁵² Esack, *On Being a Muslim*, 105.

¹⁵³ Izutsu, 16.

¹⁵⁴ Esack, *Qur’an, Liberation, and Pluralism*, 138.

¹⁵⁵ Brown, *Rethinking Tradition in Modern Islamic Thought*, 31.

¹⁵⁶ Esack, *Qur’an, Liberation, and Pluralism*, 99.

The Qur'anic hermeneutic of Esack thus forces Muslims to ask *whose* interests – the powerful or the powerless – are being served by their articulation of Islam. The call for reform has become a pervasive discourse in contemporary Islam. But the most important question in any discussion of reform, interjects Esack, should be “in response to whose demands do I re-think the meaning and implications of my faith?”¹⁵⁷ That is, reform to what ends? The question of subject is paramount here: Are the subjects – the primary actors – of my religious discourse the elites or the people? Is my Islam a theology of the centre or a theology of the margins? These questions are rarely raised in contemporary Islamic discourse. Esack gives the example of fasting in Ramadan. The rationale that is usually given as to why Muslims are commanded to fast in the holy month is in order to empathize with the poor. Yet this explanation is highly problematic, as it is founded on the presumption that the average Muslim is wealthy or at least self-sufficient.¹⁵⁸ By taking the affluent members of the faith as a default frame of reference, as the subject of Islamic discourse, the poor are Othered – indeed, poverty is treated as an essentially non-Muslim issue – and consigned to the passive role of objects that are to be empathized with through pity and charity. Muslim discourse over the AIDS pandemic, which adversely affects the poor, is another case in point. Esack notes that mainstream Muslim responses to AIDS have, in classic conservative fashion, portrayed the crisis as a form of divine retribution against people who practice the sins of sexual perversity.¹⁵⁹ So not only is there a striking lack of socio-economic analysis behind the spread of the virus, such as the fact that the market actually profits from holding back treatments to victims through patents or even the basic knowledge that the most common form of transmission

¹⁵⁷ Esack, “The Contemporary Democracy and the Human Rights Project for Muslim Societies,” 125.

¹⁵⁸ Esack, *On Being a Muslim*, 34.

¹⁵⁹ Esack and Chiddy, 4.

is not sex but contaminated needles, but the AIDS crisis is treated, too, as a non-Muslim problem. This is a pandemic that apparently affects ‘other’ people, not ‘us.’ The very idea of a Muslim afflicted with HIV or full-blown AIDS becomes an oxymoron, despite the reality that countless Muslims continue to live and die with the disease. The critical intervention of Esack’s hermeneutic, therefore, is that it shifts the locus of Islam from the dominant centre to the much maligned margins, to those people – Muslim or otherwise – for whom poverty and disease, patriarchy and dispossession are inescapable facts of life. Furthermore, this hermeneutical transition in subject, Esack argues, will transform the language of Islam, thereby allowing for a more liberating vocabulary to emerge. Consider the revamping of the term *jihad*, sensationally rendered as ‘Holy War’ in the West but literally meaning ‘struggle,’ in the discourse of progressive Muslims involved in the anti-apartheid movement. For these Muslims the objective of *jihad* was neither the Islamist project of creating an Islamic state nor the liberal Muslim project of inner exertion, of attaining spiritual enlightenment from within, but rather – through solidarity and struggle with the oppressed – the establishment of a just social order.¹⁶⁰

Conclusions

Although the substance of the Qur’anic text occupies a central position in Esack’s hermeneutic, *praxis* is treated as an equally important text. Esack’s emphasis on the Qur’an stems from the fact that it is universally accepted by all Muslims as the actual Word of God, as opposed to the *hadith* and the thousand-year old intellectual tradition,

¹⁶⁰ For the references to liberationist versus Islamist understandings of *jihad*, see Esack, *Qur’an, Liberation, and Pluralism*, 107 and Esack, *The Qur’an: A User’s Guide*, 178. For the reference to liberal Muslim interpretations of *jihad*, see Esack, “In Search of Progressive Islam Beyond 9/11,” 83.

both of which are human-made and thus fallible and disputed. Esack does not write them off altogether, however. Instead, he draws selectively from them, privileging the Qur'an wherever a contradiction may emerge. Scripture thus reigns supreme, and extra-Qur'anic texts need to be understood through the framework of scripture. Yet who gets to decide what the Qur'anic message is? In whose context is the text to be understood? It is here that a fundamental difference emerges between Esack's hermeneutical method and those of other scholars, most notably the doyen of modernist Islamic thought, Rahman. For the latter, seventh-century Arabia was the first context to be studied, and therefore historical criticism, in which a double movement theory would allow for the principles of the pre-modern text to be extracted and then applied to the modern context, constituted the 'correct' method of reading the Qur'an. The most pressing problems that Esack has with this historically based approach are its essentially elitist nature and the elevation of the classical context over the immediate present. For Esack the most important context is the contemporary one, for the Qur'an was sent for all peoples, irrespective of time and place. But even within the present the text speaks to a more specific context: that of oppression and poverty. The Qur'an, then, is the living speech of a just deity addressed first and foremost to the downtrodden. The Qur'an is only truly liberating, however, when those who are oppressed struggle against their oppressors, and it is within this framework of *praxis* that the Word ought to be engaged: through a hermeneutical dialectic of struggle, reflection and further struggle. The Qur'an, by the very nature of its own 'progressive revelation,' affirms this liberating mode of reading. Truth is never timeless and absolute, therefore, but continuously revealed to those who partake in critical reflection based on

struggle. Indeed, within Esack's exegesis, *praxis* functions as the motor of theological enquiry, a central source that is hermeneutically on a par with scripture.

While the seeds of his radical commentary are to be found in the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa, the larger vision of Esack's liberation struggle is a thoroughly comprehensive one, and thus an abiding commitment to solidarity lies at the heart of his Islamic *praxis*. Justice is a fundamental component of the Qur'anic call, commanding humankind to strive towards creating a lasting, egalitarian social order. According to the Qur'an, faith is inextricably linked with the performance of righteous works. In fact, the text makes an explicit, preferential option for the oppressed – irrespective of their belief – promising that they will inherit the Earth. This pledge is sacralised, according to Esack, in the Exodus experience. This is a problematic paradigmatic move, however, given the overwhelming emphasis that Christian liberation theology has also placed on this event. Because of the universalizing tendency of Christianity, particularly in the academic discipline of Religion, Islamic liberation theology will have to speak to the question of difference, to foreground the specificity of Muslim theology and experience. And in this vein, the concept of *tawhid* – the central tenet of Islam – holds great potential as an alternative, theological paradigm. It is precisely because a genuine commitment to morality is gauged by the ability to be moved by the suffering of others, and not just of one's own community, that the South African struggle, although playing a formative role in Esack's hermeneutic, cannot capture the utter universality of his liberationist project. Solidarity has been a hallmark of Esack's activism, especially with regard to the struggle for gender justice, combating the stigmatization of Muslims afflicted with HIV/AIDS and supporting the Palestinian cause. Because the categories of oppressor and oppressed are

dynamic and conditioned by an ever-changing context, solidarity ought to be principled – what Esack terms, ‘prophetic’ – so that the progressive Muslim intellectual does not end up reproducing relationships of inequality in her/his struggle for justice. Moreover, the impulse to stand with the oppressed must not be guided by benevolence and charity, but rather by the pressing need to keep one’s own humanity (*fitra*) intact, for within contexts of oppression one’s *fitra* is compromised if one does not act. The liberation of the Self, therefore, is intimately tied to the liberation of the Other.

Esack’s liberating exegesis is significant for two primary reasons. Firstly, he shows the potential of liberation theology to function as a viable, alternative framework to the otherwise deeply problematic discourse of religious dialogue. Interreligious solidarity became a crucial part of the South African struggle against apartheid. Standing next to and being touched by the humanity of the non-Muslim Other compelled Esack to find a pluralistic hermeneutic of liberation, disclosing the dynamism and fluidity of such key Qur’anic concepts as *iman*, *islam* and *kufir*. The core criterion of salvation in Muslim scripture, Esack argues, lies in one’s commitment to justice and not one’s membership in a ‘chosen’ ethno-religious community. And it is this emphasis on interreligious solidarity against oppression that can provide an effective alternative to the discourse of dialogue. What has been strikingly absent in the language of religious dialogue, bent on countering an imminent civilization clash between Islam and the West, is a critical awareness of international politics. For religious dialogue has failed to address the root cause of world suffering, which is not a result of a misunderstanding between different ‘civilizations’ but rather the exploits of American imperialism and the brutality of a free-market capitalism

that has long ravaged the South. Esack's emphasis on solidarity, therefore, allows the critique of power to act as the point of departure for all interfaith collaboration.

Esack's liberation theology is also significant because it forcefully undermines any essentialist, disembodied claim to 'Islam' by raising the larger question of whose context is religion being articulated within. Challenging 9/11 as the framework, the underlying backdrop within which contemporary Islamic thought has taken shape, Esack insists that Islam needs to be expounded through the context of the two-thirds world. This shift in the subject of one's discourse from the powerful to the powerless, such as the millions of people who die every year because of AIDS will, in turn, raise entirely different questions and spawn a new theological language firmly rooted in justice. So instead of pontificating as to how authentic a particular interpretation of Islam is – a theological obsession of accommodationist Islamic discourse – the progressive Muslim intellectual would ask how such an understanding can speak to the problems plaguing the vast majority of humanity: poverty, hunger, unemployment, homelessness, disease, occupation, death. Although the issue of authenticity is clearly consigned to the edges of Esack's hermeneutic, a radical commitment to justice has deep roots in Islamic history and Esack himself takes great inspiration from the examples of Muhammad and the earlier prophets of the Qur'an. The centering of liberation is a seminal contribution that Esack makes to Islamic thought, for it forces Muslims to confront the elitism and complicity of mainstream Islamic discourse, like its patronizing attitude towards the poor as passive objects to be empathized with and dismissive treatment of the AIDS pandemic as 'divine punishment' and a 'non-Muslim' problem. In so doing, Esack compels Muslims to rethink their Islam as a theology of the margins, as a faith defined by its commitment to the oppressed.

CHAPTER 2:

The Reading of Asghar Ali Engineer

Why should you not fight in the cause of God and for the oppressed – men, women and children – who pray: “Deliver us from this city, Our Sustainer, whose people are oppressors; send us a friend by Your will, send us a helper!”

(Q. 4:75)

Still, take any *madrasa*. I’m talking of higher Islamic learning in *madrasas*. It is 100% based on medieval texts. Not even a 1% attempt to understand the Qur’an in the modern context...So that [medieval] text is at the centre of traditional Islam. And what is needed to understand the Qur’an in its real, revolutionary spirit is not this medieval text but reason and reflection in the light of our own experiences, our own problems, our own issues.¹ [My parentheses]

(Asghar Ali Engineer)

Introduction

This chapter explores the Qur’anic hermeneutic of the Indian theologian Asghar Ali Engineer. The first section will examine the interpretive order of the Islamic texts in Engineer’s discourse. Specifically, I will show that, in a remarkably similar fashion to Esack, the Qur’an is the primary textual source that Engineer draws upon. This is not to say that he categorically rejects the *hadith* and the inherited, intellectual tradition, but rather that scripture authoritatively trumps all other Islamic sources. This hermeneutical privileging of the Qur’anic text, I argue, is intrinsically linked to Engineer’s critique of clerical authority. This chapter will then examine the centrality of justice in his exegesis, exploring the relationship between the sacred text and social liberation. Because of his strong emphasis on action as a mode of Qur’anic reading, Engineer’s hermeneutic is first

¹ A.A. Engineer Interview, 2010.

and foremost a hermeneutic of the here and now, of this world and *then* the next. Like Esack, he exhibits an acute awareness of the sheer complexity of oppression, calling for a thoroughly comprehensive commitment to justice and bringing together critical questions of class, gender and pluralism. But whereas Esack draws upon the Exodus as a paradigm of struggle, Engineer turns to the Battle of Karbala (680), reflecting his background as a Shi'a Muslim. While this chapter seeks to underscore the striking similarities of Esack's and Engineer's Islamic discourses in spite of their very different geographical locations, I will conclude by highlighting some key hermeneutical disparities between these two exegetes. In particular, I will problematize three recurring themes in Engineer's writings, namely: secularism, modernism and peace. This chapter will first set the stage for discussion by providing a brief history of India and a biographical sketch of Engineer.

Historical Context

Though India achieved independence from the British in 1947, the country has been plagued by communal riots, especially between Hindus and Muslims, the seeds of which were sown in the colonial era. India was a principal colony of the British Empire, which had consolidated its control from the second half of the eighteenth century onwards, first economically and then through direct, imperial rule. Initially comprised of bourgeois intellectuals loyal to the British, the Indian National Congress (est. 1885) was gradually transformed into a major vehicle of nationalist, anti-colonial resistance, developing a popular following under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi (d. 1948).² It would be elitist, however, to reduce the complex history of the South Asian liberation struggle to the activities of the Indian National Congress. As the Bengali historian Ranajit

² Robert Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), 309.

Guha has argued, India never had a “national liberation movement,” since upper-class Indians were unable to exert control over mass uprisings that were erupting throughout the country, particularly amongst peasants, workers and the urban petty bourgeoisie, and to generalize them into a unified, nationalist movement.³ India’s independence would lead to Partition (1947) – one of the most horrific events in South Asian history and in which almost a million people were killed as Muslims frantically moved to newly-created Pakistan, Hindus and Sikhs to independent India. It is important to note that the roots of such communal violence, professing solid, hermetically sealed boundaries between Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims, are to be found in the colonial period. In 1909, for example, the British set up separate electorates based on communal lines,⁴ thereby laying the groundwork for religious affiliation as a marker of political identity. Such colonial policies were informed by strategies of divide and rule, seeking to pre-empt political alignments between Hindus and Muslims against the British, as well as by the deep-seated assumption that communalism was “an essential and unchanging feature of Indian society.”⁵ Communal violence in contemporary India, then, is a lasting legacy of empire. A series of riots rocked the country in the late 1960s and early 1970s, in particular in Ahmadabad, in which a thousand people were killed, and in Bhivandi, claiming four

³ Ranajit Guha, “On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India,” in *Selected Subaltern Studies*, eds. Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 42-43.

⁴ Asghar Ali Engineer ed., *The Gujarat Carnage* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2003), 5.

⁵ Anuradha D. Needham and Rajeswari S. Rajan eds., *The Crisis of Secularism in India* (Durham, US: Duke University Press, 2007), 12. For a definitive study of how imperial discourses produced and solidified communal identities, see Gyanendra Pandey, *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990). Just as communal expressions of identity – that is, differences *between* religious groups – became established under colonial rule so, too, did the concept of caste, or innate differences *within* the predominant religious group: Hindus. See Nicholas B. Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

hundred lives.⁶ Communal conflict reared its ugly face again in the 1980s, culminating in the Mumbai riots of 1992-93. Perhaps the most shocking episode of communal violence, however, was that of Gujarat in 2002, wherein roughly eight hundred Muslims and two hundred Hindus were brutally massacred. This resurgence of sectarian strife is in large part due to the rise of Hindu nationalism (*hindutva*) since the 1980s, which has “sought to establish India as a primarily Hindu nation (*rashtra*), based on a notion of Hindu ethos, values and religion,” and views Muslims as a threat to Hindus and the nation as a whole.⁷

Raised in a traditional Muslim household, Engineer has become an influential, progressive voice in India, writing widely on Islam and communal violence.⁸ He was born on 10 March 1939 in Salumbar – a town in the Udaipur district – and brought up as a Dawudi Bohra, a sub-sect of Shi‘a Isma‘ili Islam based primarily in India and with a membership of roughly a million followers.⁹ Although he never attended a *madrasa*, Engineer was exposed to classical Islamic subjects, such as Qur’anic exegesis, jurisprudence and Muslim history, at an early age, as his father was a traditionally trained Islamic scholar.¹⁰ At the same time, however, Engineer took an avid interest in secular topics like Western philosophy and science.¹¹ Upon completing his secondary education, he went on to study civil engineering at Vikram University in Indore and eventually settled in Mumbai. While working as an engineer, he continued his readings in religion,

⁶ Asghar Ali Engineer, “How Secular is India Today?” *Secular Perspective*, 16 October 2008, accessed 23 February 2011, <http://www.csss-islam.com/arch 34.htm>

⁷ Ornit Shani, *Communalism, Caste and Hindu Nationalism: The Violence in Gujarat* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 1.

⁸ While Engineer uses the terms ‘communalism’ and ‘communal violence’ interchangeably, I prefer to use the latter in my own writing. I avoid the word ‘communalism’ in describing the historic tensions between Sikhs, Muslims and Hindus because, by definition, communalism refers to a very different concept: namely, a form of sociopolitical organization built on fellowship, egalitarianism and the commonwealth.

⁹ Asghar Ali Engineer, *On Developing Theology of Peace in Islam* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 2005), 166.

¹⁰ A.A. Engineer Interview, 2010.

¹¹ Ibid.

literature and philosophy, and wrote on these topics in Urdu magazines and in prestigious English newspapers like *The Times of India*. With the rise of communal riots between Muslims and Hindus in the late 1960s, Engineer began to write on communal violence and, in particular, how religion could work towards fostering peaceful dialogue between the two communities.¹² Concurrently, he became a prominent voice in the Bohra reform movement,¹³ rebelling against the conservative and exploitative practices of the religious leadership. Taking an early retirement in 1972, he decided to dedicate himself fully to the task of writing, publishing numerous articles and books on contemporary Islam, social justice and communal violence. Engineer has founded a number of educational and outreach organizations, including the Institute for Islamic Studies (est. 1980) and, in order to further research on communal violence and interfaith harmony, the Center for the Study of Society and Secularism (est. 1993).

Islamic Texts and Sacred Authority

Qur'an First

Like Esack, the Qur'an is the primary text that Engineer draws upon in his Islamic discourse. This is because, as the literal Word of God, the Qur'an is considered to be completely authentic by all Muslims, irrespective of sectarian affiliation.¹⁴ Engineer's foregrounding of the Qur'an is at odds with traditionalist approaches to textual authority, in which the *sunna* is also considered to be a form of divine revelation and, therefore, hermeneutically on a par with the Qur'an. Indeed, the only difference that classical theologians drew between the Qur'an and the *sunna* was that the former is to be used in

¹² Ibid.

¹³ The Bohras will be discussed later on in this chapter.

¹⁴ Engineer, *On Developing Theology of Peace in Islam*, 144.

recitation (*tilawa*), such as in religious rites and rituals, while the latter is unrecited (*ghayr matlu*).¹⁵ This is not to imply that classical scholars understood the *sunna* as being the literal word of God. Rather, they argued that while the Qur'an was the speech of God *in word*, the *sunna* reflected this divine speech *in spirit*.¹⁶ Yet how can the disputed word of the Prophet, asks Engineer, compete with the authentic Word of God? Drawing upon the writings of the Egyptian Qur'anic scholar Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd (d. 2010), specifically the distinction that he draws between revelation (*tanzil*) and interpretation (*ta'wil*), Engineer argues that while the Qur'anic text constitutes revelation, the Prophet's explanations of these verses reflect his own interpretations.¹⁷ So while these explanations may be of immense value, they are not authoritative and cannot override the dictates of the Qur'an. To put it another way: if any *sunna* is to be followed, it is that of the Qur'an and not of the Prophet. This is a compelling point given the striking absence of the much celebrated term *sunnat an-nabi* – the precedent of Prophet Muhammad – in the Qur'an. As the Islamic scholar Daniel Brown has noted, the Arabic root of *sunna* (S-N-N) surfaces only sixteen times in the text, emerging in two general contexts, both of which refer to God's judgement: firstly, as the precedent of – that is, the fate that befell – earlier communities (*sunnat al-awwalin*, such as in Q. 3:137; 8:38; 15:13; 18:55); and, secondly, as the precedent of God, or *sunnat Allah* (Q. 33:62; 35:43; 40:85; 48:23).¹⁸

That being said, the *hadith* literature is not entirely absent in Engineer's writings. Indeed, there are various *hadith* reports interspersed throughout his work. For instance, at one point he relates the prophetic prayer – “O Lord, I seek refuge in Thee from unbelief

¹⁵ Brown, *Rethinking Tradition in Modern Islamic Thought*, 7.

¹⁶ Von Denffer, 93.

¹⁷ A.A. Engineer Interview, 2010.

¹⁸ Brown, *Rethinking Tradition in Modern Islamic Thought*, 143.

(*kufir*) and poverty (*faqir*)”¹⁹ – while at another he recalls the famous prophetic maxim: “Wisdom is the lost property of the faithful; he should acquire it wherever he finds it.”²⁰ What Engineer seeks to underscore, however, is that the *hadith* are not a binding source. These reports are useful because they provide a historical window into how the Qur’an was understood in the classical world.²¹ That is, the *hadith* reflect a particular culture and experience – namely, that of the first Muslims – and while this experience certainly holds much value for contemporary believers, it should never eclipse our own lived realities. Engineer’s critique of *hadith* moves beyond the universalization of classical experiences, extending, like Esack, to issues of authenticity. Because many of the *hadith* came into being in the centuries following the Qur’anic revelation, Engineer writes, the veracity of these traditions is deeply contested. As such, the *hadith* reports need to be approached with caution and Muslims ought to avoid making any authoritative, legal pronouncements from this disputed body of literature.²² His core grievance with the *hadith*, then, is its hermeneutical elevation to that of the Qur’an or, even worse, when these prophetic reports outright trump the Word of God. The Islamic punishments for apostasy and illicit sexual relations are illustrative examples. Engineer points out that capital punishment for apostasy (*irtidad*) derives from the *hadith* and has no scriptural basis,²³ just as the penalty of stoning to death for unlawful sexual relations (*zina*), too, is based on *hadith*, while the Qur’an prescribes a hundred lashes.²⁴ Although the Qur’anic prescription is, technically

¹⁹ Engineer, *Islam and Liberation Theology*, 79.

²⁰ Ibid, 87.

²¹ A.A. Engineer Interview, 2010.

²² Asghar Ali Engineer, *The Rights of Women in Islam* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1992), 13.

²³ Asghar Ali Engineer, *Islam: Misgivings and History* (New Delhi: Vitasta Publishing, 2008), 140.

²⁴ Ibid, 166. The punishment of one hundred lashes can be found in Q. 24:2. For an in-depth discussion of how the punishment of stoning for *zina* entered into the Islamic legal tradition through the *hadith* literature, see John Burton, “The Meaning of *Ihsan*,” *Journal of Semitic Studies* 19, (1974): 47-75; John Burton, “The Origin of the Islamic Penalty for Adultery,” *Transactions of the Glasgow University Oriental Society* 26,

speaking, a step up from stoning – the express objective of stoning is to kill whereas that of flogging is not – it is difficult to believe that someone could survive a hundred lashes. In reality, the outcome of both punishments may well be the same: death.²⁵ Instead of merely juxtaposing the *hadith*-based penalty with the almost equally violent scriptural one, a more persuasive line of argument would have been to highlight the wider message of the Qur'an's discourse on *zina*. For a necessary condition of any accusation of *zina*, the text goes on to state, is the testimony of four witnesses who saw the sexual act taking place, prescribing a punishment of eighty lashes for those who accuse chaste women without substantiating their claim with these four witnesses (Q. 24:4-5).²⁶ Since it is highly unlikely that four witnesses (in addition to the couple) would be present during the act of sex – making it next to impossible for the punishment of a hundred lashes to be meted out – the Qur'an's intent is clearly not to give free license to flog fornicators. Rather, it seeks to emphasize the grave sinfulness (a) of illicit sexual relations and (b) of slander, of falsely accusing others of sexual immorality, especially women.

Engineer also engages the inherited, intellectual tradition, albeit in a critical manner, always making sure to privilege Qur'anic teachings over the *shari'a* whenever any conflict between the two may arise. Discussions of Islamic jurisprudence resurface at numerous points in Engineer's writings. When showing how earlier Muslim jurists had taken into account acute questions of oppression and social justice, for instance, Engineer refers to the following proverb by the medieval Islamic scholar Ahmad ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328): "The affairs of men in this world can be kept in order with justice and a certain

(1976): 16-27; and John Burton, *The Sources of Islamic Law: Islamic Theories of Abrogation* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990), in particular Chapter 7.

²⁵ I am grateful to Tim Gorrige (in discussion with the author) for this insight.

²⁶ These rules differ when a man accuses his own wife. In this case, both spouses take oaths that they are telling the truth, at which point, significantly, the wife's word is privileged over the husband's (Q. 24:6-9).

connivance in sin is better than pious tyranny.”²⁷ As we have noted at the beginning of this chapter, Engineer received training from his father in the Islamic intellectual tradition and therefore, like Esack, is conversant with this corpus of accumulated knowledge. His main contention with the tradition, however, is that it has come to dominate Islamic thinking and practice. As he put it in our interview:

Still, take any *madrasa*. I’m talking of higher Islamic learning in *madrasas*. It is 100% based on medieval texts. Not even a 1% attempt to understand the Qur’an in the modern context...So that [medieval] text is at the centre of traditional Islam. And what is needed to understand the Qur’an in its real, revolutionary spirit is not this medieval text but reason and reflection in the light of our own experiences, our own problems, our own issues.²⁸ [My parentheses]

There are thus two fundamental concerns at stake here. Firstly, that the *shari‘a* does not cater to contemporary circumstances. A key critique that Engineer levels against traditional Islamic scholars, particularly in the Indian context, is that they hastily apply medieval rulings without studying the particularities of present situations and without applying *ijtihad*, which he describes as being “creative re-interpretation.”²⁹ Secondly, in traditional Islam the *shari‘a* supersedes the Qur’an rather than the other way around. On the contrary, he argues, the *shari‘a* should be approached as an “instrument” – a means of transmitting, of putting into practice scriptural values – as it is the Qur’an that is central to Islamic teaching and, as such, should take precedence over *shari‘a* rulings.³⁰

Between Exegesis and Essentialism

Though Engineer’s and Esack’s hermeneutics are remarkably similar in terms of their ordering of the Islamic texts, there is a crucial difference, as the feminist legal

²⁷ Ahmad ibn Taymiyya, as cited in Engineer, *Islam and Liberation Theology*, 26.

²⁸ A.A. Engineer Interview, 2010.

²⁹ Asghar Ali Engineer, “Women’s Plight in Muslim Society,” *Secular Perspective*, 1 November 2006, accessed 23 February 2011, <http://www.csss-islam.com/arch 79.htm>

³⁰ Engineer, *Islam: Misgivings and History*, 100.

scholar Kecia Ali has pointed out, in their Qur'anic commentaries. Focussing on gender relations, Ali argues that Engineer's interpretation is an apologetic one, selectively sifting through various Qur'anic texts and singling out passages that support gender justice while overlooking those that suggest otherwise.³¹ Citing Q. 2:228, for example, Engineer concludes that the Qur'an upholds the full sexual equality of women and men:

The real intention of the Qur'an – that of sexual equality – comes through several verses. Those verses need to be reemphasized... The rights of the wives (with regard to their husbands) are equal to (husbands') rights with regard to them... (2:228) is quite definitive in this respect. It hardly needs any comment.³²

A far more complicated picture emerges, however, when one actually looks up this verse:

The divorced women shall undergo, without remarrying, a waiting-period of three monthly courses: for it is not lawful for them to conceal what God may have created in their wombs, if they believe in God and the Last Day. And during this period their husbands are fully entitled to take them back, if they desire reconciliation; but, in accordance with justice, the rights of the wives (with regard to their husbands) are equal to the (husbands') rights with regard to them, although men have a degree (*daraja*) over them. And God is All-Mighty, All-Wise.

Engineer's reference to Q. 2:228 thus really refers, as Ali shows, to a particular passage *within* the passage, dealing with mutual rights and responsibilities, while conveniently omitting the final and overtly problematic section stating men's 'degree' (*daraja*) over women.³³ This verse can, of course, be contextualized and female exegetes, as we shall see shortly, have argued that the degree refers to men's advantage in divorce proceedings – the main subject of Q. 2:228 – rather than making a broader, ontological claim about male superiority. Yet Engineer does not even attempt here to grapple with this part of the verse, ignoring it altogether. Indeed, the underlying problem in Engineer's exegesis is that he presents the Qur'an as a human rights document espousing absolute gender parity.

³¹ Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam*, 123-124.

³² Asghar Ali Engineer, "Islam, Women, and Gender Justice," in *What Men Owe Women: Men's Voices from World Religions*, eds. John C. Raines and Daniel C. Maguire (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 2001), 124.

³³ Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam*, 124.

At one point he proclaims – “Muhammad announced through the Qur’an a charter of rights for women”³⁴ – while at another he insists that the “Qur’an is the first revealed book that accords equal rights to women.”³⁵ As the first chapter has shown, Esack’s hermeneutical treatment of gender justice is more nuanced. Though Esack, like Engineer, approaches the text as an engaged reader who is in solidarity with women and their struggles against patriarchy, Esack argues that regardless of how the text may be reinterpreted, the Qur’an in certain ways remains an androcentric document, or one that addresses male audiences, while women “are essentially subjects being dealt with – however kindly – rather than being directly addressed.”³⁶ This is not to imply that the Qur’an is completely male-centred, for it explicitly affirms the individual accountability of all people irrespective of gender, promising salvation for both believing men and believing women (Q. 33:35; 49:13).³⁷ That being said, the text ascribes greater moral agency to men in the spheres of sex and marriage.³⁸ The difference between Esack’s and Engineer’s readings, then, is that whereas the former is willing to acknowledge, to wrestle with problematic passages, the latter simply refuses to do so, either explaining away or wholly ignoring those passages that do not fit into a liberating discourse.

The apologetics of Engineer’s gendered reading reflects a deeper tendency in his exegesis to essentialize the Qur’an and, by extension, Islam. Despite acknowledging the subjectivity of the reader and the hermeneutical impossibility of interpreting the text in a contextual vacuum, he persists in claiming that there are no Qur’anic passages that can be

³⁴ Engineer, *Islam and Liberation Theology*, 33.

³⁵ Engineer, *Islam: Misgivings and History*, 98.

³⁶ Esack, “Islam and Gender Justice,” 195.

³⁷ In the following chapters we will see that these verses play a key role in women’s commentary.

³⁸ Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam*, 131.

used to support the status quo.³⁹ There is only one way to read scripture, and that is a liberating reading. This essentializing of the Qur'an, in turn, leads Engineer to essentialize the Muslim faith as a whole. With regard to religious pluralism, for example, he maintains that Islam "does not even indirectly hint at coercion, let alone violence, when it comes to any religious or spiritual matter."⁴⁰ Islam can thus only be a progressive force for social justice, and interpretations that suggest otherwise are not *really* Islamic. His essentialism, moreover, comes packaged with crude triumphalism, proclaiming that Islam was "the first systematic attempt to bring a just society into existence in the history of mankind."⁴¹ This tendency to essentialize Islam stands in marked contrast, again, to Esack's liberating exegesis. As we discussed in the previous chapter, a key critique that Esack levelled against liberal Muslims in post-9/11 America was their claim over Islamic authenticity, declaring that Islam can *only* be peaceful and that militant interpretations of Islam, such as that of Osama bin Laden, are outside the fold of the faith.⁴² It is important to note that a prime hermeneutical strategy that Engineer uses in essentializing the text, in addition to selective omission, is that of 'contextuality versus normativity.' According to Engineer, the Qur'an can be divided into two categories: the contextual, which reflects time-bound contexts of revelation, and the normative, or that which is applicable for all times and places.⁴³ He applies this interpretive model to the realm of gender relations:

In conclusion, it should be said that if one goes by those verses of the Qur'an that belong to the normative category or that of the nature of laying down principles and basic values, *men and women should enjoy equal rights in every respect*.⁴⁴ [sic]

³⁹ Engineer, *On Developing Theology of Peace in Islam*, v.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 95.

⁴¹ Engineer, *Islam: Misgivings and History*, 39.

⁴² Esack, "In Search of Progressive Islam Beyond 9/11," 83.

⁴³ A.A. Engineer Interview, 2010.

⁴⁴ Engineer, "Islam, Women, and Gender Justice," 128.

But what Engineer fails to outline are the specific criteria, the framework to determine which verses are contextual, which are normative. And it is precisely his silence on this critical matter that enables him to read absolute gender justice into the Qur'an, explaining away difficult passages by calling them contextual while elevating those passages that corroborate his own biases as timeless, transcendental, essential. In other words, the first step towards a non-apologetic reading would be to expound, clearly and systematically, the hermeneutical criteria that distinguish between the normative and the contextual.

On Authority

The prioritization of the Qur'an over other Islamic texts is intrinsically linked to Engineer's critique of clerical hierarchy. As the Islamic scholar Carl Ernst has observed, the most contentious issue in Islam is the question of sacred authority: that is, who has the right to partake in religious interpretation and, in so doing, to define the faith?⁴⁵ In our interview, Engineer eloquently summed up his stance on this heated question:

There is no concept of authority as far as the Qur'an is concerned. As far as the Qur'an is concerned, it is the individual. Responsibility is with the individual. The Qur'an nowhere says that the Prophet will be responsible for what Muslims are doing. The Qur'an nowhere says that any caliph will be responsible or any '*alim* [religious scholar] will be responsible. If I am accountable on the Day of Judgement to Allah, I must accept my own authority.⁴⁶ [My parentheses]

Engineer draws a very compelling connection here between authority and accountability: that because each and every person will ultimately stand before God for what s/he has done, it is the individual's authority that is binding and not those of Islamic scholars or mystical intermediaries. The Islamic intellectual tradition, as an elite body of scholarship requiring years of intensive study in order to master medieval texts, poses a fundamental

⁴⁵ Ernst, 31.

⁴⁶ A.A. Engineer Interview, 2010.

problem for such an inclusive approach to authority. While arguably more accessible than the intellectual tradition, the *hadith*, too, comprises a dense corpus involving the study of thousands of prophetic reports, including the substantive portions of these reports as well as their complex, convoluted and often contradictory chains of narration. Indeed, it is important to point out that the *‘ulama* are not only staunch supporters of the intellectual tradition but also of the *hadith*, reflecting their sustained efforts to maintain their own position as the authoritative interpreters of the prophetic legacy.⁴⁷ Compared to the *hadith* and the tradition, the Qur’an is a simple (not to be confused with *simplistic*) and straightforward text, comprising a single-volume canon. And it is precisely because of the sheer accessibility of the Qur’an, in addition of course to its hallowed status as the Word of God, that it takes centre-stage in Engineer’s Islamic discourse. To be sure, successive layers of exegesis have accumulated around the Qur’anic text, embodied most evidently in *‘ulum al-Qur’an* (‘the Sciences of the Qur’an), which deal with the text’s ‘proper’ exposition. A recurring theme in this genre, as in much of mainstream Islamic thought, is delineating who exactly has the authority to interpret. According to Islamic scholars, the qualified Qur’anic exegete must display such qualities as soundness in *‘aqida*, or ‘creed’ (effectively ruling out heterodox Muslim groups), a mastery of the Arabic language and knowledge of the classical commentarial tradition.⁴⁸ The exegete should also refrain from using personal opinion, refer to *hadith* to advance understanding and consult the views of respected Islamic scholars.⁴⁹ Countering such interpretive hierarchy, Engineer argues that every Muslim should be able to expound the Qur’an, to draw authoritative meaning from the text. Furthermore, even if a Muslim cannot read classical Arabic – let alone display

⁴⁷ Brown, *Rethinking Tradition in Modern Islamic Thought*, 133.

⁴⁸ Von Denffer, 122-123.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

mastery over the language – s/he has the solemn responsibility to study the text through translations, though knowledge of Arabic would be an obvious advantage.⁵⁰

Engineer's suspicion of religious authority is, in large part, a result of his own upbringing, in which he was exposed to the exploitative nature of entrenched, clerical hierarchy. Manipulating his spiritual credentials, the head of the Dawudi Bohras imposed heavy taxes on his followers in order to consolidate control and secure his family's financial standing.⁵¹ What allowed him to do so was his own privileged position as the authoritative representative of the Hidden Imam.⁵² As Shi'a Muslims, the Bohras believe in the institution of imamate. Starting from Ali ibn Abi Talib (d. 661), the cousin and son-in-law of Prophet Muhammad, the imamate is understood by Shi'a Muslims as a divinely sanctioned and hereditary spiritual office, safeguarding the message of the Prophet, and the authority of which is vested in the Prophet's immediate family. Different Shi'a schools of thought, therefore, follow various hereditary lines of imams. After the disappearance of their twenty-first imam, Tayyib Abi al-Qasim (b. circa 1130), who is believed to have gone into occultation and will reappear sometime in the future, the Bohra community appointed a hereditary line of *da'is*, or representatives of the Hidden Imam. Engineer grew up under the leadership of Tahir Seifuddin (d. 1965), who assumed office as the fifty-first *da'i*. In addition to exploiting the community financially, Seifuddin essentially established himself as an intermediary between God and the faithful, claiming that any marriage contracted without his permission was Islamically unlawful – and, thus, any children borne of such wedlock illegitimate – and that no Bohra

⁵⁰ A.A. Engineer Interview, 2010.

⁵¹ Engineer, *On Developing Theology of Peace in Islam*, 171-172.

⁵² A.A. Engineer Interview, 2010.

could lead the congregational prayers without his express consent.⁵³ A traditional scholar, Engineer's father was an '*amil*', or a lower official whose task was to execute the wishes of the *da'i*. Engineer recounts his upbringing as follows:

My father was an employee of this Bohra *da'i*, fifty-first *da'i*, Tahir Seifuddin. So I saw naked exploitation at a very close quarter. And this is why my father did not want me to take up this profession. He felt like a slave, that we have to carry out all the orders, orders that are arbitrary and contradictive of our religious faith and religious beliefs. So he says, my son, I have spent my life as a slave and I don't want you to become a slave like me. So you better go for secular education and become independent. And once you become an engineer or a doctor I would also give up this and live with you.⁵⁴

In fact, when the Bohra community in the city of Udaipur was driven to such an extreme that they openly rebelled against the *da'i* in the early 1960s, Engineer joined the uprising and became a leading figure in the reformist movement.⁵⁵ This formative experience of witnessing firsthand the oppressive potential of religious hierarchy has, in turn, led Engineer to become deeply suspicious of sacred authority as a whole. The critique of the '*ulama*' is a prominent theme in his writings, which portray these traditional scholars and especially their claim that the *shari'a* is divine and unalterable – thereby consolidating their own authority – as a prime obstacle towards progressive change within Islam.⁵⁶

A Revolutionary Faith

Islam and Liberation Theology

Indeed, this lived experience of inequality has shaped his entire discourse on religion. Like Esack, Engineer approaches Islam and the Qur'an in particular as a

⁵³ Engineer, *On Developing Theology of Peace in Islam*, 173.

⁵⁴ A.A. Engineer Interview, 2010.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Engineer, "Women's Plight in Muslim Society."

revolutionary resource that can be drawn upon to combat states of oppression.⁵⁷ Justice, he argues, is a core component of the Qur’anic call, with God commanding the believers to firmly uphold justice (Q. 7:29; 49:9) and even wedding it to *taqwa*, or ‘piety’ (Q. 5:8) – a key scriptural term that we will explore in greater depth in the upcoming chapters on Wadud and Barlas.⁵⁸ Without social justice, then, piety is lacking, incomplete, empty. Economic equality is an integral aspect of Engineer’s understanding of Qur’anic justice. Far from being a discourse of benevolence centred on goodwill and charity (*sadaqa*), he writes that the text speaks to the fundamental right of the poor in the possessions of the affluent.⁵⁹ And it is this radical language of economic rights, as opposed to simply that of charity, which can confront the sin of structural poverty. Citing God’s commandment to Prophet Muhammad – “They ask thee what they ought to spend. Say: That which is superfluous.” (Q. 2:219) – Engineer comments that the faithful should keep only that which will fulfill their basic needs, distributing ‘that which is superfluous’ to the poor and needy.⁶⁰ Paralleling Esack, he argues that the Qur’an reflects a deity who not only demands egalitarian conduct, but also stands in solidarity with the powerless against the powerful.⁶¹ Engineer passionately quotes the following Qur’anic passage, referring to the ancient Children of Israel suffering under the despotic rule of Pharaoh’s regime:

It is Our Will to bestow Our grace upon the downtrodden of the Earth, and to make them the leaders, and to make them the inheritors of the Earth. And to establish them securely on the Earth, and to let Pharaoh and Haman and their hosts experience through them (the Children of Israel) the very thing against which they sought to protect themselves. (Q. 28:5-6)

⁵⁷ Engineer, *Islam and Liberation Theology*, v.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 5. The two words, as well as their linguistic derivatives, that are used in these verses – ‘*adl* and *qist*’ – are the main terms in the Qur’an for justice, the former literally meaning to divide something into exactly two equal parts and the latter referring to fair and equitable conduct. See Abdur Rashid Siddiqui, *Qur’anic Keywords: A Reference Guide* (Markfield, Leicestershire: The Islamic Foundation, 2008), 4.

⁵⁹ Engineer, *Islam and Liberation Theology*, 82.

⁶⁰ Ibid. This verse has been quoted directly from Engineer’s writings.

⁶¹ A.A. Engineer Interview, 2010.

That Engineer, in making a theological case for a just deity who intervenes in history to stand alongside the oppressed, cites precisely the same verses as Esack is hermeneutically significant, suggesting the centrality of this passage in Islamic liberation theology.

But in order for the Qur'an to function as a liberating text, it must first become a *liberated* text. A core critique that Engineer levels against mainstream Islamic thought is that it has taken a radical Qur'anic message of social liberation and reduced it to mere, metaphysical and spiritual abstractions wholly divorced from lived realities. This discursive move, moreover, is an inevitable consequence of Islamic theology's alliance with the status quo. In fact, the argument could be made, Engineer adds provocatively, that the more abstract the theology, the deeper the political complicity.⁶² This historic, hermeneutical shift within Islam from social to solely spiritual liberation is a compelling observation that Engineer makes. The Islamic scholar Abdullah Saeed has noted that with the emergence of the *shari'a* in the first three centuries of Islam, Muslims increasingly approached the Qur'an – the substance of which was broadly ethical in nature, espousing values and principles – as a strictly legal document.⁶³ Because of losing sight of the socially egalitarian vision of the Qur'an, Engineer continues, what has taken centre-stage in Muslim life has not been a commitment to creating a world characterized by justice and compassion, but an obsession with dogmas and rituals. The Islamic revival that has swept through Muslim-majority societies since the 1970s is a contemporary example of a highly ritualized Islam, writes Engineer, pointing to its heavy emphasis on piety and

⁶² Engineer, *Islam and Liberation Theology*, 1-2.

⁶³ Abdullah Saeed, *The Qur'an: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2008), 13. A legal document can, of course, be ethical. The point that I am trying to make here is that over the course of Muslim history the Qur'an was engaged progressively as a book of law, as a predominantly legal text. Yet even a casual perusal of the Qur'an would reveal that questions of law are not a prominent feature. Rather, the Qur'an is a book of guidance for humankind, in which moral and ethical commitments to society play a crucial role.

worship,⁶⁴ such as praying five times a day, donning the veil and fasting in the month of Ramadan. An uncritical accent on rites and rituals only serves to entrench further the trappings of religious authority, for “rituals require a priestcraft,”⁶⁵ thus allowing the ‘*ulama* to strengthen their already privileged positions as the custodians of Islam. This is not to suggest that Engineer rejects the rituals – on the contrary, I recall seeing him at the Friday Prayers when he spoke at the University of Oxford – but rather that he seeks to problematize understandings and practices of Islam that are blind to human suffering, that are not grounded in historical projects. In order for Islam to become a truly liberating faith, therefore, it needs to be stripped of those accumulated accretions, from “soulless rituals” to “sheer metaphysical abstractions,” that have been introduced to perpetuate the status quo instead of subverting it.⁶⁶ To put it another way: Engineer’s liberation theology must first entail the “liberation of theology.”⁶⁷

And it is struggle that effects this liberation of theology, transforming the Qur’an into a liberated and liberating scripture. Engineer moves beyond a simplistic, sweeping call for social change, for the key question that he raises – in a strikingly similar manner to Esack – is change for *whom*? That is, change to what ends? According to Engineer, societal transformation, of which religious reform is part and parcel, must be undertaken to benefit the weak and disenfranchised.⁶⁸ But liberating exegesis cannot come into being through the work of a detached commentator, but rather an engaged interpreter who actively fights with the weak against the powerful, and thus partakes in *praxis* – the

⁶⁴ Engineer, *Islam and Liberation Theology*, 107.

⁶⁵ Engineer, *On Developing Theology of Peace in Islam*, 183.

⁶⁶ Engineer, *Islam and Liberation Theology*, 22.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 21. Though Engineer does not cite anyone when making this argument, it is important to note that the Uruguayan liberation theologian and Jesuit priest Juan Luis Segundo (d. 1996) authored a study with the same title. See Juan Luis Segundo, *Liberation of Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1976).

⁶⁸ Engineer, *Islam and Liberation Theology*, 16.

hermeneutical hallmark of liberation theology that we discussed in the first chapter. Through *praxis*, through the unique insights gained from the experience of struggle, the text speaks to the reader in new ways and, in turn, these new meanings shape, and repeatedly reshape, the struggle. Citing Q. 4:95, Engineer argues that the Qur'an endorses such engaged reading, explicitly singling out the *mujahid*, or one who partakes in *jihad*.⁶⁹

The passage reads:

The faithful who sit idle, other than those who are disabled, are not equal to those who fight in the way of God with their wealth and lives. God has exalted those in rank who fight for the faith with their wealth and lives over those who sit idle. Though God's promise of good is for all, He has granted His favour of the highest reward to those who struggle in preference to those who sit at home.

The text, therefore, has a heavy emphasis on action, and it is this commitment to act that ought to form the hermeneutical key with which to unlock scripture, making it speak to lived realities of suffering and, in so doing, transforming the Qur'an into an empowering text. It is important to note, moreover, that this mode of reading is at epistemic loggerheads with conservative notions of religious hierarchy. The Christian scholar Christopher Rowland sums up the relationship between authority and liberation theology:

The primary text of oppression, poverty and dehumanizing attitudes and circumstances as a result makes theologians out of all God's people. The experts do not have a privileged position in the understanding of God as there is emphasis on the insight of the poor as interpreters of the word of God.⁷⁰

A characteristic feature of liberation theology, then, is the idea of 'twin texts.' For the Qur'an (or the Bible or the Torah) is not the only text that is to be read and reflected upon. *Life* – referring to the experience of oppression and the ensuing struggle to combat such injustice – is as central a text that is to be interpreted alongside the text of scripture, and it is at the critical interface between these two texts that a radical theology arises.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 7.

⁷⁰ Rowland, 11.

Engineer's hermeneutic is thus a pressing hermeneutic of the here and now, of this world and *then* the next. Most discussions of justice in Islam centre on the theme of divine judgement: a Day of Reckoning (*yawm al-din*) in which all human beings will be gathered before the Creator and shown each and every deed they have committed.⁷¹ Upon judgement, the righteous will enter heaven while the wicked will be condemned to hellfire. The Day of Reckoning, therefore, reflects the promise of accountability in the Hereafter – a revolutionary concept for the Meccans of Muhammad's time, as they did not believe in resurrection.⁷² Yet what is so provocative about Engineer's hermeneutic is that the next world is consigned to the very edges of his exegesis. It is this world that is foregrounded. And it is within this worldly context, and his underlying commitment to liberation, that Engineer reflects on the meaning and implications of belief. Interpreting for the present, he offers a novel reading of the Qur'anic phrase *iman bi'l ghayb* (Q. 2:3), or 'belief in the Unseen,' customarily referring to the ever-present but invisible God:

If properly interpreted, in keeping with the spirit of the Qur'an, it implies faith in the infinite potentialities which have not yet been actualised and are hence unseen. These potentialities are both within human beings and out there in the cosmos. One should therefore have deep faith in ever developing possibilities and creative powers residing within and hidden from immediate sight.⁷³

This is not to imply, of course, that Engineer rejects God, but rather that he approaches Qur'anic meaning as being rooted in two worlds at precisely the same moment. For 'belief in the Unseen,' in an interpretation that speaks to the problems of the present, must refer not simply to faith in God but in the possibilities of building a qualitatively different society marked by compassion, love and equality, encountering God through this transformative process. Consider Engineer's exegesis of Q. 104:

⁷¹ Sells, 35.

⁷² Ingrid Mattson, *The Story of the Qur'an: Its History and Place in Muslim Life* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 45.

⁷³ Engineer, *Islam and Liberation Theology*, 10.

Woe to every scorner and mockerer, who collects wealth and counts it. He thinks that his wealth will make him immortal. No! He will surely be thrown into the Crusher. And what will show you what is the Crusher? It is the fire of God, set ablaze, which will spread over the hearts. Indeed, it will close in upon them in outstretched columns.

Whereas conventional commentaries of this short chapter would interpret ‘the Crusher’ and its fiery punishment as a form of divine justice in the Hereafter, Engineer interprets otherwise. Judgement and retribution must be rendered for this world. The Crusher that will consume those who hoard wealth, he comments, refers to an impending social upheaval, fuelled by popular discontent with the glaring inequalities of wealth in Meccan society, which will ultimately destroy the city elite.⁷⁴ Sensing this imminent destruction, Prophet Muhammad’s call was a prescient warning to the Meccan leadership of a grave punishment that will be meted out in this life – a divine will channelled through the insurrectionary violence of the downtrodden – unless they duly repent and reform their ways. Upon reinterpreting this chapter, Engineer argues that all such Qur’anic passages that speak to divine retribution need to be revisited in light of both worlds, or what he calls a “socio-theological approach”⁷⁵ to exegesis – the first term (socio) referring to the Here and Now and the second, and thus *secondary*, term (theological) to the Hereafter.

It is important to note that Engineer, like Esack, does not see his radical reading of Islam as a theological innovation or a rupture with past practices, but rather as a recovery of an established, prophetic precedent. Engineer points out that all the Qur’anic prophets, with the notable exceptions of David and Solomon, emerged from the weakest segments of society – a deliberate move on God’s part to ensure that they would be sensitized to

⁷⁴ Ibid, 75.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

lived realities of inequality.⁷⁶ Indeed, a major problem that the Meccan elite had with the monotheistic call of Muhammad was not just that he preached belief in one, undivided deity, but that this message came packaged with socioeconomic implications, entailing a considerable redistribution of resources.⁷⁷ The Prophet was deeply committed to a lifestyle of simplicity, spending his wealth in the way of the poor, even after becoming the head of the Muslim state in Medina.⁷⁸ Engineer does not confine his historical argument of an egalitarian Islam to the prophets, referring to early Muslims and Islamic movements that were committed to justice. He cites, for example, the famous letter that Ali – the first imam of Shi‘a Muslims and fourth caliph of Sunni Muslims – wrote to his governor in Egypt, Malik al-Ashtar, instructing him to treat the Egyptians with justice and dignity. The selected passage reads:

So far as your own affairs or those of your relatives and friends are concerned, take care that you do not violate the duties laid down upon you by God and usurp the rights of mankind, be impartial and do justice, because if you give up equity and justice then you will certainly be a tyrant and oppressor. And whoever tyrannizes and oppresses creatures of God will earn the enmity of God along with the hatred of those whom he has oppressed.⁷⁹

Though Engineer makes reference to Islamic history to underline the authenticity of his exegesis, he fails to expound on these individuals and movements in any sort of detail, mentioning them only in passing. For instance, he briefly refers to the Qaramita – a tenth-century Shi‘a Isma‘ili group based in eastern Arabia – as a radical movement, stating that

⁷⁶ A.A. Engineer Interview, 2010.

⁷⁷ Fazlur Rahman, “Islam’s Origins and Ideals,” in *Islamic Identity and the Struggle for Social Justice*, eds. Nimat Hafez Barazangi, M. Raquibuz Zaman, and Omar Afzal (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996), 12.

⁷⁸ Safi, *Memories of Muhammad*, 140.

⁷⁹ Ali ibn Abi Talib, as quoted in Engineer, *Islam: Misgivings and History*, 120. This is an excerpt from Letter 53 of *Nahjul Balagha* (literally, ‘the Peak of Eloquence’), a famous compilation of Ali’s numerous sermons, sayings and letters. See Ali ibn Abi Talib, *Peak of Eloquence: Nahjul Balagha, with Commentary by Ayatollah Murtada Mutahhari*, edited by Yasin T. al-Jibouri (Elmhurst, New York: Tahrike Tarsile Qur’an, 2009), 791-802.

they “held all properties in common including earnings by children and women.”⁸⁰ What remains to be done by Muslim liberation theologians, then, is a larger historical project, systematically unearthing and documenting the past commitments of Muslims to liberating action, thereby making a scholarly case for a ‘radical tradition’ in Islam.⁸¹

Karbala: An Islamic Paradigm of Liberation

While Esack draws upon the Exodus as a model of struggle, Engineer turns to the Battle of Karbala, reflecting his own religious background as a Shi‘a Muslim. Over the course of his writings, he invokes a number of liberative paradigms. Like Wadud and Barlas – whose Qur’anic hermeneutics we will explore in subsequent chapters – Engineer highlights the social implications of *tawhid*. For an understanding of Islamic monotheism rooted in struggle, he argues, must entail not only the unity of the Creator but also the unity of the creation, undivided by socioeconomic hierarchy.⁸² The Battle of Karbala, however, is the most distinctive paradigm in Engineer’s liberation theology, in which Husayn ibn Ali (d. 680), the grandson of Prophet Muhammad and third imam of Shi‘a Muslims, along with seventy-two of his followers, rebelled against the despotic caliph Yazid (d. 683) and were brutally massacred in the plains of Karbala, located in modern-day Iraq. Yazid’s ascension to the caliphate following the death of his father, Mu‘awiya (d. 680), represented the introduction of monarchy into Islamic governance, and therefore a radical departure from Qur’anic values of fellowship and egalitarianism.⁸³ This development was exacerbated by Yazid’s politics, marked by nepotism and arbitrary rule, as well as his personality, taken to the sensual pleasures of courtly life and thus utterly

⁸⁰ Engineer, *Islam and Liberation Theology*, 56.

⁸¹ For a masterful example of such a study in the Christian context, see Bradstock and Rowland.

⁸² Engineer, *Islam and Liberation Theology*, 56.

⁸³ A.A. Engineer Interview, 2010.

divorced from the realities of the broader Muslim community. In fact, if Islam represented a sociopolitical revolution in seventh-century Arabia, the reign of Yazid, to quote Engineer, constituted a “counter revolution.”⁸⁴ But the rebellion of Husayn was not simply against Yazid, but rather what this individual symbolized: namely, the degeneration of Islam into a religion of establishment.⁸⁵ This was a struggle, then, that sought to reclaim the revolutionary soul of the faith, to return Muslim practices to the ethical teachings of the Prophet. Though Esack’s and Engineer’s paradigms of preference are clearly different in that the former looks towards an event within scripture – the Exodus – while the latter draws inspiration from an episode that transpired decades after the Qur’anic revelation, it is important to note that Engineer’s hermeneutical emphasis on Karbala does not necessarily make it any less Qur’anic. For Husayn’s martyrdom exemplifies core principles embedded in the text, such as justice, courage and self-sacrifice. It is in Husayn’s commitment, therefore, to put the Word into practice in the face of overwhelming odds that the link between this historic event and scripture lies. The following Urdu couplet by Muhammad Iqbal (d. 1938), the distinguished South Asian poet and intellectual founder of Pakistan, evocatively captures this dynamic relationship: “I learned the lesson of the Qur’an from Hussain. In his fire, like a flame, I burn.”⁸⁶

As this couplet suggests, Engineer is not the first Muslim thinker to have been inspired by the legacy of Husayn. Indeed, the Battle of Karbala has become a pervasive paradigm of radical struggle in contemporary Islam. During the 1978-79 Iranian Revolution, references to Husayn’s martyrdom permeated revolutionary discourse,

⁸⁴ Engineer, *Islam and Liberation Theology*, 230.

⁸⁵ A.A. Engineer Interview, 2010.

⁸⁶ Muhammad Iqbal, as quoted in Syed Akbar Hyder, *Reliving Karbala: Martyrdom in South Asian Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 137.

especially in the Islamic writings of Shari‘ati – the exegete of *tawhid* whom we met in the previous chapter – discerning in the Imam an insurrectionary figure fighting for the cause of social liberation.⁸⁷ What makes the memory of Karbala so compelling, so subversive as a political language of resistance is the remarkable fluidity with which it can be applied to markedly different contexts. In contemporary Iraq, for instance, resistance fighters have called the American occupation forces the “Army of Yazid,” while before the invasion the same term was used to denote Saddam Hussein’s regime.⁸⁸ The Battle of Karbala, then, not only acted as a powerful language of protest against domestic dictatorship but, once this regime was toppled by foreign powers, it was able to swiftly switch discursive gears and denounce imperialist invasion. It is worthwhile noting that while the memory of Karbala has inspirited Muslims of all stripes (recall that Iqbal was a Sunni Muslim) it has had a particularly formative impact on Shi‘a Islamic thought. Because the Shi‘a, as the devout followers of the Prophet’s family, were marginalized from the very outset by the Sunni-dominated Muslim polity – a betrayal that would eventually culminate in the martyrdom of Husayn – Shi‘a Islam has historically exhibited an acute awareness of power, cultivating a culture of protest. Speaking truth to power is a central teaching of Shi‘a ethics for, by siding with the oppressed and downtrodden, the believer stands up not only for “the historical Hossein but for all the Hosseins of the world.”⁸⁹ I do not mean to suggest, of course, that Shi‘a Islam is *essentially* radical. As the Iranian scholar Hamid Dabashi has observed, Shi‘a Islam remains a “religion of

⁸⁷ Nikkie Keddie, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 206.

⁸⁸ Dabashi, 178.

⁸⁹ Safi, *Memories of Muhammad*, 256.

protest” so long as it exists on the edges of society, but that once it attains power, thereby transforming into a religion of establishment, it undoes its own social message.⁹⁰

An All-Encompassing Justice: Class, Gender and Pluralism

The problem of poverty, as we have already noted, is a major theme in Engineer’s discourse. In fact, it is arguably the most important aspect of his liberation theology. For Engineer, greed constitutes the root source of human suffering. But greed should not be understood simply as a personal desire for riches, but as a structural expression of wealth accumulation: that is, economic systems like contemporary capitalism that systematically disenfranchise the many in order to enrich the few.⁹¹ Referring to the Qur’anic narratives of Adam’s expulsion from Paradise, Engineer argues that greed was the first cardinal sin committed by humankind. The following passage narrates the story:

Certainly We had enjoined Adam earlier; but he forgot, and We did not find resoluteness in him. When We said to the angels, ‘Prostrate before Adam,’ they prostrated, except Iblis [the name of Satan before his expulsion from Paradise]: he refused. We said, ‘O Adam! This is indeed an enemy of yours and your mate’s. So do not let him expel you from Paradise, or you will be miserable. Indeed you will neither be hungry in it nor naked. Indeed you will neither be thirsty in it nor suffer from the sun.’ Then Satan tempted him. He said, ‘O Adam! Shall I show you the tree of immortality, and an imperishable kingdom?’ So they both ate of it, and their nakedness became exposed to them, and they began to stitch over themselves with the leaves of paradise. Adam disobeyed his Sustainer, and went amiss. (Q. 20:115-121) [My Parentheses]

Adam and his partner, therefore, had everything that they *needed* in Paradise – a place of security in which they would be neither hungry nor naked, thirsty nor exposed to the sun – and it was precisely when they coveted what was beyond their basic needs, seeking to satisfy their greed and rebelling against their Creator in the process, that they were

⁹⁰ Dabashi, 67-68.

⁹¹ A.A. Engineer Interview, 2010.

banished to the Earth.⁹² As we have discussed earlier, Engineer argues that the Qur'an calls for a simple, even austere, style of living that is based on fulfilling one's immediate needs, spending all surplus wealth in the way of the poor and needy (Q. 2:219).⁹³ This is not to imply that the classical text outlines a specific ideology, such as Marxist economics, but rather that an underlying commitment to socioeconomic equality, as mirrored by need-based living on both personal and structural levels, is a principle that the Qur'an upholds.⁹⁴ And it is because free-market capitalism is fundamentally at variance with such values, concludes Engineer, that this economic system must be squarely rejected.⁹⁵ Citing the reported proverb of Prophet Muhammad – "Wisdom is the lost property of the faithful; he should acquire it wherever he finds it" – Engineer continues that if other systems, such as socialism and state-controlled economies, are more congruent with Islamic commitments to economic justice, then Muslims should embrace them.⁹⁶ That Engineer cites a prophetic report in making this case is telling, demonstrating his openness to the *hadith* when its substantive content can be hermeneutically channelled to affirm Qur'anic principles.

His critique of economic hierarchy leads to a wider criticism of political injustice around the world. The global economy has divided the Earth, Engineer laments, and in which the powerful economies of Europe and North America have systematically exploited and impoverished those of the Third World.⁹⁷ Such stark economic inequality, in turn, has spawned political structures and international institutions that are highly

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Engineer, *Islam: Misgivings and History*, 9.

⁹⁴ Engineer, *Islam and Liberation Theology*, 52.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid, 87.

⁹⁷ Ibid, 76.

undemocratic. The exclusive composition of the UN Security Council is an illustrative example. Comprising a handful of the most powerful nations in the world, which represent the council's permanent membership, this elite body has overridden time and again the majority decisions of the General Assembly.⁹⁸ He singles out the US in particular as a principal source of global injustice. Despite the US's discourse of supporting (and in the case of the Bush administration *spreading*) democracy in Muslim-majority societies, the US has consistently allied with repressive, dictatorial regimes whenever doing so has advanced American interests.⁹⁹ In terms of the Middle East, the Zionist state of Israel – which, Engineer adds, with the assistance of colonial powers was established on indigenous Palestinian land, dispossessing almost a million Palestinians in the process – has been a critical ally of the US.¹⁰⁰ Indeed, Israel is “an American imperialist outpost,” a geostrategic instrument through which the US can ensure its own privileged access to the region's oil resources.¹⁰¹ Engineer's critique of oppression, therefore, is acutely transnational.

As we have seen in the methodology section, gender justice is a prominent feature in his writings. Any liberation struggle that does not include the rights of women, warns Engineer, is fundamentally lacking, incomplete.¹⁰² When I asked him when exactly he first began to *see* patriarchy, discerning the social inequalities that existed between women and men, he pointed to the division of labour in the family:

The whole family structure and the distribution of power in the family, that itself convinced me that power lies with men, not with women...the division of labour itself is political. I mean, it is the powerful who decide the division of labour. So the

⁹⁸ Asghar Ali Engineer, “Israeli Aggression and the World,” *Secular Perspective*, 1 August 2006, accessed 23 February 2011, <http://www.csss-islam.com/arch 85.htm>

⁹⁹ Engineer, *Islam: Misgivings and History*, vii.

¹⁰⁰ Engineer, “Israeli Aggression and the World.”

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Engineer, *Islam and Liberation Theology*, vi.

division of labour is coercive. It is not based on justice or fairness...and once you internalize it, it becomes natural for you. But it is not natural.¹⁰³

Politics is thus not confined to issues of economic inequality and imperial domination, but is present in every societal space wherein uneven relationships of power exist. In a strikingly similar fashion to Esack, Engineer shows a keen awareness of the complexity of oppression and suffering, calling for a fully comprehensive commitment to justice, and in which gender equality constitutes a central component. As a male struggling against an entrenched, sexual system that privileges men, Engineer exhibits a commitment to a key Qur'anic dictate: that the believers must be maintainers of justice, even if doing so entails speaking out against one's own community (Q. 4:135).¹⁰⁴ It is in the sphere of gender justice, moreover, that Engineer's preference for the Qur'an over other Islamic texts comes out most clearly. Consider the issue of women's leadership. When Benazir Bhutto (d. 2007) was first elected Prime Minister of Pakistan in 1988, the following prophetic report became widely circulated amongst conservative Muslims: "a nation can never prosper which has assigned its rulership to a woman."¹⁰⁵ Countering this blatantly misogynistic report, Engineer argued that not only did *hadith* scholars consider this report to be weak in terms of authenticity, but also, and far more significantly, that the Qur'an speaks highly of a female ruler, the Queen of Sheba,¹⁰⁶ portraying her as a capable leader endowed with wisdom and political foresight (Q. 27:29-35). By trumping this *hadith* with the Qur'an, he uses the vested authority of scripture as an empowering tool with which to undercut patriarchal religious discourses.

¹⁰³ A.A. Engineer Interview, 2010.

¹⁰⁴ Safi, *Memories of Muhammad*, 17.

¹⁰⁵ Engineer, *The Rights of Women in Islam*, 17. For the original *hadith* citation, see Muhammad ibn Isma'il al-Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari* (Beirut: Dar al-Ma'rifa, 1978), 4:226.

¹⁰⁶ Engineer, *The Rights of Women in Islam*, 17.

Furthermore, Engineer's liberation theology crosses religious boundaries, accepting pluralism and the diverse ways with which human beings can respond to the divine call. At the heart of his conception of pluralism lies the conviction that there is no singular, unanimous understanding of God,¹⁰⁷ and it is this critical acknowledgment that enables Engineer to embrace the religious Other. The Qur'an, he continues, explicitly affirms religious pluralism, citing the following verse by way of example:

We have sent down to you the Book with the truth, confirming what was before it of the Book and as a guardian over it. So judge between them by what God has sent down, and do not follow their desires against the truth that has come to you. For each (community) among you We had appointed a code (of law) and a path, and had God willed He would have made you one community, but He wished to test you in respect to what He has given you. So take the lead in all good works (*al-khayrat*). To God shall be the return of you all, whereat He will inform you concerning that about which you used to differ. (Q. 5:48)

This Qur'anic passage, points out Engineer, squarely rejects any notion of Muslim supremacy.¹⁰⁸ Indeed, as Ernst has observed, the word *islam* ('submission') is of relatively minor importance in the Qur'an, occurring only eight times, while broader and more inclusive concepts such as *iman* ('faith') and *mu'min* ('believer') receive greater attention.¹⁰⁹ Yet it is not even belief but action – *al-khayrat* ('good works'), to quote from the above verse – that will ultimately determine the fate of the faithful. According to the Qur'anic text, then, salvation is achieved not by virtue of accidental birth into the 'right' religious community, but rather, as the Islamic scholar Omid Safi notes, by coupling an abiding faith in God with an equally abiding commitment to righteous conduct (*ihsan*).¹¹⁰ Drawing upon the ideas of earlier Islamic mystics and scholars, Engineer contrasts the famous Muslim belief, found in the *hadith*, that God sent 124,000 prophets to humankind

¹⁰⁷ A.A. Engineer Interview, 2010.

¹⁰⁸ Engineer, *Islam and Liberation Theology*, 208.

¹⁰⁹ Ernst, 63.

¹¹⁰ Safi, *Memories of Muhammad*, 200.

with the fact that the Qur'an – which selectively refers to the stories of past prophets to illustrate lessons to the reader, rejecting any claim to comprehensiveness – mentions only twenty-five prophets by name.¹¹¹ And it is in the disparity between these two numbers that Engineer carves out a theological space for the religious Other, since we do not know where numerous prophets were sent and, therefore, such historical figures as Raam and Krishna may well have been messengers of God.¹¹² This hermeneutical manoeuvre is indicative of Engineer's nuanced treatment of the *hadith*. For whereas in terms of gender justice we saw how he undermined a misogynistic *hadith* report through scripture, here he actually uses a *hadith* to flesh out a Qur'anic hermeneutic of religious pluralism. But Engineer does not only use the idea of prophecy to reconcile theological differences between Islam and other religions like Hinduism, but also, and perhaps paradoxically, the very concept of monotheism itself. He describes the Hindu faith as follows:

...the theory and practice of Hinduism are very different. In theory, Hinduism is as monotheistic as Christianity or Judaism or Islam. Because what is the real concept of *ishwar* [Sanskrit: God] in the Hindu religion? *Ishwar* is conceived of as formless and without attributes. And if this is not monotheism then what is monotheism?¹¹³

As commendable as Engineer's pluralistic intentions may be, the above passage raises some larger questions with regard to the meaning of religious diversity. Does this type of theological reasoning do justice to the religious Other and the Hindu Other in particular? That is, do I as a Muslim reconcile the express polytheism of Hinduism by simply explaining it away as being a misunderstood, mispracticed (Islamic) monotheism? In other words, they are *really* like us. Or do I engage in the far more difficult and unsettling theological task of embracing difference?

¹¹¹ Despite its popularity, *hadith* scholars consider the authenticity of this report to be weak (*da'if*). It can be found in the *musnad* – or a *hadith* collection that is arranged according to the chains of narration – of Ahmad ibn Hanbal (d. 855).

¹¹² A.A. Engineer Interview, 2010.

¹¹³ Ibid. My parentheses.

Secularism, Modernism, Peace: Three Critiques

Communal Violence and the Secular Alternative

It is on the issue of the religious Other that we arrive at the primary, contextual backdrop in which Engineer writes: namely, that of communal rioting between Hindus and Muslims in contemporary India. The central argument that he puts forth concerning communal violence is that, contrary to the dominant discourse in Indian society, not only is religion not the principal cause behind such conflict, but it can actually act as a rich resource for peace-building between the two communities.¹¹⁴ Instead, Engineer posits, elite politics is the main culprit behind communal violence:

Communalism is not, as is often thought by some, a product of religion, but, rather, of the politics of the elite of a religious community. In other words religion per se does not give birth to communalism; a religious community does...It is competitive politics between the elites of two or more communities, which give rise to communalism.¹¹⁵

The key argument here is that politicians play a vital role in stirring up discord between Hindus and Muslims to safeguard their own interests, to consolidate control over their respective communities. This thesis certainly holds true in the Hindu context, in which Hindu nationalist groups have consistently used the Dalits (literally: 'the Crushed People,' denoting the so-called Untouchables), in addition to other disenfranchised Hindus of lower caste standing, to attack Muslims, especially during the Gujarat riots in 2002.¹¹⁶ Playing the identity card so as to exploit the historic exclusion of lower caste

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Engineer, *The Gujarat Carnage*, 2.

¹¹⁶ Asghar Ali Engineer, "Dalit-Muslim Dialogue," *Secular Perspective*, 16 August 2004, accessed 23 February 2011, <http://www.csss-islam.com/arch 243.htm>

Hindus from mainstream Indian society, these nationalist groups have called on poor Hindus to attack the Muslim Other in order to *prove* their Hinduness.¹¹⁷

Engineer's 'elite politics' argument is unsound, however, when it comes to the Muslim community. Indeed, the quoted passage above gives the impression that Hindus and Muslims, in terms of socioeconomic standing and political power, are roughly on a par with one another. Though there is undoubtedly a wide discrepancy in material standing amongst Hindus, Indian Muslims – as Engineer himself notes – are almost as economically impoverished as Dalits.¹¹⁸ For instance, a survey conducted on childhood education (6-14 years) revealed that in the 1992-93 school year upper caste Hindus had an enrolment rate of 80.7% for boys and 64.1% for girls; lower caste Hindus an enrolment rate of 66.5% and 44.9%; and Muslims 66.5% and 52.9%.¹¹⁹ Furthermore, while the state has sought to rectify the plight of the Hindu poor, it has continued to turn a blind eye to their Muslim counterparts:

The Government of India has put in place several policies to reverse the disadvantages suffered by two major groups – Dalits and adivasis [literally, 'the indigenous people']. These include scholarships and grants, reserved quota for admission to coveted educational programmes, and reserved quota for employment in government and public sectors. Many of these policies have been in place since independence in 1947, but have been implemented far more vigorously since 1990. Since the state plays an important role in Indian educational system and government employment forms about two-thirds of the jobs in the formal sector, one expects these policies to have a significant impact. There have been no such explicit policies and programmes favouring the largest minority religious group, Muslims, who too like Dalits and adivasis have been victims of social exclusion and marginalization from the mainstream Indian society.¹²⁰ [My parentheses]

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Sonia Bhalotra and Barnarda Zamora, "Social Divisions in Education in India," in *Handbook of Muslims in India: Empirical and Policy Perspectives*, eds. Rakesh Basant and Abusaleh Shariff (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 191. This volume is a landmark contribution to our knowledge of Muslim poverty, documenting how Muslims have fared in fields like the labour market, education and child healthcare.

¹²⁰ Sonalde Desai and Venu Kulkarni, "Unequal Playing Field: Socio-Religious Inequalities in Educational Attainment," in *Handbook of Muslims in India: Empirical and Policy Perspectives*, eds. Rakesh Basant and Abusaleh Shariff (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 285.

Communal violence in India, then, is not about two, roughly equal parties battling it out with each other, but rather of a far more powerful and established community besieging a vulnerable religious minority. To be sure, Engineer has been outspoken in condemning Hindu violence against Muslims in Gujarat, showing how this alleged riot was, in fact, a premeditated and meticulously executed massacre of Muslims.¹²¹ Yet he is not so swift to point fingers at the Hindu community when it comes to other cases of communal rioting, resorting instead to a more generalized and less controversial language of criticizing ‘politicians’ and ‘elite politics,’ despite the fact that his own writings acknowledge the deep complicity of the Hindu-dominated Indian state, and of the police force in particular, during acts of communal violence against Muslims.¹²²

Engineer calls for secularism as a lasting solution to communal discord. In 1993, he, along with a number of Hindu and Muslim academics and activists, established the ‘Center for the Study of Society and Secularism’ – a research organization committed to countering communal violence in India.¹²³ The organization’s mission statement singles out secularism as a crucial discursive tool for creating peaceful, harmonious and just relations between Muslims and Hindus.¹²⁴ The Center publishes two journals that clearly underscore its ideological commitments, titled *Secular Perspective* and the *Indian Journal of Secularism*, and through which Engineer disseminates his writings. Given the centrality of religion and spirituality in South Asian life, it is important to point out here that secularism as a discourse has a very distinct meaning within the Indian context. As

¹²¹ Engineer, *The Gujarat Carnage*, 21.

¹²² Asghar Ali Engineer, “Secularism and its Problems in India,” *Secular Perspective*, 1 December 2007, accessed 23 February 2011, <http://www.csss-isla.com/arch 54.htm>

¹²³ Center for the Study of Society and Secularism, “About Us,” accessed 23 February 2011, <http://www.csss-isla.com/aboutus.htm>

¹²⁴ Ibid.

Engineer notes, secularism does not refer to an atheistic rejection of religion, but rather to a political philosophy conceived during India's independence to ensure that the country's multiple faith traditions would be treated with equality and respect.¹²⁵ Secular nationalism in India, then, was envisaged as a crucial counterweight to communal politics, for while the latter divided the nation, the former united it.¹²⁶ Because of its emphasis on inclusion, the call for a thoroughly secular state has long been a mutual rallying point for Indian progressives, including Leftists, feminists and secular nationalist reformists.¹²⁷ Indeed, Indian Muslims like Engineer are not the only religious minorities to have picked up the banner of secularism. The Christian theologian and social activist M.M. Thomas (d. 1996) is a compelling case in point. Deeply influenced by the horrific communal violence that erupted during Partition between Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs, Thomas became a staunch supporter of secularism, calling on fellow Christians and church leaders to partake in the creation of a socialist and democratic India, in which all religious communities would be welcomed and protected.¹²⁸ But the problem with Indian secularism, bemoans Engineer, is that it looks far better on paper than in practice. For while the Indian constitution upholds the principle of secularism, securing the rights of religious minorities,¹²⁹ successive governments – the majority of which, interestingly

¹²⁵ Engineer, "Secularism and its Problems in India."

¹²⁶ Needham and Rajan, 13-14. There is a growing body of critical scholarship on secularism and its place in Indian history, politics and culture. In addition to the excellent collection of essays in the above volume edited by Needham and Rajan, see: Aditya Nigam, *The Insurrection of Little Selves: The Crisis of Secular Nationalism in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006); Rajeev Bhargava ed. *Secularism and its Critics* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999); and Shabnam Tejani, *Secularism: A Social and Intellectual History: 1890-1950* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008).

¹²⁷ Bastiaan Wielenga, "Liberation Theology in Asia," in *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*, ed. Christopher Rowland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 59.

¹²⁸ Ibid, 66.

¹²⁹ Engineer, "How Secular is India Today?"

enough, have been led by the so-called secular Congress Party – have appeased the interests of Hindu lobbyists rather than abiding by constitutional dictates.¹³⁰

His sweeping accent on the secular is problematic, however, because of the normativity of Hinduism in contemporary India. Comprising the bulk of the population, the experiences of the Hindu community have effectively become institutionalized, constituting the default narrative of what it means to be ‘Indian.’ As a result, religious minorities, and particularly Muslims, have become the Other of Indian nationalist modernity. The Bengali historian of Hindu-background, Dipesh Chakrabarty, recounts his experience growing up in the Indian schooling system:

I am also very sadly aware of the historical gap between Hindu and Muslim Bengalis...this forgetting of the Muslim was deeply embedded in the education and upbringing I received in independent India. Indian Bengali anticolonial nationalism implicitly normalized the “Hindu.” Like many others in my situation, I look forward to the day when the default position in narratives of Bengali modernity will not sound exclusively or even primarily Hindu.¹³¹

It is precisely because of the universalization of Hindu discourses, such as in the national educational curriculum, that ‘Hinduness’ has taken on an aura of neutrality. The field of law is another case in point. That Hindu nationalists, when countering Muslim demands for their own civil law system, have called for the implementation of a Uniform Civil Code,¹³² as opposed to an *explicitly* Hindu civil code, reflects the close nexus between Hinduness and codified, secular law. The problem with Engineer’s language of secularism, then, is that it fails to raise the following, critical question: secularism on whose terms? That is, who gets to define the secular?¹³³ Though religious minorities and

¹³⁰ Engineer, “Secularism and its Problems in India.”

¹³¹ Chakrabarty, 21.

¹³² Engineer, *The Rights of Women in Islam*, 166.

¹³³ The anthropologist Talal Asad has played a pioneering role in challenging the perceived neutrality, the ahistoricity of secularism, situating this discourse within a wider web of power relations, and scholars who have critiqued Indian secularism, like in its privileging of Hindu subjectivity, have drawn upon his insights

political progressives have rallied around secularism, especially in the face of militant Hindu nationalism, it is the Hindu community that has nevertheless set the basis, the parameters of secular discourse in India. As Engineer himself notes, Hindus consistently portray themselves as being secular and liberal, while, conversely, presenting Muslims as being, at best, religiously conservative and, at worst, raging fundamentalists.¹³⁴ Indeed, this deeply reductive discourse of contrasting the secular, modern Hindu with the fanatical, medieval Muslim is so entrenched within Indian society that even expressly Hindu supremacist groups like the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) – a major political movement built on the ideology of Hindu nationalism (*hindutva*) – have claimed that Hindus, by their very nature, are secular and that it is due to Hindu efforts that India is a secular state.¹³⁵ At what point, therefore, does Engineer’s blanket espousal of secularism end up playing into this dichotomous discourse?

Reason and Literacy: A Modernist Hermeneutic

Engineer’s liberation theology, moreover, reflects a distinctly modernist reading – an ideological tendency that comes out most acutely in his juxtaposition of rationalist thinking on the one hand with superstitious belief on the other. Because the Bohra community in which he was raised was staunchly conservative, laying heavy emphasis on

(cf. fn. 126 on pg. 132 in this thesis). See Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003); Talal Asad, Wendy Brown, Judith Butler, and Saba Mahmood, *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury, and Freedom of Speech* (Berkeley: Townsend Center for the Humanities, 2009); and David Scott and Charles Hirschkind eds., *Powers of the Secular Modern: Talal Asad and his Interlocutors* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006).

¹³⁴ Engineer, *The Gujarat Carnage*, 17. It is worthwhile noting that Hindu calls for a Uniform Civil Code have routinely been wrapped in a rhetoric of Muslim modernization: specifically, that the implementation of a universal legal system will enlighten the backward Muslim community and liberate their passive, agentless women from Islamic bondage, such as by abolishing polygamy. In doing so, it will facilitate the integration of Muslims into the nation. See Flavia Agnes, “The Supreme Court, the Media, and the Uniform Civil Code Debate in India,” in *The Crisis of Secularism in India*, eds. Anuradha D. Needham and Rajeswari S. Rajan (Durham, US: Duke University Press, 2007), 297-298.

¹³⁵ Engineer, *The Gujarat Carnage*, 17.

unquestioned obedience to age-old traditions, Engineer gravitated towards rationalist thought, particularly modern science and Western philosophy.¹³⁶ As a result, reason – that is, a process of judgement and comprehension centred on the use of logic – has come to play a prominent role in his exegesis. Indeed, the Qur'an explicitly affirms the use of one's intellect, he points out, and constantly exhorts Muslims to ponder and reflect, referring to the faithful as *u'lil albab* and *u'lil absar*, or those endowed with reason and insight.¹³⁷ That being said, he is careful to avoid partaking in *tafsir 'ilmi*, or the scientific interpretation of scripture. Fixated on reconciling recent scientific discoveries with the Qur'an, from the Big Bang to the formation of the fetus, *tafsir 'ilmi* has emerged as a major apologetic body of literature in contemporary Islam. Engineer is sceptical of such overtly modernist readings, arguing that the Qur'an is not "a sourcebook for science" but a book of guidance and cautioning that in the fluid world of scientific knowledge what is considered as an empirical truth today may well be challenged tomorrow.¹³⁸ His emphasis on reason, in turn, leads to a scathing criticism of superstition, which comes to exemplify everything that is backward in Muslim societies. Commenting on Q. 17:90-95, Engineer maintains that Prophet Muhammad, as the bearer of a divine message based on reason, sought to cleanse the world of superstitious and supernatural beliefs, refusing to perform any miracles.¹³⁹ The passage reads:

They say, 'We will not believe you [Muhammad] until you make a spring gush forth for us from the ground. Or until you have a garden of date palms and vines and you make streams gush through it. Or until you cause the sky to fall in fragments upon us, just as you would aver. Or until you bring God and the angels in front of us. Or

¹³⁶ A.A. Engineer Interview, 2010.

¹³⁷ Engineer, *Islam and Liberation Theology*, 9. These two terms appear frequently in the text, such as in Q. 3:13; 3:190-191; 24:44; and 39:18.

¹³⁸ Engineer, *Islam: Misgivings and History*, 102-103.

¹³⁹ Engineer, *Islam and Liberation Theology*, 32. As noted in the introductory chapter, in his rejection of miracles Engineer parallels the modernist hermeneutics of Qur'an-only intellectuals. See Rab, 19; Chapter Eight – "Miracles' in the Qur'an" – in Sayyed, 117-131; and Yuksel, 111.

until you have a house of gold, or you ascend into the sky. And we will not believe your ascension until you bring down for us a book that we may read.’ Say [God commanding Muhammad]: ‘Immaculate is my Sustainer! Am I anything but a human, a messenger?!’ Nothing kept the people from believing when guidance came to them, but their saying, ‘Has God sent a human as messenger?!’ Say [God commanding Muhammad]: ‘Had there been angels in the Earth, walking around and residing (in it like humans do), We would have sent down to them from the Heavens an angel as messenger. [My parentheses]

Engineer’s conclusion that God’s *refusal* to deliver any miracles in this particular context translates into a categorical *rejection* of miracles is incoherent not only because the Qur’an is full of the miraculous – from Prophet Moses’ parting of the Red Sea to Prophet Jesus’ raising of the dead to divine promises of the Resurrection – but also, and most significantly, because the very foundation of Islam (and of religion as a whole) is built on the supernatural, the illogical: namely, faith in an unseen and yet ever-present deity.

Just as Engineer privileges the rational over the superstitious so, too, does he elevate the literary over the oral. Muslims routinely refer to pre-Islamic Arabia as the ‘Age of Ignorance’ (*jahiliyya*), alluding to the widespread practice of polytheism. Describing this period, Engineer writes: “People were steeped in superstitions and there were no more than seventeen persons who could read or write.”¹⁴⁰ Here, he not only connects superstition with illiteracy, but also implicitly associates the ignorance of literacy with a wider ignorance of God. The mission of Muhammad, then, was not simply to bring knowledge of the Word, but of the written word in general. Reflecting upon Q. 96:1-5 – the first verses that were revealed to the Prophet – Engineer claims that the call to literacy came packaged with the Qur’anic message of monotheism. The verses read:

Recite! In the Name of your Sustainer who created; created the human being from a clot of blood. Recite! And your Sustainer is the most generous, who taught by the pen (*al-qalam*), taught the human being that which he knew not.

¹⁴⁰ Engineer, *Islam: Misgivings and History*, 41.

Literacy, expounds Engineer, is intrinsically linked to knowledge and thus guidance – a sacred relationship embodied in the above verse by the metaphor of the pen (*al-qalam*).¹⁴¹ Engineer's exegetical emphasis on the literary is problematic not only because the first Muslims engaged the Qur'an primarily as an oral text, but also because he overlooks the complex ways in which knowledge was historically transmitted in pre-Islamic Arabia, reducing it, literally, to an age of ignorance. In fact, it was possible for the first Muslims to memorize lengthy Qur'anic passages precisely because mass memorization was how knowledge had been preserved – a reading practice facilitated by such poetic techniques as versification, and which the Qur'an itself would later adopt – in an oral society.¹⁴² By elevating the written letter over the oral word, Engineer takes the richness and intellectual sophistication of *orality* and demotes it to *illiteracy*, and therefore as something that is necessarily negative, lacking. Engineer's literary biases stand in stark contrast to Esack, who is keenly aware of the intrinsic value of orality, even devoting the first chapter of his textbook on the Qur'an to its popular reception and underscoring the fact that the vast majority of Muslims continue to encounter the Qur'an as an oral text, especially in terms of its rhythmic recitation.¹⁴³ What makes Engineer's modernist bent towards the written

¹⁴¹ Engineer, *Islam and Liberation Theology*, 31.

¹⁴² Mattson, 45.

¹⁴³ Esack, *The Qur'an: A User's Guide*, 21. There is an extensive body of scholarship that has explored the oral and performative dimensions of the Qur'an, both in its classical and contemporary contexts. See, among others: Anna M. Gade, *Perfection Makes Practice: Learning, Emotion, and the Recited Qur'an in Indonesia* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004); Frederick Denny, "Exegesis and Recitation: Their Development as Classical Forms of Qur'anic Piety," in *Transitions and Transformations in the History of Religions: Essays in Honor of Joseph M. Kitagawa*, eds. Frank E. Reynolds and T.M. Ludwig (Leiden: Brill, 1980); Frederick Denny, "Qur'an Recitation: A Tradition of Oral Performance and Transmission," *Oral Transmission* 4 (1989): 5-26; Gautier H.A. Juynboll, "The Position of Qur'an Recitation in Early Islam," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 19 (1974): 240-251; Kristina Nelson, *The Art of Reciting the Qur'an* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2001); Part III – "'An Arabic Reciting: Qur'an as Spoken Book'" – in William A. Graham, *Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); and William A. Graham and Navid Kermani, "Recitation and Aesthetic Reception," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur'an*, ed. Jane D. McAuliffe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

letter even more problematic, particularly in the Indian context where illiteracy is high, is that the traditions and testimonies of the downtrodden are rarely written down, but rather rooted in the oral, the folkloric. Thus, the task of liberation theology, as a theology that is in critical conversation with the oppressed, is to unearth and safeguard these much maligned traditions. For example, a principal project of Dalit Theology, which seeks to empower the so-called Untouchables in an oppressive, caste-based society, is to reclaim Dalit culture and history, embedded in oral media like songs, folk stories and myths.¹⁴⁴

Is a Theology of Liberation a Theology of Peace?

But perhaps the most pressing problem in Engineer's liberation theology is his sweeping discourse of peace, which he equates wholly with Islam. According to Engineer, the Qur'anic term *jihad* has nothing to do with violence (Q. 9:24; 22:78; 49:15),¹⁴⁵ pointing out that when the text does refer to fighting (*qital*), it is used in a decidedly defensive context (Q. 22:39).¹⁴⁶ Peace is a sacred theme that envelops the Qur'anic worldview, which describes God as *salam* ('Peace') and Paradise as a celestial abode in which the faithful will enjoy peace and security.¹⁴⁷ While Engineer's emphasis on peace is clearly meant to counter popular perceptions of the faith as inherently violent, particularly within the Indian context, this idea of Islam as being a 'religion of peace' has become, as we have already seen in this thesis, a powerful, apologetic discourse amongst Muslims since 9/11.¹⁴⁸ Indeed, the similarities between the language of liberal Muslims

¹⁴⁴ Wielenga, 68.

¹⁴⁵ Engineer, *On Developing Theology of Peace in Islam*, 27.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, 31.

¹⁴⁷ Engineer, *Islam: Misgivings and History*, 6.

¹⁴⁸ Safi, *Progressive Muslims*, 24. This apologetic claim that Islam equates to 'peace' has also been made by well-intentioned non-Muslims. For a detailed and representative exposition of this view, see Amitabh

in the US and that of Engineer in India are striking. The debate over the meaning of *islam* is a compelling case in point. This term, Engineer writes, is derived from the three-letter Arabic root *s-l-m*, which means peace, thus proving that Islam is a religion of peace.¹⁴⁹ As Esack has shown, precisely the same linguistic argument was circulated widely within liberal American Muslim circles following 9/11.¹⁵⁰ This theological discourse not only essentializes Islam as being a message of peace and only peace, dismissing militant interpretations as being outside the fold of the faith, but is also at odds with historic understandings of the term. The word *islam*, interjects Esack, has for centuries been understood by Muslims as ‘submission’ – that is, submission to God – and though the word *salam* is derived from the same three-letter root, it is blatantly inaccurate to conclude that the two terms therefore share the same meaning, for in Arabic a host of distinct, even contradictory, words can be derived from the same root.¹⁵¹ The larger point that Esack seeks to make here is that despite liberal Muslims’ incessant claims to authenticity, their discourse was profoundly shaped by the context of 9/11.

Engineer’s Islamic discourse of peace raises a crucial question concerning the very meaning of liberation theology: namely, is a theology of liberation a theology of peace? He stresses that peace ought to be attained not by fighting, but by entering into political agreements with one’s opponents.¹⁵² With regard to Kashmir, for example, Engineer maintains that, notwithstanding the genuine grievances of the Kashmiri people living under Indian military rule, there is no justification for armed struggle and thus the

Pal, “*Islam*” means Peace: *Understanding the Muslim Principle of Nonviolence Today* (Santa Barbara, California: Praeger, 2011).

¹⁴⁹ Engineer, *Islam and Liberation Theology*, 150.

¹⁵⁰ Esack, “In Search of Progressive Islam Beyond 9/11,” 95.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Engineer, *On Developing Theology of Peace in Islam*, 33.

use of violence.¹⁵³ He rehashes the same argument when discussing the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Twinning violence and “falsehood” on the one hand and non-violence and “truth” on the other, Engineer implores Israelis and Palestinians to partake in peaceful dialogue in order to resolve the conflict.¹⁵⁴ What is missing in his analysis, therefore, is the critical acknowledgement that a simplistic language of peace is often propagated by the oppressive status quo as a tool of pacification, as a means of maintaining the way things are. In terms of the Israeli occupation, for instance, the Palestinian intellectual Edward Said (d. 2003) has deftly argued – in *Peace and its Discontents: Essays on Palestine in the Middle East Peace Process* (1995) – that the US-brokered peace plan in the early 1990s was a set of treaties conceived completely on Israel’s terms, designed to quell indigenous resistance and to further divide and impoverish the Palestinian people.¹⁵⁵ Because the Palestinian national struggle in general and the First Intifada (1987-93) in particular constituted a threat to ongoing Zionist colonization, and because Israeli security was a cornerstone of American imperialism in the region, peace became policy. In contrast to Engineer, Esack, as we have seen in the preceding chapter, exhibits an acute awareness of the collusion between the status quo and rhetorics of peace and stability – a discourse that was championed by the South African regime, portraying anti-apartheid activists as threats to the peace. To borrow Esack’s own words:

When peace comes to mean the absence of conflict on the one hand, and when conflict with an unjust and racist political order is a moral imperative on the other, then it is not difficult to understand that the better class of human beings are, in fact, deeply committed to disturbing the peace and creating conflict. Along with other progressive forces in South Africa, I affirmed the value of revolutionary insurrection

¹⁵³ Asghar Ali Engineer, “Kashmiri Youth and Prospects of Peace,” *Secular Perspective*, 1 September 2006, accessed 23 February 2011, <http://www.csss-isla.com/arch 83.htm>

¹⁵⁴ Engineer, “Israeli Aggression and the World.”

¹⁵⁵ Edward Said, *Peace and its Discontents: Essays on Palestine in the Middle East Peace Process* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 90.

against the apartheid state and conflict as a means to disturbing an unjust peace and a path to just peace.¹⁵⁶

My point here is not that there is no legitimate role for peaceful protest, that languages of non-violence are the preserve of the privileged. On the contrary, expressly non-violent civil disobedience has historically been used – and continues to be used – as a robust moral argument on the part of the oppressed, most memorably in Ghandi’s involvement in the Indian liberation movement and his guiding principles of *ahimsa* (‘non-violence’) and *satyagraha* (‘passive resistance’).¹⁵⁷ Nor, for that matter, do I wish to simplify, to romanticize armed struggle. Rather, my argument is (a) that peaceful resistance is only possible in certain contexts, that it presupposes a set of circumstances and, conversely, in contexts of manifest injustice, of radical power asymmetry, armed struggle can become the only meaningful channel for resistance; and (b) that there is a fundamental difference between “peace (as conflict *resolution*) and pacification (as, in effect, the victory of the stronger party).”¹⁵⁸ In the context of the latter, a theology of peace can, paradoxically, act as a theology of suppression, ruthlessly silencing the marginalized by providing religious justification for the preservation of the status quo. The central question that the liberation theologian needs to raise, then, is whose peace – that of the powerful or the powerless?

¹⁵⁶ Esack, “In Search of Progressive Islam Beyond 9/11,” 85.

¹⁵⁷ The role of non-violence and its moral authority in liberative struggle has generated a considerable literature, inspired largely by Gandhi as well as Martin Luther King Jr.’s leadership of the American civil rights movement. See, among others: Adam Roberts and Timothy Garton Ash, *Civil Resistance and Power Politics: The Experience of Non-Violent Action from Gandhi to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Dennis Dalton, *Mahatma Gandhi: Nonviolent Power in Action* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012); Gene Sharp, *From Dictatorship to Democracy: A Conceptual Framework for Liberation* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 2011); Gene Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*, 3 vols. (Boston: Peter Sargent Publishers, 1973); James A. Colaiaco, *Martin Luther King Jr.: Apostle of Militant Nonviolence* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1988); Kurt Schock, *Unarmed Insurrections: People Power Movements in Nondemocracies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005); M.K. Gandhi, *Non-Violent Resistance (Satyagraha)* (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, 2001); Terrence J. Rynne, *Gandhi and Jesus: The Saving Power of Nonviolence* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2008); *The Power of Nonviolence: Writings of Advocates of Peace*, introduced by Howard Zinn (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002); and Walter Wink, *Jesus and Nonviolence: A Third Way* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003).

¹⁵⁸ James McDougall (in discussion with the author). McDougall, a postcolonial historian of North Africa, credits the Palestinian historian Abdel Razzaq Takriti for this insight.

To put it another way: Are we simply interested in categorical calls for ceasefire, thereby ignoring the significant power differentials that will continue to exist between oppressor and oppressed, or in a truly just and lasting resolution to conflict, entailing a structural reconfiguration of the status quo?

Conclusions

Scripture lies at the heart of Engineer's liberation theology. He focuses on the Qur'an because in the Islamic worldview it reflects the living Speech of God, addressing the faithful in all times and places. But Engineer does not dismiss outright the *hadith* literature or the inherited, intellectual tradition. In fact, various prophetic reports and the statements of classical and medieval scholars surface throughout his writings. He makes sure, however, to engage these sources in a critical manner, approaching them through the framework of the Qur'an. For it is the values, the principles embedded within this authoritative text that ought to take precedence in Islamic thinking. The hermeneutical foregrounding of scripture, then, is a major, methodological similarity between Engineer's and Esack's liberation theologies. That being said, there is also an important difference between these two exegetes. Whereas Esack is wary of idealizing the Qur'an, acknowledging that in spite of its otherwise subversive, social message it remains an androcentric text, Engineer resorts to apologetics. By selectively quoting the Qur'an, by unsystematically and conveniently categorizing certain verses as transcendental while either ignoring or explaining away problematic passages as historically contingent, he essentializes the text and, by extension, Islam as a whole. The Qur'an can only be read in one way, and that is as a liberating scripture. Furthermore, his accenting of the Qur'an is

inextricably linked to an underlying critique of religious hierarchy. Growing up in a conservative community with an entrenched and exploitative clerical establishment, Engineer is deeply suspicious of sacred authority. Since accountability before God lies with the individual, he argues, authority is vested in that individual and not with Muslim scholars. The interpretive order of the Islamic texts in his liberation theology, therefore, also needs to be appreciated in terms of access: that it is precisely because the Qur'an, in addition to being the Word of God, is an accessible text available to all Muslims, whether in its original Arabic or through translation, that it takes centre-stage in his discourse.

The Qur'an is a liberating text that forcefully speaks to contexts of oppression. Not only does the Qur'an move beyond a patronizing discourse of charity, pointing to the fundamental right of the poor in the wealth of the affluent, but also reflects a just deity who stands in solidarity with the oppressed against their oppressors. But in order for Islamic theology to become liberating, writes Engineer, it must be stripped of those discourses and practices that support the status quo, from philosophical abstractions to a blind obsession with rites and rituals. A truly liberating theology, then, must also be a liberated theology. Or, to put it another way: a theology of liberation must come packaged with a liberation of theology. Like Esack, Engineer highlights the immense value that the Qur'an places on action as opposed to solely belief, calling for a radical rereading of the text rooted in *praxis*, or the idea that the struggle for social justice ought to form the point of departure for religious reflection. And it is precisely this firm, exegetical emphasis on transforming the lived realities of the interpreter that makes Engineer's hermeneutic a pressing hermeneutic of the here and now: that is, a commentary of this world and then the next. Arguing for a 'socio-theological approach'

to exegesis, he expounds scripture and, in particular, those passages that prophesy divine retribution in the Hereafter (the ‘theological’ aspect) through the prism of the present (the ‘socio’ aspect), and thus as events that are yet to unfold in this world. In a strikingly similar manner to Esack, he exhibits an acute awareness of the sheer complexity of human suffering, calling for a thoroughly comprehensive commitment to justice and incorporating such diverse, and yet intrinsically connected, questions as class and imperialism, gender and pluralism into his Islamic thinking. But whereas Esack draws upon the Exodus as a Qur’anic model of struggle, Engineer turns to the Battle of Karbala as an Islamic paradigm of liberation. Though this fateful rebellion took place several decades after the revelatory period, what makes Karbala so compelling for this exegete, what ties it so intimately to the text, is the remarkable way in which the martyrdom of Husayn and his followers captures core Qur’anic principles, such as courage, sacrifice and, above all, an abiding commitment to justice. It is the underlying, ethical connection between this historic event and the transcendent text, then, that makes Engineer’s hermeneutical engagement with Karbala a distinctly Qur’anic one.

There are some larger differences between Esack’s and Engineer’s discourses, however. Addressing the communal violence that has plagued Hindu-Muslim relations in contemporary India, Engineer insists that it is not religion but rather competitive politics amongst the elite of both communities that is the root source of suffering – an interesting thesis but one that overlooks the considerable power differential that exists between these two communities. Secularism, understood not as an attack on religion but as a national philosophy with which to be inclusive of different faith traditions, is a key component of Engineer’s discourse on communal violence. For it is due to a lack of commitment to

secular values, as enshrined in the Indian constitution, that successive governments have failed to intervene and put a decisive end to communal rioting. Engineer's fixation on secularism is problematic because he fails to ask who gets to define the secular? Because of the universalization of Hinduism and Hindu experiences in independent India, secularism is anything but a neutral category and has been claimed by Hindus, even ardent Hindu nationalists, who have portrayed themselves as modern and secular, juxtaposed to a medieval and fanatical Muslim Other. Engineer's hermeneutic, moreover, is a markedly modernist one. While he critiques *tafsir 'ilmi*, or the scientific interpretation of the Qur'an, rationalism remains a major theme in his exegesis, maintaining that scripture was revealed to liberate humanity from belief in supernatural powers, thereby illuminating the darkness of superstition with the light of reason. Just as Engineer elevates the rational over the supernatural, so does he privilege the written letter over the oral word, twinning divine knowledge with literacy, ignorance with illiteracy – an untenable hermeneutical move given the centrality of orality in the classical period and the fact that the vast majority of Muslims today continue to encounter the Qur'an as a primarily oral text. The modernism of Engineer stands in contrast to Esack, who shows a keen appreciation for the value of oral culture and the rich, manifold ways in which scripture is embodied in popular Muslim practice. A far more significant difference between Esack's and Engineer's liberation theologies, however, lies in the latter's overwhelming emphasis on peace, raising a wider question concerning the relationship between peace and liberation. In line with his tendency towards apologia and essentialism, he argues that violence has no place in the Qur'an and, by extension, Islam as a whole. Rather, it is the divine message of peace that reigns supreme. Resistance

against oppression, such as that of Palestinians in the Middle East, can only be legitimate through peaceful and democratic means. What is absent in Engineer's thinking, then, is a critical awareness of the historic collusion between the unjust status quo and languages of peace and, conversely, the potentially liberating experience of militant struggle in deeply oppressive contexts wherein there is no space for democratic expression and non-violent protest. Indeed, in situations of manifest injustice, a theology of peace can devolve into a theology of accommodation, suppressing radical voices of dissent by using the authority of religion to reinforce the powers that be.

CHAPTER 3:

The Reading of Amina Wadud

If all the trees on the Earth were pens and the seas were ink, with seven more seas added to it, the words of God would never be exhausted, for truly God is All-Mighty, All-Wise.

(Q. 31:27)

A Muslim is a servant of God, alone.¹

(Amina Wadud)

Introduction

This chapter examines the gendered exegesis of the Black American scholar Amina Wadud. The first part of this chapter will address the question of interpretive method: namely, how exactly does she read scripture? Like Esack and Engineer, Wadud prioritizes the Qur'an over other Islamic texts and traditions, such as the *hadith* literature and the Islamic intellectual heritage. But whereas Esack's hermeneutic is built on *praxis*, or a dialectical interplay between action and reflection, Wadud's hermeneutic, I argue, is a linear mode of reading, in which liberating interpretations of the text are applied to contemporary contexts of oppression. I will then explore the relationship between Islam and sexual justice. Specifically, how does Wadud interpret the Qur'an in order to affirm the equality of women, to further the struggle against patriarchy? By unpacking the ways in which she expounds various aspects of scripture, from the Creation Story and depictions of the Hereafter to pressing women's issues like polygamy and female leadership, I will underscore the centrality of two hermeneutical tools in her exegesis:

¹ Amina Wadud, "Sisters in Islam: Effective against all Odds," in *Silent Voices*, eds. Doug A. Newsom and Bob J. Carrell (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1995), 132.

namely, textual analysis and historical criticism, the former entailing a careful, literary study of what exactly the Qur'an says and, just as significantly, does not say, and the latter seeking to understand the text in light of its immediate setting of revelation. While Esack and Engineer draw upon the Exodus and the Battle of Karbala, respectively, as paradigms of struggle, Wadud fleshes out the sociopolitical implications of *tawhid* (the unity of God) and *khilafa* (human trusteeship). This chapter will conclude by unpacking the scope of her discourse on social justice. As a result of her formative experiences as a woman born into a poor, Black household, Wadud has an acutely comprehensive approach to justice, integrating questions of class, race and religious pluralism into her thinking. Like Esack and Engineer, then, she has a keen sense of the complexity of human suffering – a profoundly layered experience that is most eloquently embodied, for Wadud, in the figure of Hagar. However, the most crucial aspect of her holistic approach to liberation, I argue, is the commitment to live out such progressive values in the private sphere, particularly within the family. Indeed, to stand for justice in the public sphere is meaningless, even hypocritical, unless this act is paralleled by a practice of egalitarianism in one's own home. This chapter will first set the context for discussion by providing a short history of Black Muslim America and some biographical background on Wadud.

Historical Context

Islam has deep roots in American history. Though it is widely assumed that Africans who were enslaved and shipped across the Atlantic practiced traditional African religions, a significant number of them were in fact Muslims, as the areas of West Africa that had been raided for slaves had housed large Muslim communities for over six

hundred years.² The following autobiographical account from Omar ibn Seid (d. 1864) – a West African Muslim captured in the early 1800s and shipped to Charleston, South Carolina – is an illustrative example of the Islamic backgrounds of the African slaves:

My name is Omar ibn Seid. My birthplace was Fut Tur [that is, the Futa Tooro region, located in southern Mauritania and northern Senegal], between the two rivers. I sought knowledge under the instruction of a Sheikh called Mohammed Seid, my own brother, and Sheikh Soleiman Kembeh, and Sheikh Gabriel Abdal. I continued my studies twenty-five years, and then returned to my home where I remained six years. Then there came to our place a large army, who killed many men, and took me, and brought me to the great sea, and sold me into the hands of the Christians, who bound me and set me on board a great ship and we sailed upon the great sea a month and a half, when we came to a place called Charleston in the Christian language.³ [My parentheses]

This Muslim heritage, however, would be largely wiped out with the passage of time. Indeed, it would not be until the formation of the Nation of Islam in the early twentieth century that Islam would resurface in the US. Established by Wallace D. Fard and his disciple, Elijah Muhammad, in Detroit in the 1930s, the Nation of Islam was committed to the liberation of Blacks in a White supremacist society. The organization called for the political self-determination and economic independence of the African American community, urging their brothers and sisters to set up their own associations and businesses.⁴ Malcolm X (d. 1965), by far the most charismatic minister of the Nation, played a crucial role in expanding the movement's following, reaching a formal membership of approximately 20,000 by the early 1960s and gaining widespread support

² Amina Beverly McCloud, *African American Islam* (London: Routledge, 1995), 1. Also, see Allan D. Austin, *African Muslims in Antebellum America: Transatlantic Stories and Spiritual Struggles* (London: Routledge, 1997); Muhammad al-Ahari, *Five Classic Muslim Slave Narratives* (Chicago: Magribine Press, 2006); Sylviane Diouf, *Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaved in the Americas* (New York: New York University Press, 1998); and Terry Alford, *Prince Among Slaves: The True Story of an African Prince Sold into Slavery in the American South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

³ Omar ibn Seid, as cited in Edward E. Curtis IV, *Muslims in America: A Short History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 23-24. For his full autobiography, see Omar ibn Said, *A Muslim American Slave: The Life of Omar Ibn Said*, translated from the Arabic, edited, and with an introduction by Ala Alryyes (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011).

⁴ Curtis, 39.

among non-Muslim African Americans.⁵ Shortly after Elijah Muhammad's death in 1975, the Nation split into two, offshoot organizations. His oldest son, Warith Deen Muhammad, took over the reins of leadership, steering the movement towards orthodox Sunni Islam and renaming it as the "World Community of Islam in the West."⁶ Countering this ideological shift, Louis Farrakhan – an influential minister and protégé of Elijah Muhammad – re-established the Nation and its original teachings.⁷ A more significant development, however, would fundamentally change the face of Islam in America. In October 1965, a new immigration law was passed that removed the racist quotas of earlier legislations, which had largely restricted immigration to predominantly White countries.⁸ As a result, immigrants from Africa and Asia – a considerable number of whom were Muslim – poured into the US. Yet despite this massive influx of Muslims, particularly from the Middle East and South Asia, Black Muslims continue to constitute the single largest ethnic community, comprising over forty percent of the American Muslim population.⁹ As we shall see later on in the chapter, a communal rift has emerged between immigrant and Black Muslims, as reflected in separate institutional structures, community publications and religious gatherings.¹⁰

An African American convert to Islam, Wadud has become an influential Islamic scholar and social activist, focusing her efforts on achieving gender justice within the Muslim community. Born as Mary Teasley on 25 September 1952 in Bethesda – a small town in Maryland – she grew up in a devout Christian family. Wadud's early years were

⁵ Carolyn Moxley Rouse, *Engaged Surrender: African American Women and Islam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 95.

⁶ Ibid, 97-98.

⁷ Ibid, 98.

⁸ Curtis, 72.

⁹ Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 103.

¹⁰ McCloud, 169.

marred by poverty. While she was still a child, her family was evicted from their house, as they were unable to pay the mortgage.¹¹ Rendered homeless, the family was forced to sleep in their car, later shifting to a trailer and, eventually, relocating to Washington, D.C., where her father had rented a couple of rooms in someone else's house.¹² At the age of fourteen, Wadud left her family to finish her final three years of high schooling at an all-White, public institution in Boston, living with various families.¹³ Upon completing high school, she attended the University of Pennsylvania. It was during her college years that Wadud converted to Islam, proclaiming the *shahada* (the testimony of the Muslim faith) on Thanksgiving Day, 1972. She graduated with a bachelor's degree in Education, concentrating in English, and worked as a teacher for several years after college.¹⁴ She later decided to pursue graduate work in Islamic studies at the University of Michigan, writing her doctoral dissertation on portrayals of women in the Qur'an. In other words, while Esack had a hybrid education marked by both secular schooling and traditional training in a *madrasa*, Wadud has no formal traditional background. That Barlas, whose exegesis we will explore in the next chapter, also has no traditional training is telling, suggesting that the modern, secular university has become an important institutional space in which Muslim women, who would have otherwise been excluded from the male-dominated world of the *madrasa*, can partake in Islamic scholarship. After completing her Ph.D. in Islamic studies in 1988, Wadud moved to Kuala Lumpur, where she taught for three years at the Department of Revealed Knowledge and Heritage at the

¹¹ Amina Wadud, "On Belonging as a Muslim Woman," in *My Soul is a Witness: African-American Women's Spirituality*, ed. Gloria Wade-Gayles (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 255.

¹² Ibid, 255-256.

¹³ A. Wadud, Interview 2010.

¹⁴ Ibid.

International Islamic University.¹⁵ It was here, in Malaysia, that she became a founding member of ‘Sisters in Islam’ (SIS) – an organization that advocated women’s rights through an Islamic framework. Acting as the movement’s resident specialist in Islam, she became intimately involved with SIS and would continue to work with them well after her contract at the university expired in 1992, flying back and forth to Malaysia every year and a half.¹⁶ Following this stint at the International Islamic university, Wadud returned to the US, taking up a post as a professor of Islamic studies at Virginia Commonwealth University, which she held until her retirement in 2008.

Hermeneutical Approach

A Qur’anic Discourse

As it is for Esack and Engineer, the Qur’an is the primary, textual source in Wadud’s Islamic writings. Although she came across the Qur’an several months after her conversion to Islam, she became instantly drawn to the book, describing her deep, spiritual attachment to it as a “love affair.”¹⁷ Because of its undisputed status amongst Muslims as the Word of God, writes Wadud, the Qur’an is the most authoritative source in Islam.¹⁸ Moreover, a critical distinction needs to be made between the Qur’anic text

¹⁵ Mehran Kamrava ed., *The New Voices of Islam: Rethinking Politics and Modernity: A Reader* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 201.

¹⁶ A. Wadud, Interview 2010. In order to avoid jeopardizing the reputation of SIS following her leading of the Friday Prayers in New York City in 2005 – a highly controversial event within the mainstream Muslim community and which will be discussed at length later on in the chapter – Wadud renounced her membership with the organization in 2006.

¹⁷ Ibid. While Wadud converted to Islam on Thanksgiving Day 1972, she did not acquire a copy of the Qur’an until March 1973. In our interview, she recounted that at the time of her conversion, the *da’wa* (Muslim proselytization) group that had given her information on Islam had, like most mainstream Muslims, failed to present any sort of hierarchy with regard to the textual sources of the faith. At the time of her conversion, then, the Qur’an was not the central source in her Islamic thinking. This interest would emerge later, once she began reading the text.

¹⁸ Wadud, *Qur’an and Woman*, ix.

and its exegesis – a difference that is often glossed over by Muslims. For while the Qur'an reflects "the articulation of the divine will," exegesis is a thoroughly human exercise limited to the contextual baggage of the exegete,¹⁹ reflecting assumptions and worldviews rooted in time, place, gender, race and class, among other factors. While Wadud hermeneutically foregrounds the Qur'an, it is important to note that she does not approach the text as the *only* articulation of the divine will. Citing Q. 31:27, she observes that the Qur'an itself acknowledges that God cannot be reduced to a text, as if a single scripture could exhaust the infinite possibilities of divine disclosure.²⁰ The verse reads:

If all the trees on the Earth were pens and the seas were ink, with seven more seas added to it, the words of God would never be exhausted, for truly God is All-Mighty, All-Wise.

Indeed, the Qur'an's very revelation in the Arabic language, Wadud points out, is testament to the contextually conditioned nature of the text, as it addressed a specific historical community. The Qur'an even professes its own rootedness in a particular setting, stating that it was revealed in "plain Arabic" (Q. 26:195) and thereby underscoring its intention of communicating to the seventh-century Arabs in their own tongue.²¹ In other words, at precisely the same time that the Qur'an, as the living Word of God, is a transcendent text, or one that can speak to multiple contexts, to generations of Muslims in different times and places, it is also a historical text, and therefore cannot possibly encapsulate all of God's speech. And the crucial source that stands next to the Qur'an, further articulating the divine will to the believer, is one's *context*: that is, one's own reality and lived experience. As Wadud put it in our interview:

¹⁹ Amina Wadud, "Alternative Qur'anic Interpretation and the Status of Muslim Women," in *Windows of Faith: Muslim Women Scholar-Activists in North America*, ed. Gisela Webb (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 11.

²⁰ Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 212.

²¹ Ibid. While I have used Wadud's translation, the Arabic phrase – '*arabiyyin mubin* – can also be rendered as 'clear Arabic'.

...we're locking Allah into a time capsule, and by that imprisonment we are making Allah obsolete. I really don't think that Allah is limited to the Qur'an. I think there is some self-disclosure in the Qur'an that Allah does self-disclose, but not in isolation to the rest of the reality that Allah has given us. Our own bodies, our environment, we have so many *ayat* [literally: 'signs'] and if we don't have the ability to put them together then we are going to actually destroy the gift that the Qur'an is to us.²²

In her emphasis on understanding the divine will through both the *word* and the *world*, encountering God through these twin revelations, Wadud's hermeneutic parallels that of liberation theology, which approaches lived experience, in particular the experience of oppression, as a text that is to be read alongside scripture.²³ I use the word 'parallel' here because while Esack explicitly draws upon the theory of liberationist hermeneutics when emphasizing the significance of one's context, Wadud does not situate herself within a wider literature, thus arriving at this understanding independently.

The *hadith* literature is the second most important textual source in her Islamic discourse. While she underscores the Qur'an's unique place in Islamic theology as the Word, she clarifies that her interest in scripture is also a disciplinary one, reflecting her choice to specialize in the study of the Qur'an.²⁴ Her hermeneutical emphasis on the Qur'an, then, should not be read as a categorical dismissal of other Islamic texts. In fact, Wadud considers the *sunna* to be one of "the two primary sources" of Islam, alongside the Qur'an.²⁵ That being said, the *sunna* is not on a par with the Qur'an, for the value of the *sunna* (and, by extension, the *hadith* literature) lies in its ability to capture and flesh out wider Qur'anic principles. Indeed, she describes the *sunna* as the "living embodiment" of the Qur'an,²⁶ thereby connecting the two and conferring legitimacy on the former vis-à-vis the latter. Wadud does not hesitate to include *hadith* reports that

²² A. Wadud, Interview 2010.

²³ Rowland, 8.

²⁴ Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, xvii.

²⁵ Wadud, "Alternative Qur'anic Interpretation and the Status of Muslim Women," 4.

²⁶ Ibid.

uphold Qur’anic values like compassion and justice. For instance, when discussing gender relations in the household, she cites the prophetic saying – “The best of you is he who is best to his family”²⁷ – and, whilst calling for a culture of egalitarianism and reciprocity amongst Muslims, refers to the following report: “One of you does not believe until he/she loves for the other what is loved for oneself.”²⁸ But just like Esack and Engineer, Wadud is sceptical of the veracity of the *hadith* literature, even those reports that are considered *sahih* (‘authentic’).²⁹ And it is precisely because of the disputed authenticity of the *hadith* that she is able to engage this corpus in a highly selective manner, drawing inspiration from those reports that affirm Qur’anic values while not feeling bound by problematic reports that violate such principles.³⁰ For example, a significant number of misogynistic *hadith* reports, Wadud noted during our interview, can all be traced back to one individual: namely, the companion Abu Hurayra (d. 681).³¹ This raises the larger, hermeneutical question, then, as to whether such reports are a genuine reflection of the Prophet himself or of the people who surrounded him? This is an especially salient question given that Abu Hurayra, as the Moroccan feminist Fatima Mernissi has pointed out, fulfilled the rather unlikely task of recounting roughly 5,300

²⁷ Wadud, *Qur’an and Woman*, 91.

²⁸ Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 29. After citing this report, Wadud adds that while the original Arabic presumes a male subject – ‘one of you does not believe until *he* loves for his brother’ – her translation, in order to be gender inclusive, incorporates both male and female subjects. See fn. 23 in *ibid*, 265-266. This specific report can be found in the celebrated *hadith* collection of Imam al-Nawawi (d. 1278). See Hadith #13 in Yahya ibn Sharaf al-Nawawi, *The Complete Forty Hadith of Imam al-Nawawi*, translated by Abdassamad Clarke (London: Ta-Ha Publishers, 2009), 66.

²⁹ Within the *hadith* sciences, scholars have established a scale of ratings to gauge the authenticity of various reports, such as *da‘if* (‘weak’), *hasan* (‘good’) and *sahih* (‘authentic’).

³⁰ A. Wadud, Interview 2010.

³¹ *Ibid*.

prophetic reports – far more than any other *hadith* narrator – whilst being in the company of the Prophet for only three years.³²

Unlike the Qur'an and the *hadith* literature, Wadud does not consider the *shari'a* to be a primary source of the faith. A major problem that she has with the inherited, intellectual tradition, of which the *shari'a* is part and parcel, is that it has overshadowed the Qur'an, with Muslims equating these later, human-made texts with the Word of God.³³ As we shall see in the next chapter on Barlas, this conflation of the texts is a key critique that female exegetes have levelled against traditional Islamic thought. Furthermore, Wadud continues, because men have almost single-handedly produced the *shari'a*, women have been reduced to mere, material objects. For instance, in Pakistan's rape laws, which are based on the *shari'a*, the crime is actually treated as an act of theft, as rape is understood as stealing another man's private property – that is, access to the sexual organs of his wife – rather than a brutal act of violence against the woman.³⁴ Yet despite Wadud's deep-seated grievances with the *shari'a*, she argues that it is still necessary to engage this body of literature. When I asked her why she did not simply dismiss secondary source traditions like the *shari'a* altogether, she replied:

I engage them because religion is a human construct and the Islamic religion consists of all the sources that we have legitimated as representing what it means to be Muslim: Qur'an, *sunna*, *hadith*, *fiqh* [Islamic jurisprudence]. And I engage *shari'a* because within the history of our tradition we have developed it, codified it, lived by it and now we are being slapped in the face by people who think we can sort of like slap it back onto the modern nation-state. So I engage it as part of the reality of the history of Muslims. Islam is nothing if not lived by people and those people would be Muslims.³⁵ [My parentheses]

³² Fatima Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 80.

³³ Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, xx-xxi.

³⁴ Amina Wadud, "Aisha's Legacy: The Struggle for Women's Rights within Islam," in *The New Voices of Islam: Rethinking Politics and Modernity: A Reader*, ed. Mehran Kamrava (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 203.

³⁵ A. Wadud, Interview 2010.

Wadud's engagement with the *shari'a*, then, is a thoroughly pragmatic one. Because the legal tradition has been an important part of Muslim history and continues to exercise considerable influence on the lives of Muslims today, especially women, Islamic reformists have no choice but to tackle the *shari'a*. There are two principal tasks, moreover, within this reformist project: firstly, to rewrite an essentially medieval tradition in the light of lived realities, thereby creating a system of law that is applicable to the present time (*fiqh al-waqi'a*); and, secondly, to firmly ground this new judicial system on broader Qur'anic principles of social justice and moral conduct.³⁶ This is a dual critique of Islamic law that, as we have seen in the previous chapter, is shared by Engineer. In other words, for Wadud the underlying, "ethical foundation" of the *shari'a* needs to be forcefully foregrounded and, if women's rights are to be taken seriously, gender, as a category of thought, has to be integrated within Islamic ethical theory.³⁷

Towards an Exegesis of the Present

Making Islam relevant to the contemporary world is a prime objective of Wadud's scholarship. As she put it in her pioneering work, *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* (1999):

...despite fourteen centuries of existence, the Qur'an must be kept alive. Otherwise, it will suffer the fate of other 'dead texts' and defeat its stated purpose: to guide humankind – unconstrained by time and place.³⁸

But how exactly can the Qur'an become alive, escaping the fate of other 'dead texts' and addressing the complex realities of the present? In answering this pressing, hermeneutical question, Wadud draws upon Rahman's double-movement theory. As discussed earlier in

³⁶ Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 205.

³⁷ Ibid, 48.

³⁸ Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, xxiii.

this thesis, Rahman's proposed methodology of interpreting the Qur'an consisted of two movements. The first movement entailed an in-depth study of the immediate setting of revelation in seventh-century Arabia, examining how the Qur'an spoke to this specific context. Broader ethical principles would then be "distilled" from this classical setting.³⁹ While the first movement focussed primarily on the past, moving from the particular to the universal, the second movement concerned itself with the present, applying these timeless principles to a radically different set of historical circumstances. And just as an in-depth examination of the classical context was necessary to arrive at wider Qur'anic principles, the contemporary context, too, required careful study in order to translate faithfully these universal principles (back) into concrete realities.⁴⁰ Like Esack and Engineer, Wadud's exegesis is thus marked by a deep desire to move beyond the literal letter of the text, seeking to uncover its underlying *spirit*, as embodied in such principles as "justice, equity, harmony, moral responsibility, spiritual awareness, and development."⁴¹ Furthermore, she notes, this scholarly project of discerning the socio-moral objectives of the Qur'an can be facilitated further by a linguistic study of the text, exploring its grammatical composition.⁴² This commitment to interpreting the faith through the prism of the present, then, enables Islam to transform from a static religion, bound to the historical constraints of seventh-century Arabia and one that is to be blindly imitated, into a "dynamic process,"⁴³ wherein the Qur'an's wider, ethical principles must be continuously understood and reunderstood by each people, as they apply these principles in light of their own lived experiences and contextual realities.

³⁹ Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, 6.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 7.

⁴¹ Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 3.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Wadud, "Alternative Qur'anic Interpretation and the Status of Muslim Women," 10.

Wadud's adoption of the double-movement theory, however, is problematic in terms of religious authority. To be sure, she is critical of interpretive hierarchy, calling for a "shared privilege" in which Qur'anic exegesis is a truly gender inclusive enterprise, welcoming the insights and experiences of both women and men.⁴⁴ Indeed, the very fact that Wadud is a female commentator puts her at odds with clerical Islam, as the *'ulama* have historically been, and continue to be, men.⁴⁵ Her critique of religious authority, moreover, is not confined to issues of gender. According to Wadud, every Muslim has the right to interpret the texts and, in so doing, to partake in defining Islam – an egalitarian, interpretive practice that will only be possible when Muslims come to respect, to value the inherent ability of each believer to make a contribution to Islamic thought.⁴⁶ Yet Wadud's otherwise inclusive discourse towards religious authority is at variance with her adoption of the double-movement theory as a mode of Qur'anic exegesis. In order to get a sense of the sheer elitism of this interpretive method, it is worthwhile providing here Rahman's own description. Referring to the first movement, which centres on the classical period, he writes:

...one must understand the import or meaning of a given statement by studying the historical situation or problem to which it [the Qur'an] was the answer. Of course, before coming to the study of specific texts in light of specific situations, a general study of the macrosituation in terms of society, religion, customs, and institutions, indeed, of life as a whole in Arabia on the eve of Islam and particularly in and around Mecca – not excluding the Perso-Byzantine Wars – will have to be made.⁴⁷
[My parentheses]

⁴⁴ Amina Wadud, "Towards a Qur'anic Hermeneutics of Social Justice: Race, Class and Gender," *Journal of Law and Religion* 12, (1995-1996): 49.

⁴⁵ To be sure, this gender imbalance is most acute in the fields of jurisprudence and exegesis. However, in other spheres, in particular Sufism, women have made historical inroads, even acquiring influential and lasting leadership roles. The following text by the Persian Sufi scholar Abu 'Abd al-Rahman al-Sulami (d. 1021), for example, provides biographical sketches of eighty women in the classical period who became leading teachers and guides in the Islamic mystical tradition: Abu 'Abd al-Rahman al-Sulami, *Early Pious Women: Dhikr an-niswā al-muta'abbidat as-sufiyyat*, edited and translated from the Riyadh manuscript with introduction and notes by Rkia E. Cornell (Louisville, Kentucky: Fons Vitae, 1999).

⁴⁶ A. Wadud, Interview 2010.

⁴⁷ Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, 6.

Clearly, such a scholarly undertaking is one in which very few Muslims can participate. Furthermore, while the second movement is relatively more inclusive, entailing a comprehensive study of contemporary circumstances and thus requiring Muslim expertise in all fields of knowledge, this movement, too, is deeply hierarchal. The discourse of the Islamic scholar Tariq Ramadan, who has also espoused the double-movement theory, is a compelling case in point. Inspired by Rahman's method, Ramadan – as noted in the first chapter – has differentiated between two types of scholars who need to work together in order to see the second movement through: namely, “text scholars” (*‘ulama an-nusus*), or specialists in Islamic sciences like jurisprudence, and “context scholars” (*‘ulama al-waqi’*), or experts in contemporary fields of knowledge, such as the natural sciences.⁴⁸ Upon making this distinction, however, Ramadan hastily qualifies that “the fundamentals of belief (*‘aqidah*) and worship (*‘ibadat*) obviously remain the prerogative of the *fuqaha’*,”⁴⁹ or Islamic jurists. The problem with the second movement, then, is that it is not only classist, excluding poor, non-skilled Muslim labourers who do not boast expertise in a specific field, but that, even in terms of those who are ‘skilled,’ it is squarely functional: Muslims who are not religious scholars are welcomed to contribute vis-à-vis their expertise in their respective professions, whether that be in social work, economics or healthcare, but not as believers who could actually make a lasting, theological contribution to Islamic thought. The elitism of the double-movement theory, therefore, is incompatible with the radical inclusivity of liberation theology, in which religious authority and interpretive insight is derived not from acquired knowledge but

⁴⁸ Ramadan, *Radical Reform*, 121.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

rather through everyday experiences of marginalization and suffering, making “theologians out of all God’s people.”⁵⁰

Between Praxis and Application

An important similarity that Wadud’s exegesis shares with liberation theology, however, is her emphasis on action, for liberating ideas can only truly be liberating if they are translated into concrete realities. As she puts it:

...theory alone is insufficient to bring an end to patriarchy and gender asymmetry. There is a crucial interplay between belief in certain ideas and the practical implementation of gender justice in the context of present global circumstances.⁵¹

The pursuit of knowledge, then, is not some pristine, scholarly endeavour detached from the rest of the world, but rather one in which new insights are used to create a new world built on social justice. She refers to this wedding of theological study and transformative struggle, whether that struggle takes place in the university classroom or in community affairs, as “spiritual activism.”⁵² Indeed, the twinning of study and struggle – a liberating practice that has also been termed “scholarship activism” – is a significant contribution that Muslim feminists have made to contemporary Islamic thought, challenging patriarchy within the wider community through their research on Islam and gender.⁵³

Wadud’s encounter with SIS played a formative role in her discourse on action, allowing her to see how purely theoretical concepts could be translated into practical reforms. In our interview, she described the impact of SIS on her thinking as follows:

⁵⁰ Rowland, 11.

⁵¹ Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 42.

⁵² Amina Wadud, “Teaching Afrocentric Islam in the White Christian South,” in *Black Women in the Academy: Promises and Perils*, ed. Lois Benjamin (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007), 142.

⁵³ Gisela Webb ed., *Windows of Faith: Muslim Women Scholar-Activists in North America* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2000), xi.

I didn't realize until after those three years of being in Malaysia that all the work I had done, which was basically theory, had very pragmatic application. So if I were to say there was a turning point, it would be between 1989 and 1992, working with Sisters in Islam...I think the result of reading for gender in the Qur'an is social justice, and that's what happened with the Sisters. The results of my research computed into strategic, meaningful, practical changes in terms of lived reality.⁵⁴

The Malaysian experience shaped Wadud's Islamic discourse, then, by shifting it from the "devotional act"⁵⁵ of an individual – that of a Muslim woman reading the Qur'an through the lens of gender justice – to a collective act that is explicitly political, coming together with likeminded Muslim women and using the results of this research to address everyday problems faced by women. As SIS organized one outreach activity after another, from public lectures and open forums to the publication of newspaper editorials and pamphlets on pressing issues like domestic violence and the equality of men and women in Islam,⁵⁶ Wadud witnessed the myriad ways in which an idea, through action, could transform a society. That being said, it is important to note that at the same time as SIS showed her the political potential of scholarship, she also had a tremendous impact on the movement's thinking. Before her arrival on the Malaysian scene, SIS had little interest in the Qur'an and focussed far more on questions of *shari'a*. By the time Wadud left Malaysia in 1992, the organization's discourse had squarely shifted from secondary sources to the scriptural source of Islam, foregrounding the Qur'an and using this text as a powerful, persuasive tool in fighting for Muslim women's rights.⁵⁷

It is in Wadud's accent on action, however, that a critical difference emerges between her hermeneutic and that of Esack, for while Esack's is a hermeneutic of *praxis*,

⁵⁴ A. Wadud, Interview 2010.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Wadud, "Sisters in Islam," 123-124. For the pamphlet publications, see: Sisters in Islam, *Are Women and Men Equal before God?* (Kuala Lumpur: Sisters in Islam, 1991) and Sisters in Islam, *Are Muslim Men Allowed to Beat their Wives?* (Kuala Lumpur: Sisters in Islam, 1991).

⁵⁷ Wadud, "Sisters in Islam," 120.

Wadud's is a hermeneutic of *application*. According to Wadud, actions are "a necessary extension of faith."⁵⁸ Her liberating exegesis is marked by a linear mode of reading, in which radical reinterpretations of the text are practically applied to real world contexts. But what about the reverse direction? Can the insights and perspectives gained through action, in turn, not lead to a renewed, reinvigorated reflection? The unidirectional nature of Wadud's exegesis stands in stark contrast to that of Esack. As we have seen in the first chapter, according to Esack a liberating exegesis is based on *praxis*, or the idea that religious reflection ought to take shape in the very midst of struggle. As a result, not only does reflection lead to action but this action, too, has a constitutive effect, creating new insights and revelations into the text.⁵⁹ To put it another way: While Wadud's exegesis is linear, Esack's is dialectical, characterized by a continuous interplay between action and reflection.⁶⁰ It is precisely because liberation theology, as a theology of *praxis*, is forged in the heat of struggle that it makes no claim to objectivity, neutrality and 'the truth.' Rather, it reclaims the value of subjectivity, privileging the experiences, the perspectives, the 'truths' of the oppressed. Yet Wadud's linear exegesis, based on extracting broader principles from the Qur'anic text (theory) and then pragmatically implementing these principles in the present (practice), subscribes to problematic notions of objectivity.⁶¹ For example, she differentiates between 'reading' and 'exegesis,' arguing that while reading

⁵⁸ Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 98.

⁵⁹ Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation, and Pluralism*, 13.

⁶⁰ Indeed, in reality 'linear readings' are a hermeneutical impossibility, for one does not simply pick up a text, read it once and then spend the rest of one's life *implementing* its teachings. Rather, there is a constant, even if unintentional, dialectic between the text and life. I am grateful to my supervisor Christopher Rowland for this insight. All readings, therefore, are necessarily dialectical, and what differentiates Esack's hermeneutic (and that of liberation theology as a whole) is that he consciously foregrounds this cyclical aspect of interpretation.

⁶¹ As we have discussed in the first chapter, this is a key problem that Esack has with Rahman's double-movement theory, arguing that the very idea of extracting perennial principles from the text is premised on deeply objectivist notions of discovering and accessing 'the real truth,' and thus failing to consider crucial questions of reader subjectivity, interpretive pluralism and who gets to define truth. See *ibid*, 68.

is a subjective enterprise, conditioned by “the attitudes, experiences, memory, and perspectives on language of each reader,” exegesis is a different creature, attaining a measure of objectivity by employing hermeneutical methods.⁶² As we shall shortly see in the next chapter, Barlas criticizes Wadud’s distinction between reading and exegesis, pointing out that it is impossible to split these two language acts into separate, hermetically sealed categories, as any textual engagement is inescapably shaped by the contextual baggage of the reader.⁶³

Qur’an and Sexual Justice

Women Reading as Women

The entry of women into the field of exegesis – a discipline that has historically been, and that continues to be, dominated by men – is the first, critical step in moving towards a truly gender inclusive approach to the text. This is a seminal point that resurfaces time and again in Wadud’s writings. An inevitable consequence of the monopoly that men have exercised in interpreting Islamic texts, she observes, is that God has been reduced to the limitations of male experiences and understandings.⁶⁴ Drawing upon wider feminist critiques of patriarchy, she argues that just as God has been restricted to the experiences of men so, too, has the normative human being.⁶⁵ That is, ‘humankind’ and ‘human experience’ have become little more than synonyms, even euphemisms, for ‘mankind’ and ‘male experience.’ It is crucial, therefore, that women become producers of Islamic knowledge, challenging its androcentrism by bringing their own experiences,

⁶² Wadud, *Qur’an and Woman*, 94.

⁶³ Barlas, “*Believing Women*” in *Islam*, 118.

⁶⁴ Wadud, “Towards a Qur’anic Hermeneutics of Social Justice,” 48.

⁶⁵ Wadud, *Qur’an and Woman*, ix.

subjectivities and insights to the interpretive task. The feminist scholar Hibba Abugideiri succinctly sums up the significance of Wadud's argument:

It is not enough for modern Qur'anic commentators to simply "add women and stir," or integrate the subject of woman into the interpretive process while ignoring her agency. Wadud shows that a hermeneutical approach to interpreting woman in the Qur'an must include women as active agents.⁶⁶

Gendered exegesis is thus not about male commentators now writing on the sexy topic of women in Islam, thereby reducing women to objects that are to be reflected upon, but rather about women becoming the subjects of the interpretive process, approaching the text *as* women. And it is precisely when Muslim women read the Qur'an unfettered by layers of patriarchal commentary, Wadud argues, that they will find a compassionate and liberating scripture that speaks to their suffering and marginalization.⁶⁷ What follows is a thematic survey and analysis of Wadud's own empowering encounter with the Qur'an.

The Origins of Humankind

Wadud commences her exegesis by revisiting the Creation Story. Due to a lack of detailed discussion in the Qur'an with regard to the creation of Adam and Eve, she notes, early commentators drew extensively upon biblical accounts.⁶⁸ As a result, the distinctly biblical notion of Eve as being created from Adam's rib became mainstreamed in Islamic thought. The precise passage, found in the Book of Genesis, reads:

So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said,

⁶⁶ Hibba Abugideiri, "Hagar: A Historical Model for 'Gender Jihad'," in *Daughters of Abraham: Feminist Thought in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, eds. Yvonne Y. Haddad and John L. Esposito (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001), 92.

⁶⁷ Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, xxi-xxii.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 20.

“This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.”⁶⁹ (Gen. 2:21-23)

Feminist scholars have shown how the *hadith* literature, which was heavily influenced by biblical lore, acted as an important, literary medium through which such ideas entered Qur’anic exegesis, for it was common practice for exegetes to refer to *hadith* reports while interpreting the text. The Pakistani feminist Riffat Hassan gives the following *hadith* report, narrated by the controversial companion Abu Hurayra, as an example of the striking convergence between the *hadith* and the Bible on the origins of woman:

Treat women nicely, for a woman is created from a rib, and the most curved portion of the rib is its upper portion, so if you should try to straighten it, it will break, but if you leave it as it is, it will remain crooked. So treat women nicely.⁷⁰

It is important to note, moreover, that Qur’anic commentators were well aware that such *hadith* reports drew upon biblical accounts. For instance, the great exegete Abu Ja‘far al-Tabari (d. 923) openly acknowledged in his *hadith*-based commentary of the Qur’an that such accounts had been “learned from the people of the Torah,” adding that “God knows best” (*wallahu ‘a‘lam*) regarding the reliability of these accounts.⁷¹ After pointing out the lack of any Qur’anic basis behind this idea of woman as being created from man’s rib – that is, highlighting what the text does *not* say – Wadud discusses the Qur’an’s portrayal

⁶⁹ In this thesis, all translations of biblical passages have been taken from *Holy Bible: English Standard Version, Anglicized Edition* (London: Collins, 2007).

⁷⁰ As cited in Hassan, “An Islamic Perspective,” 102. For the original citation of this *hadith* report, see M.M. Khan, *Translation with Notes of Sahih al-Bukhari Vol. IV* (Lahore: Kazi Publications, 1971), 346.

⁷¹ Abu Ja‘far al-Tabari, as cited in Barabara F. Stowasser, *Women in the Qur’an, Traditions, and Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 28. It is interesting to note here that the Arabic name used by Muslims to refer to Eve – *Hawwa’* – is also drawn from the *hadith* literature and not found anywhere in the Qur’an. Indeed, as the following *hadith* excerpt from Tabari’s commentary shows, the name *Hawwa’* is itself based on the entrenched idea of woman as being created from man’s rib: “The angels said: Why was she named *Hawwa’*? He [Adam] said: Because she was created from a living (*hayy*) thing.” See *ibid*, 29.

of the origins of humankind. Paralleling the earlier work of Hassan,⁷² she argues that in the Qur'an woman and man were created from a 'single soul.' The verse reads:

O humankind, be conscious of your Sustainer, who has created you from a single soul (*nafsin wahidatin*), and from it created its mate (*zawjaha*), and from the two of them dispersed men and women in multitudes.⁷³ (Q. 4:1)

There is clearly no mention here of woman being created from the flesh, or even soul, of man. In fact, in a strictly grammatical sense, adds Wadud provocatively, the feminine was created first and it is the masculine that is derived, for the Arabic word for soul (*nafs*) is a feminine noun while that of mate (*zawj*) is a masculine one.⁷⁴ But conceptually speaking, she continues, this verse moves beyond gender distinctions,⁷⁵ thereby establishing the ontological equality of women and men. Reflecting upon this verse, as well as others like Q. 51:49 – 'And of all things We have created pairs (*zawjayn*), perhaps you will then reflect' – she concludes that *duality* is a defining feature of the creation,⁷⁶ with each partner existing in a symbiotic relationship of harmony with the other.

In addition to rereading the Creation Story, Wadud critically analyzes the Events of the Garden. Just as Qur'anic commentators were deeply influenced by biblical accounts (or what are referred to as the *isra'iliyat* literature in Islamic scholarship) when it came to explaining the origins of humankind so, too, were they informed by this earlier literature while interpreting Satan's temptation of Adam and Eve. According to the Old Testament, Satan first whispered into the ear of Eve, who then, enticed by his words, approached Adam. The biblical account, found in Genesis 3:1-7, reads:

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any

⁷² Hassan, "An Islamic Perspective," 98.

⁷³ The origins of humankind are also described, as Wadud notes, in Q. 7:189, 6:98 and 39:6.

⁷⁴ Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 19-20.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid, 20-21.

tree in the garden?” And the woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.’” But the serpent said to the woman, “You will surely not die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths.

Indeed, by the time of al-Tabari in the tenth century, the majority of Muslim scholars believed that it was through the inherent weakness of Eve that Satan was successfully able to tempt Adam.⁷⁷ In stark contrast to the biblical account, Wadud points out that the Qur’an does not blame the woman, as it uses the Arabic dual form when describing Satan’s temptation.⁷⁸ Q. 7:20-23 is a compelling case in point:

But Satan whispered to both of them, in order to reveal their hidden parts of which they were not aware (till then), and said: “Your Sustainer has forbidden you to go near this tree lest you become angels or immortal.” Then he swore to both of them an oath: “I am your sincere friend;” And led them both (to the tree) by deceit. When they both tasted the tree their disgrace became exposed to them, and they patched the leaves of the Garden to hide it. And the Sustainer said to both of them: “Did I not forbid you this tree and tell you that Satan is your open enemy?”

It is important to note here that Wadud is not the first Muslim scholar to offer such a gender-sensitive reading of this fateful event. Hassan has also underlined the Qur’an’s usage of the Arabic dual form, thereby showing that what transpired in the Garden was a collective act of disobedience in which Adam and Eve were equally responsible.⁷⁹

Furthermore, not only is the woman never singled out in the Qur’an’s treatment of the narrative, but, Wadud observes, paralleling Hassan again,⁸⁰ in the sole exception to

⁷⁷ Stowasser, 29. For al-Tabari’s account of this event, which mirrors the biblical one, see Abu Ja‘far al-Tabari, *Jami‘ al-Bayan fi Tafsir al-Qur’an Vol. 1* (Beirut: Dar al-Ma‘rifa, 1972), 525-527.

⁷⁸ Wadud, *Qur’an and Woman*, 25.

⁷⁹ Hassan, “An Islamic Perspective,” 104.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

the text's usage of the Arabic dual form it is the pronoun 'him' that is employed.⁸¹ The passage, which we have already discussed in the preceding chapter on Engineer who reinterpreted it through the lens of economic justice, reads:

Certainly We had enjoined Adam earlier; but he forgot, and We did not find resoluteness in him. When We said to the angels, 'Prostrate before Adam,' they prostrated, except Iblis [Satan]: he refused. We said, 'O Adam! This is indeed an enemy of yours and your mate's. So do not let him expel you from Paradise, or you will be miserable. Indeed you will neither be hungry in it nor naked. Indeed you will neither be thirsty in it nor suffer from the sun.' Then Satan tempted him [*fawaswasa ilayhi al-shaytanu*]. He said, 'O Adam! Shall I show you the tree of immortality, and an imperishable kingdom?' So they both ate of it, and their nakedness became exposed to them, and they began to stitch over themselves with the leaves of paradise. Adam disobeyed his Sustainer, and went amiss. (Q. 20:115-121)

Yet how can this account that clearly blames Adam – 'Then Satan tempted him' – be reconciled with other Qur'anic verses that use the dual form exclusively? Wadud explains this inconsistency by placing this passage in its wider, textual context. In particular, she looks at the verse that immediately precedes it (Q. 20:114), which reads: 'So exalted is God, the True Sovereign. Do not hasten [O Muhammad] with the Qur'an before its revelation is completed to you, and say, 'My Sustainer! Increase me in knowledge.''' Fearing that he would forget the Qur'anic revelations relayed to him by Gabriel, Prophet Muhammad was hastily repeating the revelations in order to memorize them. A prime, hermeneutical function of this specific retelling of the Garden story, comments Wadud, is thus to illustrate to the Prophet the inherent forgetfulness of humankind, as exemplified by Adam forgetting to stay away from the forbidden tree.⁸² The implication being made here, then, is that the Prophet need not worry about forgetting the revelations, as it is God who will ensure that the Prophet, miraculously, memorizes the entire scripture.⁸³

⁸¹ Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 25.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ This interpretive conclusion is corroborated further by Q. 75:16-19, which reassures the Prophet that, through divine assistance, he will indeed be able to memorize the Word correctly.

The Justice of Divine Judgement

Wadud not only reinterprets the beginning of days, but also explores the Qur'an's apocalyptic depictions of the world to come. While she challenges classical and medieval commentators on the origins of humankind and the events of the Garden, she actually affirms their readings when it comes to the Day of Judgement, observing that there is "an unusual consensus among the commentators with regard to the absence of male/female distinctions in the Qur'anic accounts of Judgement and recompense..."⁸⁴ This is a telling example of how her criticism of the exegetical tradition is hardly a sweeping one, categorically dismissing all prior reflections on the Qur'an, but rather a nuanced critique, problematizing those interpretations that undermine the full humanity of women. As Wadud notes, because the Qur'anic text is so explicit that equal recompense will be given to men and women – such as Q. 3:195: 'Lo! I suffer not the work of any worker, male or female, to be lost. You proceed one from another'⁸⁵ – it is, in fact, quite difficult to privilege men over women when discussing the Day of Judgement.⁸⁶ Significantly, the key term that the Qur'an uses with reference to death and the Hereafter, she points out, is that of the gender-neutral soul (*nafs*), which will be brought before its Creator to stand judgement, thereby transcending the sexual distinctions associated with the human body.⁸⁷ She cites Q. 21:47, among others,⁸⁸ to illustrate the text's emphasis on the soul when describing the world to come. The verse reads:

We shall fix the scales of justice on the Day of Resurrection, and no soul will be wronged in the least; and even if it were equal to the weight of a mustard seed, We shall take it (into account). We suffice as reckoners.

⁸⁴ Ibid, 51.

⁸⁵ Q. 40:40 is another example of how divine justice will be meted out equally to the sexes on the Day of Judgement, explicitly mentioning women alongside men.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid, 46.

⁸⁸ These include Q. 3:185-186, 39:42 and 81:1-7.

So not only does the Final Day reflect the absolute justice of God, who will take every action into account ‘even if it were equal to the weight of a mustard seed,’ but by focussing on the soul over the body, this verse also implicitly underscores this deity’s refusal to differentiate between men and women, elevating the former over the latter.

Like Esack and Engineer, a deep-seated conviction in the inherent justice of the Creator lies at the heart of Wadud’s Islamic discourse. Citing verses like Q. 10:44 – ‘Surely God does not wrong anyone; they wrong themselves’ – she argues that God does not commit acts of injustice, but rather it is humankind who perpetrates oppression.⁸⁹ In fact, her very choice of ‘Wadud’ – one of the ninety-nine names of God and which she defines as “the Loving God of Justice”⁹⁰ – as a family name upon converting to Islam reflects her abiding belief in God’s endless compassion and commitment to justice. And it is precisely because God is just, concludes Wadud, that divine judgement is based solely on *taqwa*, or ‘piety,’ denoting one’s level of God-consciousness and how this spiritual consciousness, in turn, translates into ethical action.⁹¹ Referring to Q. 49:13, she writes that *taqwa* is the chief criterion that differentiates one human being from another.⁹² This verse, which has become a seminal passage amongst Muslim feminists, reads:

O humankind! We created you from a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know one another. The noblest among you in the eyes of God are the most pious among you. Indeed, God is all-Knowing, all-Aware.

⁸⁹ Wadud, “Towards a Qur’anic Hermeneutics of Social Justice,” 46. She also cites Q. 9:70, 29:40 and 30:9.

⁹⁰ Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 2. The famous ninety-nine names of God can be found in the Qur’an and denote various divine attributes, such as *al-Rahim* (‘the Compassionate’), *al-Ghafur* (‘the Forgiving’) and *al-Malik* (‘the King’). The name *al-Wadud*, conventionally defined as ‘the Loving,’ appears twice in the text (Q. 11:90, 85:14).

⁹¹ Wadud, *Qur’an and Woman*, 36-37.

⁹² Ibid.

Furthermore, God alone has the ability to gauge one's level of *taqwa* and thus to render judgement, cautions Wadud, and not other human beings.⁹³ Given the centrality of *taqwa* in the Qur'an, her usage of this concept as an organizing principle of gendered exegesis is a highly persuasive, hermeneutical move. Indeed, Rahman, in his pioneering study of the text, titled *Major Themes in the Qur'an* (1980), noted that *taqwa* is arguably the single most important term in the entire scripture.⁹⁴ In her emphasis on *taqwa*, Wadud shares common ground with Esack who, as we have already seen in the first chapter, also uses *taqwa* – which he defines as “integrity and awareness in relation to the presence of God” – as a hermeneutical key in his liberationist exegesis.⁹⁵

The Final Abodes

After reading Qur'anic depictions of the Day of Judgement through the eyes of gender justice, Wadud moves on to the two, final destinations of humankind: namely, Heaven and Hell. Like the Final Day, she comments, portrayals of Hell in the Qur'an are remarkably gender neutral, as it is described in very general terms as being a place of severe punishment and utter despair,⁹⁶ wherein the wicked will reside forever. As a result, her hermeneutical engagement with Hell is minimal. While Wadud does not compare the Qur'an's portrayal of Hell with other Islamic texts – a reasonable omission given her express, disciplinary interest in scripture – it is important to note that the Qur'an's gender-neutral discourse on Hell is at loggerheads with the *hadith* literature, in which descriptions of divine punishment are acutely gendered. The following misogynistic

⁹³ Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 185.

⁹⁴ Rahman, *Major Themes in the Qur'an*, 28-29. The first edition of this book was published in 1980.

⁹⁵ Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation, and Pluralism*, 82-83.

⁹⁶ Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 52.

report, found in the *hadith* collection of Sahih Bukhari, relates the story of Prophet Muhammad having a vision of Hell and seeing that it was filled mostly with women:

The Prophet said: “Hell was revealed to me, and I perceived that the majority of its occupants are women who are ungrateful.” He was asked: “Are they ungrateful to God?” “They are ungrateful to their husbands,” he replied. “And they are ungrateful for any kindness shown them and if you have been kind to any one of them for a time and then she sees something that she does not like in you, she will then say, ‘I have never received anything from you!’”⁹⁷

The authenticity of such *hadith* reports are, of course, hotly disputed amongst Muslims, and feminist scholars have problematized the reliability of numerous, misogynistic *hadith* reports. The Moroccan feminist Fatima Mernissi, for example, has shown how the companion Abu Hurayra – a key transmitter of anti-women *hadith* reports and whom we met earlier on in this chapter – was considered a highly unreliable source by the first Muslims, in particular Aisha, the wife of the Prophet.⁹⁸

In her treatment of the final abodes, Wadud directs far more attention to Heaven, which, unlike Hell, is portrayed in scripture in starkly gendered terms. She commences her analysis by arguing that, because the Qur’an was revealed in a specific historical context, we need to make sense of its depictions of heavenly pleasure in light of this time and place. For instance, the recurring description of Paradise as a place of ‘gardens with rivers flowing beneath’ should not be taken literally, as such a portrayal is much more meaningful, as Wadud puts it, for “someone living in an arid desert environment than, perhaps, for someone living in the tropics of Malaysia.”⁹⁹ What is necessary, then, is to extract the underlying message embedded within this metaphorical language: essentially, that Paradise is a place of unbound pleasure and eternal comfort. In a similar vein,

⁹⁷ Nicholas Awde ed., *Women in Islam: An Anthology from the Qur’an and Hadiths* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 2005), 36. The original reference of this report can be found in Muhammad Muhsin Khan ed., *The Translation of the Meaning of Sahih Bukhari Vol. 1* (1973), 29.

⁹⁸ Mernissi, 78.

⁹⁹ Wadud, *Qur’an and Woman*, 52.

descriptions of sexual pleasure, too, need to be interpreted through the framework of historical criticism. The *huri*, referring to an erotic, light-skinned virgin woman with a vigorous sex-drive, has become a pervasive image of Paradise amongst Muslim men and is mentioned four times in the text,¹⁰⁰ specifically in Q. 44:54, 52:20, 55:70-76 and 56:17-24. But this portrayal of the *huri*, argues Wadud, should not be taken literally. Rather, it ought to be read in terms of the prevailing understandings of beauty at the time:

The specific depiction here of the companions of Paradise demonstrates the Qur'an's familiarity with the dreams and desires of those Arabs. The Qur'an offers the *huri* as an incentive to aspire after truth. It is impossible to believe that the Qur'an intends white women with large eyes to represent a single universal description of beauty for all humankind.¹⁰¹

More significantly, she observes, references to the *huri* only appear in the Meccan chapters,¹⁰² or those chapters that were revealed in the earliest days of Islam before the Muslims fled to Medina (622) in order to escape persecution. There was a direct, hermeneutical link, therefore, between the androcentric sexuality of the Meccan chapters and the dire state of gender relations in Meccan society, which was overwhelmingly patriarchal.¹⁰³ However, with the creation of a qualitatively different society in Medina marked by more egalitarian relations between women and men, continues Wadud, the Qur'an made a critical shift in its portrayals of pleasure in the Hereafter, abandoning the term *huri* altogether and adopting the gender-neutral *azwaj* (the plural of *zawj*, meaning 'partner' or 'spouse').¹⁰⁴ She gives the following Medinan verse by way of example:

Say: "Shall I tell you of (things) even better (than the pleasures of this world)? With the Sustainer are gardens with rivers flowing beneath for those who keep from evil

¹⁰⁰ Esack, *The Qur'an: A User's Guide*, 164.

¹⁰¹ Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 55.

¹⁰² Ibid, 54-55.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 55.

and follow the straight path, where they will remain forever with purified spouses (*azwajun mutahharatun*) and blessings of God.¹⁰⁵ (Q. 3:15)

Countering patriarchal readings of this verse, in particular the interpretation that *azwaj* ('spouses') really refers to the pleasures of polygamy awaiting righteous men, Wadud underscores the grammatical fact that the usage of the plural *azwaj* here simply corresponds to the plural noun that precedes it – 'those who keep from evil' – and, therefore, hardly constitutes textual proof of polygamy in Paradise.¹⁰⁶ To put it another way: just as the beginning of humankind's journey, in which man and woman were created from a single soul, was marked by a relationship of *duality*, so too will its end, wherein the righteous believer will be paired with her/his companion.

Polygamy, Veiling and Seclusion

Indeed, by using hermeneutical tools like textual analysis and historical criticism, Wadud is able to make a convincing case against polygamous readings of the Qur'an. Most Muslims believe that polygamy – or, to be more precise: polygyny, in which only men have more than one partner¹⁰⁷ – is upheld in Islam, arguing that the Qur'an allows men to take up to four wives. Critiquing this argument, Wadud writes that we need to examine the exact wording of the Qur'anic text with regard to this practice. The 'polygamy verse,' in its entirety, reads:

¹⁰⁵ Wadud also cites a number of other passages, such as Q. 2:25, 4:57 and 36:54-56. Though this does not significantly problematize Wadud's argument of a general shift from the Qur'anic usage of *huri* to *azwaj* with the Muslim migration to Medina, especially given the number of Medinan verses that corroborate this claim, it is worthwhile noting that the chapter in which the last citation is listed here – *Surat Yasin* (Chapter 36) – was actually revealed in the Meccan period.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 57.

¹⁰⁷ Whereas polygamy, strictly speaking, is a gender neutral term referring to either a man or woman having multiple partners, in reality most polygamous relationships have been based on the patriarchal practice of polygyny, in which only men have multiple partners. Polyandry, which is much more rare but not without historical precedent, refers to women having multiple partners.

If you fear that you will not deal justly with the orphans, then marry women that you like, two, three, or four. But if you fear that you will not be able to deal justly with them, then only one, or what your right hands possess. That makes it likelier that you will not be unjust. (Q. 4:3)

Far from being an open license for polygamy, she comments, this passage deals with a specific, social crisis that emerged in the early Muslim community, in particular that of the unjust treatment of orphans – a historical context evidenced further by the Qur’anic verse immediately preceding this one, which warns male guardians of orphans not to mismanage their wealth and mix it with their own.¹⁰⁸ The verse reads:

Give the orphans their property, and do not replace the good with the bad, and do not eat up their property (by mingling it) with your own property, for that is indeed a grievous crime. (Q. 4:2)

A practical solution that the Qur’an put forth, then, to counter such exploitation was that of marriage to female orphans who had come of age,¹⁰⁹ thereby protecting them through the legal responsibilities that came packaged with the institution of marriage. In addition to pointing out that this passage speaks to a particular context, she also underscores a key condition that Q. 4:3 lays down for polygamous relationships: specifically, that such an arrangement is only possible *if* the husband is able to deal justly with all his wives.¹¹⁰ The Qur’an reiterates the centrality of just conduct, observes Wadud, in a later verse in the same chapter, which reads: ‘You will not be able to treat your wives with justice’ (Q. 4:129) – a statement that has led numerous commentators to conclude that monogamy is, in fact, the preferred form of marriage.¹¹¹ And it is precisely because the text has this overwhelming emphasis on justice that the absence of this condition in the lived

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 83.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Asma Barlas, “Amina Wadud’s Hermeneutics of the Qur’an: Women Rereading Sacred Texts,” in *Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qur’an*, ed. Suha Taji-Faruqi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 115.

¹¹¹ Wadud, *Qur’an and Woman*, 83.

experiences of women in polygamous relationships today ought to constitute sufficient grounds for the abolition of this practice. As Wadud put it in our interview:

Now what we need are specialists in social work who can provide evidence of the full effects of polygamy and they are, you know, interviewing children, men and women...and they are showing, this is the result. So if the Qur'an uses the term justice three times in the verse on polygamy, and then you show that obviously there is a travesty of justice in the experience, whatever it was that the Qur'an intended and however it may have been practiced at the time of the Prophet, what we are seeing now is the injustice of it.¹¹²

Furthermore, she continues, contemporary Muslims have rightly criticized and abandoned the practice of slavery – an institution that is never explicitly prohibited in the Qur'an, though the text does emphasize the just treatment of slaves and their freeing as a form of atonement for specific sins.¹¹³ So if today Muslims, without much hesitation, are able to condemn slavery on the basis of it being an affront to human dignity and without any Qur'anic mandate,¹¹⁴ then why not oppressive practices against women like polygamy?

Wadud also uses the Qur'an to critique such established Muslim practices as veiling and female seclusion. While she has chosen to observe the headscarf, she clarifies that she does “not consider it a religious obligation, nor ascribe to it any religious value per se.”¹¹⁵ In fact, it was not questions of religion but rather race – specifically, as a Black

¹¹² A. Wadud, Interview 2010.

¹¹³ Wadud, “Alternative Qur'anic Interpretation and the Status of Muslim Women,” 14-15.

¹¹⁴ For the history of slavery in the Muslim world, particularly in the past three centuries, and its long road towards abolition, see: Alan G.B. Fisher and Humphrey J. Fisher, *Slavery in the History of Black Muslim Africa* (London: Hurst and Company, 2001); Chouki El Hamel, *Black Morocco: A History of Slavery, Race, and Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Ehud R. Toledano, *Slavery and Abolition in the Ottoman Middle East* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1998); Madeline C. Zilfi, *Women and Slavery in the Late Ottoman Empire: The Design of Difference* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Murray Gordon, *Slavery in the Arab World* (New York: New Amsterdam Books, 1989); Terence Walz and Kenneth M. Cuno, *Race and Slavery in the Middle East: Histories of Trans-Saharan Africans in Nineteenth-Century Egypt, Sudan, and the Ottoman Mediterranean* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2010); and William G. Clarence-Smith, *Islam and the Abolition of Slavery* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

¹¹⁵ Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 176.

woman living in a White supremacist society – that compelled her to don the veil, even before her conversion to the Muslim faith. To put it in her own words:

The actual impetus behind my dress was in contradistinction to the experiences of African slave women who were stripped of their garments of piety before the lecherous eyes of slave auctioneers and masters. In fact, I covered my hair and wore long dresses before I accepted Islam.¹¹⁶

Citing Q. 7:26 – ‘the best dress is the dress of piety (*taqwa*)’ – Wadud argues that modesty cannot be reduced to mere physical attire, subject to the approval or disapproval of men and male-dominated communities, but rather is an ethical principle embodied in one’s relations with others.¹¹⁷ Indeed, such social practices as veiling and female seclusion were introduced into the early Muslim community, as the historian Leila Ahmed has shown in her pioneering study *Women and Gender in Islam* (1992), by Sassanian society, which was heavily segregated, as well as Christian communities in the Mediterranean and Middle East.¹¹⁸ In addition to foregrounding the Qur’an’s emphasis on modesty as a principle, Wadud highlights this historicity of the veil – that is, its emergence in a particular context in Muslim history – and how it initially symbolized protection, worn by women of wealth and power.¹¹⁹ With regard to female seclusion, Q. 33:33 has become a popular passage amongst conservative men who believe that women should not leave their homes. The verse, written in the Arabic feminine plural, reads:

Stay in your houses and do not deck yourselves with wanton display (*tabarruj*) as in the former Days of Ignorance. Maintain the prayer and pay the mandatory almsgiving, and obey God and His Apostle.

Wadud tackles this tricky verse with two, principal hermeneutical moves. Firstly, she places it within its wider textual context, citing it along with the verse that immediately

¹¹⁶ Wadud, “Teaching Afrocentric Islam in the White Christian South,” 140.

¹¹⁷ Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 219.

¹¹⁸ Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 5.

¹¹⁹ Wadud, *Qur’an and Woman*, 9-10.

precedes it (Q. 33:32),¹²⁰ which begins with the phrase, ‘O wives of the Prophet,’ thereby clarifying that a specific group of people is being addressed. But even if women happen to be the immediate audience, she continues, why should this verse only be applicable to women? Can women not be used to illustrate larger lessons for the community? Far from being some random, categorical command to remain in the home, Wadud argues that there is a larger ethical principle underlying this verse and one that is equally applicable to men and women: namely, to observe modesty and humility by staying away from ‘wanton display’ (*tabarruj*) and ostentatious behaviour in front of others, as practiced in ‘the former Days of Ignorance,’ referring to pre-Islamic Arabia.¹²¹

The Family: Then and Now

Wadud wrestles with problematic verses elevating men by highlighting the historical attitudes held towards the family at the time of revelation – a reality that inevitably shaped the text’s discourse. The first part of Q. 4:34 is a passage commonly cited to ‘prove’ God’s preference for men over women. It reads: ‘Men are the guardians (*qawwamun*) of women, because of the advantage God has granted some of them over others and by virtue of their spending out of their wealth.’ Reflecting on this verse, she notes that a critical connection is being made here between privilege – that is, men’s role as guardians – on the one hand and responsibility, or the financial provision for women’s needs, on the other.¹²² Addressing a specific historical context, this verse presupposes a particular type of familial arrangement: namely, one in which the husband earns and the wife stays at home. Indeed, men are granted twice the share of inheritance (Q. 4:11),

¹²⁰ Ibid, 97-98.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid, 70-71.

writes Wadud, precisely because of the solemn financial responsibility that lay solely upon their shoulders in that time.¹²³ But what if the present time is radically different, in which large numbers of Muslim women have become breadwinners alongside men? Because Q. 4:34 squarely bases men's authority on the assumption that they are the primary providers of the family, female exegetes have argued that in a new context wherein both spouses are economically productive, the husband would cease to function as guardian.¹²⁴ Passages like Q. 4:11 and 4:34, then, need to be interpreted in light of contemporary circumstances, in which understandings of the family have shifted significantly. Furthermore, the fact that the Qur'an speaks to the sensibilities of a given society does not mean that it endorses such social norms, upholding them as timeless models that are to be emulated by subsequent generations of Muslims. As Wadud puts it:

The Qur'an does not attempt to annihilate the differences between men and women or to erase the significance of functional gender distinctions which help every society to run smoothly and fulfil its needs...However, the Qur'an does not propose or support a singular role or a single definition of a set of roles, exclusively, for each gender across every culture...Such a specification would be an imposition that would reduce the Qur'an from a universal text to a culturally specific text.¹²⁵

This is not to imply, however, that everything about gender dynamics in seventh-century Arabia was problematic and to assume, rather arrogantly, that we in the twenty-first century have finally gotten it 'right.' On the contrary, there are aspects of family relations in the classical period that can be reclaimed by Muslim feminists in their struggle for social justice. In an illuminating discussion on mothering, Wadud points out that at the time of the Prophet, delivery and nursing were seen as completely unrelated tasks, for the mother was understood simply as being the one who gave birth, while it was the

¹²³ Ibid, 71. This verse is incorrectly cited in Wadud's work as Q. 4:7.

¹²⁴ Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam*, 119.

¹²⁵ Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 8-9.

responsibility of the father's tribe to nurture and raise the child.¹²⁶ This is why, Wadud keenly observes, in the prophetic biographical sources there is no negative stigma whatsoever associated with Amina, the biological mother of Muhammad, despite the fact that she sent him off to live with a wet-nurse, Halima, shortly after his birth.¹²⁷ In other words, in the world of the first Muslims, a societal distinction was drawn between bearing and rearing – a very different approach to motherhood that is at odds with understandings of the term today, in which the two acts are wholly conflated.¹²⁸ By using the formative Islamic period to historicize the role of mother, Wadud undermines any essentialist claims about motherhood – that there is something *natural* about this social function – and which are invariably invoked to legitimate, and thus to ignore, the burdens of care that mothers in general and single mothers in particular are expected to endure, as well as to exempt men from responsibility for familial care and housework.¹²⁹

Saying No to (the Literal Letter of) the Text

But unlike Engineer, Wadud's liberationist exegesis is not an apologetic one, acknowledging certain problems with the literal wordings of the text. As we discussed in the previous chapter, Engineer rather simplistically portrays the Qur'an as a "charter of rights for women,"¹³⁰ upholding complete gender parity. Indeed, he even goes so far as to

¹²⁶ Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 127-128.

¹²⁷ Ibid, 128.

¹²⁸ Wet nursing has hardly been restricted to the Middle East, of course, and was a common practice throughout the world, including in Europe and North America up to the twentieth century. See George D. Sussman, *Selling Mothers' Milk: The Wet-Nursing Business in France, 1715-1914* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982); Jane Golden, *A Social History of Wet Nursing in America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); and Valerie Fildes, *Wet Nursing: A History from Antiquity to the Present* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988).

¹²⁹ Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 128-129.

¹³⁰ Engineer, *Islam and Liberation Theology*, 33.

claim that the Qur'an is "the first revealed book that accords equal rights to women."¹³¹

While Wadud interprets the text through the eyes of justice, she is wary of falling into this apologetic trap. Her reading of Q. 4:34 – the first part of which we discussed in the preceding paragraph – is an illustrative example of her refusal to explain away overtly problematic passages. The entire verse reads:

Men are the guardians of women, because of the advantage God has granted some of them over others and by virtue of their spending out of their wealth. So righteous women are obedient, caretaking in the absence (of their husbands) of what God has enjoined them to guard. As for those wives whose misconduct you fear, (first) advise them, and (if ineffective) keep away from them in the bed, and (as a final option) beat them. Then if they obey you, do not seek any course (of action) against them. Indeed, God is most High, most Great.

In line with her hermeneutical emphasis on historical contextualization, Wadud argues that this verse, referring to beating as a last resort, ought to be understood as a "severe restriction" on violence against women, as the biographies of the Companions and the pre-existing custom of female infanticide – a practice severely condemned in the Qur'an – suggest that violence against women was widespread in seventh-century Arabia.¹³² But despite forwarding this initial argument, she retains deep reservations about this verse:

There is no getting around this one, even though I have tried through different methods for two decades. I simply do not and cannot condone permission for a man to "scourge" or apply *any kind* of strike to a woman... This leads me to clarify how I have finally come to say "no" outright to the literal implementation of this passage.¹³³

In other words, just as approaches to the family have dramatically changed since the time of the first Muslims so, too, have our understandings of social justice and sexual ethics, especially in terms of acknowledging the evils of domestic abuse.¹³⁴ Wadud's exegesis is thus closer to that of Esack who, as we have seen in the first chapter, is critical of

¹³¹ Engineer, *Islam: Misgivings and History*, 98.

¹³² Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 76.

¹³³ Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 200.

¹³⁴ *Ibid*, 203.

apologia, pointing out that men are the primary audience of the Qur'an.¹³⁵ Wadud also acknowledges the text's androcentrism. For instance, referring to Q. 2:223 – 'Your women are a tillage (*harth*) for you, so come to your tillage whenever you like' – she concedes that the Qur'an speaks to male desire, affirming the sexuality of men while treating women's sexuality as passive.¹³⁶ Paralleling Esack's emphasis on the egalitarian spirit of the Qur'an over its literal wording,¹³⁷ Wadud grapples with passages like Q. 4:34 by prioritizing the text's principles over its particulars, arguing that a literal reading of this verse violates wider Qur'anic commitments to "justice" and "human dignity" – the understandings of which have radically changed since late antiquity.¹³⁸ In so doing, she is able to say 'no' to the contextually bound letter of the Qur'an while, at precisely the same time, upholding its underlying spirit.

On Gender Mainstreaming and Male Solidarity

An important component of Wadud's Qur'anic exegesis is gender mainstreaming: that is, approaching female figures discussed in the text as paradigms of piety for *all* Muslims, men and women. As feminist scholars have noted, a pressing problem in Muslim women's leadership is not that it does not exist, but rather that it is largely restricted to women's issues and thus the leadership of other women.¹³⁹ The confinement of female participation to 'women's committees' in the mosque, as opposed to wider leadership roles concerning the whole community, is an everyday example that

¹³⁵ Esack, "Islam and Gender Justice," 195.

¹³⁶ Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 193.

¹³⁷ Esack, "Islam and Gender Justice," 203.

¹³⁸ Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 203.

¹³⁹ Abugideiri, 89.

immediately comes to mind. Yet the Qur'an, Wadud interjects, discusses a number of female figures in starkly universal terms. Q. 66:10-12 is a compelling case in point:

God draws an example for those who are faithless (*lilladhina kafaru*): the wife of Noah and the wife of Lot. They were under two of our righteous servants, yet they betrayed them, and even they [Noah and Lot] could not avail them in the least against God, and it was said to them: 'Enter the Fire, along with the incomers.' God draws another example for those who have faith (*lilladhina amanu*): the wife of Pharaoh, when she said, 'My Sustainer! Build me a home near You in Paradise, and save me from Pharaoh and his deeds, and save me from a wicked people.' And Mary, daughter of Imran, who guarded the chastity of her womb, so We breathed into it of Our spirit. She confirmed the words of her Sustainer and His Books, and she was one of the obedient ones (*qanitin*).

Highlighting the Arabic usage of the masculine plural, which grammatically includes both men and women, as opposed to the feminine plural, which denotes only women, Wadud comments that this passage is usually interpreted as being applicable to women alone – a problematic reading given that the wording here is clearly gender neutral, referring to 'those who are faithless,' 'those who have faith' and 'the obedient ones.'¹⁴⁰ These women, therefore, are being used as parables for both men and women to reflect upon. Whereas figures like the wife of Pharaoh and Mary are presented as paradigms of spiritual leadership, the Qur'an also speaks of a woman who embodied the qualities of political leadership. Like Engineer,¹⁴¹ Wadud points out that the Qur'an not only praises the personality of the Queen of Sheba, singling out her political wisdom and diplomatic skill (Q. 27:29-35),¹⁴² but that she is also the only ruler, other than the prophets, who is portrayed in a favourable light.¹⁴³ Yet despite the text's celebration of this sovereign, she has curiously not become a paradigmatic figure in Islamic political thought. As the Qur'anic scholar Barbara Stowasser has shown, classical and medieval commentators,

¹⁴⁰ Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 33-34.

¹⁴¹ Engineer, *The Rights of Women in Islam*, 17.

¹⁴² Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 40-41.

¹⁴³ *Ibid*, 89.

while ascribing various legendary tales to the Queen, showed little interest in fleshing out wider lessons from her example, examining how the queen's astute leadership skills could contribute to Muslim thinking,¹⁴⁴ such as in the field of political theory. Indeed, in direct contradistinction to the Qur'an's positive portrayal of the Queen, as well as the fact that the text never presents men as natural leaders,¹⁴⁵ most Muslim men continue to approach leadership – political, social, religious or otherwise – as a male prerogative, dismissing women as being inherently incompetent for the task of leadership.¹⁴⁶

Women's leadership in ritual worship is a crucial aspect of gender mainstreaming. The struggle for gender justice, or what Wadud calls the 'gender jihad,' is therefore a thoroughly comprehensive struggle, calling for the full and equal participation of women in each and every aspect of Muslim life.¹⁴⁷ While Wadud has popularized the term gender jihad, especially through the publication of her second book – *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women's Reform in Islam* (2006) – the origins of this phrase can be traced back, as she herself notes, to radical Muslim discourse in Apartheid South Africa. Here, the term was first used by Imam Rashied Omar,¹⁴⁸ the spiritual guide of the Claremont Main Road Mosque in Cape Town, and Esack, who actually has a section titled 'The Gender Jihad'

¹⁴⁴ Stowasser, 65.

¹⁴⁵ Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 89.

¹⁴⁶ In the previous chapter on Engineer we saw that the *hadith* literature has been used to justify women's exclusion from leadership roles. Cf. pg. 126 in this thesis.

¹⁴⁷ Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 10. As noted earlier, although the Arabic word *jihad* is commonly understood as 'holy war,' it literally means to struggle or to exert effort and, therefore, includes all forms of strivings: individual or communal, peaceful or militant, expressly political or 'purely' spiritual.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid, 264. Omar (b. 1959) is a well-known progressive Muslim figure in South Africa. Like Esack, he has a traditional Islamic education – studying in South Africa, Pakistan, Sudan and Malaysia – as well as a secular academic one. Omar received his Ph.D. in Religious Studies from the University of Cape Town, writing his dissertation on the role of the state in situations of religious conflict, and is currently Research Scholar of Islamic Studies and Peacebuilding at the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame in the US. He spends two-thirds of the year in Cape Town serving as the coordinating *imam* of the Claremont Mainroad Mosque. See Rashied Omar, "About Me," personal website. Accessed 23 September 2012, <http://www.rashiedomar.com/about-me.html>

in his book on Islamic liberation theology.¹⁴⁹ In fact, the first time that Wadud seriously considered the idea of a woman delivering the Friday sermon (*khutba*) and leading the prayers was whilst undertaking a speaking tour in South Africa in 1994, in which audience members asked her about the possibility of women's leadership in ritual worship.¹⁵⁰ As it turned out, she delivered the Friday sermon during that very tour, speaking at the Claremont Main Road Mosque on the timely subject of Muslim women and 'engaged surrender,' or the act of wilfully submitting to God through personal and social struggle.¹⁵¹ As Esack recounts, despite the fact that the prayer organizers (of whom he was one) had diplomatically advertised Wadud's sermon as a "pre-sermon lecture," this initiative was met with intense hostility by mainstream South African Muslims, who marched on the mosque in an ultimately unsuccessful attempt to shut down the program.¹⁵² This impassioned condemnation of woman-led prayer, spearheaded by conservative men, became internationalized in 2005 when Wadud led the Friday Prayer in New York City, speaking on the Unity of God and the nature of divine disclosure.¹⁵³ Traditional Islamic scholars from around the world vehemently voiced their disapproval, contending that a female prayer leader would only distract the male worshippers sexually, hampering their ability to concentrate.¹⁵⁴

But despite all these heated responses to woman-led prayers, a significant number of which were personal attacks levelled against Wadud's character, what bothered her the most was the problematic attitude of progressive men who supported her leadership of the

¹⁴⁹ Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation, and Pluralism*, 239.

¹⁵⁰ Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 166.

¹⁵¹ For the full text of the South African sermon, see *ibid*, 158-162.

¹⁵² Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation, and Pluralism*, 246.

¹⁵³ For the full text of the New York City sermon, see Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 249-252.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 222.

prayers. For far more attention was being paid, she laments, to the wonderful fact that a woman was finally giving the sermon (the form) rather than what that human being was actually saying at the pulpit (the substance).¹⁵⁵ Reflecting on the South African sermon, Wadud recounts that she was informed that she would speak less than an hour before the prayer and that flyers, as she would later find out, had been circulated before her arrival in Capetown.¹⁵⁶ The substantive message of the lecture, then, was clearly not a priority for the organizers. She sums up her grievances as follows:

The absence of this direct conversation is a major indication that the planners were thinking and acting like men in exclusion of women's full humanity, while yet pretending to employ a woman as an agent of gender transformation. They were thinking *for* the woman, rendering her a mere object of their privileged agency. How can a woman be a full and equal human being when the details of her public role are orchestrated without her consultation? ...informing me at the last minute also indicates that very little value was attributed to the content of my actual *khutba* [sermon]. This event was about form.¹⁵⁷ [My parentheses]

In other words, in order for women to become meaningful participants in ritual worship, rather than simply being tokens pushed to the fore by progressive men, not only must the substance of their religious discourses be taken as seriously as the form (or the fact that a female is delivering the sermon and leading the prayer) but women themselves need to play the leading role in planning and executing these gender-inclusive activities.

This brings us to the complex question of male solidarity: that is, how can progressive men stand alongside women and partake in the struggle against patriarchy?

When I posed this question to Wadud in our interview, she responded:

The thing is that women have to be able to speak for themselves, even if they don't speak sufficiently at first. I mean they have to. So what happens? What's the role of

¹⁵⁵ A. Wadud, Interview 2010.

¹⁵⁶ Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 167-168.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid, 172. It is perhaps precisely because of the effective silencing of her voice at, ironically, the very moment that she spoke that Wadud includes the full texts of the South African and New York City sermons in her second book, *Inside the Gender Jihad*. For the references to these two sermons, cf. fn. 151 and fn. 153, respectively, on pg. 186 of this thesis.

men? The role of men is to inform themselves and then to advocate on behalf of gender justice with *other men*. That's the biggest role that they can do. ...If men are together and other men make condescending statements about women, that's what men can do. But it's not that you speak for women.¹⁵⁸ [My italics]

So in order to avoid (mis)representing women and reproducing gender inequality in the very struggle against patriarchy – such as that of progressive men speaking over the voices of women, whether they are progressive, conservative or otherwise – men need to combat gender asymmetry within specifically male spaces. In forwarding this argument, Wadud draws upon the ideas of the Black American revolutionary Malcolm X and his stance on White solidarity,¹⁵⁹ summed up in his famous autobiography as follows:

What *can* a sincere white person do? When I say that here now, it makes me think about that [White] little co-ed [college student] I told you about, the one who flew from her New England college down to New York and came up to me in the Nation of Islam's restaurant in Harlem [asking how can a White person contribute to the struggle against racism?], and I told her that there was 'nothing' she could do. I regret that I told her that. ...The first thing I tell them [White people] is that at least where my own particular Black nationalist organization, the Organization of Afro-American Unity, is concerned, they can't *join* us. ...Where the really sincere white people have got to do their 'proving' of themselves is not among the black *victims*, but out on the battle lines of where America's racism really *is* – and that's in their own home communities. American racism is among their own fellow whites. That's where the sincere whites who really mean to accomplish something have got to work.¹⁶⁰ [My parentheses]

Wadud's discourse on gender segregation, then, is a nuanced one. Whereas earlier on in this chapter we saw how she used the Qur'an to critique forced female seclusion, here she embraces segregation as not only a strategy to pre-empt the formation of patriarchal hierarchies that typify mixed gender spaces, but also as a means of enabling women to meet and work with other women, exchanging one another's experiences and struggles.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁸ A. Wadud, Interview 2010.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Malcolm X and Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (London: Penguin, 2001), 494-495.

¹⁶¹ A. Wadud, Interview 2010. Although Wadud does not explicitly situate herself within a wider theoretical discourse here, it is important to note that separatism has a long history in feminist thought, particularly as a political strategy, as a short-term move in order for women to empower themselves collectively before re-entering patriarchal, gender-mixed spaces. On feminist separatism, see Dana R.

This is not to suggest, however, that she is dismissive of the commitments of progressive men. In fact, Wadud attributes the origins of her decades-long work on Islam and gender justice to the inspirational figure of her late father: a poor, Black Methodist minister who, despite overwhelming odds, strove tirelessly to provide for his family.¹⁶² Moreover, it is important to note that while she sharply criticizes the gender dynamics of the South African sermon, she also salutes the courage of the male organizers, acknowledging that this event would not have been possible without their support.¹⁶³ Rather, the point that Wadud is driving home here is that social struggle requires the self-representation of the oppressed and because women alone are the owners of their experiences – subjective realities that can only be understood and explained by women – it is paramount that they speak for themselves.¹⁶⁴

Paradigms of Struggle: Tawhid and Khilafa

The conceptualization and development of theological paradigms that address women's suffering is an integral component of such self-representation. While Esack and Engineer focus on the Exodus and the Battle of Karbala, respectively, as hermeneutical models of liberation, Wadud reflects upon the Qur'anic concept of *tawhid*: the centrepiece of Islamic theology, referring to the absolute Oneness and Unity of God.

Echoing Shari'ati, whose liberating exegesis of *tawhid* we discussed earlier, Wadud

Shugar, *Separatism and Women's Community* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1995); Estelle Freedman, "Separatism as Strategy: Female Institution Building and American Feminism, 1870-1930," *Feminist Studies* 5, (1979): 512-529; and Marilyn Frye, "Some Reflections on Separatism and Power," in *Feminist Social Thought: A Reader*, ed. Diana T. Meyers (London: Routledge, 1997). As the above quotation from Malcolm X suggests, separatism as a tool of empowerment also has deep roots in African American intellectual and social history. For an excellent, though admittedly dated, reference work on this extensive body of literature, see Betty C. Jenkins and Susan Phillis, *Black Separatism: A Bibliography* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1976).

¹⁶² Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 4.

¹⁶³ Ibid, 179.

¹⁶⁴ Wadud, "Sisters in Islam," 131.

argues that *tawhid* is not simply faith in a single, undivided deity, but also a concomitant commitment to translating this monotheistic belief into the mundane realm, creating a single, undivided society. To quote her eloquent words:

As an ethical term, *tawhid* relates to relationships and developments within the social and political realm, emphasizing the unity of all human creatures beneath one Creator. If experienced as a reality in everyday Islamic terms, humanity would be a single global community without distinction for reasons of race, class, gender, religious tradition, national origin, sexual orientation or other arbitrary, voluntary, and involuntary aspects of human distinction. Their only distinction would be on the basis of *taqwa*...¹⁶⁵

The unity of God, then, has direct socio-political, economic and gendered implications. Moreover, in this radically revamped society built on the unity of the creation, one's worth is not determined by socioeconomic standing, gender affiliation or racial identity, but rather solely by *taqwa* (piety). Yet although the unity of God is a divine characteristic that Muslims ought to emulate, this deity is also, at exactly the same time, utterly unique. Citing Q. 42:11 – 'Nothing is like Him' – Wadud juxtaposes this *singularity* of the Creator with the *duality* of the creation, arguing that unlike humankind, God is beyond any partner and thus forever unpaired: One.¹⁶⁶ And it is precisely when men seek to pair themselves and their experiences with God, such as by portraying God as a male being exhibiting masculine qualities, that the tenet of *tawhid* is effectively violated.¹⁶⁷ It is difficult to overemphasize the centrality of *tawhid* in Wadud's Islamic discourse. In fact, she even describes the interpretive method of her gendered exegesis – that is, of reading the Qur'an as a coherent whole, extracting wider principles from the text – through this very language of divine unity, calling her holistic approach a "hermeneutics of

¹⁶⁵ Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 28.

¹⁶⁶ Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 25-26.

¹⁶⁷ Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 81.

tawhid.”¹⁶⁸ So the unity of God is reflected, too, in the unity of the Word. Thus, Muslims throughout the world, from Iran to South Africa to America, have drawn upon *tawhid* in multiple contexts of oppression.¹⁶⁹ But in terms of its systematic, scholarly exposition, gender activists have been at the forefront of this hermeneutical project. Like Wadud, Barlas, as we shall shortly see in the next chapter, has reflected extensively upon this key Islamic tenet. Paralleling Wadud’s critique of mainstream, masculine projections of the divine, Barlas argues that because God’s “sovereignty” is indivisible and thus God’s domain alone, attempts by men to impinge on this sovereignty, such as by acting as mediators between the divine and the rest of humanity, undermines *tawhid*.¹⁷⁰

In addition to Islamic monotheism, Wadud also reinterprets the Islamic concept of *khilafa*, or ‘trusteeship.’ Whereas Engineer’s interest in the Battle of Karbala reflects his religious background as a Shi’a Muslim, her hermeneutical emphasis on *khilafa* (though not necessarily a conscious move) speaks to her own sectarian affiliation as a Sunni Muslim. Historically understood as the ‘caliphate,’ the *khilafa* became an enduring Sunni institution of political leadership following the Prophet’s death. Referring to Q. 2:30, she

¹⁶⁸ Wadud, *Qur’an and Woman*, xii.

¹⁶⁹ It is interesting to note that Malcolm X also saw society through the prism of *tawhid*. In 1964, he undertook his famous pilgrimage to Mecca. Deeply moved by the camaraderie shared between Muslims of different racial backgrounds, Malcolm began to make links between the political implications of *tawhid* and his own struggle against White racism. Consider the following excerpts from his autobiography: “All ate as One, and slept as One. Everything about the pilgrimage atmosphere accented the Oneness of Man under One God.”; “I could see from this [pilgrimage experience], that perhaps if white Americans could accept the Oneness of God, then perhaps, too, they could accept *in reality* the Oneness of Man – and cease to measure, and hinder, and harm others in terms of their ‘differences’ in color.” [My parentheses]; “About twenty of us Muslims who had finished the Hajj were sitting in a huge tent on Mount Arafat. As a Muslim from America, I was the center of attention. . . They asked me what about the Hajj had impressed me the most. . . I said, ‘The *brotherhood*! The people of all races, colors, from all over the world coming together as *one*! It has proved to me the power of the One God.’” See Malcolm X and Haley, 443; 455; and 452, respectively.

¹⁷⁰ Barlas, “*Believing Women*” in *Islam*, 13-14.

brings this term back to its scriptural origins.¹⁷¹ The verse, referring to a primordial time before humankind's creation, reads:

When your Sustainer said to the angels, 'Indeed, I am going to create a trustee (*khalifatun*) on the earth,' they said, 'Will You set in it one who will create corruption, and shed blood, while we celebrate Your praise and proclaim Your sanctity?' He said, 'Indeed, I know what you do not know.'

The purpose of humanity, Wadud concludes, is thus to function as a trustee, a vicegerent of the Creator on the Earth.¹⁷² This duty, moreover, is first and foremost an ethical one, in which the trustee – or, to use another definition that she forwards, “moral agent”¹⁷³ – has the solemn responsibility to uphold divine justice,¹⁷⁴ to ensure that the unity of God, with all its socio-political ramifications, remains intact. Citing Q. 33:72, she points out that humankind wilfully accepted this role, thereby entering into a sacred covenant with their Creator.¹⁷⁵ The verse reads:

Indeed, We presented the Trust to the heavens and the earth and the mountains, but they refused to bear it, and were apprehensive of it; but the human being undertook it. Indeed, he has been an oppressor and ignorant.

But humankind has not only failed to live up to its role as trustee by spreading suffering on the Earth, but also by hampering the ability of fellow human beings to fulfil this divinely sanctioned purpose, such as when men silence women's voices by claiming that women's voices are taboo (*'awra*), and thus not to be heard.¹⁷⁶ In emphasizing humankind's role as *khalifa*, Wadud echoes the earlier exegetical work of Hassan, who has shown that biblical concepts like 'the Fall' and 'original sin' – and, by extension, the idea of being 'redeemed' and 'saved' – are non-existent in the Qur'an, as the Earth was

¹⁷¹ This verse on *khilafa* is incorrectly cited as Q. 2:38 in Wadud, "Towards a Qur'anic Hermeneutics of Social Justice," 48.

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 33.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid, 35.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Barlas, "Amina Wadud's Hermeneutics of the Qur'an," 105.

understood right from the very beginning as being the principal abode in which the human being, as trustee of God, would dwell.¹⁷⁷

Justice for All

Liberation for Whom?

While the struggle for gender justice clearly lies at the core of Wadud's liberationist discourse, she acknowledges the complexity of human suffering, calling for an utterly comprehensive approach to justice. Because women are marginalized, if not excluded altogether, from most articulations of social justice and of what constitutes a normative, egalitarian order,¹⁷⁸ she is acutely aware of the importance of making connections between different forms of oppression. She notes, for example, that even Qur'anic commentators who argue that the text seeks to establish justice have continued, rather paradoxically, to issue highly patriarchal interpretations of verses dealing with women, reflecting the striking absence of gender in their understandings of justice.¹⁷⁹ Liberation, then, has to be a genuinely inclusive commitment, embracing everyone's experiences. But just as Wadud has been left out of androcentric constructions of justice, she has also felt excluded, as a poor Black woman, from feminist discourses headed by wealthy White women.¹⁸⁰ Indeed, because the lives of African American women have been shaped primarily by the realities of racism, they have sharply criticized the feminist movement for failing to take their experiences into account.¹⁸¹ Fleshing out this critique, Black women pioneered 'womanism' and 'womanist theology' as alternative liberationist

¹⁷⁷ Hassan, "An Islamic Perspective," 106-107.

¹⁷⁸ Wadud, "Towards a Qur'anic Hermeneutics of Social Justice," 37.

¹⁷⁹ Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 35-36.

¹⁸⁰ Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 80.

¹⁸¹ McCloud, 146.

discourses that acknowledged the key differences that exist between women, thinking holistically through questions of race, class and gender.¹⁸² Indeed, it is precisely because of the historic exclusion of Black women, as well as women based in the Third World, from the predominantly secular project of Western feminism that Wadud is wary of identifying as feminist, referring to herself instead as “pro-faith, pro-feminist.”¹⁸³ This emphasis on the “pro-faith agenda” of her work, moreover, underscores her conviction in the compatibility of Islam and women’s rights,¹⁸⁴ thereby distinguishing herself from secular Muslim feminists who claim that religion is inherently patriarchal.

On Race and Religious Pluralism

As we have seen at numerous points in this chapter, issues of race permeate Wadud’s writings. In fact, race is arguably the most crucial aspect of her analysis after gender. Looking back at her early life, she recalls how Blackness became an inseparable part of her identity, especially during the final three years of high school. Recall that at the age of fourteen, Wadud left Washington, D.C. to attend a reputed high school in an all-White suburb of Boston, living with different families.¹⁸⁵ She vividly recounts her conflicted experience at this institution, being one of only two Black students:

I was a black female. During those years I was never for a moment allowed to let my Blackness escape me. Aspects of my color and ethnicity were the points of entry and exit into many facets of my high school life. Privileges were given to me or withheld from me because of my race. In my first semester, I refused to stand for the pledge of allegiance. I was permitted to make my protest, but not to enter the classroom. So, for three years, I spent homeroom period wandering the halls. I was allowed to do this – although no one else ever was. ...I was even excused from dissecting a frog on the day that Martin Luther King was shot. None of these favors were permitted to

¹⁸² Mary Grey, “Feminist Theology: A Critical Theology of Liberation,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*, ed. Christopher Rowland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 111.

¹⁸³ Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 79-80.

¹⁸⁴ Wadud, “Sisters in Islam,” 118.

¹⁸⁵ A. Wadud, Interview 2010.

white students. In each case the affirmation was only that one set of rules applied for the whites and another set applied for me. No one ever knew that I simply didn't want to dissect the frog. ...Being Black was a special prize and a unique curse. My first highschool crush told me he couldn't kiss me because I was Black. I had no boyfriends because I was Black, or I had them out of curiosity or pity because I was Black. In short, at no juncture was I to forget that I was Black. So I never forgot.¹⁸⁶

Though she had grown up in mostly coloured spaces, it was, interestingly, with her entry into a predominantly White setting that her racial consciousness heightened.¹⁸⁷ This emerging sense of ethnic identity was intensified, moreover, by the wider American context: namely, the civil rights struggle – as the above passage notes, Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated during her senior years – and, more significantly, the rise of the Black Power movement.¹⁸⁸ And just as with gender, Wadud brings her racial background to the interpretation of the Qur'an. Reflecting upon Q. 49:11-13, she argues that while the text acknowledges the differences that exist between various communities, it never uses these differences as a measure of human worth.¹⁸⁹ The passage reads:

O you who believe! Let not any people deride another people: it may be that they are better than they are; nor let women (deride) other women: it may be that they are better than they are...O humankind! We created you from a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes that you may know one another. The noblest among you in the eyes of God are the most pious (*atqakum*) among you.

So whereas she drew upon the first part of Q. 49:13 when reading through the lens of gender justice – 'Indeed, we created you from a male and a female' – here she focuses on the latter part of this verse, referring to God creating 'nations and tribes' so that they may recognize one another. Furthermore, just as with the case of gender, it is *taqwa*, appearing in this passage in the superlative form (*atqakum*: literally, 'the most God-conscious

¹⁸⁶ Wadud, "On Belonging as a Muslim Woman," 259.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ A. Wadud, Interview 2010.

¹⁸⁹ Amina Wadud, "American Muslim Identity: Race and Ethnicity in Progressive Islam," in *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender, and Pluralism*, ed. Omid Safi (Oxford: Oneworld, 2003), 274.

among you’), that becomes the central criterion with which God will render judgement.¹⁹⁰

But while White racism has undoubtedly played a formative role on Wadud’s hermeneutic, it is important to note that the brunt of her critiques, at least insofar as race relations *within* the American Muslim community are concerned, centre on Arab and South Asian Muslim immigrants who, due to their superior socioeconomic standing in comparison to their African American coreligionists, have monopolized leadership and public representation roles within the American Muslim community.¹⁹¹

Wadud also embraces questions of religious pluralism. Like Esack and Engineer, she is wary of exclusivist Islamic discourses that claim to *own* God, countering that Muslims constitute one of numerous faith communities that have been recipients of divine revelation.¹⁹² As she put it in her Friday sermon in New York City in 2005:

There is no chosen people, exclusive members of one of the world’s many religions – some no longer in existence – some so widespread by numbers and powers that they look upon themselves as exclusively “the chosen.” The “chosen” are all of humanity.¹⁹³

There can be little doubt that her emphasis on the transcendence of God, underscoring the ‘chosen-ness’ of all people as opposed to solely Muslims, is a direct result of her own diverse religious background, being born into a devoutly Christian household, living for a year as a Buddhist and, finally, converting to Islam.¹⁹⁴ This deeply enriching experience enabled her to appreciate the intrinsic value of different faiths, to acknowledge the plurality of divine disclosure. Wadud’s writings on religious pluralism also delve into apologetics, however. Her commentary on polytheism is an illustrative example:

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Ibid, 271-272.

¹⁹² Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 207.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid, 62.

...polytheism in Qur'anic discourse did not include any direct references to Hindu or African traditional religious polytheism, which have both the concept of numerous gods as well as the concept of the sacred as Ultimate. ...There are no animists, believers in the sacred manifestations throughout creation, as in many indigenous traditions, like native African, Australian, and North and South American pre- and post-Qur'anic traditions. These are not directly spoken to in the Qur'an. Furthermore, all forms of Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism, with unembodied or non-personified concepts of the sacred, were excluded from Qur'anic discussions of faith or religion, despite their existence prior to the seventh century in other parts of the globe.¹⁹⁵

But since the Qur'an spoke to a specific context, addressing the religious communities and practices that were immediately present in that time and place – precisely the reason why Jews and Christians, in addition to polytheists, are mentioned – is it persuasive to reason that just because other faith traditions are not discussed that they are, therefore, outside the fold of the text's discourse on monotheism? For the Qur'an puts forth a *principle* with regard to belief: namely, that of not associating any partners with God, thereby undermining the unity of the Creator. Particular manifestations of such divine association, then, are contingent upon different historical contexts. Given Wadud's hermeneutical emphasis on principles over particulars, it is surprising that here she focuses on particulars, shying away from making broader generalizations on polytheism.

However, in terms of religious pluralism, her primary interest is not in Muslim/non-Muslim relations but rather in the interfaith dynamics that exist within the Muslim community. Referring to Q. 2:256, 'There is no compulsion in religion,' she argues that not only is entry into Islam a purely personal decision that cannot be forced upon anyone but so, too, is a Muslim's decision to leave the faith – a right that is severely undermined by the punishment of death for apostasy, as outlined in the *shari'a*.¹⁹⁶ This accusation of apostasy, of being outside the pale of Islam, is used not only to ensure that

¹⁹⁵ Ibid, 194-195.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid, 81-82. She incorrectly cites the verse as Q. 3:256 – an obvious typographical error given that there are only two hundred verses in the third chapter.

Muslims remain Muslims but also as a powerful tool to silence alternative, religious voices within the community.¹⁹⁷ Indeed, Wadud herself, as a highly controversial figure amongst mainstream Muslims, has been constantly accused of being non-Muslim, even an enemy of Islam. A YouTube video that covered aspects of the 2005 Friday Prayer in New York City captures the deeply controversial (and marginal) nature of this event within the wider Muslim community, showing an angry group of Muslims protesting outside the prayer venue – a church, the Episcopal Cathedral of St. John the Divine – amongst them a man holding a placard that read: “Ameena Wadud is not a Muslim according to the Qur’an and Sunnah.”¹⁹⁸ Fostering an inclusive atmosphere of interpretive pluralism within the community is crucial, therefore, in order to mainstream egalitarian interpretations of Islam, especially in terms of gender justice.

Class and Global Politics: An Inconsistent Analysis

Along with race and religious pluralism, Wadud incorporates class into her thinking. As we already noted in the biographical sketch at the beginning of this chapter, her early life was marred by poverty. Because her father was unable to pay the mortgage for their house in semirural Maryland – a home that he himself had built – the family was forced into homelessness.¹⁹⁹ She recounts this painful episode:

For the next 2 weeks, we must have slept in my father’s car...When school was out, my father built a trailer for us to stay in...Since we did not remain at any one place for more than a month, I suppose I knew that we did not belong...By the time the school year started [that is, when Wadud entered the sixth grade] my father had rented 2 rooms on the 3rd floor of someone else’s house. But this time, we were in the city: Washington, DC. We lived in these 2 rooms for 1 year.²⁰⁰ [My parentheses]

¹⁹⁷ Ibid, 55-56.

¹⁹⁸ “Female Imams – Morocco,” *YouTube*, accessed 22 September 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qgk5JFGUkRw>

¹⁹⁹ Wadud, “On Belonging as a Muslim Woman,” 255.

²⁰⁰ Ibid, 255-256.

This formative experience has had a lasting impact on the way in which Wadud interprets scripture. Referring again to Q. 49:13 – ‘O humankind! We created you from a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes that you may know one another. The noblest among you in the eyes of God are the most pious among you’ – she argues that by looking solely at piety (*taqwa*), God refuses to differentiate between human beings on the basis of wealth.²⁰¹ The affluent and the poor, then, are to be treated the same. And it is precisely here that a notable difference emerges between Wadud’s and Esack’s hermeneutics, as the former is less radical than the latter. Citing Q. 28:5 – ‘It is Our Will to bestow Our grace upon the downtrodden of the Earth, and to make them the leaders and to make them the inheritors of the Earth’ – Esack writes that God makes a ‘preferential option’ for the marginalized.²⁰² In other words, this is a divine being that *does* take material realities into account. For in a context of manifest inequality, a truly just and compassionate deity cannot remain a neutral broker but rather must forcefully take sides, standing in solidarity with the weak against the powerful.

It is in the realm of global politics, however, that Wadud’s discourse on poverty is problematic. She is explicit about the evils of capitalism and consumerism, which she refers to as capitalism’s “bastard child,” criticizing a cruel economy whereby massive numbers of people are being impoverished, particularly women and children.²⁰³ At the same time, a tiny fraction of the world’s population is enjoying increasingly lavish and wasteful lifestyles, driven by the market and fuelled by mass consumption.²⁰⁴ To evidence her argument, Wadud provides statistics from the 1998 U.N.D.P. Human

²⁰¹ Wadud, *Qur’an and Woman*, 36-37.

²⁰² Esack, *Qur’an, Liberation, and Pluralism*, 98-99.

²⁰³ Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 136-137.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid*, 137.

Development Report, showing that the wealthiest 20% of the world's population consume a whopping 86% of private consumption expenditure while the poorest fifth account for a meagre 1.3%.²⁰⁵ Yet after suggesting a critical linkage between the affluence of the few and the deprivation of the many – the implication clearly being that the sin of structural poverty can only be alleviated through a far-reaching, systematic redistribution of global wealth – she makes the following conclusion: “We have the means to not only eradicate poverty but also to do so without depriving the well to do from experiencing extreme luxury and privilege.”²⁰⁶ Constituting a glaring contradiction in an otherwise politically progressive discourse, this statement betrays wider inconsistencies in Wadud's approach to global politics.

Her writings on 9/11 are a compelling case in point. Radical Muslims like Esack have highlighted the political economy of 9/11, arguing that this event cannot be disentangled from the oppressive web of global inequalities sustained by American imperialism, as shown, for instance, by the rejoicing of people not only in the Muslim world but also in other parts of the South like Brazil and China.²⁰⁷ To be sure, Wadud notes that 9/11 has forced Americans to wake up, to acknowledge the dire consequences of their quest for world dominance.²⁰⁸ Yet despite her critique of US hegemony, she plays into ideologically loaded language surrounding 9/11: namely, the juxtaposition of the ‘good Muslim,’ who is peaceful, loving and acquiescent, with the ‘bad Muslim,’ who is

²⁰⁵ Ibid, 267. For the original report, see “Human Development Report 1998,” *United Nations Development Program*, accessed 23 September 2012, <http://hdr.undp.org/en/reports/global/hdr1998/>

²⁰⁶ Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 267.

²⁰⁷ Esack, “In Search of Progressive Islam Beyond 9/11,” 94.

²⁰⁸ Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 224.

angry, violent, virulently anti-American.²⁰⁹ The passage below reveals this dichotomous construction in her writings:

Islam is not a monolith. It has a plethora of meanings and experiences...Indeed, just as Americans were presented with a horrible affront to their sense of integrity and security by the event of Sept. 11, 2001, when a dozen or so Muslim men laid claim to "Islam" as justification for their vehemence and violence, so too are babies born and women and men surrender in peace and harmony to a claim of "Islam." Which is the truer picture, the face of evil and destruction or the face of love and life?...while I do not identify with suicide bombers or acts of violence, I cannot ignore that they occur within the ranks of that vast community of Islam.²¹⁰

While Wadud avoids the liberal Muslim trap of essentializing Islam – one that, as we have seen in the second chapter, Engineer falls into – acknowledging that there are both peaceful and militant interpretations of the faith, she reduces a highly politicized and symbolic event, expressly bent on resisting American domination in the Muslim world, to mere religious fanaticism, contrasting ‘the face of evil and destruction’ (the bad Muslim) with ‘the face of love and life’ (the good Muslim). Furthermore, she portrays 9/11 as yet another expression of patriarchy in Muslim societies, stating that “men perpetrated these events in response to actions men exclusively had decided upon, planned and orchestrated” and concluding that “men make war while women and children are victims as well as other men.”²¹¹ Such statements not only gloss over the decidedly global context in which these attacks occurred, but also presuppose that women themselves do not partake in violence, whether it be imperialist wars waged by women in the North to ‘save’ Muslim women in the South or militant resistance in which women take up arms alongside men in order to defend their land and their families. Indeed, women have historically been, and continue to be, active participants in militant struggle, especially in

²⁰⁹ For a seminal study of the emergence of this ‘Good Muslim/Bad Muslim’ paradigm and its usage in American foreign policy, see Mahmood Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2004).

²¹⁰ Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 5.

²¹¹ Ibid, 228.

nationalist resistance against occupation. The Palestinian medical worker Wafa Idris (d. 2002) is a noteworthy example. During the Second Intifada, she became the first female suicide bomber, and was followed in the same year by three other Palestinian women: namely, Dareen Abu Aisheh, Ayat Akhras and Andaleeb Takatkeh.²¹²

Hagar: The Complexity of Oppression Embodied

Wadud's holistic approach to injustice is captured paradigmatically in the figure of Hagar. Indeed, Hagar has become a central, scriptural symbol for womanist theologians, who have discerned in the Black slave of Abraham a "woman who is rejected on the grounds of race, sex and class, yet at the same time is the recipient of a divine revelation."²¹³ In particular, Wadud sees in Hagar's abandonment in the desert and in her desperate efforts to locate water for her child the predicament of the "homeless, single parent,"²¹⁴ forced to provide for herself and her family in a classist, patriarchal society. In so doing, Wadud forges a direct, hermeneutical link between Hagar's experiences and her own as a divorced, single mother.²¹⁵ Her focus on Hagar, moreover, is significant in terms of interpretive methodology. For while she privileges the Qur'an over other Islamic texts, Wadud's writings on Hagar reveal her interest in engaging the *shari'a*. A key problem with Islamic law, she argues, is that it is "premised upon an ideal of an extended family network,"²¹⁶ thereby ignoring the lived realities of a growing number of Muslim women in general and of African American Muslim women in

²¹² For a perceptive study of these four female fighters and how they have represented themselves and been represented within the larger Arab world, see Frances S. Hasso, "Discursive and Political Deployments by / of the 2002 Palestinian Suicide Bombers / Martyrs," *Feminist Review* 81, (2005): 23-51.

²¹³ Grey, 112.

²¹⁴ Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 143.

²¹⁵ A. Wadud, Interview 2010.

²¹⁶ Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 144.

particular. The *shari'a*, then, needs to be reinterpreted in order to address the Hagar paradigm, to speak to situations in which women are the sole, financial providers of their families.²¹⁷ But Wadud's interest in Hagar not only reflects her willingness to engage the *shari'a*, but also the Qur'anic exegetical tradition. Whereas Hagar is discussed in the Old Testament (Genesis 16), she is actually never mentioned by name in the Qur'an. Rather, she is implicitly referred to in a supplication that Abraham makes shortly after leaving Hagar and Ishmael in the desert.²¹⁸ The prayer reads:

When Abraham said, 'My Sustainer! Make this city [Mecca] a sanctuary, and save me and my children from worshipping idols. My Sustainer! Indeed they have misled many people. So whoever follows me indeed belongs to me, and as for someone who disobeys me, surely You are All-Forgiving, All-Merciful. Our Sustainer! I have settled part of my descendants in a barren valley by Your sacred house, our Sustainer, that they may maintain the prayer. So make the hearts of the people fond of them, and provide them with fruits, that they may give thanks. Our Sustainer! Indeed you know whatever we hide and whatever we disclose, and nothing in the earth or in the sky is hidden from God. All praise belongs to God, who, despite my old age, gave me Ishmael and Isaac. Indeed, my Sustainer hears all supplications. My Sustainer! Make me a maintainer of the prayer, and my descendants. Our Sustainer, accept my supplication. Our Sustainer! Forgive me, my parents and all the faithful on the day when the reckoning is done. (Q. 14:35-41) [My parentheses]

Hagar has made her way into Muslim memory, therefore, not through the Qur'an itself but rather through Qur'anic commentaries, which drew upon a number of unauthenticated prophetic reports and biblical traditions (*isra'iliyat*) in order to flesh out her story.²¹⁹ The following passage from the medieval commentator Isma'il ibn Kathir (d. 1373) is an illustrative example, depicting Hagar's deep, abiding faith in God:

When he [Abraham] left the two of them there and turned his back on them, Hagar clung to his robes and said: 'Abraham, where are you going, leaving us here without means to stay alive?' He did not answer. When she insisted, he would still not

²¹⁷ Ibid, 144-145.

²¹⁸ Abugideiri, 83.

²¹⁹ Ibid.

answer. So she said: ‘Did God command you to do this?’ He said: ‘Yes.’ Then Hagar said: ‘He will not let us perish.’²²⁰ [My parentheses]

So despite Wadud’s critique of Qur’anic commentary, her usage of the Hagar paradigm shows that she is prepared to draw upon this body of knowledge when doing so can further liberationist understandings of Islam.

Walking the Walk: Justice as a Way of Life

The most crucial aspect of Wadud’s comprehensive approach to justice, however, is the commitment to *live out* these principles in the private sphere. Citing Q. 61:2 – ‘Why do you say that which you do not do?’ – she writes that calling for equality in the public sphere is meaningless, even hypocritical, if such progressive discourses are not put into practice in one’s personal life.²²¹ As she phrased it in our interview:

...it’s like you live that consciousness. And in that sense that’s where I think back to my father. I think my father lived his consciousness as much as you can for a poor, not very well educated man. I mean like 6th grade’s top education for him. So to me it’s the idea of walking the walk, not just talking the talk...Islam as *din* [literally: ‘religion’], as a way of life. Justice is a way of life. Justice is a relationship between yourself and between others inspired by your relationship with God, who created you. And so there’s no public/private divide, where you can do all kinds of stuff in private as long as you look good in public.²²² [My parentheses]

Indeed, when I travelled to Norway in 2009 to interview Wadud – she was presenting at an Islamic studies conference at the University of Bergen – I was struck by the modesty of this human being. We were scheduled to hold the first part of the interview right after her presentation. Over the course of the program, I somehow ended up losing my recording device in the lecture hall. I told Wadud, who was waiting for me near the hall entrance, to go ahead and head off for lunch with the other conference participants, and

²²⁰ Isma‘il ibn Kathir, as cited in Stowasser, 47. For the original citation, see Isma‘il ‘Umar Abu l-Fida ibn Kathir, *Qisas al-Anbiya’ [The Stories of the Prophets] Vol. 1*, Ed. Mustafa Abd al-Wahid (Cairo: Dar al-Kutub al-Hadith, 1968), 202-203.

²²¹ Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 207.

²²² A. Wadud, Interview 2010.

that I would shortly catch up with her once I had found the recorder. Sensing my distress at losing the device, on which I had stored the other interviews of this dissertation, she stayed with me in the lecture hall for twenty minutes, patiently looking for the recorder and warmly reassuring me that we would find it, which we eventually did. I was deeply moved by this initial encounter with Wadud, as I did not expect such an internationally renowned scholar to treat an unknown graduate student like myself with such respect and kindness. After reflecting upon her work, moreover, I realized that she was not simply being a ‘nice person,’ but rather that the humility that marked her personal relationships was part of a wider commitment rooted in her understanding of Islam: namely, that of internalizing the struggle to transcend hierarchy in one’s everyday relations with others. The organizational dynamics of SIS also reflects this commitment. While numerous human rights organizations call for social justice and gender equality, their administrative structures, paradoxically, tend to be rigidly hierarchal. There is a critical disconnect, then, between the empowering public discourse of these movements and the unequal manner in which their members actually relate to one another. However, SIS, at least during Wadud’s time in Malaysia between 1989 and 1992, was acutely non-hierarchal in its organizational structure, operating without a chairperson, president or executive committee – what Wadud describes as “the standard male corporate lines” – as members, working purely as volunteers, interacted with each other as essentially equals.²²³ In other words, SIS not only forwarded an inclusive discourse in the public sphere, supporting women’s full participation in socio-political and religious life, but also strove to translate

²²³ Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 117-118. She notes, however, that SIS has since developed into a full-fledged NGO with an executive director and salaried workers and, thus, an institutionalized, hierarchal structure.

these egalitarian ideals into its everyday functioning, fostering a genuine culture of sisterhood between its members.

The family is the most important private space wherein professed commitments to social justice need to be lived out. The centrality of the family in Wadud's writings is captured in the acknowledgements of her second book, *Inside the Gender Jihad* (2006), in which she emphasizes the pivotal role that her children have played in her life:

Of course the last acknowledgement belongs to my children from whom I have learned more about the struggle to believe and practice Islam than through any of the various other gifts from Allah, over a period of thirty years as an active single parent with little or no support. My prayer is that one day they will come to understand the struggles of my life which made loving and caring for them even more difficult because I sometimes had to work for Allah outside the home that did not allow me enough time to do the work for Allah that they might have wanted me to do for them inside the house; for that is the foundation of my gender jihad.²²⁴

So despite her pioneering contributions to Islam and gender reform, or what she collectively refers to as “work for Allah outside the home,” it is the efforts and sacrifices that she as a single mother has made for her family – work for Allah inside the home – that takes centre-stage, constituting the very “foundation” of her gender jihad. But it is precisely here, in contributing to familial tasks like housework and childcare, that Wadud discerns a disjuncture between the public discourses and private lives of progressively minded Muslim men. As she forcefully put it in our interview:

There's too much lip service. This is a disappointment that I had with actual persons who are considered reformist. And then you go [to his] home and the wife never comes out of the kitchen...[or]...they are married to traditional women or women who are not as well educated as themselves so they don't engage them intellectually at the same level that they do with other men or even women who are educated in the public space...whatever it is, I'm not seeing, I'm not seeing families, where the progressive men are doing everything that they say that they are talking about in the public space. It's like, who are you talking for? Are you talking for your wife here? Are you saying that, oh yeah, well, I want it in the public space but at home, you know?²²⁵ [My parentheses]

²²⁴ Ibid, xvii.

²²⁵ A. Wadud, Interview 2010.

Therefore, in order to be truly committed to justice, men need to *value* housework, to appreciate the labour that women have historically undertaken inside the home. Indeed, men need to start seeing this work as being as valuable in the eyes of God as the work that is done outside the home – recalling Wadud’s description of both as ‘work for Allah’ – and then to play an equal share in that labour. To put it another way: the movement of women outside the home needs to be paralleled by a reverse movement of men into the home. There is a Qur’anic basis, moreover, for such a reverse movement. As we have already seen earlier on in this chapter, the Qur’an never describes domestic activities like child rearing as being an essential aspect of womanhood.²²⁶ There is no scriptural mandate, then, for such a public/private division of labour between women and men, leaving the distribution of these tasks open to the possibilities of new contexts. In making an Islamic case for egalitarian relations within the family, Wadud reinterprets the well-known prophetic proverb: ‘Marriage is half of faith.’ Whereas most Muslims have narrowly understood this report as meaning that one’s faith is protected upon entering into wedlock, thereby avoiding the sin of premarital sex, she argues that this prophetic saying needs to be read *through* the framework of marriage: that is, approaching our relationships within the family as fully half of our surrender to God.²²⁷ So just as we will be divinely accountable for our actions outside the home, we will be held equally responsible in our roles as parents and children, spouses and siblings.

²²⁶ Wadud, *Qur’an and Woman*, 22.

²²⁷ Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 160.

Conclusions

Paralleling Esack's and Engineer's exegeses, Wadud focuses on the Qur'an as the principal, textual source of Islam. Because the text represents the Word of God, a clear distinction needs to be made between this living Word and other Islamic sources like the exegetical tradition, which is often conflated with the Qur'an itself. This is particularly problematic given that men have dominated the field of Qur'anic commentary, inevitably leading to patriarchal understandings of the text. Women, therefore, need to partake in the exegetical enterprise, bringing their subjectivities, insights and experiences to the task of interpretation. While Wadud treats the *hadith* literature as a primary source of Islam, she, like Esack and Engineer, is wary of the authenticity of numerous prophetic reports and warns that this highly disputed corpus needs to be approached through the framework of the Qur'an. She does not consider the *shari'a* to be a primary source of Islam. But despite this subordination of the *shari'a* to the Qur'anic word, she argues that the legal tradition still needs to be critically engaged due to the sheer legitimacy that it enjoys within Muslim societies, exerting an enormous influence on people's lives, especially women. In interpreting the Qur'an, Wadud draws upon Rahman's double-movement theory, which seeks to extract ethical principles from the text and then apply these principles to contemporary contexts. However, as this interpretive method is based heavily on historical criticism, entailing an exhaustive and systematic study of the original context of revelation, it raises a larger question concerning religious authority: namely, how accessible is this mode of reading for everyday Muslims? It also raises questions about objectivity, for who gets to decide what constitutes a Qur'anic principle? Wadud's espousal of the double-movement theory points to the importance of action in her Islamic

discourse. For once timeless, ethical principles are derived from the text, they need to be practically applied to lived contexts of oppression. Wadud's involvement with SIS played a crucial role in allowing her to see how theoretical research could be meaningfully translated into concrete reforms through activism. Knowledge, then, must necessarily lead to action. And it is here that a key difference emerges between Wadud's and Esack's exegeses, for while the former's is a hermeneutic of application, the latter's is a hermeneutic of *praxis*. Because the experience of struggle sheds valuable insight into the Word of God, Esack argues, knowledge does not simply lead to action but action, too, effects new understandings. In other words, whereas Wadud's hermeneutic is linear in nature, characterized by a unidirectional movement from knowledge *to* action, Esack's is dialectical, marked by a continuous interplay *between* knowledge and action.

Wadud uses textual analysis and historical criticism extensively in her Qur'anic readings, reflecting the centrality of these twin interpretive strategies in women's exegesis, as they play less prominent a role in Esack's and Engineer's commentaries. Her emphasis on a careful, literary study of the Qur'an – showing exactly what the text says and, just as significantly, does not say – comes out most clearly in her reading of the beginning of time. Critiquing the entrenched notion amongst Muslims that Eve was created from Adam's rib, she shows that this is actually a biblical narrative and that the Qur'anic text itself never mentions this story, describing man and woman as being created from a single soul. While she utilizes textual analysis when interpreting the origins of humankind, she employs historical criticism to grapple with androcentric descriptions of sexual pleasure in Paradise, arguing that such depictions spoke to understandings of beauty at the time of revelation and were thus shaped by the patriarchal

realities of Meccan society. Moving into the here and now, Wadud uses textual analysis and historical criticism to tackle a number of women's issues, from polygamy and female seclusion to veiling and men's 'guardianship' over women. Her interpretation of the 'guardianship verse' (Q. 4:34) is a compelling example of the convergence of these two hermeneutical techniques. Examining the precise wording of the passage, she comments that it never makes any categorical claims of men's superiority over women, presupposing a marital arrangement in which the husband is the sole financial provider. Men's authority is thus conditional, presuming a societal context in which women are confined to the home. Therefore, in a radically different context wherein both partners are economically productive, such as in the present time, the husband would cease to function as guardian and authority would be shared equally between both partners. However, unlike Engineer, who portrays the Qur'an as a human rights document upholding complete gender equality, Wadud steers away from apologetics. For instance, she argues that however the 'beating verse' (also Q. 4:34) may be reinterpreted, such as it being a significant restriction on violence against women in seventh-century Arabia, she cannot accept any type of physical strike against women. In a similar move to Esack, who also acknowledges certain problems with the Qur'an, she negotiates this difficult verse by prioritizing the underlying, egalitarian spirit of the text over its literal letter.

A number of theological paradigms surface at various points in Wadud's writings. Whereas Esack and Engineer draw on the Exodus and the Battle of Karbala as models of struggle, respectively, she reflects upon the nature of Islamic monotheism. Echoing the earlier ideas of Shari'ati, she argues that *tawhid* has direct sociopolitical consequences. For the unity of God must translate into the unity of humanity, undivided by gender, race

and class. But while humanity is marked by duality, as expounded in Wadud's reading of the Creation Story, God is utterly unique, unpairable. Therefore, patriarchal portrayals of God as being masculine – that is, pairing God with men's experiences – undercuts the singularity of this deity. In order to uphold *tawhid*, Muslims must thus tirelessly work towards creating an egalitarian and just social order. And in this new society, the only marker of distinction is that of *taqwa* – a key Qur'anic principle and a theme that permeates Wadud's Islamic discourse. A truly just deity, she argues, is one who looks beyond mere material and physical differences, focussing on piety alone as a measure of human worth. In addition to *tawhid* and *taqwa*, she unpacks the Islamic concept of *khilafa*, historically understood as the Sunni political institution of the caliphate. Bringing the meaning of *khilafa* back to its original Qur'anic usage, in which it is defined as trusteeship, she argues that it is the solemn duty of every human being, as trustee of God, to establish social justice on the Earth, thereby fulfilling her/his divinely sanctioned purpose. Hagar is the final paradigm that Wadud elaborates upon. What makes this figure so compelling for Wadud, and for womanist theologians in general, is the way in which Hagar eloquently captures the complexity of suffering, marginalized on the basis of class, race and gender. Drawing on her own experience as a single, working mother, Wadud sees in the example of Hagar, who was abandoned in the desert and forced to provide for her child in the face of overwhelming odds, an inspirational model of struggle for Muslim women today, especially African American Muslim women.

Indeed, as the Hagar paradigm suggests, Wadud has a comprehensive commitment to justice. Because she has been excluded from liberationist discourses – whether as a woman in androcentric struggles based purely on class or race, and thus

exhibiting little awareness of how such social categories are inescapably gendered or, conversely, as a poor Black woman in feminist struggles spearheaded by affluent White women – she has an acute sense of the multifaceted nature of oppression. In a strikingly similar fashion to Esack and Engineer, she integrates critical questions of race, class and religious pluralism into her thinking. While Wadud’s discourse on race draws upon her lived experiences as a Black woman growing up in a White supremacist society, she is also highly critical of race relations amongst American Muslims, criticizing the privilege of Arab and South Asian immigrant Muslims, whose superior socioeconomic standing has allowed them to monopolize leadership and representational roles within the community. Embracing religious pluralism, Wadud acknowledges the plurality of divine disclosure and argues that Muslims constitute one of numerous recipients of revelation. The bulk of her writings on pluralism, however, focus on internal Muslim dynamics, criticizing the marginalization of alternative, reformist voices and defending the right to religious freedom. Like gender and race, the experience of poverty, particularly during her childhood years, has had a lasting impact on her Qur’anic hermeneutic. Reiterating her emphasis on piety as the chief criterion of human worth, she argues that God, as a fundamentally just deity, does not differentiate between humankind on the basis of wealth. At a global level, however, Wadud’s discourse on poverty is problematic, for at the same time as she condemns the devastating economic inequalities created by capitalism, she concludes that such disparity can somehow be dismantled without a systematic redistribution of global wealth, without “depriving the well to do from experiencing extreme luxury and privilege.”²²⁸ Here, she is at variance with Esack and Engineer, for whom global socioeconomic justice must entail precisely such a far-

²²⁸ Ibid, 267.

reaching redistribution of resources. But the most crucial aspect of a comprehensive approach to justice, for Wadud, is ‘walking the walk:’ that is, living out these progressive values in one’s personal life, thereby collapsing the public and private spheres. And the family is the most important space wherein such commitments need to be actualized. Indeed, it is hypocritical to support women’s rights in public while being complicit in patriarchal practices in one’s own household. A genuine commitment to justice, then, must forcefully transcend discourse, impacting one’s most intimate relationships.

CHAPTER 4:

The Reading of Asma Barlas

Muhammad is not the father of any of your men,
but he is the Apostle of God and the Seal of the Prophets.

(Q. 33:40)

I cannot not see politics everywhere.¹

(Asma Barlas)

Introduction

This chapter is devoted to the Qur’anic exegesis of the Pakistani intellectual Asma Barlas. The first section will explore her interpretive methodology. Like Esack, Engineer and Wadud, she privileges the Qur’an over other Islamic texts, such as the *hadith* and the *shari’a*. Barlas reads scripture in multiple ways, and this section will systematically outline the hermeneutical strategies that she employs. In so doing, I will show a key similarity between Barlas’ and Wadud’s methodologies: namely, their usage of historical criticism and textual holism as liberating modes of reading. I will then unpack Barlas’ gendered exegesis. Like Wadud, she seeks to demonstrate how the Qur’an can be interpreted to further the struggle for sexual equality. However, while the works of these exegetes tend to be conflated, as if they are simply doing ‘the same thing,’ I argue that they are actually engaged in substantively different projects, for whereas Wadud undertakes a study of woman in the Qur’an, Barlas interrogates the relationship between the text and patriarchy. That is, while the former explores the Qur’an’s representations of

¹ A. Barlas Interview, 2009.

women, from the Creation Story to the Hereafter, the latter makes a case for the anti-patriarchal basis of Muslim scripture, claiming that it is at variance with both ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ understandings of patriarchy. *Tawhid*, the unity of God, is the most important theological paradigm that Barlas draws upon in this exegetical endeavour. That Wadud, as we have seen in the preceding chapter, also expounds the social and political implications of Islamic monotheism is significant, reflecting the centrality of this paradigm in women’s readings of the Qur’an. The final part of this chapter will show that Barlas, in a strikingly similar fashion to all the commentators considered in this thesis, has an utterly holistic stance towards justice, reflecting not only on gender but also on class and empire, race and religious pluralism. This comprehensive approach to liberation, I argue, stems from her engagement in ‘double critique,’ or her commitment to speak truth to power in both Muslim and non-Muslim Western contexts. This chapter will first set the stage for discussion by providing a brief history of Pakistan and a biographical sketch of Barlas.

Historical Context

Conceived as a ‘Muslim homeland’ in South Asia, Pakistan has been ruled by military regimes for most of its history. The entry of the English into India, as we have already discussed in the second chapter on Engineer, was primarily an economic one, headed by the East India Company in the 1600s. The Indian Revolt of 1857, however, effected a critical shift in colonial policy from the indirect imperialism of the Company to the overt political rule of the Crown, lasting until independence in 1947. Over the course of the Indian liberation struggle, Muslim leaders such as Muhammad Ali Jinnah (d. 1948) and Muhammad Iqbal (d. 1938) became increasingly anxious about the future of the

Muslim community in what would inevitably become a Hindu-dominated state.² This concern led them to call for the creation of a Muslim homeland. As a result, when the British were forced to pull out in 1947, two sibling states came into existence: India and Pakistan.³ While a Muslim homeland had successfully been established, however, Pakistan did not last long as a functioning, democratic society. Politically fragmented, the country was swept in 1958 by a military coup headed by General Ayub Khan (r. 1958-1969). The army has dominated the political scene ever since.⁴ Though civilian rule was restored for a brief spell under the socialist prime minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (r. 1973-77), another coup took place in 1979, bringing General Zia ul-Haq (r. 1979-1988) to power. In addition to denationalizing and deregulating the economy, Zia called for the ‘Islamization’ of the Pakistani state. Indeed, he radically revamped the national myth of Pakistan’s creation from being a “Muslim homeland” to an “Islamic state,”⁵ reflecting his acutely conservative religious sensibilities. The authoritarian process of state-sponsored Islamization, which adopted a Wahhabi and thus literalist approach to Islam, had a deeply divisive impact on Pakistan’s heterogeneous religious landscape,⁶ exacerbating sectarian

² John L. Esposito, *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 64.

³ There is a vast literature on the origins of communal politics, the Pakistan movement and Partition. See, among others: Akbar Ahmed, *Jinnah, Pakistan and Islamic Identity: The Search for Saladin* (London: Routledge, 1997); Ayesha Jalal, *The Sole Spokesman: Jinnah, the Muslim League and the Demand for Pakistan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Ian Talbot and Gurharpal Singh, *The Partition of India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Mushirul Hasan, *India’s Partition: Process, Strategy and Mobilization* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994); and Yasmin Khan, *The Great Partition: The Making of India and Pakistan* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008). For two useful historical surveys of Pakistan, see Ian Talbot, *Pakistan: A Modern History* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998) and Muhammad R. Kazimi, *A Concise History of Pakistan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

⁴ With regard to the military’s role in Pakistani history and politics, see Ayesha Jalal, *The State of Martial Rule: The Origins of Pakistan’s Political Economy of Defence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Hasan-Askari Rizvi, *Military, State and Society in Pakistan* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000); and Yunan Samad, *The Pakistan-US Conundrum: Jihadists, the Military and the People: The Struggle for Control* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

⁵ Talbot, 5.

⁶ This process of homogenization is one that continues today, particularly in the ‘talibanization’ of Pakistan’s North-West Frontier Province (NWFP). For a rich ethnographic study of the great diversity of Muslim practices in NWFP, specifically in the city of Chitral, and the rising religious tensions between

tensions not only between Sunnis and Shi‘as but also amongst Sunnis of different shades, especially between Sufi-oriented Barelvis and puritanical Deobandis.⁷ Zia’s policy of Islamization manifested itself not only in domestic politics but also on the international level, most notably in his support for the Afghan Mujahidin – a militant resistance movement that emerged in response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. Zia’s backing of the Mujahidin, moreover, reflects a close nexus between Pakistan and the US, which bankrolled the Afghan struggle against Soviet communism. It is important to note, however, that the alliance between Pakistan and the US is hardly distinct to Zia’s regime and can, in fact, be traced all the way back to the first coup in 1958. Following the takeover, Khan gave the US, in particular Harvard University and the Ford Foundation, control over Pakistan’s economic policies – a disastrous move that has effectively “concentrated 80% of the national wealth in the hands of a mere twenty-two families.”⁸

In Pakistan’s history, therefore, there has been an enduring relationship between domestic dictatorship and the US, and one that has continued through the 2000s, as evidenced by American support for General Pervez Musharraf (r. 2001-08).

them, see Magnus Marsden, *Living Islam: Muslim Religious Experience in Pakistan’s North-West Frontier* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

⁷ Talbot, 251. The Barelvis and Deobandis represent two opposite poles of the vast interpretive spectrum of Sunni Islam in South Asia. Taking their name from Sheikh Ahmed Barelvi (d. 1921) – an Islamic scholar who was a Sufi and an ardent critic of Wahhabism – the Barelvis adhere to a mystical practice of Islam. In contrast to the Barelvis, the Deobandis reflect a much more literalist approach. Taking their name from a *madrassa* founded in 1867, Dar al-‘Ulum Deoband (based, as its name suggests, in a town called Deoband), they condemn Sufi and Shi‘a practices as being ‘un-Islamic,’ calling for a return to the Qur’an and *sunna*.

⁸ Asma Barlas, *Democracy, Nationalism and Communalism: The Colonial Legacy in South Asia* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1995), 13. For the devastating impact of US aid and liberalization policies on Pakistan’s economy and society, see Jayatilleke S. Bandara, Prema-chandra Athukorala and Saman Kelegama eds., *Trade Liberalisation and Poverty in South Asia* (London: Routledge, 2011), in particular Chapter Eight – “Pakistan” – by Rehana Siddiqui; Masooda Bano, *Breakdown in Pakistan: How Aid is Eroding Institutions of Collective Action in Pakistan* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012); and Muhammad Shoaib Butt and Jayatilleke S. Bandara, *Trade Liberalization and Regional Disparity in Pakistan* (London: Routledge, 2009).

Raised in Pakistan, Barlas was forced to flee the country during Zia's rule and has made the US her home ever since, thus suggesting the important (and rather paradoxical) role that the US has played both as a major force in domestic Pakistani politics and as a principal point of emigration for the Pakistani diaspora. Barlas was born on 10 March 1950 in Lahore. Her early childhood coincided with the transformation of Pakistan from a civilian government to a military state: she was eight years old when Khan seized control.⁹ Barlas' parents were socially privileged, coming from military households and studying in elite Western institutions. Her father attended Forman Christian College (est. 1864) and her mother Kinnaird College for Women (est. 1913), thereby becoming one of the first Pakistani women to earn a graduate degree.¹⁰ Barlas would follow in the footsteps of her mother by enrolling in Kinnaird, receiving a bachelor's degree in English literature and philosophy and later a master's degree in journalism.¹¹ Upon completing her studies, she joined the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as a diplomat. By this time, Zia had taken power and was aggressively implementing his Islamization programs. Barlas became a staunch critic of the regime, openly voicing her grievances with its authoritarian policies. This led to Zia terminating her career in the foreign service and persecuting her family.¹² After a brief stint as an assistant editor of *The Muslim* – an oppositional newspaper – she was eventually forced to leave Pakistan in 1983, seeking political asylum in the US. Although Barlas arrived in America as an exile, and thus not in search of upward social mobility, her example is representative of a wider migration of Muslims from Asia, Africa and the Middle East to the US in the second half of the

⁹ A. Barlas Interview, 2009.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

twentieth century – a mass movement made possible by the passage of the Hart-Cellar Act (1965), which lifted the racist quotas of earlier American legislation restricting immigration to predominantly White countries.¹³ Barlas continued her graduate studies in the US, receiving an M.A. and Ph.D. in International Studies at the University of Denver in Colorado. Clearly conditioned by her experiences in Pakistan, her doctoral dissertation was a Marxist analysis of Muslim and Hindu politics in late British India, seeking to understand why Pakistan and India had taken such different paths – the former becoming a military dictatorship, the latter a functioning democracy – despite their shared colonial past.¹⁴ Upon completing her Ph.D., Barlas joined the Department of Politics at Ithaca College in New York State. She is currently a professor at Ithaca College, as well as the director of the college's Centre for the Study of Culture, Race, and Ethnicity. Her educational and professional trajectory is significant for two reasons. Firstly, like Wadud and unlike Esack and Engineer, Barlas has no traditional background in Islamic studies. Paralleling the educational paths of numerous Muslim intellectuals in the contemporary period, particularly women, she has been schooled solely within the secular university. However, unlike Wadud, who as we saw earlier received a doctorate in Islamic studies from the University of Michigan, Barlas never studied religion academically. Rather, her training lies in politics and postcolonial theory, journalism and English literature. She is thus representative of an entirely different wave of Muslim thinkers, trained in diverse fields like education, engineering and medicine, who are shaping Islamic discourse and, in so doing, challenging the authority of the *'ulama*.¹⁵

¹³ Curtis, 72.

¹⁴ Barlas, *Democracy, Nationalism and Communalism*, 1.

¹⁵ Eickelman and Piscatori, *Muslim Politics*, 131.

Methodology

The Primacy of the Word

Just as for the other exegetes studied in this thesis, the Qur'an stands at the centre of Barlas' Islamic discourse. Because the Qur'an, according to Muslim belief, reflects the actual speech of God, it is "inimitable, inviolate, inerrant, and incontrovertible."¹⁶ It is this text, therefore, that ought to act as the authoritative point of departure for all Islamic thought and practice. As she eloquently phrased it in our interview:

I think the Qur'an is the starting point and the ending point. Just like the Names of God: God is the First and God is the Last. So if the Qur'an is God's Word, then it is the First and it is the Last. It has to provide the framework, the yardstick, the touchstone in terms of which we formulate law or norms or anything else.¹⁷

In her emphasis on the Qur'an as the "framework" and "yardstick" for (re)understanding Islam, Barlas echoes the text's own self-description. *Al-Furqan* – literally, 'the Criterion' or 'the Distinguisher' – is one of the many names that the Qur'an uses to refer to itself (Q. 25:1), underscoring its express purpose as a book of guidance that will allow the believers to discern right from wrong, truth from falsehood.¹⁸ Like Wadud,¹⁹ Barlas criticizes the conflation of the Qur'an with its historical exegesis,²⁰ which elevates human – or, to be more precise, male – interpretation with scripture. So while the Qur'an, as the Word, is "incontrovertible," its earthly exposition is not.²¹ In fact, she observes keenly, the Qur'an makes a critical distinction between itself and its interpretation, warning those

¹⁶ Barlas, "Believing Women," 33.

¹⁷ A. Barlas Interview, 2009. On the Names of God, cf. fn. 90 on pg. 171 in this thesis.

¹⁸ Siddiqui, 63. As Siddiqui goes on to note, the term *furqan* is also used in the Qur'an to describe the Old and New Testaments (Q. 2:53, 3:3-4, 21:48), suggesting that it is the function of revelation, irrespective of the specific scripture in question, to act as a standard of ethical conduct for the faithful.

¹⁹ Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, xxi-xxii.

²⁰ Barlas, "Believing Women" in Islam, 38-39.

²¹ Ibid, 33.

“who write the Book with their own hands and say: ‘This is from God.’” (Q. 2:79)²² To be sure, this verse is usually understood as addressing the *Ahl al-Kitab* (literally, ‘the People of the Book,’ referring to earlier monotheistic communities, including Jews, Christians and Zoroastrians), who, as the verse goes on to state, would forge scripture in order to ‘sell it for a small profit.’ But on a conceptual level, comments Barlas, this verse can be read as a severe criticism of those who collapse divine discourse with its fallible, human exposition.²³ Furthermore, the equation of human interpretation with the Word has deeply problematic theological implications, as it entails, to use her own words, “erasing the distinction between God and humans.”²⁴ To conflate the texts, then, is also to conflate the *authors* of the texts – that is, to elevate humans to the level of God – thus impinging upon divine sovereignty.

Barlas is largely dismissive of the *hadith* literature, criticizing the elevation of prophetic practice alongside the Qur’an. As we have already discussed in this thesis, in mainstream Islam the *sunna* is approached as being on a par with the Qur’an, as also being a form of divine inspiration.²⁵ Barlas has deep-seated grievances with this understanding of the *sunna* not only because of the unique status of the Qur’an as the direct Word of God, but also due to the questionable reliability of the *hadith*, which began to be collected over a century after the Prophet’s death.²⁶ Like Esack, Engineer and Wadud, Barlas is therefore highly sceptical about the authenticity of this body of

²² Ibid, 17.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid, 79.

²⁵ Von Denffer, 18-19. This conflation of the authority of the *sunna* with the Qur’an has deep roots in Islamic history, going back to the classical period. Cf. pg. 101-102 in this dissertation. The jurist Muhammad ibn Idris al-Shafi‘i (d. 820) is generally credited as being the principal architect behind this approach to the *sunna*. See Majid Khadduri, *Islamic Jurisprudence: Shafi‘i’s Risala* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1961).

²⁶ Barlas, “*Believing Women*” in *Islam*, 42.

knowledge. Moreover, she charges the *hadith* with misogyny, portraying women as being ethically and spiritually lacking; intellectually deficient; and constituting the majority of the inhabitants of Hell, as punishment for being ungrateful to their husbands.²⁷ Citing Q. 3:79, Barlas argues that the Qur'an squarely positions the authority of God's Word over those of the prophets.²⁸ The passage reads:

It does not behove any human that God should give him the Book, judgement and prophecy, and then he should say to the people, 'Be my servants instead of God's.' Rather (he would say): 'Be a godly people, because of your teaching of the Book and because of your studying it.'

This verse is significant for two reasons. Firstly, it states clearly that God stands at the core of the Muslim faith and not God's messengers, themselves being devout servants commissioned with the solemn task of prophecy. Secondly, and by extension, it is God's words that take centre-stage, with the prophets calling on their people to become 'godly' by teaching and studying 'the Book,' or God's speech rather than their own. That being said, it is important to note that while Barlas takes issue with the *hadith* literature, her critique is not a categorical one. For the problem is not with the *hadith per se*, but rather with the selective privileging and mass circulation of a handful of reports that are blatantly anti-women. Indeed, she notes that there are only six misogynistic reports that are deemed 'reliable' (*sahih*) and, conversely, that there are markedly egalitarian sayings

that emphasize women's full humanity; counsel husbands to deal kindly and justly with their wives; confirm the right of women to acquire knowledge; elevate mothers over fathers...and record that the Prophet accepted the evidence of one woman over that of a man.²⁹

²⁷ Ibid, 45. Barlas does not provide any citations (*hadith* collection and chapter) or authenticity rankings when mentioning these reports, indicating her lack of systematic treatment of the *hadith* literature and extra-Qur'anic sources in general – an aspect of her writings that will be discussed later in this chapter.

²⁸ Ibid, 123.

²⁹ Ibid, 46. Here, Barlas draws upon the scholarship of the Moroccan scholar Fatima Mernissi, a pioneering figure in Islamic feminism. For an important reappraisal of the Prophet's legacy through the lens of gender justice, see Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite*. While Barlas consults Mernissi's work – and thus secondary literature on the *hadith* – she does not, as noted in fn. 27 in this chapter, make any direct references to the *hadith* corpus itself. She fails to specify and cite which "six misogynistic *ahadith*" (plural

The underlying problem with the *hadith* literature, then, is not only that it is used to interpret the Qur'an rather than the other way around – that is, using the Qur'an as the definitive criterion by which to read and evaluate prophetic practice³⁰ – but also that those reports that do uphold sexual justice remain unknown to most Muslims.

Her discourse on the legal tradition is less nuanced, however. In the preceding chapter we saw that Wadud, in the spirit of pragmatism, has become increasingly inclined towards engaging the *shari'a*, arguing that Islamic law needs to be reinterpreted in the present time and in accordance with Qur'anic values.³¹ Barlas seems to have moved in the opposite direction. While her Commentary – *Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an* (2002) – called for the necessity to rethink Islamic juristic principles in light of the Qur'an's teachings,³² she has since become disenchanted with the prospects of reforming the *shari'a*. When I interviewed Barlas in 2009, she articulated her new platform in sharp and unambiguous terms:

But clearly as it [the *shari'a*] exists: No, there's no point in salvaging it. What's the point of salvaging something that is not just patriarchal but downright misogynistic and un-Qur'anic? What's the point? I don't understand.³³ [My parentheses]

I then raised the question of pragmatism, pointing out that several Muslim feminists, acknowledging the legitimacy that the *shari'a* wields amongst mainstream Muslims, have called for a critical engagement with it on strategic grounds. To this she replied:

I don't know what to say to that. I understand the importance of pragmatism, but for me things are not always about strategy. They are about principle. And principles and strategies may or may not always cohere.³⁴

of *hadith*) are considered reliable or, for that matter, which gender-egalitarian reports are being alluded to in the quoted passage above.

³⁰ Barlas, *“Believing Women” in Islam*. 123.

³¹ Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 205.

³² Barlas, *“Believing Women” in Islam*, 75.

³³ A. Barlas Interview, 2009.

³⁴ Ibid.

The legal tradition, therefore, is simply too sexist and unjust to sustain any serious, systematic attempts at reform. In addition to legalizing gender inequality, she laments, the *shari‘a* fails to differentiate between premarital sex, adultery and rape, taking pregnancy as evidence of voluntary extramarital relations.³⁵ This has resulted in raped women being doubly wronged, first by the rapist and then by the court, as the *shari‘a* prescribes stoning to death for adultery – a capital punishment that, she notes, has no basis in scripture.³⁶ While Barlas’ grievances with the *shari‘a* are well founded, she ultimately fails to distinguish between the theory of Islamic law and its practice. In many cases the latter has little to no relationship with the former. For example, the Maliki school of law is the only school that takes pregnancy in an unmarried woman as proof of voluntary extramarital relations, while the other schools find pregnancy to be insufficient as evidence.³⁷ It is important to note here that Barlas’ criticism of the *shari‘a* should not be read as a sweeping dismissal of the entire intellectual tradition, which is often reduced to its legal expression. As we shall see later on in this chapter, when discussing religious pluralism she draws upon the writings of two towering figures in medieval Islamic theology and mysticism: the Persian theologian Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 1111) and the Andalusian Sufi Muhyiddin ibn ‘Arabi (d. 1240), respectively.³⁸

³⁵ Barlas, *Islam, Muslims, and the US*, 78-79.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam*, 63. For a wider discussion of *zina* (illicit sexual relations) in the legal tradition, see Chapter Four: “Prohibited Acts and Forbidden Partners: Illicit Sex in Islamic Jurisprudence.” On the Qur’an and *zina*, cf. pg. 103-104 in this thesis.

³⁸ Asma Barlas, “Reviving Islamic Universalism: East/s, West/s, and Coexistence,” in *Contemporary Islam: Dynamic, not Static*, eds. Abdul Aziz Said, Mohammad Abu-Nimr, and Meena Sharify-Funk (London: Routledge, 2006), 247-248.

How to Read the Qur'an: Hermeneutical Strategies

According to Barlas, the task of interpretation is open to all. Indeed, the Qur'an mandates each and every Muslim, irrespective of gender affiliation or scholarly expertise, to read and reflect upon its words. For just as Muhammad – an unlettered prophet – was commanded to 'Read!' (Q. 95:1-5) so, too, are all believers "equal inheritors of his legacy of reading."³⁹ Despite the fact that the overwhelming majority of Islamic scholars are men, such stark gender asymmetry in religious learning has no scriptural basis, as the Qur'an does not ascribe to males "any sort of epistemic privilege."⁴⁰ In fact, Barlas adds, the text launches a scathing critique of religious officials who, blinded by greed, have misled their people (Q. 9:31, 9:34).⁴¹ Muslims, therefore, have to rely upon their own '*aql*' (insight and intelligence), rather than on a sanctified class of interpreters, in making sense of the Qur'an. Mastery of classical Arabic, moreover, is unnecessary to qualify a believer to interpret scripture. Though the Qur'an was revealed in Arabic, she argues, this language is not endowed with any type of sacred status, for God's choice of Arabic was a purely practical one, seeking to communicate clearly to the seventh-century Arabs by using their own tongue.⁴² It is worthwhile noting here that Barlas herself does not know Arabic – which is unsurprising given her educational background in politics, journalism and English literature – and developed her understanding of the Qur'an through the study of English translations, particularly those of Abdullah Yusuf Ali, Muhammad Dawud and

³⁹ Asma Barlas, "The Qur'an and Hermeneutics: Reading the Qur'an's Opposition to Patriarchy," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 3, (2001): 33.

⁴⁰ Barlas, *Islam, Muslims, and the US*, 130.

⁴¹ Barlas, "*Believing Women*" in *Islam*, 121. Barlas comments that while these verses explicitly refer to Christian and Jewish priests, there is a larger lesson to be learnt here – specifically, the historic nexus between priesthood and corruption – suggesting that it is precisely for this reason that the Qur'an refused to sanction a priestly class.

⁴² *Ibid*, 17.

Muhammad Asad.⁴³ In her Qur’anic commentary, she relies almost entirely upon Ali’s translation. So translations, notwithstanding their inability to capture the complexity, the richness of the Word in its totality, are a completely legitimate means with which to engage scripture.⁴⁴ For not only does the Qur’an not sanctify Arabic, but it never suggests that it is “the only language in which we can understand revelation.”⁴⁵ Barlas, as the Islamic scholar Julianne Hammer has observed, thus stands apart from Wadud, for although Wadud also rejects the sacredness of Arabic, she is schooled in classical Arabic and draws upon these linguistic skills extensively when interpreting the text.⁴⁶ Barlas’ lack of knowledge in Arabic also distinguishes her from Esack and Engineer, who received training in classical Arabic.

If the task of interpretation is the vocation of all Muslims, how exactly ought the Qur’an to be read? A hermeneutical commitment to scriptural *unity* – or reading the text in a thoroughly holistic manner – is a major interpretive strategy that Barlas employs. Paralleling Wadud, she argues that the Qur’an cannot be approached in a selective, piecemeal fashion but rather, treating the text as an interconnected and organic whole, must be read intratextually.⁴⁷ That is, any passage within the text ought to be approached as just that – a passage *within* the text – and, thus, must be interpreted in light of this wider text. An underlying problem with mainstream interpretations of scripture, Barlas writes, is that they fixate on a few scattered verses, even words, especially when making

⁴³ A. Barlas Interview, 2009. See Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur’an: Text, Translation and Commentary*, 2nd US ed. (New York: Tahrike Tarsile Qur’an, 1988); N.J. Dawood, *The Koran* 7th rev. ed. (London: Penguin Books, 2000); and Asad, *The Message of the Qur’an*.

⁴⁴ As we have seen in the receptions section of the introductory chapter, the lack of mastery in classical Arabic is a key critique that conservative Islamic scholars have levelled against women’s exegesis of the Qur’an, despite Wadud’s training in Arabic.

⁴⁵ Barlas, “*Believing Women*” in *Islam*, 17.

⁴⁶ Hammer, “Identity, Authority, and Activism,” 452.

⁴⁷ Barlas, “Amina Wadud’s Hermeneutics of the Qur’an,” 109.

claims of male superiority over women.⁴⁸ As we have seen in the previous chapter, this was a key criticism that Rahman levelled against traditional exegesis, which provided a verse-by-verse, cover-to-cover commentary. Such “atomistic” readings, Rahman argued, rendered the interpreter blind to the text’s larger worldview.⁴⁹ And it is precisely this worldview that enables the exegete to discern the Qur’an’s general principles from its particulars,⁵⁰ the former applicable to all times and places and the latter historically bound. Furthermore, Barlas locates this reading strategy within scripture itself, which castigates those who “have made the Qur’an into shreds” (Q. 15:91) – a charge, incidentally, also made against the ancient Israelites, who reduced their scripture “into separate sheets for show,” hiding the bulk of its contents (Q. 6:91) – while praising those who proclaim: “We believe in the Book; the whole of it is from our Lord.” (Q. 3:7)⁵¹ But the Qur’an is not the only source that she cites in making a case for holistic readings. At various places in her exegesis Barlas points to the hermeneutical writings of the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur (d. 2005).⁵² According to Ricoeur, a text is by its very nature interconnected, exhibiting a worldview greater than the sum of its constituent parts:

...a text has to be construed because it is not a mere sequence of sentences, all on equal footing and separately understandable. A text is a whole, a totality... This intention [of the text] is something other than the sum of the individual meanings of the individual sentences. A text is more than a linear succession of sentences. It is a cumulative, holistic process.⁵³ [My parentheses]

⁴⁸ Asma Barlas, “Women’s Readings of the Qur’an,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur’an*, ed. Jane D. McAuliffe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 262-263. Here, Barlas gives the example of Q. 4:34, which will be quoted and discussed at length later in the chapter.

⁴⁹ Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, 2-3. The exact word that Rahman uses is *weltanschauung*, or a comprehensive view of the world and humankind’s relationship to it.

⁵⁰ Barlas, “*Believing Women*” in *Islam*, 60.

⁵¹ Barlas, “The Qur’an and Hermeneutics,” 24.

⁵² Barlas, “*Believing Women*” in *Islam*, 18, 35, 169.

⁵³ Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation*, edited and translated by John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 211-212.

By utilizing the interpretive insights of Ricoeur, Barlas' approach to the Qur'an reflects a broader trend in contemporary Islamic thought, particularly within European and North American universities, wherein Muslim intellectuals have drawn increasingly upon modern theories of hermeneutics and literary criticism.⁵⁴

In addition to intratextuality, she unpacks the Qur'an's extratextuality, or the place of the text in history. Scripture needs to be contextualized. Historical criticism – what Barlas calls reading *behind* the text – is a necessary interpretive strategy in any liberating commentary because although the Qur'an speaks to all times and places, it was revealed in a specific historical setting and, consequently, its language was shaped by this inescapable context. Reading behind the text, then, entails making “visible the historical contexts in which it was revealed and interpreted as a way of explaining its patriarchal exegesis.”⁵⁵ Like textual holism, the hermeneutical task of discerning timeless principles from historically bound particulars lies at the heart of her historical criticism.⁵⁶ Here, again, Barlas' commentary bears remarkable resemblance to Rahman's. As we have already discussed in this dissertation, historical criticism was an integral component of Rahman's double-movement theory. For in order to extract “general moral-social objectives” from the classical context, he argued, Muslims must undertake an exhaustive study of seventh-century Arabian society, including its culture and religion, politics and economics.⁵⁷ Echoing Wadud,⁵⁸ Barlas laments that it is precisely the failure to use historical criticism as a tool of interpretation that Muslims, rather than historicizing the

⁵⁴ Taji-Farouki, 14.

⁵⁵ Barlas, “Women's Readings of the Qur'an,” 268.

⁵⁶ Barlas, “*Believing Women*” in *Islam*, 60.

⁵⁷ Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, 6.

⁵⁸ Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, xii-xiii.

particular, have, instead, universalized the particular.⁵⁹ This problematic practice is, in large part, due to the tendency to idealize the world of the first Muslims. Indeed, this formative period, particularly the reign of the first four caliphs (r. 632-661) – referred to as ‘the Rightly-Guided Caliphs’ (*al-Khulafa’ al-Rashidun*) – has been sacralized in mainstream Muslim memory as a “golden, paradigmatic age,”⁶⁰ and thus one that is to be emulated by later generations of believers. This canonization of the classical period and, by extension, the commentaries that were composed in this time constitutes a curious paradox for Barlas, as it “serves to draw Muslims close to what is distant from us in real time and to distance us from that which, in real time, is close to us.”⁶¹

As this astute observation suggests, for Barlas the most important aspect of the Qur’an’s extratextuality is not a distant past but rather the immediate present. Like all the commentators considered in this thesis, her abiding interest is in the contemporary world, the lived reality of the interpreter. Reading behind the text, then, is necessary but insufficient for interpretation, as it must be paralleled by a concomitant commitment to “read in front of the text:” that is, to recontextualize the Qur’an’s teachings in the here and now.⁶² Yet again, we see Barlas’ deep intellectual debts to Rahman, and whom she explicitly cites,⁶³ for while the first move in Rahman’s double-movement theory entailed a historical reading, the second sought to apply the Qur’an’s teachings to the present – a complex process that required a comprehensive study of the contemporary context.⁶⁴

⁵⁹ Asma Barlas, “‘Holding Fast by the Best in the Precepts:’ the Qur’an and Method,” in *New Directions in Islamic Thought: Exploring Reform and Tradition* eds. Kari Vogt et al (London: I.B. Tauris, 2008), 18.

⁶⁰ Asma Afsaruddin, *The First Muslims: History and Memory* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2008), 54.

⁶¹ Barlas, “*Believing Women*” in *Islam*, 24.

⁶² Ibid, 23.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, 7.

Drawing upon an earlier insight of Wadud,⁶⁵ Barlas writes that in order “for divine disclosure to speak to us, we must also continue asking questions of it.”⁶⁶ Scripture, therefore, becomes meaningful only insofar as it can respond effectively to the needs of its reader. But since needs are not timeless but defined, and continuously redefined, by time and space, new readers rooted in new contexts must necessarily bring new questions to the text. To put it another way: so long as Muslims fail to raise such pertinent questions, the text will fail to answer them. Barlas’ emphasis on reading ‘in front’ of the Qur’an is arguably the most subversive strategy in her exegetical toolbox, as it holds the greatest potential to fundamentally alter received understandings of Islam. As she puts it:

The Qur’an tells us that everything will perish but the face of God (28:88, 55:26-7). Hence that is the only unchangeable in Islamic thought and practice – all else is changeable and will pass, whether we will it to or not. This certainty should free us from a “fear of freedom” and allow us to embrace a universe of unthought possibilities.⁶⁷

In addition to opening up infinite hermeneutical horizons, reading in light of the present is also unsettling because it makes visible the politics of interpretation, showing that a dominant reading is deemed authentic, even natural, not because it represents ‘Truth,’ but rather because its exegesis has been tailored to the needs of a privileged few, thereby answering certain questions and not others.

It is on this issue of asking new questions of the text that the first key paradigm emerges in Barlas’ exegesis: namely, that of Umm Salama (d. 680), the wife of Prophet Muhammad. As noted in the chapter on Esack, the Qur’an was not revealed at one go, but came down in stages over a period of twenty-three years, addressing various issues and

⁶⁵ Wadud, *Qur’an and Woman*, xx-xxi.

⁶⁶ Barlas, “Women’s Readings of the Qur’an,” 256.

⁶⁷ Barlas, “Holding Fast by the Best in the Precepts,” 22. Barlas’ usage of the phrase “fear of freedom” is taken from the Brazilian educational theorist, Paulo Freire (d. 1997). See Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. by Myra Bergman Ramos (London: Penguin Books, 1996).

problems that arose within the burgeoning Muslim community. Reflecting on the Qur'an, which was still in the process of being revealed, Umm Salama confronted her husband, stating: "O Prophet of God, I see that God mentions men but omits women."⁶⁸ It was at this point that the following verse – Q. 33:35 – was revealed:

Surely, men and women who have submitted themselves to God, men and women who are believers, men and women who are obedient, men and women who are true to their word, men and women who are patient in adversity, men and women who are modest, men and women who give charity, men and women who observe fasting, men and women who guard their private parts, and men and women who remember God unceasingly, for them God has prepared forgiveness and a great reward.

It is difficult to overstate the centrality of this verse in Barlas' hermeneutic. Indeed, the very title of her Commentary – *'Believing Women' in Islam* – is a loving tribute to this profound passage. That God responded to, rather than ignored, Umm Salama's grievances with the text represents, for Barlas, a crucial moment in "divine pedagogy," demonstrating to subsequent generations of Muslims the necessity of questioning, of interrogating the Qur'an as a mode of reading.⁶⁹ Approaching the text in such an engaged manner is especially important for women because they have been historically denied the right to ask questions, reflecting their own experiences and subjectivities, and, as a result, the Qur'an "appears to remain silent" on gender issues.⁷⁰ But just as scripture spoke to the anxiety of Umm Salama fourteen hundred years ago so, too, will it speak to the needs of believing women today. That Umm Salama had the space to interrogate the Qur'an so bluntly, moreover, suggests that while Islamic knowledge production has become a male-dominated enterprise, this was not always the case. As the historian Leila Ahmed has

⁶⁸ Esack, *The Qur'an: A User's Guide*, 53. For the original citation, see Badruddin Muhammad ibn 'Abd Allah al-Zarkashi, *Al-Burhan fi 'Ulum al-Qur'an* [The Definitive Proof in the Sciences of the Qur'an], Vol. 1 (Beirut: Dar al-Ma'rifa, 1972), 82-83.

⁶⁹ Barlas, "Holding Fast by the Best in the Precepts," 21. Barlas credits her husband, Ulises Ali Mejias, with this specific phrasing.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

shown, in the Prophet's time women participated actively in religious and political life, openly voicing their opinions with the expectation of being heard.⁷¹ The frankness of Umm Salama, therefore, was not the exception but the norm. Though Barlas is alone in focussing on Umm Salama and her spirit of enquiry as a hermeneutical model of reading the Qur'an, this paradigm shares similarities with Esack's and Wadud's approaches. As we have seen in the first chapter, Esack underscored the dialectical nature of Qur'anic revelation – or what he referred to as the principle of progressive revelation – reflecting a deity who “manifests His will in terms of the circumstances of His people, who speaks to them in terms of their reality and whose word is shaped by those realities.”⁷² While Esack did not make explicit reference to Umm Salama when discussing this principle, her critical reflection on the Qur'an is perhaps the most eloquent example of such revelatory dialectics. Barlas' usage of Umm Salama as paradigm also shares parallels with Wadud's hermeneutic, which, as we have discussed earlier, drew deep inspiration from Hagar, who embodied, for Wadud, the plight of the abandoned, single mother.⁷³ Central to women's readings of the Qur'an, then, has been the rediscovery, the reclaiming of earlier believing women, whether in the time of Muhammad or the preceding prophets, as models of faith.

At the same time as Barlas calls for interpreting the Qur'an in the here and now, highlighting the multitude of meanings that can emerge from such a contextual reading, she cautions that not all readings are equally legitimate. Citing Q. 7:145 and 39:18 – the latter adorning the front-cover of her Commentary – she points out that the Qur'an itself

⁷¹ Ahmed, 72.

⁷² Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation, and Pluralism*, 60.

⁷³ Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 144.

acknowledges that not all interpretations may be appropriate, instructing the faithful to seek out ‘the best’ meanings.⁷⁴ The verses read:

And We wrote down on the Tablets admonitions and clear explanations of all things for Moses, and We said, ‘Hold fast to them, and bid your people to hold on to what is best [*ahsaniha*] in them. (Q. 7:145)

Those who listen to the Word and follow the best [*ahsanahu*] in it, they are the ones whom God has guided, and it is they who possess intellect. (Q. 39:18)

When making a case for a particular hermeneutical strategy, whether it is textual unity, interpretation for the present or arriving at the best meanings, Barlas thus consistently positions herself *within* the text, foregrounding the scriptural basis of her approach. As such, her exegesis can best be described as an ‘autohermeneutics,’ or one that seeks to unearth the ways in which the Qur’an calls for its own interpretation – a reading strategy that we will revisit in the concluding chapter. While she argues that the task of the engaged commentator is to arrive at the best meanings, it is important to note that she, unlike Wadud, does not subscribe to notions of objectivity. In fact, as we discussed in the last chapter, this was a critique that Barlas levelled against Wadud, who problematically distinguished between ‘exegesis’ and ‘reading,’ claiming that the former was an objective undertaking based on scientific methods while the latter was subjective, conditioned by the biases of the reader.⁷⁵ Because all textual engagement is inescapably subjective, writes Barlas, it is up to the reader to decide which interpretation is the most suitable – ‘the best’ – given her/his specific circumstances.⁷⁶ It is this project of discernment, of figuring out which understandings of Islam can speak forcefully to the world today – and only today; the realities of the future may be radically different – that she refers to as

⁷⁴ Barlas, “Holding Fast by the Best in the Precepts,” 20.

⁷⁵ Barlas, “Amina Wadud’s Hermeneutics of the Qur’an,” 118.

⁷⁶ Barlas, “Holding Fast by the Best in the Precepts,” 20.

ijtihad,⁷⁷ traditionally defined as a legal convention in the *shari‘a*, wherein the jurist exercises independent judgement. Though Barlas derives this hermeneutical strategy from scripture, it is worthwhile noting that she has also been influenced by Ricoeur who, as we have just seen, shaped her stance on textual unity. According to Ricoeur, a “text is a limited field of constructions” and, thus, while all texts are open to interpretation, some interpretations are “more probable” than others.⁷⁸ Readings, then, need to be compared in order to determine which are the most persuasive. And it is social justice, argues Barlas, that ought to act as the chief criterion in evaluating competing interpretations. The best readings are those that work towards securing justice for God’s creation.⁷⁹ But how does she substantiate, scripturally, her positioning of social justice as the framework, the point of departure for arriving at the best meanings? It is here that we move to the next section, which unpacks the theology of justice that lies at the core of her commentary.

Qur’an and Gender I: Against Traditional Patriarchy

Reading Sexual Justice in the Sacred Text: A Different Approach

Barlas reflects extensively on the nature of the divine, and it is this critical reflection that forms the epistemological groundwork for her liberating hermeneutic. The commentaries of Wadud and Barlas tend to be lumped together, the latter often portrayed as simply rehashing the insights of the former. However, as I will show in the following sections, they are involved in substantively different (though complementary) exegetical projects. In the preceding chapter we saw that Wadud focuses on the subject of woman in Muslim scripture, thematically exploring topics like the Creation Story and the Events of

⁷⁷ Barlas, “Reviving Islamic Universalism,” 251.

⁷⁸ Ricoeur, 213.

⁷⁹ Barlas, “*Believing Women*” in *Islam*, 16.

the Garden, the Day of Judgement and the Hereafter, as well as gender issues such as divorce, polygamy and male authority. Barlas, on the other hand, is more interested in the concept of patriarchy and, specifically, its relationship to the Qur'an. And herein lies her original, lasting contribution to Muslim women's exegesis, as female commentators have failed to define systematically what they mean by the term patriarchy and, therefore, have not been able to appreciate fully the Qur'an's stances on this system of male privilege.⁸⁰ Indeed, Wadud devotes a two-page subsection to patriarchy, describing the patriarchal backdrop in which the text was revealed and noting that this historical context inevitably shaped its language.⁸¹ Barlas, after undertaking an in-depth study of the relationship between the Qur'an and patriarchy, puts forth two principal arguments: namely, that the text is at odds with both 'traditional' and 'modern' forms of patriarchy. She defines traditional patriarchy – its modern manifestation will be discussed shortly – as follows:

When I ask whether the Qur'an is a patriarchal or misogynistic text, I am asking whether it represents God as Father/male or teaches that God has a special relationship with males or that males embody divine attributes and that women are by nature weak, unclean or sinful. Further, does it teach that rule by the father/husband is divinely ordained and an earthly continuation of God's Rule, as religious and traditional patriarchies claim?⁸²

Theology, or how one conceptualizes God, therefore plays a pivotal role in Barlas' anti-patriarchal exegesis. There is an unbreakable bond between the divine and divine speech, between the *theological* and the *textual*. And it is precisely because "our understanding of God's word cannot be independent of our understanding of God," she concludes, that "we must seek the hermeneutic keys for reading the Qur'an in the nature of divine self-disclosure."⁸³ That is, how does God describe God's self? It is only after the exegete has

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 80-81.

⁸² Barlas, "*Believing Women*" in *Islam*, 1.

⁸³ Barlas, "Holding Fast by the Best in the Precepts," 19.

addressed this crucial question that s/he can then begin to interpret scripture, for a sound reading of the Qur'an must commence with a sound, theological conception of its author.⁸⁴ Here, in her emphasis on the intimate, inseparable connection between author and authored, Barlas clearly departs from Ricoeur. For a text, according to Ricoeur, is wholly independent of its author and takes on a life of its own,⁸⁵ an irreversible rupture that transpires at the very moment of the text's composition. As we shall see, this linking of the theological (God) and the textual (God's Word) has a lasting pay off for Barlas' gendered hermeneutic, enabling her to expound the text in light of a liberating theology.

The Infinite Justice of the One God

Justice is a key aspect of divine self-disclosure. Like all the commentators studied in this dissertation, Barlas is deeply committed to the belief in a compassionate and just Creator, observing that the Qur'an persistently negates any association of *zulm* (oppression) with God.⁸⁶ As the Japanese Islamic scholar Toshihiko Izutsu has noted, Qur'anic descriptions of God, which present this deity's "essentially ethical nature," are brought together in the scriptural trope of Divine Names, referring to God as 'the Benevolent' (*al-Rahman*), 'the Merciful' (*al-Rahim*) and 'the Forgiving' (*al-Ghaffar*), among others.⁸⁷ Reading the text for the best meanings must centre on recovering justice, then, because its author is utterly just.⁸⁸ Moreover, Barlas argues, the justice of God establishes the fundamental equality of men and women, as such a deity would never

⁸⁴ Barlas, "Women's Readings of the Qur'an," 261.

⁸⁵ Ricoeur, 211.

⁸⁶ Barlas, "Holding Fast by the Best in the Precepts," 19. While Barlas does not provide any Qur'anic citations when making this claim, there are a number of verses that explicitly deny God's association with oppression, such as Q. 4:40, 11:117 and 40:17.

⁸⁷ Izutsu, 17.

⁸⁸ Barlas, "*Believing Women*" in *Islam*, 16.

favour a specific sex. Citing Q. 33:35 – the ‘Believing Women’ verse, which we read earlier on when discussing the Umm Salama paradigm – she argues that “moral praxis” is the sole basis on which humankind will be judged, and that women and men are endowed equally with the ability to attain *taqwa*, or “God-consciousness.”⁸⁹ Barlas thus echoes Wadud who, as we saw in the last chapter, drew upon *taqwa* as an organizing, hermeneutical principle when arguing for the equality of the sexes (Q. 49:13).⁹⁰ But if God is inherently just, continues Barlas, then this has lasting implications in terms of how we approach scripture, for if “God never does *zulm* to anyone, then God’s speech (the Qur’an) also cannot teach *zulm* against anyone.”⁹¹ Conversely, reading oppression into the text associates oppression with its divine author, who is expressly described as just. Indeed, this constitutes one of the great contradictions of Islamic history, she laments, for at the same time as Muslims have believed in the justice of God they have continued to read patriarchy into this deity’s living words.⁹²

It is here, in discussing Barlas’ liberating theology, that we arrive at the single most important paradigm in her Islamic thinking: *tawhid*, the absolute unity of God. Monotheism, she comments, is a central theme running through the Qur’anic text, which states clearly and unequivocally that “Your God is One God” (Q. 16:22), even dedicating an entire chapter to this belief.⁹³ *Surat al-Tawhid*, or ‘the Chapter of Unity’ (Q. 112) is one of the shortest and most straightforward chapters in the text. It reads: ‘Say: “He is God, the One. God is the Eternal. He neither gave birth, nor was He given birth, and there is none comparable to Him.”’ And it is this aspect of divine self-disclosure that functions

⁸⁹ Barlas, “The Qur’an and Hermeneutics,” 25-26.

⁹⁰ Wadud, *Qur’an and Woman*, 36-37.

⁹¹ Barlas, “*Believing Women*” in *Islam*, 14.

⁹² *Ibid*, 204.

⁹³ *Ibid*, 95.

as the principal, hermeneutical key in Barlas' anti-patriarchal exegesis. For *tawhid* reflects the utter indivisibility of God's sovereignty, and therefore any human attempts to partake in this sovereignty undermines Islamic monotheism.⁹⁴ In terms of gender relations, she continues, this means that patriarchy – as a system that upholds male privilege, giving men sovereignty over women and setting up men as intermediaries between women and God – is at odds with divine sovereignty, with *tawhid*, and thus must be dismantled on Qur'anic grounds.⁹⁵ In her theological exposition of the gendered implications of *tawhid*, Barlas shares common ground with Wadud. To be sure, these two exegetes differ (albeit slightly) in how they reinterpret Islamic monotheism. Though Wadud also emphasizes the sovereignty, the transcendence of God, thereby problematizing male portrayals of God as having masculine qualities,⁹⁶ she makes a second hermeneutical move. In addition to expounding on the unity of God, Wadud, echoing the writings of Shari'ati,⁹⁷ reflects upon the unity of *humanity*, arguing that the Oneness of God must necessarily translate into the Oneness of humankind, undivided by “race, class, gender, religious tradition, national origin, sexual orientation or other arbitrary, voluntary, and involuntary aspects of human distinction.”⁹⁸ While Barlas may well support this interpretation, it is not one that figures in her hermeneutic; her primary interest with regard to *tawhid* is the indivisibility of God and the sexual ramifications of this sovereignty. That *tawhid* plays such a prominent role in both Wadud's and Barlas' thinking is significant, reflecting the centrality of this theological paradigm in women's readings of the Qur'an. In fact, monotheism has become so crucial to Islamic critiques of

⁹⁴ Ibid, 13.

⁹⁵ Ibid, 13-14.

⁹⁶ Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 81.

⁹⁷ Shari'ati, 3. For Shari'ati's exposition of *tawhid*, cf. pg. 69 in this thesis.

⁹⁸ Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 28.

patriarchy that Muslim women specialized in other traditions have also reinterpreted this foundational belief. The Lebanese-American feminist Azizah al-Hibri is a compelling case in point. Writing in the context of the *shari'a*, she argues that *tawhid* is “the core principle of Islamic jurisprudence,” establishing the supremacy of God and, by extension, “the fundamental metaphysical sameness of all humans as creatures of God.”⁹⁹ In order for legal rulings to comply conceptually with *tawhid*, therefore, they must treat men and women as fully equal human beings.

Our Father who art in Heaven

If God is One, if no other being can partake in divine sovereignty, then God is unparalleled, unmatched, unique. And it is this unrepresentability of God – the inability to compare this deity with humans, to portray the divine in anthropomorphic terms – that constitutes the third hermeneutical key, alongside divine justice and unity, with which Barlas rereads scripture.¹⁰⁰ Indeed, as the Qur’anic scholar Abdur Rashid Siddiqui has noted, while *Allah* literally means ‘the God’ (*al-ilah*) it also suggests the state of being hidden from vision, of lying beyond the boundaries of human comprehension (Q. 6:103; 42:11), forever perplexing and bewildering the believers.¹⁰¹ Yet despite the Qur’an’s description of God as being unrepresentable, Barlas bemoans, Muslims have drawn parallels between God and men, implying that God shares a special affinity with men, that God is, in fact, male. For example, the Persian scholar Shams al-Din Muhammad al-Tabrisi (d. 1248) commanded wives to bow down to their husbands, claiming that God’s

⁹⁹ Azizah Y. Al-Hibri, “An Introduction to Muslim Women’s Rights,” in *Windows of Faith: Muslim Women-Scholar Activists in North America* ed. Gisela Webb (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 51-52.

¹⁰⁰ Barlas, “*Believing Women*” in *Islam*, 14-15.

¹⁰¹ Siddiqui, 16-17.

dominion over humankind entailed men's dominion over women, while the South Asian scholar Ashraf Ali Thanawi (d. 1943) compared a wife's ingratitude to her husband with ingratitude to God.¹⁰² As the post-Christian feminist theologian Mary Daly has argued, the conceptualization of God as male, as exhibiting masculine characteristics plays a seminal role in legitimizing such unholy equations, for if "God is male, then the male is God."¹⁰³ But the Qur'an, interjects Barlas, squarely rejects representations of God as male and, specifically, as Father – a theological staple of traditional patriarchies. Once again, she turns to the 'Chapter of Unity' (*Surat al-Tawhid*): 'Say: "He is God, the One. God is the Eternal. He neither gave birth, and nor was He given birth, and there is none comparable to Him."' Not only does this Qur'anic chapter, Barlas comments, clearly establish God's utter unrepresentability ('there is none comparable to Him'), but it also defies portrayals of God as Father ('He neither gave birth') or Son ('nor was He given birth').¹⁰⁴ In fact, she continues, the Qur'an launched a scathing criticism of the Jews and Christians of seventh-century Arabia for portraying God as a father figure.¹⁰⁵

The Jews say, 'Ezra is the son of God,' and the Christians say, 'Christ is the son of God.' These are sayings that they utter with their mouths, following assertions made by unbelievers in earlier times. May God assail them! How perverted are their minds!"¹⁰⁶ (Q. 9:30)

¹⁰² Barlas, "The Qur'an and Hermeneutics," 22.

¹⁰³ Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), 19. The masculinization of God is an especially problematic practice in mainstream Christianity, given that the Old and New Testaments explicitly describe God as a father figure. The following passages are illustrative examples: "But now, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand." (Isaiah 64:8); "He shall cry to me, 'You are my Father, my God, and the Rock of my salvation.' And I will make him the firstborn, the highest of the kings of the Earth." (Psalms 89:26-27); "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in Heaven." (Matthew 5:14-16); "And Jesus said: 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.' And they cast lots to divide his garments." (Luke 23:34)

¹⁰⁴ Barlas, "The Qur'an and Hermeneutics," 27.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Indeed, the underlying theme in the Qur'an's discourse on Christianity and Jesus in particular is the denial that this prophet had any filial relationship to God, which is precisely why Jesus is routinely referred to as 'Jesus son of Mary' (*'isa ibn maryam*). See, for instance, Q. 4:171.

While the text vigorously disassociates God from being Father, there remains the thorny question of why the text continuously refers to God with the male pronoun ‘He’ (*huwa*)? Does this not reflect a glaring contradiction in the text? Barlas tackles this question by drawing upon historical criticism, highlighting the societal context in which the Qur’an was revealed. In particular, she points out that there is no neuter in Arabic grammar and that even inanimate objects are classified as being either masculine or feminine.¹⁰⁷ This is a *linguistic* feature distinct to the Arabic language, then, and cannot be used to engender God, especially in light of the Qur’an’s wider emphasis on divine unrepresentability.

But just as portraying God as paternalistic is problematic so, too, is the reverse representation: reclaiming God as a motherly figure. In the face of patriarchal projections of God the Father, feminists have sought to recover past theologies wherein God exhibits feminine qualities, as exemplified by the ‘Mother-God’ or ‘Goddess.’ The historian Leila Ahmed, for instance, has written that the ancient cultures of the Middle East prior to the Christian era, such as in Mesopotamia and Egypt, venerated goddesses, concluding that the “decline in women’s status was followed eventually by the decline of goddesses and the rise of supremacy of gods.”¹⁰⁸ Barlas takes issue with Ahmed’s linkage of goddess-worship with gender egalitarianism, countering that the public presence of goddesses and priestesses is not necessarily reflective of an equitable distribution of sexual power on the ground.¹⁰⁹ She gives the compelling example of the people of ancient Greece, who

in spite of strong female goddesses in their pantheon, believed that women were just lesser men who lacked the ability to reason. On this basis, they excluded women from public and political life and the rights extended to men.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 35.

¹⁰⁸ Ahmed, 12.

¹⁰⁹ Asma Barlas, “‘Texts, Sex, and States: A Critique of North African Discourses on Islam,” in *The Arab-African and Islamic Worlds: Interdisciplinary Studies*, eds. Kevin Lacey and Ralph Coury (New York: Peter Lang, 2000), 108-109.

¹¹⁰ Barlas, *Islam, Muslims, and the US*, 120.

Ahmed's historical account, then, is representative of a broader, essentialist tendency amongst feminists to romanticize the goddess-cult as inherently empowering for women. And insofar as the Qur'an is concerned, adds Barlas, not only is there no scriptural basis for God being a motherly or female figure – as we have seen, this is a deity that is beyond gender classification, literally or metaphorically – but the Qur'an also explicitly rejects ascriptions of either sons *or* daughters to God (Q. 6:100).¹¹¹ The text, therefore, rules out the possibility of this deity exhibiting any anthropomorphic qualities. As the Islamic scholars Kecia Ali and Oliver Leaman have noted, the Qur'an's denial of God as having daughters is in large part due to the existing, religious milieu in which the text was revealed, as goddesses – in particular Lat, 'Uzza and Manat, considered to be God's daughters (Q. 53:19-23)¹¹² – were a part of pre-Islamic Arabian theology.¹¹³

Fathers: Earthly Surrogates of God?

Not only does the Qur'an avoid portraying God as a heavenly patriarch but also, in its treatment of parenthood, refuses to privilege fathers over mothers. According to the Qur'an, Barlas points out, the main reason behind the Arabs' rejection of Muhammad's prophecy was their practice of blindly following in the footsteps of their fathers:¹¹⁴

When they are told, 'Follow what God has sent down,' they say, 'We will rather follow what we have found our fathers (*aba'ana*) following.' What, even if their fathers (*aba'uhum*) neither applied any reason nor were guided? (Q. 2:170)

¹¹¹ Barlas, "*Believing Women*" in *Islam*, 98.

¹¹² It is important to note here that the statement in this verse, "Are you to have males and He females? That, then, will be an unfair division" (cf. Appendix), is meant to be ironic, given the great shame that the pre-Islamic Arabs associated with the birth of daughters, leading them to bury their daughters alive – a practice that the Qur'an roundly condemns (Q. 16:58-59). See Asad, *The Message of the Qur'an*, 926-927.

¹¹³ Ali and Leaman, 43.

¹¹⁴ Barlas, "*Believing Women*" in *Islam*, 120.

While the obvious critique can be made here that Barlas' gendered reading of this verse translates the term *aba'ana* ('our fathers') literally, rather than using its wider, conceptual meaning ('our forefathers' or 'our ancestors'), her argument that this passage challenges patriarchal conventions remains persuasive. For unquestioning obedience – on the part of both men and women – to established norms, to existing configurations of power is a core aspect of patriarchal practice. Indeed, the Arabs equated what was normative (ethical) with whatever they found their forefathers doing, while the Qur'an introduced, as Izutsu aptly phrases it, "a new morality based on the absolute will of God." (Q. 2:170; 43:22-24).¹¹⁵ Furthermore, Barlas argues, the text's condemnation of the blatantly misogynistic tradition of female infanticide, or the pre-Islamic Arabian custom of burying newborn daughters alive (Q. 16:58-59; 81:8-9), undercuts father-right in traditional patriarchies: that is, the base assumption that the father exercises ownership over his children, who function as his personal property, permitting him to do whatever he wants with them.¹¹⁶ But the text, Barlas observes insightfully, not only refuses to ascribe to fathers "any real or symbolic privileges that it does not accord mothers,"¹¹⁷ but it actually elevates mothers over fathers. For instance, while the Qur'an states the importance of showing kindness and respect to one's parents, it singles out mothers in particular, expressing empathy for the pains of pregnancy and childbirth that the mother alone has to endure:¹¹⁸

We have enjoined the human being concerning his parents. His mother carried him through weakness upon weakness, and his weaning takes two years. Give thanks to Me and to your parents. To Me is the return. But if they urge you to ascribe to Me as partner that of which you have no knowledge, then do not obey them. Keep their company honourably in this world and follow the way of him who turns to Me

¹¹⁵ Izutsu, 45-46.

¹¹⁶ Barlas, "*Believing Women*" in *Islam*, 180-181.

¹¹⁷ Barlas, "The Qur'an and Hermeneutics," 31.

¹¹⁸ Barlas, "*Believing Women*" in *Islam*, 175. The Qur'an's sensitivity to the difficulties of childbearing is best captured in Jesus' birth, in which God, through a divine messenger, comforts Mary (Q. 19:22-26).

penitently. Then to Me will be your return, whereat I will inform you concerning what you used to do. (Q. 31:14-15)

As this passage shows, however, at the same time as children owe their parents respect, it is God's authority that constitutes the final word, trumping all other forms of allegiance. What differentiates one's relationship with God from that of one's parents, writes Barlas, is that the former is to be worshipped, and thus owed obedience, while the latter deserve courtesy, compassion, mercy (Q. 17:23-24).¹¹⁹ The rebellion of Prophet Abraham against his polytheist father, which we will examine below, is perhaps the most compelling example of a Qur'anic story that deftly draws out both teachings.

Prophetic Paradigms: Abraham and Muhammad

Abraham emerges as a central prophetic figure in Barlas' exegesis, exemplifying the Qur'an's emphasis on God's rule over father's rule. Abraham's break with his father is narrated in the following verses:

And mention in the Book: Abraham. He was a truthful one, a prophet. When he said to his father, 'O my father! Why do you worship that which neither hears nor sees, and is of no avail to you in any way? O my father! A knowledge has come to me that has not come to you. So follow me that I may guide you to a right path. O my father! Do not worship Satan. Indeed, Satan is disobedient to the all-Beneficent. O my father! I am afraid that a punishment from the all-Beneficent will befall you, and you will become Satan's accomplice.' He said, 'Abraham! Are you renouncing my gods? If you do not desist, I shall stone you. So go away from me for a while.' He said, 'Peace be on you! I shall plead with my Sustainer to forgive you. Indeed, he is gracious to me. I dissociate myself from you and whatever you invoke besides God. I will supplicate to my Sustainer. Hopefully, I will not be disappointed in supplicating to my Sustainer.' (Q. 19:41-48)

This seminal passage, comments Barlas, demonstrates that the Qur'an, by subverting the authority of Abraham's father, is at odds with the structuring of traditional patriarchies, which rest on the indisputable sovereignty of fathers.¹²⁰ Moreover, she hastens to clarify,

¹¹⁹ Ibid, 174.

¹²⁰ Barlas, "The Qur'an and Hermeneutics," 27-28.

these verses do not simply substitute the authority of disbelieving fathers with believing ones, but rather firmly establish the supremacy of God's rule, as evidenced further by the fact that while Abraham's prophetic descendants are praised in the text, neither he nor they are valorized *as* fathers.¹²¹ In sum, the very person who is routinely referred to, even celebrated, as 'the Great Patriarch' – a label that the Qur'an never uses – himself engaged in an acutely *anti*-patriarchal act: splitting with his own father. Even Esack, an outspoken advocate of gender justice, falls into the trap of paternalizing this prophet:

Abraham, mentioned sixty-nine times in the Qur'an, emerges as the common father of the people of the book with the Muslim community also being the children of this great patriarch.¹²²

On the contrary, Barlas writes, the Qur'an employs markedly gender-neutral language when describing Abraham: specifically, it uses the term *imam* (Q. 2:124),¹²³ referring to one who acts as a leader and spiritual guide of the people. It is important to note here that while *imam* is grammatically masculine (the feminine form would be *imama*) the term is, conceptually speaking, gender-neutral. This is clearly not the case with the word 'Father' – such as when Abraham states in the above passage: 'O my father' (*ya abati*) – which is both grammatically and conceptually masculine. While Barlas only discusses Abraham as *imam*, the text uses a number of titles to describe this prophetic figure, all of which are, significantly, gender-neutral. On various occasions, for example, Abraham is referred to, even by himself, as a *hanif* (Q. 3:67; 6:79; 16:120), denoting one who has abandoned

¹²¹ Barlas, "*Believing Women*" in *Islam*, 113.

¹²² Esack, *The Qur'an: A User's Guide*, 153.

¹²³ Barlas, "*Believing Women*" in *Islam*, 114-115. The term *imam* – literally, 'one who stands in front' – has taken on very different meanings in Sunni and Shi'a Islam. In the former, it refers to a prayer leader or, more generally, used as a title of respect when addressing an Islamic scholar, while in the latter it can refer either to a prayer leader, an Islamic scholar or, much more significantly, to one of the twelve divinely-appointed Imams (note the upper-case 'I'), starting with Imam Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of Prophet Muhammad, and ending with Imam Muhammad al-Mahdi, who remains in occultation.

everything in order to commit him or herself to God:¹²⁴ a devout monotheist. In addition to *hanif*, Abraham is venerated as *khalilullah*, or ‘the friend of God’ (Q. 4:125).¹²⁵

Just as Abraham is denied symbolic fatherhood, so is Muhammad, who is, in fact, denied not only symbolic but *real* fatherhood. This scriptural silence – that is, the absence of portrayals of the Prophet in distinctly paternalistic terms – speaks volumes for Barlas, affirming the Qur’an’s opposition to father-rule, to the consecration of fathers as earthly surrogates of God.¹²⁶ Q. 33:40 – ‘Muhammad is not the father of any of your men, but he is the Apostle of God and the Seal of the Prophets’ – is the most important passage that she draws upon in this respect. While Barlas acknowledges that the specific historical circumstances of this verse suggest that it sought to clarify Muhammad’s relationship to Zayd bin Haritha, his adopted son,¹²⁷ she argues that, on a deeper reading, this verse undercuts patriarchal representations of the Prophet as a symbolic father of the faithful.¹²⁸ Yet exegetes have continued to paternalize the prophet, reading fatherhood into this passage despite its categorical disavowal of Muhammad as any type of father figure. For example, the great English translator and commentator of the Qur’an, Muhammad Asad (d. 1992), asserts that this passage confirms the Prophet’s status as “the spiritual father of the whole community,” as opposed to a physical one, thereby refuting claims of lineal

¹²⁴ Siddiqui, 75.

¹²⁵ It is precisely because of this epithet that the Palestinian city of Hebron, wherein Abraham lived, is referred to in Arabic as *Khalil*.

¹²⁶ Barlas, “The Qur’an and Hermeneutics,” 30.

¹²⁷ Zayd was a child-slave purchased by Muhammad, who set him free and adopted him as his own son. Zayd would later marry Zaynab bint Jahsh. Their marriage, however, was a rocky one, eventually leading to divorce. The Prophet married Zaynab shortly afterwards. He became deeply worried, however, about what people might say. Q. 33:40 essentially underscored Muhammad’s adoption of Zayd, clarifying that the same marriage restrictions that apply to blood relatives do not hold for adopted / legal ones, as marriage to the former spouse of one’s biological child is forbidden. See Asad, 725.

¹²⁸ Barlas, “*Believing Women*” in *Islam*, 121.

descent as a sign of righteousness.¹²⁹ Asad falls into this trap yet again when translating Q. 33:6. His translation reads: “The Prophet has a higher claim on the believers than [they have on] their own selves, [seeing that he is as a father to them] and his wives are their mothers [*sic*].”¹³⁰ Asad is a useful barometer for gauging established, scholarly understandings of scripture, as he anchors his explanatory notes in the inherited, exegetical tradition. His parenthetical addition – “[seeing that he is as a father to them]” – is thus not putting forth his own original exposition, but rather echoing the opinions of earlier commentators, in particular Abu al-Qasim al-Zamakhshari (d. 1144) and Isma‘il ibn Kathir (d. 1372).¹³¹ But Muhammad, adds Barlas, is not only denied symbolic fatherhood, but also, as history has shown, real fatherhood:

Given that the Prophet is not sacralised as father, is it also a mere coincidence that he loses his father, Abdullah, in his own infancy, and all his sons in theirs; that only his daughters survive, at a time and in a place when people view girls as a curse?¹³²

Her discussion on how such aspects of Muhammad’s life are at variance with traditional patriarchy is an illustrative example of how she incorporates the *sira* (‘prophetic biography’) into her thinking, using historical accounts to complement her Qur’anic reading. Indeed, the Prophet’s personal lifestyle, Barlas observes, was surprisingly gender egalitarian – especially given the machismo of his times – partaking in household chores, such as preparing his own meals, and never physically or verbally abusing his wives.¹³³

This reference to prophetic biography is also revealing, however, because it indicates that Barlas’ engagement with extra-Qur’anic Islamic texts is unabashedly selective, anecdotal. Like Esack, Engineer and Wadud, when she draws upon other texts

¹²⁹ Asad, *The Message of the Qur’an*, 726.

¹³⁰ Ibid, 718.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Barlas, “*Believing Women*” in *Islam*, 122.

¹³³ Ibid, 125.

she does so in an unsystematic and utilitarian fashion, the ultimate criterion for judging the validity, the worth of these texts merely being whether their substantive content can supplement (her own reading of) the Qur'an. Thus, there is little interest in, or even appreciation for, the integrity of these sources as complex, discursive traditions in their own right, and with a rich legacy of interpretive engagement. Barlas' usage of the historic example of Umm Salama, in particular her questioning of the Qur'an as a hermeneutical model with which to seek new answers from the text, is another compelling case in point. For the 'Occasions of Revelation' (*asbab al-nuzul*) literature, which catalogue the various contexts in which Qur'anic verses were revealed, is part and parcel of the wider *hadith* corpus, and therefore is of doubtful authenticity. If we cannot be certain that Umm Salama questioned the text – this account may well be fabricated – why is her enquiry so crucial to Barlas' commentary, elevated to the level of a hermeneutical paradigm? Given Barlas' criticism of the *hadith* as a genre, her emphasis on Umm Salama betrays a lack of internal consistency in her exegesis.¹³⁴ In other words, at the same time as Barlas calls for a holistic reading of scripture, employing sophisticated reading strategies and accenting the text's underlying principles, she herself, paradoxically, partakes in an atomistic hermeneutic of picking-and-choosing when it comes to other Islamic texts and traditions.

Qur'an and Gender II: Against Modern Patriarchy

From Biological Sex to Politicized Gender

The Qur'an not only undermines traditional configurations of patriarchy, but also 'modern' understandings of the term. By modern patriarchy, Barlas refers to those

¹³⁴ In this sense, the Qur'an-only movement, which we discussed in the introductory chapter, is remarkably consistent in its methodology, categorically refusing to use extra-Qur'anic texts, regardless of whether their content corroborates scriptural teachings.

discourses and practices that justify gender inequality on the grounds that men and women have different biologies.¹³⁵ The central question that Barlas poses, then, is as follows: does the text politicize biological sex, prescribing specific social roles for men and women? Though the Qur'an, she concludes, "recognizes sexual *differences*, it does not propagate a view of sexual *differentiation*; that is to say, the Qur'an recognizes sexual specificity but does not assign it any gender symbolism."¹³⁶ To put it in simpler terms, the text does not depict males and females in terms of social characteristics – masculinity and femininity – outlining a normative, gendered division of labour. Paralleling Wadud's emphasis on *taqwa* ('piety') as the sole measure of human merit,¹³⁷ Barlas writes that the only type of differentiation that the Qur'an makes is "ethico-moral," and thus irrespective of one's anatomy.¹³⁸ In her hermeneutical emphasis on distinguishing between biological sex and politicized gender, Barlas has clearly been influenced by feminist theory. This critical distinction between sex ("the biological fact") and gender ("the social fact") was an intellectual breakthrough in the 1970s, undermining the usage of anatomical arguments to rationalize women's subjugation.¹³⁹ Womanhood and femininity, feminists argued, were not innate qualities stemming from women's physical makeup but constructed categories, produced through socialization, through lived experience. To quote the famous words of the French feminist Simone de Beauvoir: "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman."¹⁴⁰ This is not to imply, however, that one is an autonomous agent, free to simply choose whichever gender one desires. As the American

¹³⁵ Ibid, 1.

¹³⁶ Barlas, "Women's Readings of the Qur'an," 266.

¹³⁷ Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 36-37.

¹³⁸ Barlas, "Texts, Sex, and States," 102.

¹³⁹ R.W. Connell, *Gender* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), 33-34.

¹⁴⁰ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 267. It is worthwhile noting here that the first edition of this landmark book was published in 1949, and thus predates feminist theoretical distinctions between sex and gender, biology and sociality.

feminist Judith Butler has noted, while gender is socially construed – a verb rather than a noun, a doing rather than a being – it is a performative act that is closely regulated by a complex web of power relations that not only discipline the subject who takes on gender roles, but actually create and recreate this subject through the very act of doing, hence problematizing any notions of a self-aware, self-existing agent.¹⁴¹

On Mothering, Polygamy and Veiling

Since we have already discussed the Qur'an's elevation of mothers over fathers, the topic of motherhood is an appropriate point of departure to explore Barlas' argument. Is this not evidence of the text's reduction of women to mothers? Firstly, counters Barlas, whereas patriarchies glorify mothers, privileging women who have given birth over those who have not, they never elevate mothers over fathers, who remain the centrepiece of this oppressive system.¹⁴² Secondly, while modern patriarchies portray mothering as the sole function of women, the Qur'an does not present women as only being mothers.¹⁴³ Indeed, a number of women who never bore children became highly influential figures in the first Muslim community. Barlas gives the example of Ayesha bint Abu Bakr (d. 678) – the wife of Muhammad – who, despite never becoming a mother, is one of the most revered personalities in Islam and a role model for Muslim women.¹⁴⁴ As *hadith* scholars have shown, Ayesha played a seminal role in the formation of the *hadith* literature, relating

¹⁴¹ Judith Butler, "Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire," in *Feminisms*, eds. Sandra Kemp and Judith Squires (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 285.

¹⁴² Barlas, "*Believing Women*" in *Islam*, 179.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

roughly 2,200 reports.¹⁴⁵ As we saw in the preceding chapter, Wadud, when highlighting the Qur'an's emphasis on bearing rather than rearing, also drew upon Islamic history. Specifically, she pointed to Amina, the Prophet's mother, who did not partake in her child's rearing, giving him to a wet-nurse, Halima – an action that, significantly, did not lead to any stigma, to any “charge of un-motherliness” in the biographical accounts.¹⁴⁶ Furthermore, Barlas continues, the Qur'an does not politicize the act of giving birth. That is, it does not portray childbirth as some form of divine retribution against women.¹⁴⁷ This stands in sharp contrast to the Old Testament, which presents the ordeal of childbirth as a perpetual punishment for women, brought about by Eve's enticement (Gen. 3:11-16):

He [God] said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?” The man said, “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate.” Then the Lord God said to the woman. “What is this that you have done?” The woman said, “The serpent deceived me, and I ate.” ...To the woman He said, “I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children. Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.”¹⁴⁸ [My parentheses]

By foregrounding the absence of this narrative – portraying childbirth as punishment, thereby politicizing female biology – in the Qur'an, Barlas makes a novel contribution to the earlier work of Wadud and Hassan. As we have seen, these scholars underscored the

¹⁴⁵ Jonathan Brown, *Hadith: Muhammad's Legacy in the Medieval and Modern World* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009), 19. Brown provides the following quantitative breakdown of the five leading *hadith* transmitters: Abu Hurayrah (5,300), Ibn 'Umar (2,600), Anas bin Malik (2,300), Ayesha (2,200) and Ibn 'Abbas (1,700).

¹⁴⁶ Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 127-128.

¹⁴⁷ Barlas, “*Believing Women*” in *Islam*, 175.

¹⁴⁸ The New Testament provides a slightly different take on this story, for while it affirms the Genesis narrative of Eve's enticement, it represents childbearing as an ordeal that will *save* women in the Hereafter. Consider, for instance, the following passage from Paul's letters to his disciple Timothy: “Let a woman learn quietly with all submissiveness. I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet she will be saved through childbearing – if they continue in faith and love and holiness, with self-control.” (1 Tim. 11-15) It is important to note that Christian feminists have challenged such biblical texts that extol silence and submission on the part of women. See, among others: Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Discipleship of Equals: A Critical Feminist Ekklesia-logy of Liberation* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1993); Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1994), first published in 1983; and Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Towards a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), also first published in 1983.

absence in the Qur'an of the biblical understanding that (a) Eve was created from Adam's rib, showing that they were both created from a 'single soul' (Q. 4:1) and, therefore, that women and men are ontologically the same; and that (b) Eve persuaded Adam to eat from the Tree, as the Qur'anic narrative presents this act of disobedience as a collective one, in which both partners were equally culpable.¹⁴⁹

According to Barlas, the Qur'an does not license polygamy.¹⁵⁰ Like Wadud,¹⁵¹ she makes this case by using historical criticism and careful, textual analysis. Quoting Q. 4:2-3 – the 'polygamy verse' (4:3), as well as the one that immediately precedes it – she comments that not only did the text's approval of having up to four wives actually restrict the number of wives that a man could take in that time (theoretically, men could have an unlimited number of spouses) but also that the Qur'an's objective, as the precise wording of the passage reveals, was to ensure justice for female orphans.¹⁵² The verses read:

Give the orphans their property, and do not replace things of your own that are bad with things that are good among theirs, and do not eat up their property by mingling it with your own property, for that is, indeed, a grave crime. (4:2) If you fear that you will not deal justly with the orphans, then marry women that you like, two, three, or four. But if you fear that you will not be able to deal justly with them, then only one, or what your right hands possess. That makes it likelier that you will not be unjust. (4:3)

This focus on female orphans brings us back to the question of historical context. This verse was revealed in a situation wherein male guardians were exploiting orphans under their care and, thus, the Qur'an proposed marriage as a way of rectifying the problem, "the assumption being that marriage gives the husband a stake in the honest management of his wife's property."¹⁵³ The Qur'an's espousal of polygamy, then, is tied to a specific

¹⁴⁹ Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 19-20 and 24-25; Hassan, "An Islamic Perspective," 98 and 103-104.

¹⁵⁰ On definitions of polygamy, polygyny and polyandry, cf. fn. 107 on pg. 175 in this thesis.

¹⁵¹ Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 83.

¹⁵² Barlas, *"Believing Women" in Islam*, 191.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

moment of crisis in the burgeoning Muslim community and not applicable for all times. Paralleling Wadud,¹⁵⁴ Barlas also makes a holistic reading, noting that social justice is a theme that permeates the text's discourse on polygamy. For in addition to ensuring that justice is meted out to orphans, it states that a man is not allowed to marry more than one wife if he feels that he 'will not be able to deal justly with them,' adding later on that even if he wanted to treat them equally, he would be unable to do so (Q. 4:129).¹⁵⁵ The absence of justice in polygamous relationships therefore rules out the possibility of having multiple spouses. It is important to note, however, that Barlas does not simply rehash Wadud's interpretive insights. By reflecting upon these verses in light of modern patriarchy, Barlas is able to push a liberating exegesis of polygamy further. Many Muslims who support polygamy claim that it is in the inherent nature of men to desire multiple partners, as one woman cannot possibly satisfy the incessant male libido. Yet nowhere in the above verses, Barlas observes keenly, are the "sexual nature or needs" of men or women mentioned, showing that polygamy does not serve a sexual function.¹⁵⁶ That is, there is no connection made between polygamy and desire. Indeed, the Qur'an, she argues, does not distinguish between male and female sexualities.¹⁵⁷ By not framing its discussion on polygamy in terms of male desire, the Qur'an refuses to politicize male biology, to make a wider, social statement about men's bodies. This returns us to the construction of gender as a category, for not only do women become women but so, too, do men become men, acquiring manhood and masculinity through everyday performative

¹⁵⁴ Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 83.

¹⁵⁵ Barlas, "Believing Women" in *Islam*, 191. Q. 4:129 is incorrectly cited as Q. 4:125 in her Commentary.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Barlas, "Women's Readings of the Qur'an," 264.

acts,¹⁵⁸ from getting into fights with other men and driving powerful cars to withholding one's emotions in the face of pain and having sex with multiple partners.

Just as the Qur'an does not sanction polygamy, there is no scriptural basis for the female headscarf, referred to today as the *hijab*. There are two Qur'anic passages that are commonly cited to justify the veil. They are provided below:

O Prophet! Tell your wives and your daughters and the women of the faithful to draw closely over themselves their wraps (*jalabibihinna*). That makes it likely that they will be recognized and not be troubled, and God is all-Forgiving, all-Merciful. If the hypocrites, those in whose hearts is a sickness, and the rumourmongers in the city, do not desist, We will surely rouse you against them. Then they will not be your neighbours in it except for a while. (Q. 33:59-60)

Tell the believing men to lower their gaze and to guard their private parts. That is more decent for them. God is well aware of what they do. And tell the believing women to lower their gaze and to guard their private parts, and not to display their charms, except for what is outward, and let them draw their veils (*khumurihinna*) over their breasts, and not display their charms except to their husbands, or their fathers, or their husband's fathers, or their sons, or their husband's sons, or their brothers, or their brothers' sons, or their sisters' sons, or their women, or their slave women, or male attendants lacking sexual desire, or children that are still unaware of women's nakedness. Let them not thump their feet to make known their hidden ornaments. Turn to God in repentance, O believers, so that you may be felicitous. (Q. 24:30-31)

These passages, Barlas comments, reflect two very different types of injunctions, the former historically contingent and the latter universally applicable. The precise wording of Q. 33:59-60 clearly indicates that it was addressing a particular situation and, therefore, needs to be read in light of this context. Specifically, non-Muslim men – ‘the hypocrites, those in whose hearts is a sickness, and the rumourmongers in the city’ – were harassing Muslim women on the streets. This was in large part due to the culture of a slave-owning society, as slaves (who were traditionally uncovered) were seen as open to sexual approach.¹⁵⁹ The Qur'anic commandment to cover was thus meant “to make

¹⁵⁸ Connell, 4.

¹⁵⁹ Barlas, “Women's Readings of the Qur'an,” 268.

Muslim women visible to non-Muslim (*jahili*) men as being sexually unavailable.”¹⁶⁰

While Q. 33:59-60 reflects a call to veil relating to a specific set of circumstances,¹⁶¹ Q. 24:30-31, the language of which is markedly broad in nature, represents a principle applicable to all times and places. Like Wadud,¹⁶² Barlas argues that the veil is an essentially ethical concept, or what she calls “a sexually moral and modest praxis,” and not something that can be reduced to mere physical attire,¹⁶³ which is contextually bound. Not only is this a form of veiling that applies, as the wording of Q. 24:30-31 shows, to both men and women – indeed, men are addressed first – but it also presumes, Barlas adds, that men and women are, in fact, free to mix with one another, for how else can the injunction to lower one’s gaze make sense if the sexes are segregated?¹⁶⁴ While she offers a persuasive, scripturally grounded rereading of veiling, she erroneously claims that the Arabic word *hijab* (literally: ‘covering’) does not occur in the Qur’an.¹⁶⁵ To be sure, *hijab* is never used to refer to a headscarf. However, it does appear in three distinct senses: firstly, as a partition between Muhammad’s wives and the faithful, who were ordered to address his wives from behind a curtain (Q. 33:53); secondly, as a barrier that emerges between the believers and the pagans when the Qur’an is recited (Q. 17:45); and, finally, as a screen separating humankind and God, who would never speak to a human directly, but rather through divine inspiration, a curtain (*hijab*) or a messenger (Q. 42:51).¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ The understanding of the veil as being a universal head-covering was, as the historian Leila Ahmed has shown, introduced into Muslim societies through Sassanian and Middle Eastern Christian communities, wherein veiling and segregation were prevalent practices amongst upper-class women. See Ahmed, 5.

¹⁶² Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 219.

¹⁶³ Barlas, “*Believing Women*” in *Islam*, 56.

¹⁶⁴ Barlas, “Women’s Readings of the Qur’an,” 268.

¹⁶⁵ Barlas, “*Believing Women*” in *Islam*, 53.

¹⁶⁶ Ali and Leaman, 50-52. With regard to Q. 42:51, Moses and the Burning Bush are a classic example of God speaking to humankind from behind a curtain, while Jesus’ miraculous speech as a newborn and Gabriel’s correspondence with Muhammad are examples of inspiration and messengership, respectively.

Closely tied to veiling is the issue of female sexuality. The sad irony behind the Qur'anic mandate to veil, laments Barlas, is that although its intent was to confront *male* sexual immorality – namely, non-Muslim men harassing Muslim women – it has since devolved into a patriarchal obsession with women's sexual conduct.¹⁶⁷ Indeed, a central assumption underlying Muslim conservatives' support for female veiling, ranging from the headscarf that exposes the face and hands to the *burqa*, covering the entire body, is that women's bodies are “sexually corrupting to those who see them; it is thus necessary to shield Muslim men from viewing women's bodies by concealing them.”¹⁶⁸ This idea of women's bodies as being too alluring, too sexually robust (and, conversely, of men as being morally weak and thus vulnerable to temptation when exposed to women's bodies) is intrinsically connected to a wider view of sex as being unclean, impure, indecent. This problematic approach to sexuality, she argues, has more in common with Judaism and Christianity than the Qur'an – which makes no such claim – finding its way into Islamic thought through such extra-scriptural sources as the *hadith* and *tafsir*.¹⁶⁹ A recurring theme, therefore, in women's readings of the Qur'an (recalling Wadud's and Hassan's commentaries of the Creation Story and the Events of the Garden) is the contrasting of the Qur'an with the Bible, in particular the Old Testament, critically discerning the dissimilarities between the two. In so doing, they have unearthed the lasting effects that biblical exegesis has had on Qur'anic exegesis as a field. On the contrary, Barlas notes, the Qur'an has a very different take on sexuality, approaching sex as “fulfilling and

¹⁶⁷ Barlas, “Women's Readings of the Qur'an,” 268.

¹⁶⁸ Barlas, “*Believing Women*” in *Islam*, 54.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 151-152. Although Barlas explicitly mentions both Judaism and Christianity, the former – as my supervisor Christopher Rowland has pointed out to me – is actually closer to Islam in this respect.

wholesome in itself, that is, outside of its procreative role.”¹⁷⁰ According to the text, she observes, the purpose of sexual intimacy is the attainment of ‘tranquillity’ (*sukun*), without making any reference to reproduction (Q. 30:21).¹⁷¹ The verse reads:

Among His signs is that He created for you mates (*azwajan*) from your own selves that you may take comfort in them (*litaskunu ilayha*), and He ordained love and mercy between you. There are indeed signs in that for a people who reflect.

This passage not only illustrates vividly the compatibility of sexuality and religion, argues Barlas, but acknowledges that men and women have the same sexual natures,¹⁷² as reflected in the Qur’an’s usage of the gender-neutral term: ‘mates’ (*azwaj*, sing: *zawj*). That is, the text does not differentiate between male and female sexualities. As we shall see shortly, however, this is a sore point of contention amongst Islamic feminists.

Revisiting a Difficult Verse

Q. 4:34, as we have witnessed in the preceding chapter on Wadud, is arguably the most challenging passage for Qur’anic commentators reading for gender justice. This subsection will explore core aspects of this verse, analyzing how exactly Barlas grapples with them hermeneutically, beginning with the opening section, which reads: “Men are the guardians (*qawwamun*) of women, because of the advantage God has granted some of them over others and by virtue of their spending out of their wealth.” Interpreters of the Qur’an, critiques Barlas, have read sexual differentiation into this statement, insisting that men are guardians because they have greater physical strength, rationality, even virtue than women.¹⁷³ Yet this passage does not make any claims about the innate superiority of

¹⁷⁰ Ibid, 153.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Ibid, 153-154.

¹⁷³ Barlas, “The Qur’an and Hermeneutics,” 17-18.

men. Echoing Wadud,¹⁷⁴ Barlas foregrounds the historical context of this verse, pointing out the explicit connection drawn between male authority and financial resources: that is, the husband's role as family breadwinner.¹⁷⁵ But since the society that we live in today is drastically different, she concludes, with women becoming financial earners next to men, the husband's guardianship is effectively nullified. In addition to historical criticism, Barlas uses textual holism as an interpretive strategy, arguing that a patriarchal reading of men as guardians is at variance with other gender-egalitarian verses in the Qur'an, such as Q. 9:71, describing men and women as each other's protectors (*awliya*):¹⁷⁶

The believing men and the believing women are protectors (*awliya*) of one another: they enjoin what is right and prohibit what is wrong. They maintain the prayer, give the poor rate, and obey God and His Messenger. It is they to whom God will soon bestow His mercy. Indeed, God is all-Mighty, all-Wise.

Alongside Q. 4:34, there is another verse that conservative Muslims routinely reference when making sweeping claims of male superiority: specifically, Q. 2:228, which refers to men as having a 'degree' (*daraja*) over women. Paralleling Wadud yet again,¹⁷⁷ Barlas reads this passage in its *entirety*, demonstrating that the word *daraja* is not used to signify "male ontological superiority" but a husband's rights in divorce.¹⁷⁸ The verse reads:

Divorced women shall wait by themselves for three periods of purity, and it is not lawful for them to conceal what God has created in their wombs, if they have faith in God and the Last Day; and their husbands have a greater right to restore them during this duration, if they so desire reconciliation. The wives have rights similar to the obligations upon them, in accordance with honourable norms; and men have a degree (*daraja*) above them, and God is all-Mighty, all-Wise.

However, whereas Wadud interprets the husband's 'right' as being able to pronounce a divorce without outside arbitration, as opposed to the wife who requires the mediation of

¹⁷⁴ Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 70-71.

¹⁷⁵ Barlas, "Believing Women" in *Islam*, 186.

¹⁷⁶ Barlas, "The Qur'an and Hermeneutics," 18.

¹⁷⁷ Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 68.

¹⁷⁸ Barlas, "The Qur'an and Hermeneutics," 16-17.

a judge,¹⁷⁹ Barlas writes that the husband's right is being able to rescind the divorce.¹⁸⁰ Here, she draws upon the explanatory notes of Asad, the English translator of the Qur'an whom we met earlier on. Asad argues that because the husband is the maintainer of the family, he exercises the right to revoke a divorce first.¹⁸¹ So just as male guardianship is negated in a new context wherein women are no longer confined to the home so, too, is male privilege in divorce proceedings. Q. 4:34 and 2:228, then, cannot be divorced from their original, revelatory setting. And herein lies a key argument in Barlas' commentary: namely, that *difference* does not necessarily entail *inequality*, for the Qur'an's sometimes different treatment of men and women, as exemplified by these two verses, is not rooted in wider, biological claims of men as being the superior sex and women the inferior one, but rather reflect the existing division of labour in a patriarchal society.¹⁸²

The wife's obedience to her husband is another contentious aspect of Q. 4:34, or, to be more precise, of mainstream understandings of it. The passage, including the first part on male guardianship, reads:

Men are the guardians of women, because of the advantage God has granted some of them over others and by virtue of their spending out of their wealth. So righteous women are obedient (*qanitatun*), safeguarding what is unseen (*hafizatun lil-ghaybi*) of what God has enjoined them to guard.

Citing Wadud, Barlas argues that although the vast majority of interpretations of *qanitat* (literally: 'obedient women') assert that the husband is the object of obedience, it is God, and God alone, who is worthy of obedience.¹⁸³ In order to substantiate this argument, Wadud undertook a holistic approach, exploring how the same term is used in other parts of the Qur'an. In so doing, she showed that other occurrences of *qanitat* and its linguistic

¹⁷⁹ Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 68.

¹⁸⁰ Barlas, "The Qur'an and Hermeneutics," 17.

¹⁸¹ Asad, *The Message of the Qur'an*, 61.

¹⁸² Barlas, "Believing Women" in *Islam*, 198-199.

¹⁸³ Barlas, "Women's Readings of the Qur'an," 263.

derivatives are used solely to denote (male and female) obedience to God (Q. 3:17; 33:35; 66:12).¹⁸⁴ *Hafizatul lil-ghayb* (literally: ‘safeguarding what is unseen’) is another hotly disputed term in this verse. Female exegetes have argued that this phrase refers to women “who fulfil their religious obligations and protect their faith, as God has guarded it.”¹⁸⁵ Yet most commentators have understood this phrase as being women who, in the absence of their husbands, protect their chastity and their husband’s property – an interpretation that, as Islamic feminists have shown, was deeply influenced by a widely circulated and inauthentic *hadith* report.¹⁸⁶

The Messenger of God said: "The best of women is the one who pleases you if you look at her, obeys you if you order her, and if you are away from her, she guards herself and your property. Then the Prophet recited verse 34 of *Surat al-Nisa'* ["Chapter of the Women," Chapter 4]."¹⁸⁷ [My parentheses]

Though Barlas does not make an original contribution to this discussion, reiterating the ideas of Wadud, she could have advanced a sexually just reading of *qanitat* and *hafizatul lil-ghayb*. For while Wadud relied on a *textual* argument, analyzing how such terms are employed in other parts of scripture, Barlas could have made a *theological* one, reinterpreting them in light of her earlier thesis that the Qur’an is at loggerheads with traditional patriarchy, refusing to portray men as earthly surrogates of a Heavenly Father. Because divine self-disclosure categorically rejects any representation of God as a father figure, and because men can never partake in God’s sovereignty and undivided unity, a

¹⁸⁴ Wadud, *Qur’an and Woman*, 74. Although Wadud does not include Q. 16:120 here, it is interesting to note that this verse, which we cited earlier when discussing Abraham’s rebellion against his father, describes Abraham as a *qanit* (‘an obedient one’).

¹⁸⁵ Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam*, 119.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ The earliest appearance of this report can be found in the *musnad* (*hadith* collection) of Abu Dawud al-Tayalisi (d. 819), which is significant, as the report does not appear in the *sahihayn*, or the two ‘authentic’ *hadith* collections of Bukhari and Muslim. This *hadith* has resurfaced in classical and medieval Qur’anic exegesis, most notably in ‘the Great Commentary’ (*al-Tafsir al-Kabir*) of Abu Ja’far al-Tabari (d. 923). I am grateful to Mustafa Abu Sway of al-Quds University for providing the text and citations of this report.

theologically sound interpretation of *qanitat* and *hafizatur lil-ghayb* must necessarily direct women's obedience and loyalty to God alone.

The most controversial aspect of Q. 4:34 is the final segment of the verse, a literal rendering of which (as we have seen previously) gives a man license to beat his wife. The verse, in its entirety, reads:

Men are the guardians of women, because of the advantage God has granted some of them over others and by virtue of their spending out of their wealth. So righteous women are obedient, safeguarding what is unseen of what God has enjoined them to guard. As for those wives whose misconduct you fear, (first) advise them, and (if ineffective) keep away from them in the bed, and (as a last resort) beat them (*idribuhunna*). Then if they obey you, do not seek any course (of action) against them. Indeed, God is all-Exalted, all-Great.

Barlas grapples with this last portion using two, signature hermeneutical moves. Firstly, she reads this passage extratextually, underscoring the patriarchal setting of revelation, in which violence against women was widespread. As she puts it:

At a time and in a society in which a man would inherit his father's wives, bury his new-born daughter alive in the sand, and beat a woman at will, verse 4:34, even if read as permission to strike a wife in specific circumstances, could not have seemed like a license or unethical.¹⁸⁸

Secondly, she reads this verse intratextually, arguing that an interpretation that mandates wife-beating violates wider Qur'anic principles pertaining to marriage, such as its call for 'love and mercy' (*mawaddatan wa rahma*) between spouses (Q. 30:21), even instructing partners who are in the midst of divorce to act graciously with one another (Q. 2:237).¹⁸⁹ As we saw in the preceding chapter, Wadud initially came to terms with Q. 4:34, taking into account the original context of revelation and concluding that this verse constituted a severe restriction on male violence against women.¹⁹⁰ This reading was unable to satisfy

¹⁸⁸ Asma Barlas, *Re-Understanding Islam: A Double Critique*, Spinoza Lectures presented by the University of Amsterdam (Amsterdam: Van Gorcum, 2008), 16.

¹⁸⁹ Barlas, "Women's Readings of the Qur'an," 264.

¹⁹⁰ Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 76.

Wadud, however, leading her to later “say “no” outright to the literal implementation of this passage.”¹⁹¹ Yet literalism, interjects Barlas, is a hermeneutical impossibility, for “so long as a word can have more than one meaning there is no such thing as a literal reading.”¹⁹² In other words, whereas Wadud eventually rejects this last part of the verse, Barlas questions why ‘beat them’ is privileged as the ‘literal’ translation of *idribuhunna*? She departs from Wadud, then, by analyzing *idribuhunna* holistically, exploring how it is employed elsewhere in the text. Citing Q. 38:44, she shows that this term is also used in a distinctly symbolic fashion.¹⁹³ Referring to Prophet Lot, the verse reads:

We told him: ‘Take a small bunch of grass in your hand and then with it strike (*idribbihi*) your wife, but do not break your oath.’ Indeed, We found him to be patient. What an excellent servant and one who would always turn unto Us!”

According to classical commentators, Lot vowed to beat his wife with a hundred lashes, as she had cursed God on account of his painful tribulations.¹⁹⁴ When he was healed, God instructed him to take ‘a small bunch of grass’ and to symbolically strike his wife with it once (*idribbihi*), thereby fulfilling his promise without physically harming her.¹⁹⁵ Barlas’ emphasis on the figurative dimension of *idribuhunna* is persuasive, particularly given the Qur’an’s frequent usage of the phrase *darb mathalan*, or ‘to strike an example,’ when drawing parables and lessons for the believers (Q. 14:24-26; 16:112-113; 18:45-46). But “the best” reading of *idribuhunna* insofar as Q. 4:34 is concerned, concludes Barlas, is not symbolic hitting but “confinement” (that is, restricting the wife to her home) as the Qur’an prescribes this action when discussing how husbands should deal with adulterous

¹⁹¹ Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 200. Upon making this statement, Wadud put forth a textually holistic argument that parallels that of Barlas, arguing that any physical strike against women would run counter to such core Qur’anic values as “justice” and “human dignity” (203).

¹⁹² Barlas, *Re-Understanding Islam*, 23.

¹⁹³ Barlas, “*Believing Women*” in *Islam*, 188.

¹⁹⁴ Asad, *The Message of the Qur’an*, 789.

¹⁹⁵ Barlas, “*Believing Women*” in *Islam*, 188.

wives (Q. 4:15).¹⁹⁶ This specific rendering of *idribuhunna* is less convincing, however, since Q. 4:15 uses a different word altogether: *amsikuhunna* ('confine them').

Critical Interpretation or Apologetic Argument?

Barlas' exegesis of Q. 4:34 betrays the limits of her radical hermeneutic, for despite her otherwise critical rereading, she idealizes the text. By idealize I mean that she seeks to completely reconcile contemporary understandings of sexual justice with a text that emerged in late antiquity, and thus within a society that had a markedly different conception of gender relations. As we saw in the first chapter, a central grievance that Esack has with the Qur'an is its androcentrism,¹⁹⁷ addressing men, who become the subject of divine discourse, thereby reducing women to objects that are acted on. Going back to our discussion on Q. 4:34, irrespective of whether *idribuhunna* is interpreted as '[physically] beat them,' '[symbolically] beat them,' that is, spell out a lesson for them, or 'confine them,' men remain the text's audience and women passive objects in the third person – an absent 'them' – who are to be checked, rebuked, disciplined. Wadud also takes issue with this problematic aspect of the Qur'an, highlighting its androcentric discourse on sexuality, as illustrated in Q. 2:223 – 'Your women are a tillage (*harth*) for you, so come to your tillage whenever you like' – portraying male sexuality as assertive and dominant, female sexuality as acquiescent and submissive.¹⁹⁸ This verse clearly conflicts with Barlas' claim that the text does not differentiate between male and female sexualities.¹⁹⁹ And yet she dismisses any critiques of androcentrism. Since the text was

¹⁹⁶ Ibid, 188-189.

¹⁹⁷ Esack, "Islam and Gender Justice," 195.

¹⁹⁸ Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 193. Q. 2:187 is another example of the text's androcentric approach to sexuality, speaking to husbands and permitting them to enter their wives during the nights of fasting.

¹⁹⁹ Barlas, "Women's Readings of the Qur'an," 264.

revealed in a context wherein men held power, she rebuts, it had to speak in terms of this reality, clarifying that to “deal with a historical contingency is not to advocate it as a timeless norm.”²⁰⁰ But her own research reveals that the Qur’an provocatively pushed the boundaries of its own context, speaking *of* women and men in egalitarian terms and even speaking *to* women directly, as exemplified by Umm Salama’s verse (Q. 33:35). In other words, when it comes to matters of faith, good deeds and divine recompense, the Qur’an explicitly addresses both sexes. But if the Qur’an is willing to use such gender-inclusive language with regard to belief, why does it speak solely to men when discussing sexuality? For instance, the text’s discourse on marriage – a partnership that is public, unlike sexual intercourse, which is private and confined to the home – is acutely androcentric, describing men as “marrying,” women as being “married.” (Q. 2:221)²⁰¹ Even the so-called polygamy verses, which female exegetes like Wadud and Barlas have persuasively reinterpreted, are inescapably male-focussed. Although women’s readings have demonstrated that the sanctioning of polygamy presumes a historical crisis wherein female orphans were being exploited, and thus is not a free license for having multiple wives, men remain the audience of these verses and it is up to them to decide, to initiate marriage with the female orphans: “If you fear that you may not deal justly with the orphans, then marry women that you like: two, three, or four.” (4:3)²⁰² Hence, when it comes to sexuality, of which marriage is part and parcel, the Qur’an does make social statements about male and female bodies, politicizing their different biologies.

The roots of Barlas’ apologia can be found in her essentialization of the Qur’an, that is, approaching it as a text that is innately liberating and thus can *only* be liberating.

²⁰⁰ Barlas, *Re-Understanding Islam*, 25.

²⁰¹ Ali and Leaman, 42.

²⁰² I am grateful to Christopher Rowland for alerting me to the androcentric nature of this passage.

As the Islamic feminist Kecia Ali has observed, Barlas' anti-patriarchal interpretation refuses to acknowledge the legitimacy of the need to wrestle with divergent Qur'anic readings, in particular patriarchal ones, which are too readily reduced to "misreadings."²⁰³ Indeed, while Barlas states at the beginning of her Commentary that her intention is "not to deny that the Qur'an can be read in patriarchal modes,"²⁰⁴ she ends up making precisely this argument a few pages later, insisting that an "exegesis that reads oppression, inequality and patriarchy into the Qur'an should be seen as a misreading, a failure in reading, since it attributes to god *zulm* [oppression] against women."²⁰⁵ In her essentialist approach to scripture, Barlas shares common ground with Engineer. As we saw in the second chapter, Engineer presents the Qur'an as an ancient "charter of rights for women," championing complete sexual equality.²⁰⁶ He even goes so far as to claim that there is not a single verse that can be used to support the oppressive status quo.²⁰⁷ In other words, when the status quo does draw upon the Qur'an for Islamic legitimacy, it is merely manipulating the text's *real* meaning, which is an invariably liberating one. Though both Barlas and Engineer resort to apologetics, it is important to appreciate the very different ways in which these two exegetes essentialize the text, as Barlas does so in a far more sophisticated manner. Not all essentialist arguments are the same; some are articulated more rigorously than others. Whereas Engineer reads scripture in a selective and inconsistent fashion, Barlas commences her exegesis with a theological reflection – making God's justice, unity and unrepresentability her hermeneutical points of departure – and then forwards textual interpretations in light of this liberating theology. For "basing

²⁰³ Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam*, 132.

²⁰⁴ Barlas, "Believing Women" in *Islam*, 4.

²⁰⁵ Ibid, 14. My parentheses.

²⁰⁶ Engineer, *Islam and Liberation Theology*, 33.

²⁰⁷ Engineer, *On Developing Theology of Peace in Islam*, v.

our readings of the Qur'an on a theologically sound view of God opens up infinite, and infinitely liberating, ways of encountering scripture."²⁰⁸ The problem with this approach, however, is that it serves to undermine the letter, the substance, the specificity of the text, allowing the reader to explain away anything that contradicts her/his view of a just deity.

Islam: A Double Critique

Between a Rock and a Hard Place

This final section will unpack the scope of Barlas' discourse on justice. A theme that continuously resurfaces in her writings is her commitment to speaking truth to power in both Muslim and non-Muslim Western contexts.²⁰⁹ This is an intellectual that occupies two uneasy subject positions: the one as a believing woman in a patriarchal Muslim community, the other as a Muslim in a racist, Western-dominated world. She succinctly sums up this dual grievance as follows:

As a Muslim woman I thus find myself precariously balanced on the inhospitable terrain between the (ostensibly religious) sexism of conservative Muslims and the (secular) racism of the liberal Western society in which I live. My quarrels, therefore, are necessarily with both.²¹⁰

Barlas' oppositional role in both contexts is effectively encapsulated in a volume titled, *Re-Understanding Islam: A Double Critique* (2008) – a collection of two lectures that she delivered in 2008 as part of the Spinoza lecture series at the University of Amsterdam. The first lecture is essentially a summary of her gender-egalitarian reading of the Qur'an, a project clearly targeted at the wider Muslim community, while the second unpacks the

²⁰⁸ Barlas, "Holding Fast by the Best in the Precepts," 20.

²⁰⁹ While she acknowledges that 'the West' is an ideologically loaded term, plagued with essentialist assumptions and premised on a reductive representation of a primitive 'East,' she uses it because it reflects "an actual existing hegemony that characterizes itself as Western." See Asma Barlas, "Globalizing Equality: Muslim Women, Theology, and Feminisms," in *On Shifting Ground: Middle Eastern Women in the Global Era*, ed. Fera Simone (New York: Feminist Press, 2005), 108.

²¹⁰ Barlas, *Islam, Muslims, and the US*, 14.

problematic ways in which non-Muslim Westerners have represented Islam and Muslims, thereby addressing a different audience altogether.²¹¹ While I have used the subjects of these twin lectures as a heuristic tool to illustrate her commitment to ‘double critique,’ it is important not to portray Barlas’ exegetical work on the Qur’an as being targeted solely at Muslims. As she notes at the beginning of her Commentary, she undertook this study in order to challenge both conservative Muslims and secular feminists, who cannot see the Qur’an as being anything but a patriarchal, indeed blatantly misogynistic, text.²¹² Confronting European and North American discourses on Islam is crucial given the long history of the West’s demonization of Islam and Muslims. Barlas notes, for example, that Prophet Muhammad’s vilification as a ‘terrorist’ in Islamophobic circles is not simply a contemporary phenomenon, but has deep roots stretching back to medieval Christendom, in which he was attacked as an imposter, a fanatic and even the Antichrist.²¹³ As a result, when writing on Islam, especially in European languages, the Muslim intellectual has to think against the grain of an entire vocabulary – an epistemology – that posits her/his religion as being irredeemably conservative, irrational, backward. Conversely, argues Barlas, such representations serve to vindicate the West, which comes to stand for everything that Islam is not, and never will be:²¹⁴ liberal, reasoned, civilized. And it is precisely in order to escape such racist dichotomies that she unmasks injustice in both

²¹¹ Barlas, *Re-Understanding Islam*, 31. The first lecture, delivered in May 2008, was titled, “Believing Women in Islam: Between Secular and Religious Politics and Theology,” and the second, delivered in June 2008, was titled: “Would Spinoza Understand Me? Europe, Islam, and the Mirror of Difference.”

²¹² Barlas, “*Believing Women*” in *Islam*, xii.

²¹³ Barlas, *Re-Understanding Islam*, 39. For two pioneering historical studies of Western representations of Islam, see Norman Daniel, *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009), first published in 1960; and R.W. Southern, *Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962).

²¹⁴ *Ibid*, 32.

Muslim and non-Muslim contexts, showing that oppressive systems like patriarchy are not exclusive to Muslim societies. As she puts it with regard to violence against women:

As someone who was born in the so-called Muslim world and who now lives in the so-called West, I am as horrified by practices like “honour” killings in some Muslim societies as I am by the fact that a woman is sexually assaulted every 2 minutes in the US.²¹⁵

This section will demonstrate that it is this commitment to double critique that forms the critical point of departure for Barlas’ utterly comprehensive approach to social justice, drawing connections between different forms of suffering and resistance.

9/11 and the Empire

The attacks of 11 September 2001 are arguably the single most important event, at least in the past decade, that has framed discussions on Islam. Paralleling Esack, who sharply criticized liberal Muslims for failing to challenge the presumption that America’s suffering ought to be “the axis around which the earth rotates,”²¹⁶ Barlas locates 9/11 firmly within the framework of global politics, thus rejecting any notion that it marked a “unique event” in history.²¹⁷ Ascribing any uniqueness to 9/11, she writes, is inextricably bound to the racist idea that Americans themselves are unique, that their pain is somehow more important than that of the rest of the world.²¹⁸ While, as we have seen throughout this chapter, Barlas takes issue with literalist readings of scripture, she emphasizes the

²¹⁵ Ibid, 18. She adds that what initially drew her to the issue of violence against women was not violence perpetrated in the name of Islam, but rather the European practice of witch-burning, which lasted between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries and claimed the lives of almost one million women.

²¹⁶ Esack, “In Search of Progressive Islam Beyond 9/11,” 82-83.

²¹⁷ Barlas, *Islam, Muslims, and the US*, 17.

²¹⁸ Ibid, 21.

universality of extremism – that it is not intrinsic to Islam or, for that matter, to religion as a whole – and points to the underlying, socioeconomic roots of such interpretations.²¹⁹

...extremism needs to be understood in the broader context of a racist, unjust and oppressive global political economy that is the outgrowth of both centuries of Western imperialism and of many existing US policies.²²⁰

For Barlas, then, 9/11 is first and foremost a political event. By portraying these attacks as being the outcome of religious fundamentalism, the US has not only rendered invisible the social context in which it transpired but has also found a justification to shape Islamic discourse ever since. The US, Barlas laments, has appropriated Islam as a tool of imperial policy, creating a simplistic and stifling dichotomy – the “moderate” Muslim versus the “militant” Muslim – which has nothing to do with religious interpretation but rather is defined purely on the basis of one’s political allegiance.²²¹ The moderate Muslim is pro-American; the militant Muslim anti-American. Calling for gender reform is a central part of this colonial project, portraying Muslims and Islam as being innately patriarchal and promoting ‘inclusive’ and ‘liberal’ (read acquiescent and apolitical) interpretations. So whereas Americans had very little interest in Muslim reformist movements prior to 9/11, ‘Islamic reform’ suddenly became a fashionable topic. Indeed, Barlas recalls that she was having great difficulty in locating a publisher for her manuscript on the Qur’an.

Following 9/11 and the subsequent surge of interest in Muslim women, however, she was successfully able to secure one.²²² In her critical awareness of the ideological politics of Islam, and of Muslim women in particular, Barlas departs significantly from Wadud. As we saw in the preceding chapter, when discussing 9/11 Wadud not only subscribed to

²¹⁹ Ibid, 67-68.

²²⁰ Ibid.

²²¹ Ibid, 29.

²²² Ibid, 33.

such a moderate / militant Muslim binary, or what she referred to as “the face of love and life” versus “the face of evil and destruction,”²²³ but she also singled out Muslim *men* as being responsible for planning and perpetrating the attacks.²²⁴ In so doing, Wadud played into American discourses on 9/11 that link this political event, expressly centred on resisting US domination, with unequal gender relations within Muslim communities.

As Barlas’ discourse on 9/11 suggests, she is highly critical of US imperialism. Her criticism, moreover, moves beyond the Middle East and Muslim-majority countries, noting how the US has undertaken military interventions throughout the world, especially in Latin America.²²⁵ What is so provocative, so audacious about US empire-building is the veneer of liberalism that sugarcoats it. As Barlas eloquently words it:

Wanting control of the world is nothing new. What is perhaps new is that the West and the United States want to be loved as they go about the business of making the world subservient to themselves by any means necessary, for how else can one explain the plaintive question, Why do they hate us?²²⁶

Indeed, echoing Said,²²⁷ Barlas argues that portrayals of ‘Islam’ and ‘the West’ as being diametrically opposed are a direct epistemic outgrowth of Western global dominance,²²⁸ sustained today by American firepower. This dichotomy is deeply problematic, she observes, not only because ‘Islam’ and ‘the West’ are simply incongruent as categories, the former being a religion and the latter a “geographic space/identity,” but it is also based on the racist presumption of “radical difference.”²²⁹ That is, the essentialist idea that there is something fundamentally different between ‘the Westerner’ and ‘the

²²³ Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 5.

²²⁴ Ibid, 228.

²²⁵ Barlas, *Islam, Muslims, and the US*, 60.

²²⁶ Ibid, 58.

²²⁷ See Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978) and Edward Said, *Covering Islam: How the media and the experts determine how we see the rest of the world* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981).

²²⁸ Barlas, “Reviving Islamic Universalism,” 243-244.

²²⁹ Ibid.

Muslim,' as if the two are hermetically sealed, occupying different worlds. The very term – “the Muslim world” – is inherently flawed, objects Barlas, since “Muslims live in the same world as everyone else.”²³⁰ Furthermore, this phrasing presumes that religion is the most important determinant of Muslim life, ignoring key differences amongst the world’s one billion plus Muslims rooted in race, culture and political orientation, among others.²³¹ It is important to note here that Barlas’ discourse on world politics cannot be divorced from her anti-patriarchal exegesis. For it is impossible to conceptualize and mainstream gender-egalitarian readings of the Qur’an without a wider democratization of Muslim societies,²³² which are plagued with highly authoritarian regimes that routinely clamp down on human rights and basic freedoms. Consequently, numerous Muslim reformists – as different as Rachid Ghannouchi in Tunisia, Mohsen Kadivar in Iran and Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid in Egypt, to name but a few – have either lost their jobs, been imprisoned or have been forced into exile.²³³ However, the dismantling of domestic dictatorship will be tremendously difficult, if not impossible, mourns Barlas, given America’s backing of

²³⁰ Barlas, *Islam, Muslims, and the US*, 57.

²³¹ Ibid.

²³² Barlas, “Reviving Islamic Universalism,” 249-250.

²³³ Kamrava, 24. Ghannouchi (b. 1941) is a Tunisian Islamist and a co-founder of *Harakat al-Nahda* (‘The Renaissance Movement’), which is currently the largest political party in Tunisia. An outspoken critic of then-president Habib Bourguiba, Ghannouchi was imprisoned from 1981-84, serving a second term from 1987-88. He was eventually forced to leave for Europe as a political exile, and recently returned to his home country following the 2011 Tunisian Revolution, which overthrew President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali’s regime. Kadivar (b. 1959) is a reformist Shi’a cleric and a prominent leader in the opposition movement in Iran. Because of his religious critiques of Khomeini’s theocratic writings, in 1999 Kadavar was imprisoned for eighteen months. Abu Zayd (d. 2010) was an Egyptian scholar of the Qur’an. Due to his research, which situated the text within the broader history of Arabic literature rather than religion *per se*, an Egyptian court charged him with apostasy. Furthermore, the court ruled that he must divorce his wife, Ibtihal Yunis, as a Muslim woman according to Islamic law cannot be married to a non-Muslim man. As a result, they were forced to go into political exile in the Netherlands.

despotic rulers throughout the globe.²³⁴ Rereading scripture is thus intrinsically tied to domestic politics that, in turn, are shaped by the international status quo.

On Class and Race

An analysis of politics is meaningless without paying attention to questions of class. As Barlas puts it: “to study political institutions *qua* institutions – that is, without analyzing the class matrices in which they are embedded – is to neglect a vital dimension of politics.”²³⁵ In fact, her first book, titled *Democracy, Nationalism, and Communalism: The Colonial Legacy in South Asia* (1995), is a Marxist – to be more precise: a Gramscian – study of the development of British, Hindu and Muslim socio-political institutions in colonial India.²³⁶ Gender, too, cannot be divorced from class. Barlas’ approach to gender issues in light of socioeconomic realities can be seen in her critical analysis on the impact of globalization in general, and of new information technologies in particular, on the lives of Muslim women. Sidestepping the conventional line of argument that modernity will necessarily exert a positive influence on Muslim women, she not only points out that such technologies must be accompanied by “a fundamental epistemic shift in how Muslims interpret and practice Islam,”²³⁷ but also questions how applicable such technologies are to the vast majority of humankind:

The growing gap between the rich and the poor suggests that about 99% of people will never have access to such technologies as computers and thus to the rosy new worlds of borderless travel and participatory politics that the internet is thought to have opened up.²³⁸

²³⁴ A. Barlas Interview, 2009. I suspect that, following the revolutions that have swept the Arab world since 2011, she has become more optimistic of the possibility of breaking the shackles of American power.

²³⁵ Barlas, *Democracy, Nationalism, and Communalism*, 203.

²³⁶ Ibid, ix. This work grew out of her doctoral dissertation at the University of Denver, Colorado.

²³⁷ Barlas, “Globalizing Equality,” 91.

²³⁸ Ibid, 93. In light of the fact that one no longer needs to own a computer to access the internet – as evidenced, for example, by the proliferation of internet cafes – and that such online phenomena as

Given Barlas' Marxist background and her emphasis on socioeconomic deprivation, it is surprising that markedly liberal terms like individualism and individuality surface at various points in her exegesis. Accenting the Qur'an's discourse on the genderless basis of "moral praxis" – that God does not differentiate between women and men, judging them solely on their deeds – she argues that this is an example of scriptural support for "individuality" and, borrowing a phrase used by the Qur'anic scholar Barbara Stowasser, "ethical individualism."²³⁹ And as individuals, concludes Barlas, Muslims are "free moral agents."²⁴⁰ This connection between individuality and autonomy is best summed up in the following passage, which Barlas approvingly quotes from the French Muslim intellectual Mohammad Arkoun. A Qur'anic reading based on individuality, Arkoun claims, creates

an infinite space for the promotion of the individual beyond the constraints of fathers and brothers, clans and tribes, riches and tributes; the individual becomes an autonomous and free agent, enjoying a liberty guaranteed by obedience and love lived within the community.²⁴¹

This representation of the individual as "an autonomous and free agent" is problematic for a couple of reasons. Firstly, it subscribes to the fiction of the self-fulfilling subject, to the agent who is in complete control of her/his destiny, thereby ignoring the social circumstances that confine, indeed define, agency, of which moral agency is part and parcel. Secondly, the Qur'an conceives of righteousness in acutely communal terms: that is, to one's ethical relations with the wider human family (Q. 2:177; 90:8-17; 107:1-7). In other words, it is the community – not the individual – that is the centrepiece of moral

Facebook have played an important (though certainly not formative) role in recent popular uprisings like the Arab Spring, Barlas' claim is questionable.

²³⁹ Barlas, *"Believing Women" in Islam*, 130.

²⁴⁰ Ibid, 118-119.

²⁴¹ Mohammad Arkoun, as cited in Barlas, *"Believing Women" in Islam*, 119. For the original citation, see Mohammad Arkoun, *Rethinking Islam: Common Questions, Uncommon Answers*, translated by Robert D. Lee (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1994), 57.

agency. As Barlas herself notes, the text “defines moral personality in terms not only of ‘*ibadah* [‘worship’], but also in terms of responsibilities to the *ummah* [‘the community’], and that the two are connected and inseparable.”²⁴²

In addition to global politics and economic inequality, race figures prominently in Barlas’ thinking. While she undoubtedly experienced racism as a Muslim living in the US, especially in the aftermath of 9/11, her critiques focus on her disorienting experience as a coloured Muslim *woman* in feminist circles dominated by White women and largely blind to racial politics.²⁴³ This insensitivity is most evident in feminist representations of the veil, which is invariably portrayed as a symbol of women’s oppression. Although, as we have seen, Barlas opposes the mainstream Muslim practice of veiling, arguing that it has no scriptural basis, she also criticizes feminists, for whom “the exposed / naked body is represented as the free / liberated body, leading many to see clothed bodies as unfree / imprisoned bodies.”²⁴⁴ Her discourse on the headscarf, therefore, is a compelling example of her commitment to engage in double critique, challenging the privilege of both Muslim men and non-Muslim White women. In her deep-seated grievances with feminism, Barlas shares common ground with Black feminists, who have foregrounded the racial and class dimensions of women’s suffering.²⁴⁵ In so doing, Black women, as well as women of colour from the global South, have had a lasting impact on feminism as a field, which has shifted to a much more comprehensive approach to oppression, incorporating questions

²⁴² Barlas, “*Believing Women*” in *Islam*, 148. My parentheses.

²⁴³ Asma Barlas, “Engaging Islamic Feminism: Provincializing Feminism as a Master Narrative” (paper presented at the Tampere Peace Research Institute, Tampere, Finland, August 31, 2007), 2.

²⁴⁴ Barlas, “*Believing Women*” in *Islam*, 160.

²⁴⁵ bell hooks, “Feminism: A Movement to End Sexist Oppression,” in *Feminisms*, eds. Sandra Kemp and Judith Squires (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 23.

of race and sexuality, class and empire.²⁴⁶ Yet despite these important transformations in feminism, Barlas refuses to identify as feminist. She explains her position as follows:

I am troubled to the extent to which feminism as a discourse has foreclosed the possibility of theorizing sexual equality from within alternative paradigms. An obvious sign of this is the fact that one can't avoid being called a feminist any time one speaks of liberation or equality, no matter what sort of language one speaks in. ...In a sense, then, it is the very inclusivity of feminism – its attempt as a meta and master narrative, to subsume and annihilate all conversations about equality – that I found both imperializing and reductive.²⁴⁷

That is, feminism has attained hegemony over anti-patriarchal thought, making it difficult even to think of non-sexist languages and practices outside of its totalizing framework – a dynamic not so different from Marxism's hegemony over anti-capitalist critique. As we saw in the last chapter, Wadud also refused to identify outright as a feminist, using the qualified label “pro-faith, pro-feminist.”²⁴⁸ While Barlas acknowledges her intellectual debts to feminism as a liberating mode of thinking – indeed, her thesis that the Qur'an is at odds with modern patriarchy and its politicization of women's biology has clearly been informed by feminist theory – she chooses to self-identify in distinctly Qur'anic terms, referring to herself as a “believing woman.”²⁴⁹

Twin Fundamentalisms

Feminism is also problematic because of the secularism that underpins it. Barlas has had a bitter, firsthand experience of feminism's antagonism towards religion. In our interview, she recounted the following incident:

Now lately when I went back to Pakistan on a post-doc in 1999, the women I met who are feminists and who are involved in the Women's Action Forum (WAF) and

²⁴⁶ For examples, see Butler; Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham, US: Duke University Press, 2003); and Zillah Eisenstein, *Against Empire: Feminisms, Racism, and the West* (London: Zed Books, 2004).

²⁴⁷ Barlas, “Engaging Islamic Feminism,” 6-7.

²⁴⁸ Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 80.

²⁴⁹ Barlas, “Engaging Islamic Feminism,” 2. This Qur'anic term refers to Umm Salama's verse (Q. 33:35).

Shirkat Gah, you know, so many NGOs. Most of them don't want to touch Islam with a 10-foot pole. When I made a presentation on my work, one of the women in the audience said very loudly, she just got up and said: *Yeh to perhi likhi mawlani hai* [Urdu]. "This is an educated female mulla," is what she told me. You're no better than a female educated mulla because, you know, to speak about the Qur'an is already to be an obscurantist in the eyes of the liberated, feminist women in Pakistan.²⁵⁰ [My parentheses]

Her grievances, therefore, are not just with White feminists, but also Muslim feminists. In order to differentiate between Muslim women who utilize a religious framework to fight against patriarchy and those who rely upon a secular language of universal human rights, gender activists have suggested the terms "Islamic feminism" to describe the former and "Muslim feminism" to refer to the latter.²⁵¹ However, given that leading intellectuals like Wadud and Barlas do not identify as feminists, even with the word 'Islamic' in front of it, this classification system is misleading. As we have seen, Wadud also takes issue with the secularity of feminism, which is precisely why she adopts the designation "pro-faith, pro-feminist."²⁵² In fact, Barlas observes insightfully, secular feminist portrayals of Islam – that it is a monolith, that it can only be interpreted in one way – are strikingly similar to those of Muslim conservatives, thereby reifying oppressive understandings of Islam.²⁵³ In so doing, secular feminists have made it more difficult for Muslim women to secure their rights in the name of Islam. Feminism reflects a wider problem within secularism. For "secular fundamentalists," writes Barlas, "suffer from an absence of doubt about their

²⁵⁰ A. Barlas Interview, 2009. The Women's Action Forum (WAF) is a feminist organization in Pakistan. Founded in 1981 in Karachi, the group has established chapters in cities throughout the country. WAF espouses a comprehensive approach to women's rights. Its activities include awareness raising about pressing women's issues like domestic abuse; political lobbying against sexist legislation; and providing a general forum wherein different women and women's groups can network. Shirkat Gah – an Urdu term meaning 'a place of participation' – is a Pakistani women's organization that was established in 1975. It seeks to empower women by making them full and equal members of society. Among the organization's many activities are lobbying for more gender-egalitarian legislation and policies; the provision of legal assistance and counselling to women in crisis situations; and the production and dissemination of educational literature on sexual oppression.

²⁵¹ Ali and Leaman, 37-38.

²⁵² Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 79-80.

²⁵³ Barlas, "Texts, Sex, and States," 112.

own positions, to which they adhere uncritically, while advocating critical engagements with religion.”²⁵⁴ For example, she notes that despite secularist portrayals of religion as being inherently violent, secularism has been equally, if not more, guilty of bloodshed, pointing to the two world wars, fascism and the Nazi holocaust.²⁵⁵ Indeed, secularism as a discourse needs to construct a fundamentalist, religious Other in order to justify its own “civilizing project.”²⁵⁶ Secular modernity and religious fundamentalism, therefore, are inextricably linked. In her criticism of secularism, Barlas stands in contrast to Engineer. As we saw in the second chapter, Engineer is rather uncritical of secularism, upholding it as a neutral language to counter communal violence between Hindus and Muslims.²⁵⁷ He thus overlooks the crucial question of *who* gets to define the secular, which in the Indian context has historically been, and continues to be, the prerogative of Hindus.

This is not to imply, of course, that religions are bastions of pluralism. In fact, most Muslims are convinced that Islam exercises a monopoly over truth, constituting *the* path towards God. Challenging this chauvinistic claim, Barlas argues that the Qur’an acknowledges the universality of revelation, as God sent prophets to every nation.²⁵⁸ Islam, then, is simply a continuation of a long, historical chain of divine disclosure. She points to Q. 5:48 in particular, which celebrates religious diversity.²⁵⁹

We have sent down to you the Book with the truth, confirming what was before it of the Book and as a guardian over it. So judge between them by what God has sent down, and do not follow their desires against the truth that has come to you. For each

²⁵⁴ Barlas, *Re-Understanding Islam*, 25.

²⁵⁵ Ibid, 18.

²⁵⁶ Barlas, *Islam, Muslims, and the US*, 112.

²⁵⁷ Engineer, “Secularism and its Problems in India.”

²⁵⁸ Barlas, “Reviving Islamic Universalism,” 246. Although she does not provide any Qur’anic citations to substantiate this specific argument, there are two verses that support this idea that revelation was sent down to multiple peoples: Q. 35:24 claims that divine messengers have been sent to all nations without exception, while Q. 40:78 clarifies that the Qur’an only discusses a select number of prophets, leaving out others. The text, therefore, makes no claim of providing a comprehensive listing of the prophets.

²⁵⁹ Barlas, “*Believing Women*” in *Islam*, 145-146. She incorrectly cites this verse as Q. 5:51.

community among you We have appointed a law and a way of life, and had God wished He would have made you one community, but He wished to test you by that which He gave you. So take the lead in all good works. To God shall be the return of you all, whereat He will inform you about that which you used to differ.

So not only does the Qur'an acknowledge the legitimacy of other faith traditions, at least monotheistic ones (the people of the above mentioned 'Book'), but it also states that the presence of diverse religions is actually a part of the divine plan, for 'had God wished, He would have made you one community.' In addition to embracing the validity of other religions, Barlas acutely appreciates that they, too, are subject to interpretation. If Islam can be read in multiple modes, so can other faith traditions. She observes, for instance, that Christianity has historically been interpreted in drastically different ways, contrasting the tyranny of the Inquisition and the genocide of indigenous South America, justified in the name of Christ, to the radical liberation theologies that emerged in the mid-twentieth century.²⁶⁰ Her discourse on religious pluralism, moreover, is a compelling example of how she is willing to use extra-Qur'anic texts when these texts work to affirm 'the best' meanings of scripture. Specifically, she refers to the medieval Sufi scholar ibn 'Arabi and his meditations on the unity of God²⁶¹ – a theological concept that, as we have discussed earlier, Barlas reflects upon extensively. According to ibn 'Arabi, all revealed religions, irrespective of their divergent *forms*, are, in essence, one.²⁶² To put it another way: while followers of different faiths have embarked upon paths that may or may not overlap, they are all ultimately united by their shared destination: God.²⁶³

²⁶⁰ Ibid, xi.

²⁶¹ Barlas, "Reviving Islamic Universalism," 248-249.

²⁶² Ibid, 249.

²⁶³ Ibid. Barlas is referring here to ibn 'Arabi's notion of *wahdat al-wujud* ('the unity of existence'). On his life and teachings, see *Ibn 'Arabi: The Bezels of Wisdom*, translated and introduced by R.W.J. Austin (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1980); William C. Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn al-'Arabi's Cosmology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998); and William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn 'Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany: State University of New

The brunt of Barlas' writings on religious pluralism, however, centres on the importance of fostering genuine inclusivism within the Muslim community. Pointing to Q. 2:256 – 'There is no compulsion in religion' – Barlas argues that no Muslim has the right to force any type of moral conduct upon a fellow Muslim.²⁶⁴ By reading Q. 2:256 through the lens of *intrareligious* relations, Barlas, like Wadud,²⁶⁵ departs from common understandings of this verse, which have restricted its meaning to *interreligious* relations: namely, as prohibiting forced conversion to Islam.²⁶⁶ Indeed, writes Barlas, in order for a Muslim's submission to God to be meaningful, to carry any "moral weight" it has to be voluntary.²⁶⁷ It is precisely for this reason that she (re)defines Islam, which literally means submission, as "willed submission to God."²⁶⁸ Earlier on we saw Barlas, when exploring the Qur'an's opposition to patriarchy, expound on Abraham's relationship with his father. Here, in making a case for the voluntary basis of faith, she returns to Abraham, but this time examines his role *as* father, in particular his response to God's command to sacrifice his child. The story is narrated below:

When he [Abraham's son] was old enough to go about with him, he said, 'O my son! I see in a dream that I am sacrificing you. Consider, then, what is your view? (*fa-andhur madha tara*).' He said, 'Father! Do whatever you have been commanded. If God wishes, you will find me to be amongst the patient ones.' So when they had both submitted to God's will, and he had laid him down on his forehead, We called out to him, 'O Abraham! You have fulfilled the vision! Thus do We reward the virtuous! That was a manifest test.' Then we ransomed him [Abraham's son] with a great sacrifice, and left for him [Abraham] a good name in posterity. Peace be on Abraham! Thus do we reward the virtuous. Indeed, he was one of our faithful servants.²⁶⁹ (Q. 37:102-111) [My parentheses]

York Press, 1989). For a feminist rereading of ibn 'Arabi, see Sa'diyya Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy: Ibn 'Arabi, Gender and Sexuality* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

²⁶⁴ Barlas, "Believing Women" in Islam, 55.

²⁶⁵ Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 81-82.

²⁶⁶ Asad, *The Message of the Qur'an*, 69-70.

²⁶⁷ Barlas, *Islam, Muslims, and the US*, 136.

²⁶⁸ Barlas, "Believing Women" in Islam, 235.

²⁶⁹ It is interesting to note that the passage does not specify the name of the child. However, the next verse goes on to state – 'And We gave him the good news of the birth of Isaac, a prophet, one of the righteous' (Q. 37:112) – thereby suggesting that Ishmael was the older son and the one referred to in Abraham's

Barlas comments that this passage not only demonstrates that the Qur'an undermines the rule of fathers – Abraham cannot simply do as he pleases with his son, first seeking his opinion and consent ('Consider, then, what is your view?') – but it also illustrates vividly the voluntary nature of faith.²⁷⁰ For in order for the sacrifice to be meaningful, his son had to be willing to go along with it. Barlas' discourse on pluralism within the Muslim community, moreover, is yet another example of her willingness to use extra-scriptural sources. While she cites ibn 'Arabi when discussing interreligious pluralism, she draws upon the insights of the medieval theologian al-Ghazali when calling for intrareligious pluralism.²⁷¹ Al-Ghazali lived in a time when Muslim theologians were constantly attacking one another, hurling accusations of heresy while positing their own theological positions as authentic. But no school of thought, intervened al-Ghazali, can claim a monopoly over truth, for all theologies are interpretations that are historically conditioned and, thus, cannot be conflated with divine revelation.²⁷² This was a profound insight, particularly for someone writing in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, and, as we have seen throughout this thesis, one that is echoed today by radical exegetes.

sacrifice. This is in line with mainstream Muslim understandings of the story. There is a point of disagreement, therefore, between the Qur'anic and biblical accounts, as the latter explicitly posits Isaac as Abraham's only son at the time and the one who was to be sacrificed. See, for example, Gen. 22:1-3, which reads: "After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, 'Abraham!' And he said, 'Here am I.' He said, 'Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.' So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac. And he cut the wood for the burnt offering and arose and went to the place of which God had told him."

²⁷⁰ Barlas, "The Qur'an and Hermeneutics," 29.

²⁷¹ Barlas, "Reviving Islamic Universalism," 247-248. When discussing al-Ghazali, Barlas consults the work of the Islamic scholar Sherman Jackson, *On the Boundaries of Theological Tolerance in Islam: Abu Hamid al-Ghazali's Faysal al-Tafriqa Bayna al-Islam wa al-Zandaqa* ['The Decisive Criterion for Distinguishing between Islam and Masked Infidelity'], translated, annotated and introduced by Sherman A. Jackson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). Also, see *Al-Ghazali's Path to Sufism: His 'Deliverance from Error' and Five Key Texts*, translated and annotated by R.J. McCarthy (Louisville, Kentucky: Fons Vitae, 1999) and Ebrahim Moosa, *Ghazali and the Poetics of Imagination* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005). For a study of al-Ghazali's Qur'anic hermeneutics, see Martin Whittingham, *Al-Ghazali and the Qur'an: One Book, Many Meanings* (London: Routledge, 2011).

²⁷² Ibid, 246-247.

Conclusions

Like Esack's, Engineer's and Wadud's readings, the Qur'an stands at the very heart of Barlas' liberationist exegesis. Because Muslim scripture reflects the actual speech of God, it ought to function as the definitive criterion (*al-furqan*) in shaping our understandings and practices of Islam. Therefore, all Muslims, irrespective of their level of learning, have the solemn responsibility and, in fact, the fundamental right to interpret this central Islamic text, allowing it to speak to their own lives. Barlas is highly critical of other Islamic texts, such as the *hadith* and exegetical tradition, the historic elevation of which has blurred the distinction between human interpretation and divine disclosure. Unlike Wadud, who has recently called for a renewed engagement with the *shari'a*, Barlas categorically dismisses the legal tradition, arguing that it is too patriarchal to sustain serious reform. There are a number of hermeneutical strategies that emerge in her commentary. Interpreting for the present is a key strategy, and one that she shares with all the commentators considered in this study. The task of the interpreter, according to Barlas, is to understand and to implement the teachings of scripture in light of her/his own experiences and lived realities. Here, Barlas draws great inspiration from Umm Salama, who boldly questioned scripture, relating the Qur'an to her own subject position as a woman. Muslims must follow in the footsteps of Umm Salama, approaching the Qur'an in terms of their own problems, for the text cannot speak to new contexts unless new questions are asked of it. But not all 'answers' are equally legitimate; some are more relevant than others. A truly contextual exegesis, then, is one that gleans 'the best' meanings from the Qur'an. And because God, as the author of that text, is a just and compassionate deity, the best meanings must necessarily uphold justice. In order to

interpret the Qur'an in the present time, to arrive at the best meanings, it is essential to distinguish between the text's timeless principles and its historical particulars. Paralleling Wadud, Barlas argues that this can be achieved by undertaking a holistic approach – that is, reading the Qur'an as an integrated whole – and a historically sensitive one, situating the text within its original setting of revelation. That both Wadud and Barlas rely heavily upon textual holism and historical criticism, strategies that play relatively minor roles in Esack's and Engineer's *praxis*-centred exegeses, suggests that these twin hermeneutical strategies form a crucial and distinctive component of women's readings of the Qur'an.

Indeed, throughout this chapter I have shown the striking similarities between Wadud's and Barlas' exegeses. At the same time, however, I have argued that while the works of these two interpreters tend to be conflated, as if they are simply doing 'the same thing,' they are actually engaged in substantively different projects. For whereas Wadud explores the topic of woman in the Qur'an, examining such themes as the Creation Story and depictions of the Hereafter, Barlas interrogates the relationship between the text and patriarchy. And it is her systematic and highly original reflection on this relationship that constitutes her lasting contribution to women's readings of the Qur'an. Specifically, she argues that the text is at variance with both 'traditional' and 'modern' manifestations of patriarchy. In traditional / religious contexts, patriarchy entailed representations of God as Father and, by extension, of real fathers as earthly surrogates of this heavenly patriarch. By reflecting upon the nature of divine self-disclosure – that is, how God describes God's self in scripture – Barlas is able to make a theological case for the Qur'an's opposition to patriarchy. Like Esack, Engineer and Wadud, she emphasizes the absolute justice of God. As a just and compassionate deity, God cannot, by definition, show an affinity for men as

the socially privileged sex. *Tawhid* is the most important feature of such self-disclosure. Because God is One, divine sovereignty is indivisible. When men station themselves as spokespersons, as intermediaries of God they impinge upon this sovereignty and, in so doing, violate *tawhid*. God is not only described in the Qur'an as unpairable, but also unrepresentable. Therefore, portrayals of God in gendered terms, such as being a fatherly or motherly figure (both of which are absent in the text) undermine Islamic monotheism. That Wadud, too, reflects upon the sociopolitical implications of *tawhid* is significant, disclosing the centrality of this paradigm in Muslim women's exegesis. Just as God is not portrayed as Father in the Qur'an, fathers themselves are not elevated over mothers. In fact, although the text speaks in terms of 'parental' rather than 'paternal' rights, it singles out mothers, showing sensitivity to the pains of pregnancy and childbirth. Furthermore, prophets are never venerated as fathers. Abraham emerges as a key prophetic paradigm in Barlas' exegesis. The great rebellion of the so-called 'Patriarch' against his own father – an action that clearly runs counter to patriarchal logic and its consecration of father-rule – exemplifies the sovereignty of God over that of fathers. Nor, for that matter, is Abraham himself celebrated *as* father. Rather, he is referred to in markedly gender-neutral terms, such as *imam* ('leader'), *hanif* ('monotheist') and *khalilullah* ('the friend of God'). While Abraham was refused symbolic fatherhood, Muhammad was denied both symbolic and real fatherhood. For not only is Muhammad never presented as a figurative father of the Muslim community – despite the claims of commentators to the contrary – but he also, as the biographical sources record, lost all his sons in their infancy. Although this last observation is demonstrative of Barlas' interest in using extra-Qur'anic Islamic sources, it also shows that her engagement with such texts, like all the exegetes studied in this thesis,

is inconsistent, selectively picking and choosing whichever aspects of these traditions can corroborate her own readings of scripture. There is little appreciation, then, for these texts as sophisticated, discursive traditions in their own right, as intellectual disciplines with complex histories of hermeneutical engagement and contention.

The Qur'an is also at odds with modern / secular forms of patriarchy. That is, while the text recognizes sexual difference, it does not subscribe to a politics of sexual differentiation, politicizing (and thus engendering) women's biology. Barlas fleshes out this argument by examining a number of women's issues, including polygamy, sexuality and the headscarf. Her analysis of polygamy is illustrative of how she parallels Wadud's exegesis while building on it in novel ways. Like Wadud, she reads the relevant verses in their totality, noting their emphasis on justice and equal treatment towards the wives, which, as the Qur'an later goes on to state, is an impossibility. Echoing Wadud again, she unpacks the verses' immediate historical context, showing that male guardians were exploiting female orphans under their care. These verses, then, addressed a specific crisis in the first Muslim community; they are historically particular, not universally applicable. But the Qur'an's discourse on polygamy, Barlas observes insightfully, also makes no mention of sexual desire, stating that it is a part of men's nature to have multiple partners, thereby making wider, gendered statements about the male body. Conversely, it never claims that it is in women's nature to 'share' a single husband. Barlas draws extensively upon textual holism and historical criticism when wrestling with Q. 4:34, or the so-called Beating Verse. Highlighting its contextual backdrop, she argues that since this verse was revealed in a society in which violence against women was widespread, it should be read as a restriction on, and not a license for, domestic abuse. Barlas also employs a textually

holistic approach, pointing out that the controversial term *idribuhunna* and its various linguistic derivatives are used in diverse ways in other parts of scripture, and thus cannot be defined solely as ‘beat them.’ Her exegesis of Q. 4:34, however, betrays her tendency to idealize the Qur’an’s discourse on gender relations, for however *idribuhunna* is redefined, men remain the subjects of the text, acting upon women who, in turn, become passive objects. Barlas refuses to acknowledge the manifest androcentrism of the text, at least in matters pertaining to sexuality. It is here that a key difference emerges between Barlas on the one hand and Esack and Wadud on the other, as the latter are critical of the Qur’an’s presumption of male audiences. In its apologia for Muslim scripture, Barlas’ exegesis is similar to Engineer’s. The underlying problem with both their interpretations is that they end up essentializing the text. For them, the Qur’an (and, by extension, Islam) can only be liberating; readings to the contrary are simply misreadings.

In a remarkably similar fashion to all the commentators considered in this study, Barlas has a comprehensive approach to social justice, drawing connections between different forms of suffering. And the crucial point of departure for this wider commitment to liberation, I have argued, is her engagement in ‘double critique’: that is, opposing not only oppressive discourses and practices in Muslim communities, but also in non-Muslim Western societies, especially the US. Paralleling Esack, she argues that post-9/11 America has appropriated Islam as a tool of empire, creating a stifling binary between the ‘moderate Muslim,’ who is American-friendly and supportive of Islamic reform, and the ‘militant Muslim,’ who is anti-American, religiously conservative. Barlas, as a Muslim woman devoted to securing justice for all people, finds herself caught between a rock and a hard place. The following passage succinctly sums up her deep-seated frustrations:

For criticizing Muslim interpretive violence, I am courted as a moderate Muslim but, for criticizing the US's political violence, I am denounced as a militant anti-American. Where then is the space for Muslim-Americans like me to live in accordance with our religious and political principles and beliefs?²⁷³

Her commitment to double critique is an attempt to carve out such an alternative, third space, wherein she can speak truth to power in multiple contexts of oppression. Barlas' discourse on feminism is a compelling example of double critique. Just as she wrote her gendered commentary to challenge conservative Muslim readers, she also had secular feminists in mind, for whom Islam is irredeemably patriarchal, even misogynistic. Like Wadud, she criticizes feminism for its secular biases. Indeed, and in contrast to Engineer, Barlas takes issue with secularism as a whole, pointing out its hypocritical tendency to engage religion critically while lacking any doubt in its own assumptions. Her critique of the feminist movement, which has been headed by White women and therefore catered to their own lived experiences, also reflects the centrality of race in her thinking, constantly foregrounding her own subject position as a coloured Muslim woman. Though her earlier research focussed on class, it is important to note that questions of economic inequality continue to play a role in her analysis. For, as her writings on US imperialism, 9/11 and feminism show, power relations are inextricably intertwined; one category of oppression, whether it is that of racism, patriarchy or poverty, cannot be engaged without the others. Finally, she embraces religious pluralism, arguing that Islam is not the only path towards God, but rather one of numerous callings. But the most essential aspect of pluralism is intrareligious pluralism, or the acceptance of interpretive diversity within the Muslim community. Like all the exegetes examined in this dissertation, Barlas is keenly aware

²⁷³ Barlas, *Islam, Muslims, and the US*, 34.

that any potential of implementing, of mainstreaming her liberating readings lies in cultivating a culture of mutual respect and understanding amongst Muslims.

CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

This final chapter will unpack the wider significance of this study, which, I argue, is two-fold. Firstly, liberationist and women's readings of the Qur'an shed valuable insight into the emergence of 'thematic commentary' (*tafsir mawdu'i*) in contemporary Muslim exegesis: namely, (a) the desire to partake in a direct engagement with scripture and, thus, one that is unmediated by the historic exegetical tradition; (b) the conscious foregrounding of the subject position of the reader in the task of interpretation, suggesting a critical linkage between thematic reflection and contextual theology; and (c) the seminal role that print culture has played in transforming the craft of commentary, 'massifying' both the producers and the consumers of religious knowledge. Secondly, the overtly political character of Esack's, Engineer's, Wadud's and Barlas' exegeses, calling for a just social order and upholding a comprehensive approach to liberation, exposes the hegemony of Islamism over our understanding of 'the political' and 'the radical' in Islam.¹ This chapter will end, then, by proposing a new definition of political and radical Islam, and one that can accommodate liberationist and women's readings of the Qur'an.

New Insights into the Rise of Thematic Commentary

Direct Engagement with Scripture

Thematic commentary has become a prominent genre in contemporary Qur'anic exegesis. Conventional commentaries are referred to as *tafsir musalsal* (literally: 'linked

¹ I will define 'Islamism' as a type of religious activism that seeks to establish an Islamic state, whether through militant or peaceful, democratic means.

commentary'), as they commence with the first verse of the first chapter, continuing in a sequential manner to the last verse of the final chapter, and therefore are usually large, multivolume works.² However, not all sequential commentaries cover the entire text, but rather specific chapters or parts. The Egyptian Qur'anic exegete Muhammad Abduh (d. 1905) is a case in point, producing sequential commentaries on select sections of the text, such as the first chapter (*Surat al-Fatiha*, or 'the Chapter of the Opening') and the last part (*Juz' 'Amma*), which is comprised of thirty-seven chapters.³ In contrast to this linear format, thematic commentary focuses, as its name suggests, on a particular subject. As we have seen, all the commentators considered in this thesis read scripture thematically, exploring topics like socioeconomic liberation, gender justice and religious pluralism. To be sure, thematic commentaries do not necessarily have to centre on a single subject and can address a host of different topics. For instance, Rahman – whose hermeneutic we have encountered at various points in this dissertation – authored one of the first thematic commentaries on Muslim scripture, titled *Major Themes in the Qur'an* (1980). The chapters in this commentary were devoted to different, and yet clearly interrelated, topics, such as "God," "Man in Society," "Eschatology" and "Prophethood and Revelation."⁴ While the vast majority of thematic commentaries are nonlinear, it is worthwhile noting here the work of an exegete who has reflected on the Qur'an thematically but in a

² Jane D. McAuliffe, "The Tasks and Traditions of Interpretation," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur'an*, ed. Jane D. McAuliffe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 183.

³ Rotraud Wielandt, "Exegesis of the Qur'an: Early Modern and Contemporary." In *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an*, ed. Jane D. McAuliffe (Leiden: Brill Online, 2012) Accessed 8 May 2012. http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-the-quran/exegesis-of-the-quran-early-modern-and-contemporary-COM_00059. *Juz' (pl: ajza')* literally means a 'part,' and is one of the ways in which Muslims have sectioned the Qur'an. Altogether there are thirty parts, allowing Muslims to recite the entire Qur'an in a month, such as in Ramadan. The last part – popularly known as *Juz' 'Amma* – consists of the shortest chapters and among the first that Muslims memorize. It takes its name from the first verse of the chapter that it begins with. Referring to the promise of resurrection and the Hereafter, the verse reads: "About what do they question each other (*'amma yatasa'aluna*)?" (Q. 78:1)

⁴ Rahman, *Major Themes in the Qur'an*, ix.

distinctly linear fashion: namely, the Egyptian Islamic scholar Muhammad al-Ghazali (d. 1996). Beginning with the first chapter and ending with the last, al-Ghazali approached each chapter as a unified, cohesive unit, unpacking its dominant themes and linking them together as he moved, sequentially, through the text.⁵ Although thematic commentary has emerged in the twentieth century as an increasingly popular mode of exegetical reflection, it is important not to portray conventional, verse-by-verse commentary as being in decline. On the contrary, it remains a robust and influential mode of reading scripture. For example, the Egyptian Sayyid Qutb (d. 1966) and the Pakistani Abul A'la Mawdudi (d. 1979) – two pioneering figures in Islamist thought – wrote sequential Qur'anic commentaries that have attained mass circulation amongst Muslims.⁶ Indeed, Mawdudi's commentary is currently “one of the most widely read sources of its kind in Urdu,”⁷ while Qutb's may well be “the most widely translated and distributed Islamic book of all time.”⁸

A key insight that the exegeses of Esack, Engineer, Wadud and Barlas reveal in terms of the emergence of thematic commentary is the desire to engage the actual text of the Qur'an rather than its historic interpretation. As we have seen, they all underline the privileged status of the Qur'an as the literal Word of God. This critical differentiation between scripture and its interpretation is most pronounced in the gendered readings of Wadud and Barlas, the former pointing out the fallibility of the exegetical tradition as a

⁵ Muhammad al-Ghazali, *A Thematic Commentary of the Qur'an*, translated by Ashur A. Shamis (Virginia: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2000), x.

⁶ Zaman, 39. See Sayyid Qutb, *Fi Zilal al-Qur'an* [In the Shade of the Qur'an], 6 vols. (Cairo: Dar al-Ihya' al-Kutub al-'Arabiyya, 1959) and Sayyid Abul A'la Mawdudi, *Towards Understanding the Qur'an: Abridged Version of Tafhim al-Qur'an*, edited and translated by Zafar Ishaq Ansari (Markfield, Leicestershire: The Islamic Foundation, 2008).

⁷ Sayyed Vali Reza Nasr, “Mawdudi and the Jama'at-i Islami: The Origins, Theory and Practice of Islamic Revivalism,” in *Pioneers of Islamic Revival*, ed. Ali Rahnema (London: Zed Books, 2008), 104.

⁸ Johannes J.G. Jansen, as quoted in Zaman, 39. For the original citation, see Johannes J.G. Jansen, *The Dual Nature of Islamic Fundamentalism* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1997), 51.

thoroughly human construct, and thus limited to the contextual baggage of the exegete,⁹ while the latter goes even further by arguing that the conflation of scripture and interpretation effectively erases “the distinction between God and humans.”¹⁰ This desire to engage the text directly, however, is not restricted to the exegetes examined in this thesis. Rather, it characterizes the craft of thematic commentary. Consider Rahman’s exegesis, which is one of the most important contributions to this burgeoning field. Throughout the commentary, he makes extensive references to the Qur’anic text, as exemplified by the following excerpt that explores the issue of free will:

There is no doubt that the Qur’an does make frequent statements to the effect that God leads aright whom He will and leads astray whom He will, or that God has “sealed up” some people’s hearts to the truth, etc. (2:8, 142, 213, 272; 14:4; 16:93; 24:35; 28:56; 30:29; 35:8), although more often it says that “God does not lead aright the unjust ones,” “God does not guide aright the transgressors,” “God guides aright those who listen, are sincere, fear God.” (2:26, 258, 264; 3:86; 5:16, 51, 67, 108; 6:88, 144; 9:19, 21, 37, 80, 109; 12:52; 13:27; 16:37, 107; 28:50; 39:3; 40:28; 42:13; 46:10; 61:5: “when they went crooked, God bent their hearts crooked” (61:7; 62:5; 63:6). [*sic*] This means that man does something to deserve guidance or misguidance.¹¹

In fact, in the entire work there are only three references to classical and medieval commentators: two referring to al-Tabari,¹² one to ibn Taymiyya.¹³ This emphasis on the actual letter of scripture can also be found, though to a lesser extent than in thematic interpretation, in sequential Islamist commentaries. The exegesis of Qutb is an illustrative example, as he shows little interest in the inherited interpretive tradition, seeking instead to understand the Qur’an through the Qur’an itself, as well as the *hadith*.¹⁴ Such direct

⁹ Wadud, “Alternative Qur’anic Interpretation and the Status of Muslim Women,” 11.

¹⁰ Barlas, “*Believing Women*” in *Islam*, 79.

¹¹ Rahman, *Major Themes in the Qur’an*, 15. Since I am using this passage simply to illustrate Rahman’s overwhelming emphasis on the Qur’an, as opposed to the content of the passage itself, I have not provided the wording of these verses in the Appendix.

¹² Ibid, 74; 76-77.

¹³ Ibid, 31-32.

¹⁴ McAuliffe, “The Tasks and Traditions of Interpretation,” 200. On Qutb and the Qur’an, see Ronald Nettler, “A Modern Islamic Confession of Faith and Conception of Religion: Sayyid Qutb’s Introduction to

engagement with scripture stands in sharp contrast to classical commentary, which was based on interpreting the text through earlier exegetical writings. Indeed, a commentary was so dependent on its predecessors that the Qur’anic scholar Walid Saleh has described classical exegesis as a “genealogical tradition,” for each commentary was in a “dialectical relationship” with the interpretive tradition as a whole and, therefore, cannot be studied in isolation of this tradition.¹⁵ To put it another way: classical exegesis was not so much a commentary of the Qur’an as a commentary of (past) commentaries. This hermeneutic, moreover, was not restricted to scripture, but extended to other traditions like the *shari‘a*, which “developed largely by means of interpretive elaborations on basic [legal] texts.”¹⁶

Textual holism, or a commitment to an integrated reading of the Qur’an, is an inevitable outcome of thematic commentary’s direct engagement with the text. As we discussed in the preceding two chapters, Wadud and Barlas have deep-seated grievances with the traditional format of verse-by-verse commentaries and call for a more holistic approach to scripture, claiming that the text itself supports such an integrated reading.¹⁷ The lack of textual holism in the interpretive tradition was actually a key motivational force behind Rahman’s commentary, which argues that a thematic approach can yield

the *Tafsir, fi Zilal al-Qur’an*,” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 21 (1994): 102-114. For a comprehensive intellectual biography of Qutb, see John Calvert, *Sayyid Qutb and the Origins of Radical Islamism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

¹⁵ Walid A. Saleh, *The Formation of the Classical Tafsir Tradition: The Qur’an Commentary of al-Tha’labi (d. 427/1035)* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 14-15.

¹⁶ Brinkley Messick, *The Calligraphic State: Textual Domination and History in a Muslim Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 30. My parentheses. Insofar as my thesis is a study of Muslim writings on the Qur’an – that is, a commentary of commentaries – it adheres (admittedly inadvertently) to a classical hermeneutic.

¹⁷ Wadud, *Qur’an and Woman*, xii; Barlas, “The Qur’an and Hermeneutics,” 24. While Barlas devotes more attention to the Qur’an’s ‘autohermeneutics’ – a reading strategy that will be discussed in detail shortly – than the other exegetes in this thesis, Wadud also makes an autohermeneutical claim by describing her holistic reading as a ‘hermeneutics of *tawhid*,’ thereby invoking the Qur’an’s central theme: namely, the undivided unity of God.

greater insight into the Qur'an's worldview, or its "cohesive outlook on the universe."¹⁸ Another leading exponent of thematic exegesis, the Egyptian intellectual Hassan Hanafi (b. 1935), echoes Rahman's thesis, writing that thematic commentary can uncover the underlying message – the conceptual heart – of the Qur'an, while linear and sequential commentaries hastily jump from one theme to the next without accumulating meanings, without connecting them together in a systematic way.¹⁹ They are, to use Rahman's wording, "atomistic."²⁰ The arguments forwarded by Wadud, Barlas, Rahman and Hanafi betray a curious paradox of exegesis: specifically, that in order for an interpretation to be holistic, providing insight into the text's wider worldview, it has to be partial, qualified, thematic. Conversely, conventional verse-by-verse commentaries are atomistic precisely because they are encyclopaedic and exhaustive. Indeed, thematic interpretation and textual holism are inextricably linked; the latter is a direct, hermeneutical effect of the former. Textual holism is an inescapable aspect of thematic exegesis because of the nature of the thematic task, as the exegete needs to sift through the entire text with a particular subject in mind, relating the various component parts together in a coherent manner. This is especially acute in the context of Muslim scripture (as opposed to, for instance, the Bible, which is comparatively more linear) since the Qur'an is markedly achronological, with various historical figures, communities and episodes spread out in different parts of the text. The Exodus – which, as we saw in the first chapter, is the principal paradigm of Esack's liberation theology – is a compelling case in point. The

¹⁸ Rahman, *Major Themes in the Qur'an*, xi.

¹⁹ Massimo Campanini, *The Qur'an: Modern Muslim Interpretations*, translated by Caroline Higgitt (London: Routledge, 2011), 75. For the original citation, see Hassan Hanafi, "Method of Thematic Interpretation of the Qur'an," in *Islam in the Modern World*, ed. Hassan Hanafi (Cairo: Anglo-Egyptian Bookshop, 1995), 407-428.

²⁰ Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, 2.

Qur'an does not relate the entire life of a prophet in one piece, the sole exception being that of Joseph, whose story appears in a single, extended narrative in Q. 12:3-101.²¹

While Moses is mentioned roughly 140 times,²² making him the most cited prophet in the Qur'an, these references are scattered in 44 different places in the text.²³ So when Esack wanted to examine Moses' life, he had no choice but to engage in a holistic reading, working through the full text and carefully piecing together the various accounts.

The Role of Experience in Thematic Interpretation

Liberationist and women's readings of the Qur'an also reflect the increasingly important role of experience in interpretation, as the reader consciously foregrounds her/his subject position. In the commentaries of Esack, Engineer, Wadud and Barlas, there is nothing random about their choice of themes; rather, that choice is directly contingent on the struggles facing these exegetes in their everyday lives. Sexism is an obvious example. Wadud's and Barlas' hermeneutical focus on woman and patriarchy, respectively, is clearly related to their own experiences of oppression and marginalization as Muslim women, and it is from this subject position that they expound the text. Their identity is a central component of their readings. While Engineer is not as explicit about his subject position and its role in shaping his liberationist exegesis, he was initially drawn to questions of social justice because of his own formative experiences growing up in an oppressive context. Ruling with impunity, the religious head of the Dawudi Bohras exploited the community, such as by imposing heavy taxes on its members in order to

²¹ Sells, 15. The Qur'an, of course, has its reasons for this eclectic treatment of prophetic narratives. Rather than presenting a comprehensive account of a given prophet's life, the text presumes prior knowledge of these figures and events – through the Old and New Testament narratives – drawing upon select aspects of their lives in order to flesh out wider lessons.

²² Esack, *The Qur'an: A User's Guide*, 154.

²³ Sells, 15.

consolidate his family's financial standing.²⁴ As we saw, this eventually led to a widespread rebellion against his authority, in which Engineer played an integral part.²⁵ Esack, however, is the most explicit commentator when it comes to highlighting his own subject position, to showing the critical connections between his lived realities and choice of themes in interpretation. Consider the very format of his Commentary. The first two chapters are not even devoted to the Qur'an – the text comes later – but to the history of South Africa and the South African Muslim community, and to providing an overview of Esack's own life, especially as an early victim of apartheid and an active participant in the struggle against it.²⁶ These chapters demonstrate vividly that his interest in topics like social liberation, religious pluralism and gender justice are not mere 'interests,' but intimately tied to his own lived experiences. He recalls, for instance, that as a child growing up in the ghettos of the Cape Flats, he was constantly touched by the humanity of his Christian neighbours, instilling in him "a deep awareness of the intrinsic worth of the religious other."²⁷ This awareness was reaffirmed during the struggle against apartheid, in which interreligious solidarity was a prominent feature.²⁸ Furthermore, the roots of Esack's commitment to gender justice, and to a comprehensive justice in general, lie in the suffering of his mother. As he recounts painfully, his father abandoned his mother when Esack was only three weeks old, leaving her to support six children.²⁹ As a

²⁴ Engineer, *On Developing Theology of Peace in Islam*, 171-172.

²⁵ A.A. Engineer Interview, 2010.

²⁶ See "Introduction: In Humble Submission to the Almighty God" and "Chapter One: The Context: Muslims in the Cape" in Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation, and Pluralism*, 1-48.

²⁷ Ibid, 3.

²⁸ Ibid, 8.

²⁹ Ibid, 1-2.

result, she was forced to work from dawn till dusk as an underpaid factory worker, eventually succumbing to her circumstances.³⁰

This hermeneutical move of using experience as a point of departure for scriptural reflection is largely due to recent developments in the understanding of the interpretive task. In classical Islamic thought, the quest for knowledge was viewed as an objective undertaking. As we discussed in the first chapter, this understanding was exemplified by the age-old scholarly distinction between *al-tafsir bi'l-ma'thur* ('commentary based on transmitted sources,' referring to the inherited, exegetical tradition and *hadith* literature) and *al-tafsir bi'l-ra'y* ('commentary based on opinion'), the former treated as an authentic and legitimate mode of interpretation and the latter frowned upon as fanciful conjecture, unless firmly rooted in the exegetical tradition.³¹ Traditional Christianity, too, approached interpretation as "a kind of objective science of faith," delineating two principal sources of theological reflection (*loci theologici*) – biblical scripture and the intellectual tradition – and both of which were understood as fixed and unchanging.³² The late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, however, would witness significant advances in the understanding of the hermeneutical task, particularly in the field of biblical studies, calling into question the assumed neutrality of the exegete. The German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer (d. 2002), for example, pointed out that the reader cannot occupy some sort of pristine, stable and objective vantage point, as if questions of instability lie solely in the text and in its past interpretations, for all readers exist within the flux of history and, therefore, read the Bible through the limitations of their own contextual

³⁰ Ibid, 2.

³¹ McAuliffe, "The Tasks and Traditions of Interpretation," 189-190.

³² Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2008), 3-4.

horizons.³³ This critical insight – that all interpretation is inescapably subjective, contextual – has now become mainstream in the field of hermeneutics.³⁴ As the Christian theologian Stephen Bevans eloquently puts it:

There is no such thing as “theology”; there is only *contextual* theology; *feminist* theology; *black* theology, *liberation* theology, *Filipino* theology, *Asian-American* theology, *African* theology, and so forth. Doing theology contextually is not an option.³⁵

To be sure, there is a crucial difference between the epistemological acknowledgement that ‘theology is contextual’ – that is, that all interpreters are informed by their contextual baggage, such as their socioeconomic, racial and gendered background – and ‘contextual theology,’ which explicitly centres that contextual baggage in the act of interpretation.³⁶ By foregrounding their own contextual realities, liberationist and female interpreters of the Qur’an are located squarely within this second category.

It is precisely its emphasis on a specific topic (or set of related topics) that makes thematic commentary a far more effective, exegetical vehicle through which interpreters can centre their own contexts than traditional verse-by-verse commentary. For while in a sequential mode of interpretation the exegete must respond to one verse after another, and

³³ David Jasper, *A Short Introduction to Hermeneutics* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 108.

³⁴ This development in exegesis is a long and complex story, one that lies outside the scope of this chapter. I would like to highlight here, however, that twentieth-century understandings of the task of interpretation that unsettled the stability, the supposed neutrality of the interpreter were not so much a response to classical scholarship as to deeply objectivist practices of biblical reading that became mainstream in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Greatly influenced by the Enlightenment and its emphasis on reason and scientific enquiry, interpreters approached the Bible increasingly as a historical object of study – a text no different from any other – drawing on tools like historical criticism and literary analysis to uncover its ‘real’ meaning, to discover the ‘real’ Jesus. For pioneering examples of this approach, see Hermann S. Reimarus (d. 1768), *Fragments*, edited by Charles H. Talbert and translated by Ralph S. Fraser (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970); Friedrich Strauss (d. 1874), *The Life of Jesus, Critically Examined*, 3 vols., translated by George Elliot (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); and Ernest Renan (d. 1892), *The Life of Jesus* (London: Watts, 1935). On the emergence of hermeneutics as a discipline and its lasting impact on biblical exegesis, see Anthony C. Thiselton, *Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2009); Jasper; and Werner G. Jeanrond, *Theological Hermeneutics: Development and Significance* (London: SCM, 1994).

³⁵ Bevans, 3.

³⁶ Angie Pears, *Doing Contextual Theology* (London: Routledge, 2010), 1.

is thus restricted to the content of successive passages, in a thematic format the exegete can be more pro-active, starting “from the application of his own questions to the text.”³⁷ This is not to imply that the exegete did not have a say in classical, sequential exegesis, as there was always an interpretive choice in terms of what aspect of a particular Qur’anic passage to reflect upon, like its grammatical composition, legal ramifications and theological underpinnings, and the exegete’s own interests would often determine the approach taken.³⁸ Nor is this to suggest that all thematic commentary is an explicit exercise in contextual theology. I use the word explicit here because all exegesis is, of course, inescapably contextual. In fact, a significant number of thematic commentaries continue to subscribe to acutely objectivist notions, such as ‘scientific exegesis’ (*tafsir ‘ilmi*) – an apologetic body of thematic commentary that seeks to *prove* the complete compatibility of the Qur’an and natural science.³⁹ Rather, my argument is that thematic commentary has emerged as an increasingly popular form of scriptural reflection because it complements a contextual theological approach, acting as a powerful medium through which the exegete can reflect on her/his own context, give this context thematic expression and then use these themes as an analytical framework to engage the text.

But because contextual theology remains on the margins of Qur’anic exegesis, liberationist and female exegetes, as we have seen throughout this thesis, have had to evoke Islamic paradigms in order to legitimize their overtly contextualist readings. In the previous chapter, I described Barlas’ hermeneutic as an ‘autohermeneutic,’ or a form of interpretation that uncovers the ways in which scripture calls for its own interpretation. In

³⁷ Wielandt.

³⁸ McAuliffe, “The Tasks and Traditions of Interpretation,” 183.

³⁹ Stefan Wild, “Political Interpretation of the Qur’an,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur’an*, ed. Jane D. McAuliffe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 281.

her commentary, Barlas drew great inspiration from Umm Salama, whose critique of the androcentric nature of the Qur'an (which was still in the process of being revealed) resulted in the revelation of Q. 33:35, explicitly mentioning women in a strikingly parallel fashion alongside men. That God responded favourably to, rather than ignored or castigated, Umm Salama's criticism represented, for Barlas, a moment in "divine pedagogy," for just as Umm Salama reflected upon her own subject position as a woman when engaging the text so, too, should all Muslims (women and men) raise new questions when reading the Qur'an, drawing upon their own intellect, concerns and needs.⁴⁰

Although Barlas reflects on the Qur'an's autohermeneutics more extensively than the other commentators in this dissertation, in certain ways they all make autohermeneutical claims. When accenting the role of struggle in exegesis, and thus the importance of the reader's realities, Esack also appeals to the roots, arguing that this mode of reading was how the first Muslims engaged the Qur'an. The text was not revealed at a single moment, he points out, but rather came down gradually over an extended period of twenty-three years – what Esack refers to as "progressive revelation" – addressing specific situations, problems and difficulties that emerged in the burgeoning Muslim community.⁴¹ The Qur'an, then, not only spoke to their context, but its language was continuously reshaped by it. In the third chapter, we discussed how Wadud saw her own acutely layered experience of oppression – that is, being a woman, Black and poor, as well as a single mother – in Hagar, who becomes a key paradigm in Wadud's writings. Specifically, she discerned in Hagar, a black slave abandoned in the desert and forced to find water for her

⁴⁰ Barlas, "Holding Fast by the Best in the Precepts," 21.

⁴¹ Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation, and Pluralism*, 54.

child, the plight and suffering of the “homeless, single parent.”⁴² While Engineer is silent on the contextual dimensions of the Qur’an’s autohermeneutics, he still references the text to legitimize his own interpretive methodology. For example, Engineer locates his *praxis*-based approach within scripture, pointing to Q. 4:95, which elevates the *mujahid* (or ‘one who partakes in *jihad*’) over those who sit at home.⁴³

Lasting Effects: The Rise of Print Culture

There are two aspects of the Qur’anic commentaries of Esack, Engineer, Wadud and Barlas that struck me over the course of my research: namely, their brevity and sheer accessibility. Historically, commentaries were encyclopaedic in scope, massive exegetical works that would usually run up to twenty dense volumes.⁴⁴ Indeed, there are references in Islamic biographical dictionaries – a prominent literary genre in Muslim history – of commentaries comprised of fifty to even one hundred volumes.⁴⁵ It is precisely because classical commentaries were so vast that scholars were forced to produce what Saleh has termed “*madrassa* commentaries,” or abridged versions of well-known commentaries that could be practically taught to students in Islamic seminaries.⁴⁶ The length of traditional commentaries stands in sharp contrast to those of contemporary liberationist and female exegetes, which are single-volume works and, thus, significantly shorter: Esack’s *Qur’an, Liberation and Pluralism* is 288 pages; Barlas’ “*Believing Women*” in *Islam* 254 pages; Wadud’s *Qur’an and Woman* 118 pages. While Engineer does not have a single work that focuses solely on the Qur’an – his exegesis is spread out in a number of books – they,

⁴² Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 143.

⁴³ Engineer, *Islam and Liberation Theology*, 7.

⁴⁴ McAuliffe, “The Tasks and Traditions of Interpretation,” 183.

⁴⁵ Saleh, 20. For the original citation, see ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Suyuti, *Tabaqat al-Mufasssin* [The Classes/Generations of the Commentators], edited by Ali Umar (Cairo: Maktabat Wahbah, 1972).

⁴⁶ Saleh, 21.

too, are relatively compact: *Islam and Liberation Theology* is 238 pages; *On Developing Theology of Peace in Islam* 200 pages; and *The Rights of Women in Islam* 183 pages. In addition to their brevity, I was struck by how effortlessly I could access these writings. In terms of acquisition, my physical labours as a researcher were minimal. I simply had to stroll over to the university libraries or order them through a general book distributor like Amazon, picking them up at my doorstep. In the past, however, knowledge acquisition operated in the reverse direction: it was the scholar that moved, not the texts. Learning was an immensely demanding vocation. A medieval scholar was, essentially, an itinerant traveller, constantly setting off for distant lands to gain knowledge. Consider the journeys of ibn ‘Arabi in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries:

So the great Spanish mystic Ibn Arabi (b. 1165) travelled from Murcia to Seville, to Tunis, to Fez, to Cordoba, to Almeria, to Tunis again, to Cairo (twice), to Jerusalem (twice), to Mecca (twice), to Baghdad (twice), to Mosul, Malatya, Sivas, Aksaray, Konya, and Damascus where he died in 1240.⁴⁷

It is important to note here that scholars did not travel merely to acquire various texts and obscure manuscripts, but rather to read these intellectual works with other scholars.

Unlike the modern world, in which the written word is the dominant mode of knowledge transmission, learning was historically defined by oral culture. For writing “was not the mechanical representation of an author’s meaning, and in this sense there was no simple ‘presence’ of an author in a text.”⁴⁸ In order to be ‘read,’ then, a text had to be read out loud in the presence of its author or a scholar who had an *ijaza* (‘license’) to teach that specific text, which he would have acquired either by studying the text with its author or

⁴⁷ Francis Robinson, “Technology and Religious Change: Islam and the Impact of Print,” *Modern Asian Studies* 27, (1993): 237.

⁴⁸ Timothy Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 150.

another scholar who had done so.⁴⁹ In this sub-section, I will argue that these twin aspects of the commentaries examined in this thesis – brevity and accessibility – reflect the transformative impact that print culture has exercised on the field of Qur’anic exegesis in general and on the emergence of thematic exegesis in particular.

Over the past two centuries, the printing press has become a formidable force in Muslim societies. Printing emerged in the Islamic world in the nineteenth century, taking off in South Asia in the 1820s and 1830s and in the Ottoman Empire, Iran and Egypt in the second half of the century.⁵⁰ The very first question that the historian faces, then, is what explains the roughly 350 year gap between the rise of the press in the Islamic world and Christian Europe, wherein printing emerged in the late fifteenth century, playing a key role in the Protestant Reformation (1517-1648)? According to the historian Francis Robinson, the answer lies in the privileged place of orality in traditional Islamic learning, for the printed word challenged the oral word, undermining “what was understood to make knowledge trustworthy, what gave it value, what gave it authority.”⁵¹ In fact, it was because of the potential threat that the printing press posed to religious authority that the ‘*ulama* became the first Muslims to exploit the press, publishing their own tracts in order

⁴⁹ Robinson, 237-238. On modes of learning in the medieval Muslim world, see Jonathan Berkey, *The Transmission of Knowledge in Medieval Cairo: A Social History of Islamic Education* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992) and Konrad Hirschler, *The Written Word in the Medieval Arabic Lands: A Social and Cultural History of Reading Practices* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012). For a classic study of the continued importance of orality in traditional Islamic education in the twentieth century – focussing on learning practices in the Moroccan city of Marrakesh in the 1920s and 1930s – see Dale F. Eickelman, “The Art of Memory: Islamic Education and its Social Reproduction,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 20 (1978): 485-516.

⁵⁰ Robinson, 232-233.

⁵¹ Ibid, 234. Historians have also pointed out that print took longer to spread in the Muslim world due to the technical difficulties of reproducing a cursive, ligatured script with early forms of movable type. As a result, lithography emerged faster in Muslim societies, such as in Southeast Asia. See Michael Laffan, *The Makings of Indonesian Islam: Orientalism and the Narrative of a Sufi Past* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011). For two important anthropological studies on the impact of print culture, focussing on Jordan and Yemen, see Andrew Shryock, *Nationalism and the Genealogical Imagination: Oral History and Textual Authority in Tribal Jordan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997) and Messick, *The Calligraphic State*.

to reach new audiences and consolidate their authority.⁵² The rise of print has been accompanied since the mid-twentieth century by the steady spread of state-sponsored mass education, which has increased the literacy rate considerably.⁵³ In the Arab Middle East, for instance, mass education emerged in the 1950s in Egypt and Morocco and in the early 1970s in Gulf countries like Oman and Yemen.⁵⁴ As a result, by the late 1980s “a critical mass of people with post-secondary education, capable of sustaining an expanded internal market for newspapers, periodicals, and books, began to emerge.”⁵⁵ Although the literacy rate in modern Muslim societies is significantly higher than at any point in history, one should be careful not to over-estimate this phenomenon and, thus, the influence of print. India, Bangladesh and North Yemen are illustrative examples of the limited reach of the press, in which literacy rates in the early 1990s were 36%, 20% and 14%, respectively.⁵⁶

The rise of print culture and popular literacy has led to a remarkable expansion in the ranks of Islamic knowledge production.⁵⁷ As the anthropologist Dale Eickelman and political scientist James Piscatori have observed, a distinguishing feature of contemporary Islam is that “discourse and debate about Muslim tradition involves people on a mass

⁵² Robinson, 240.

⁵³ Taji-Farouki, 14.

⁵⁴ Eickelman and Piscatori, 40.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 39.

⁵⁶ Robinson, 250.

⁵⁷ While my focus in this section is on print media and its seminal impact on Qur’anic exegesis, it is important to note that new media technologies – such as cassettes and satellite, video and the internet – have also exerted a lasting influence on contemporary Islam. See, among others: Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006); Dale F. Eickelman and John W. Anderson eds., *New Media in the Muslim World: The Emerging Public Sphere* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2003); Dorothea E. Schultz, *Muslims and New Media in West Africa: Pathways to God* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2012); Gary R. Bunt, *Islam in the Digital Age: E-Jihad, Online Fatwas and Cyber Islamic Environments* (London: Pluto Press, 2003); Gary R. Bunt, *iMuslims: Rewiring the House of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); Göran Larsson, *Muslims and the New Media: Historical and Contemporary Debates* (Farnham, Surrey: Asghate, 2011); Muhammad el-Nawawy and Sahar Khamis, *Islam Dot Com: Contemporary Islamic Discourse in Cyberspace* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

scale.”⁵⁸ Despite the initial attempts of the *‘ulama* to harness the press, this technology, as numerous scholars of Islam have indicated, has served to subvert religious hierarchy.⁵⁹ Today, the *‘ulama* are no longer the sole, even principal, interlocutors of Islamic thought. Rather, a new class of Muslim intellectuals educated in seemingly secular fields such as medicine and engineering, history and literature, journalism and the social sciences have entered the exegetical circle, vigorously debating the meaning of Islam.⁶⁰ It is within this specific context that we need to situate the exegetes in this thesis, all of whom have been trained in the secular university, with the notable exception of Esack, who also attended a *madrasa*. This new class of interpreters, moreover, employ modes of reading that differ considerably from those of traditional Islamic scholarship, exhibiting little interest in the inherited, interpretive tradition, either out of ignorance or because this tradition, so they argue, is simply out of touch with the problems and needs of the contemporary world.⁶¹ As we have seen, all the commentators considered in this study, especially Wadud and Barlas, share this critique. Indeed, the very bypassing of the tradition constitutes a radical challenge to the *‘ulama*’s authority, for the commentary was a core, discursive site wherein authority was historically reproduced. The following passage by the Islamic historian Muhammad Qasim Zaman deftly demonstrates the critical interplay between traditional exegesis – in this case, a commentary of *hadith* based on the lectures of the South Asian scholar Rashid Ahmad Gangohi (d. 1905) – and the construction of the *‘ulama*’s authority as a class:

⁵⁸ Eickelman and Piscatori, 39. Also, see Dale F. Eickelman’s insightful – though inappropriately titled – article: “Inside the Islamic Reformation,” *Wilson Quarterly* 22, 1 (Winter 1998): 80-89. For a critique of the term ‘Reformation’ when discussing Islamic reform, cf. pg. 23-27 in this thesis.

⁵⁹ Robinson, 245; Eickelman and Piscatori, 43; Taji-Farouki, 13; Peter Mandaville, *Global Political Islam* (London: Routledge, 2007), 309.

⁶⁰ Wild, 278.

⁶¹ Ibid.

But it is not only Rashid Ahmad's presence, or his personal authority, that is perpetuated through this commentary. Muhammad Yahya, who wrote down the lectures; his son Muhammad Zakariyya, who added an introduction and glosses to his commentary; and Abu'l-Hasan 'Ali Nadwi (d. 1999), the former rector of the Nadwat al-'Ulama of Lucknow and the most influential Indian religious scholar of his generation... who added a short biography of Muhammad Zakariyya to it, are all part, in varying measures, of a select group that this commentary helps to consolidate, celebrate, and link both with the earliest generations of Islam, and with other scholars of all times engaged in the venture of transmitting similar materials. Each scholar, dead or living, shares some of the lustre of the others and adds some of his own authority to this company.⁶²

It should be hardly surprising, then, when mainstream traditional scholars, as we have witnessed in the Introduction, lambast new readings of the Qur'an that engage the text directly, as traditionalists are well aware that they have much to lose in terms of religious authority. That being said, it is important to point out that although print has allowed new communities to interpret scripture who would otherwise have been excluded from Islamic knowledge production, in particular women,⁶³ the *'ulama* have also benefited greatly from print technology, which has enabled them to gain access to Islamic texts that would have been rare commodities in the manuscript age, as well as provided them with a cheap and efficient means with which to spread their own interpretations.⁶⁴

Print culture not only 'democratized' the producers of Islamic knowledge, but also drastically enlarged its audiences: that is, the consumers of Islamic knowledge. This development can be discerned most acutely in the growing number of commentaries that were written for the expressly public medium of journals and newspapers. For instance, the Qur'anic exegesis of Abduh and Rashid Rida (d. 1935) – two pioneering Islamic reformists – first appeared in the Egyptian journal *al-Manar* ('The Light Stand') between

⁶² Zaman, 52. The title of Gangohi's work is *Lami' al-darari 'ala Jami' al-Bukhari* ('The Streaming Light on the Collection of al-Bukhari') which, as its name implies, is an exegesis of *Sahih al-Bukhari*, a central *hadith* collection in Sunni Islam.

⁶³ There are, of course, historical exceptions to this patriarchal tendency, especially with regard to the mystical tradition. Cf. fn. 45 on pg. 159 in this thesis.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 54.

1927 and 1935, and is precisely why it is referred to as *Tafsir al-Manar*, or ‘the Commentary of *al-Manar*.’⁶⁵ Muslim South Asia provides another compelling example of the movement of Qur’anic exegesis from private scholarly circles to the public domain of mass media. Earlier on in this chapter, we noted the widely distributed commentary of the Islamist thinker Mawdudi, titled *Understanding the Qur’an (Tafhim al-Qur’an)*. Like Abduh’s and Rida’s exegesis, *Understanding the Qur’an* first appeared in a journal that was edited by Mawdudi and in which, over the course of thirty years (1942-72), he published a running exegesis of the entire text.⁶⁶ Upon completion, the various journal articles were collected and compiled into book format. That one of the most influential interpreters of the Qur’an was a journalist – Mawdudi worked as an editor for numerous newspapers throughout his career, such as *The Muslim*, the official media mouthpiece of the Society of Indian ‘*Ulama (Jami‘at-i ‘Ulama-i Hind)*⁶⁷ – is significant, reflecting the massification of Islamic discourse in general and of Qur’anic exegesis in particular. The looming presence of the West was a key factor that spurred Abduh and Mawdudi to try to reach out to and influence a larger audience. Indeed, the Qur’anic scholar Stefan Wild has argued that modern Muslim exegesis cannot be understood without appreciating the global context in which it has emerged: namely, the superior military and economic might of the modern West.⁶⁸ Abduh’s chief objective was to prove to Muslims that Islam was compatible with modernity, portraying Islam as, to borrow the words of the historian

⁶⁵ Wild, 280. In addition to his exegetical contributions to *al-Manar*, Abduh – a traditional scholar trained at the Cairo-based Islamic University of al-Azhar – was chief editor of the official newspaper of the Egyptian state, *al-Waqa‘a al-Misriyya* (known in English as ‘The Egyptian Official Gazette’). See Yvonne Haddad, “Muhammad Abduh: Pioneer of Islamic Reform,” in *Pioneers of Islamic Revival*, ed. Ali Rahnama (London: Zed Books, 2008), 32.

⁶⁶ Nasr, 103-104.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 100. It is interesting to note that although Mawdudi always identified as a journalist and layperson, he actually completed the *Dars-i Nizami*, the standard *madrassa* curriculum in South Asia. This aspect of Mawdudi’s life, moreover, only became known after his death. See *ibid*, 101.

⁶⁸ Wild, 276-277.

Yvonne Haddad, “the champion of progress and development.”⁶⁹ Similarly, Mawdudi wrote in an environment wherein young Muslims, impressed by the achievements of the West, were adopting Western lifestyles and therefore, in order to counter this devious trend, targeted his commentary not at the *‘ulama* but at the average, lay Muslim reader.⁷⁰ In addition to journals and newspapers, books have become an increasingly popular medium for Islamic discourse, especially in the Middle East and South Asia, which have undergone an Islamic revival since the 1970s. Not to be confused with lengthy, dense and costly scholarly works, these “Islamic books” are often short, attractively designed and cheap, thereby being accessible and appealing to a mass readership that lacks advanced literary skills.⁷¹ It is difficult to over-emphasize the popularity of such religious literature. Focussing on topics like Qur’anic exegesis, the *shari’a* and women’s issues, these books have acquired an enormous readership, especially amongst university students.⁷²

And it is this broader context that can provide critical insight into the current state of Qur’anic commentary and, specifically, the ascendance of thematic commentary. The massification of Islamic discourse, with millions of Muslims now able, via a publication market, to access Islamic texts, has fundamentally transformed the craft of commentary: stylistically, it has significantly shortened exegesis; substantively, it has shifted from a full-scale, encyclopaedic treatment to a partial, thematic one. This transformation was inevitable, for the commentary had to adapt to its new audiences, which were not only

⁶⁹ Haddad, 46.

⁷⁰ Saeed, *Interpreting the Qur’an*, 17.

⁷¹ Eickelman and Piscatori, 40. As the authors note, the French Arabist Yves Gonzalez-Quijano was the first to coin this term. See Gonzalez-Quijano, “Les Gens du livre: Champ intellectuel et édition dans l’Egypte republicaine (1952-1993)” (Ph.D. diss., Institut d’Études Politiques de Paris, 1994).

⁷² Dale F. Eickelman and Jon W. Anderson, “Print, Islam, and the Prospects for Civic Pluralism: New Religious Writings and their Audiences,” *Journal of Islamic Studies* 8, (1997): 55.

exponentially larger but also unschooled in complex, scholarly methods of exegesis.⁷³ Whereas a traditional scholar might have had the time and training to read a convoluted, twenty-volume work, this was simply not an option for the overwhelming majority of lay readers. Clarity and conciseness now became key features of a successful Islamic text, for in order for a text to be read, to gain widespread distribution, it had to respond effectively to the demands of its readers, being able to capture and to sustain their interests – a feat that would be difficult, if not impossible, to achieve with a lengthy, dense text. These are, in fact, defining traits of the Islamic books that have become popular in recent decades, written in clear prose – sometimes even in the local vernacular language – and strikingly compact, mostly taking the form of manuals, pamphlets and primers.⁷⁴ The encyclopaedic commentary is problematic, therefore, because it is designed for a completely different audience. A child of its time, it addresses a small, closely knit circle of scholars. Its sheer breadth and the disparate, disconnected nature of its verse-by-verse hermeneutic are at variance with contemporary needs for lucidity, succinctness, the ability to speak to a mass readership. In contrast, thematic exegesis, by focussing on a specific subject or set of related subjects rather than offering a comprehensive exposition, is not only considerably shorter but can centre on issues that are of pressing concern and relevance, or merely of general interest, to its readers. The rise of this form of commentary, then, is inextricably

⁷³ This dynamic has been reinforced with the emergence of new media technologies such as the internet, which has made it possible for anyone, irrespective of educational level, to access effortlessly the Qur'an and other Islamic texts – often in the form of brief articles and discussion threads / forums – and to partake in religious debate from the comfort and privacy of one's home. Television has, of course, played a key role in accelerating the massification of Islamic discourse, most notably with the rise of popular televangelists like the Egyptian Amr Khaled (b. 1967). Khaled has become something of a phenomenon in the Arab street, despite the fact that he has no traditional Islamic training, having studied accounting at Cairo University. The argument could be made that it is precisely Khaled's lay background (in addition to his exploitation of satellite television) that has enabled him to secure such massive followings, imbuing him with a certain earthly appeal – a worldly relevance – to the average, uneducated Muslim listener. On Islam and new media, cf. fn. 57 on pg. 303 in this thesis.

⁷⁴ Eickelman and Piscatori, 42-43.

tied to the emergence of print culture and mass literacy, of new producers and consumers of Islamic knowledge. Thematic commentary, too, is a child of its time.

In this sub-section, I have used the thematic approaches of the interpreters examined in this thesis as a point of departure to make a larger argument about the ascendance of thematic commentary and its relationship to print culture. In doing so, however, I do not mean to imply that their writings are situated within the type of popular Islamic literature that we have discussed above. Rather, all the exegetes considered in this dissertation, with the exception of Engineer, are academics and publish with university or academic trade presses like Oxford University Press (Wadud), University of Texas Press (Barlas) and Oneworld Publications (Esack). As such, their commentaries belong to a genre within contemporary Islamic literature that speaks to a more elite readership that is familiar with their complex hermeneutical methods and theoretical frameworks.⁷⁵ That being said, their commentaries are still shaped by external factors. Indeed, there are remarkable parallels between the forces exerted on their writings and on popular Islamic literature. Clarity and marketability, for instance, have become crucial criteria for academic publication houses. Discussing the transition from doctoral dissertation to book, Gregory Colón Semenza – a scholar of medieval English literature – writes:

...editors will be focussed on numerous practical considerations. How much need is there for such a book? Is this book likely to sell? How much work will the press need to ready the book for publication? Whereas jargon may sound intelligent to you, it will likely suggest to an editor your inability to communicate clearly. ...In constructing a prospectus, you must communicate the marketability of the project without surrendering its intellectual integrity.⁷⁶

In certain ways, the transformation of a thesis into a book – shifting from an audience of a handful of examiners to hundreds, even thousands, of readers – is a microcosm of our

⁷⁵ Taji-Farouki, 15.

⁷⁶ Gregory Colón Semenza, *Graduate Study for the 21st Century: How to Build an Academic Career in the Humanities* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 219.

preceding discussion on the movement of Islamic discourse from restricted, scholarly circles to a mass readership. As noted in the above passage, in order to be accessible to specialists in other fields, as well as lay readers, an academic book needs to be able to ‘communicate clearly’ and without ‘jargon.’ Secondly, while contextual information may need to be added in order to make the book comprehensible to those in other disciplines, the process is, essentially, one of “pruning,” removing the literature review section, long discussions of methodology and extensive footnoting.⁷⁷ Conciseness is especially acute in trade publishing, as it is more difficult to maintain the reader’s interest over a lengthy work.⁷⁸ So just like mainstream print culture, the demands of academic print culture are at variance with the voluminous and convoluted nature of traditional exegesis. Thematic commentary, on the other hand, with its eschewal of encyclopaedic comprehensiveness and focus on select topics, is much more compatible as an exegetical format. Moreover, traditional commentary’s approach of reading one verse after another without amassing meanings in a systematic way, and of mustering prior interpretations without necessarily offering new ones, conflicts with academia’s heavy emphasis on advancing knowledge, on forwarding original arguments.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Beth Luey, *Handbook for Academic Authors* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 40-41.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 161-162.

⁷⁹ This actually reflects a paradox in the relationship between the scale and nature of knowledge in traditional learning on the one hand and contemporary academia on the other. For despite the majestic size of traditional Qur’anic commentaries, and of medieval Islamic scholarly works in general, their aims were markedly modest, humble: to seek (*talaba*) and to preserve (*hafaza*) knowledge rather than the more grandiose objective of originating knowledge, of forwarding bold and entirely new understandings. Conversely, the culture of contemporary academia celebrates, indeed is defined by, originality and radical creativity while, at the same time, emphasizing succinctness and lucidity. I am grateful to James McDougall for this insight.

Rethinking the Political and the Radical in an Islamic Context

The Hegemony of Islamism

In this final section, I will unpack the implications of liberationist and women's readings of the Qur'an in terms of our understanding of political Islam. In mainstream Western discourse, Islamism, synonymously referred to as political or even radical Islam, is represented as a threat to the West. For instance, the Lebanese-American sensationalist writer Brigitte Gabriel, in *They Must Be Stopped: Why We Must Defeat Radical Islam and How We Can Do It* (2010), warns the American public that Islamists are inherently violent and bent on waging *jihad* – what Gabriel defines as “Holy War” and entailing “terrorist acts” – against anyone who does not believe in the Qur'an.⁸⁰ She points to the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood as an example, describing the movement as “the world's oldest and most sophisticated Islamic terrorist group.”⁸¹ In this discourse, the ultimate objective of Islamist movements is to create, by force, a worldwide Islamic state. So the American (and equally polemical) writer Bruce Bawer claims, in *While Europe Slept: How Radical Islam is Destroying the West from Within* (2006), that European Muslim communities are being led by fundamentalists who wish to establish, within Europe, “a caliphate governed according to shari'a law – the law of the Koran,” and view militant Islamic groups as key allies in a wider “global jihad” to attain this aim.⁸² Islamism or “fundamentalist Islam,” Bawer continues, challenges the very values of Western civilization, such as democracy, religious tolerance and human rights.⁸³ These writings

⁸⁰ Brigitte Gabriel, *They Must Be Stopped: Why We Must Defeat Radical Islam and How We Can Do It* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2010), 24-25.

⁸¹ Ibid, 76.

⁸² Bruce Bawer, *While Europe Slept: How Radical Islam is Destroying the West from Within* (New York: Anchor Books, 2006), 3.

⁸³ Ibid, 104.

fail, indeed refuse, to distinguish between Islam and Islamism, maintaining that violence and theocracy are inherent to the Muslim faith. Gabriel even goes so far as to juxtapose so-called Judeo-Christian culture, based on “love, tolerance, and forgiveness,” with “the sword of Islam,” which has been seething with hatred and bigotry for the past fourteen hundred years.⁸⁴ In terms of Muslims and theocracy, the neo-conservative historian Bernard Lewis argues, in *The Political Language of Islam* (1988), that there is no separation of Church and State in Islam:

It was never so in the past, and the attempt in modern times to make it so may perhaps be seen, in the longer perspective of history, as an unnatural aberration which in Iran has ended and in some other countries may also be nearing its end.⁸⁵

The Islamic state, therefore, is inseparable from Islam; there is something essential within Muslims that inclines them towards theocratic governance. The Islamist drive to erect an Islamic state, moreover, is pathological: a reactionary tendency in Muslim societies to the historic decline of Islamic civilization and, in its place, the rise of Western civilization and modernity. According to Lewis, the question that haunts the Muslim mind – notice my usage of the singular – is “What went wrong?,” as Muslims desperately struggle to come to terms with the cultural, scientific and military superiority of the modern West.⁸⁶

Such sweeping and problematic portrayals have not remained uncontested. The historian Zachary Lockman writes that two general currents can be discerned in Western discourses about Islamism: the “hard-line position” as represented above by Lewis and a

⁸⁴ Gabriel, 15-16.

⁸⁵ Bernard Lewis, *The Political Language of Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 2. While Islamophobic writings like those of Gabriel and Bawer cannot be epistemologically disentangled from a long history of demonizing Islam in the West, harking back to the Middle Ages, it is important to note that Lewis’ writings in particular – which have been circulated widely in the US – have played a key role in mainstreaming such representations of Islam today. Indeed, Huntington’s highly influential book on an impending Clash of Civilizations between Islam and the West, which we discussed in the first chapter on Esack, was inspired largely by Lewis’ article, “The Roots of Muslim Rage,” *The Atlantic Monthly* 266 (September 1990).

⁸⁶ Bernard Lewis, *What Went Wrong? The Clash Between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2003), 3-7.

more “liberal camp,” exemplified by the writings of the Islamic scholar John Esposito, who has underlined the complexity and diversity of Islamist movements.⁸⁷ Esposito and his close colleague, the Islamic historian John Voll, have shown that since the 1980s the majority of Islamists, such as in Egypt, Jordan and various North African countries, have eschewed violence, embraced the democratic process and adopted gradualist, grassroots approaches.⁸⁸ Furthermore, the minority of Islamists that use militancy to further their goals do not do so because of an inherent disposition towards violence within Islam, but due to state repression. Esposito gives the example of the assassination of the Egyptian president Anwar al-Sadat in October 1981 by Khalid Islambuli, a member of the militant Islamist group *Jama‘at al-Jihad* (‘The Organization for *Jihad*’), and who, after gunning down the president, proclaimed: “I am Khalid Islambuli, I have killed Pharaoh and I do not fear death.”⁸⁹ This action, Esposito argues, was a direct outcome of Sadat’s immense unpopularity in Egypt, wherein both the religious and secular opposition referred to him as “Pharaoh,”⁹⁰ a Qur’anic figure who embodies tyranny. Sadat’s unpopularity was a result of broader policies like economic liberalization – which widened the gap between the wealthy and the poor – and Egypt’s peace treaty with Israel in 1979, as well as more immediate actions, in particular his large-scale crackdown on oppositional activists in

⁸⁷ Lockman, 221-222. For more examples of what Lockman broadly terms the “liberal camp,” see Bruce Lawrence, *Shattering the Myth: Islam Beyond Violence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998); Emran Qureshi and Michael A. Sells eds., *The New Crusades: Constructing the Muslim Enemy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003); and Fred Halliday, *Islam and the Myth of Confrontation: Religion and Politics in the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2002); as well as the works on Islamism cited in this paragraph. Edward Said’s *Covering Islam: How the media and the experts determine how we see the rest of the world* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981) and, of course, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978) have played a pioneering role in critiquing the ways in which Islam and Muslims have historically been, and continue to be, represented in the West.

⁸⁸ John L. Esposito and John O. Voll, *Islam and Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 179.

⁸⁹ Esposito, 95. The Islamist assassination of Sadat is one of the great ironies of his reign, as he actively encouraged Islamists, freeing thousands of Muslim Brotherhood members imprisoned during the Nasser period. Sadat’s underlying objective in supporting Islamism and adopting a religious public persona was to counter the legacy of secular Nasserism, which, he felt, posed the most significant challenge to his rule.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

September 1981.⁹¹ In other words, a crucial move that scholars like Esposito and Voll made was abandoning essentialist claims and, instead, examining the social and historical circumstances in which Islamist movements emerged. Indeed, this emphasis on context is *the* guiding framework in the critical study of Islamism.⁹² In this discourse, the demands of most Islamists are not cosmic and global but acutely concrete and national, rooted in the pressing problems facing their own countries. The Muslim Brotherhood, for instance, is extensively engaged in social and charity work, constructing “mosques, hospitals, clinics, day-care centres, youth clubs, legal aid societies, foreign language schools, banks, publishing houses,” and numerous other institutions.⁹³ In doing so, the Brotherhood has basically provided everything that the Egyptian state has failed to deliver to its citizens.⁹⁴ Its activities, therefore, cannot be divorced from the realities of contemporary Egypt.

By unpacking the contextuality of Islamism, I do not mean to partake in an apologetic dichotomy, which Esposito to a certain extent plays into: namely, that Islamist movements are *only* violent in states of oppression and, conversely, that they are necessarily peaceful in contexts wherein they are allowed to mobilize freely, to express themselves politically. In other words, that when Islamists do engage in violence, it is justified, targeting the authoritarian state as the source of their suppression. Islamist relations with Coptic Christians in Egypt are a compelling counterpoint. As Esposito and Voll themselves note, with the emergence of militant Islamism in the 1970s the relationship between Muslims and Copts deteriorated, particularly in Upper Egypt in

⁹¹ James Jankowski, *Egypt: A Short History* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2000), 177.

⁹² Aslan, 29-30; Beinín and Stork, 22; Mohammed Ayoob, *The Many Faces of Political Islam: Religion and Politics in the Muslim World* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2008), 1; Salwa Ismail, *Rethinking Islamist Politics: Culture, the State and Islamism* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006), 2.

⁹³ Esposito and Voll, 178.

⁹⁴ This is not to imply, however, that the movement is comprised of the rural and uneducated poor. On the contrary, the Brotherhood – and Islamism in general – is an urban phenomenon, its members consisting mainly of young, educated professionals in fields like medicine and engineering. See Mandaville, 97.

1972 and 1978-81, resulting in anti-Coptic demonstrations; the burning of churches and Coptic businesses; and the killing of various members of the Coptic community.⁹⁵ The persistence of Muslim-Coptic tensions today, occasionally erupting into riots and outright murder, are a lasting legacy of this period. It is crucial to appreciate here the fundamental difference between Islamist militancy against the state and Copts, for the latter are neither complicit in the regime nor a materially privileged minority, being economically spread out in Egyptian society. On the contrary, the Copts have been at variance with the state, especially the Sadat regime. In fact, during the crackdown in September 1981 that was mentioned earlier, Muslim oppositional activists were not the only targets: three Christian organizations were dissolved and a number of Christians arrested, most notably Pope Shenouda III (d. 2012), the head of the Coptic Church.⁹⁶ Rather, my intention in discussing the contextual dimensions of Islamism is to emphasize its fluid nature, to counter representations of Islamist movements as static, monolithic. Consider their discourse on the *shari'a*. While Islamists collectively call for the implementation of Islamic law, they differ sharply as to what exactly this entails, some pushing for the application of *shari'a* to specific areas of the law, such as civil law, while others firmly uphold “a completely Islamized system,”⁹⁷ thus including criminal law and the *hudud* punishments.⁹⁸ Even the call for an Islamic state – the defining feature of Islamism – has

⁹⁵ Esposito and Voll, 188. To be sure, Muslim violence against Copts has been spearheaded by fringe, militant movements like the *Jama'a Islamiyya* (literally, ‘the Islamic group’) while the more mainstream Brotherhood has been relatively inclusive of Copts. In the 1987 elections, for example, ‘the Islamic Alliance’ – a coalition comprised of the Brotherhood, the Labor Party and the Liberal Party – included Coptic candidates on its electoral list and, in 1989, proclaimed that “brother Copts in particular and the people of the book [that is, Christians and Jews] in general have the same rights and obligations as Muslims.” [My parentheses] See *ibid*, 180-181.

⁹⁶ Jankowski, 177.

⁹⁷ Mandaville, 57.

⁹⁸ Derived from the Qur'an and *shari'a*, the *hudud* (literally, ‘the limits’) refer to punishments that are to be administered for select crimes, such as theft and *zina* (illicit sexual relations). The penalty for theft in

not always been at the forefront of their discourses, but, at various junctures, has been shrewdly understated depending on the wider political climate. When Sadat's successor Husni Mubarak (r. 1981-2011), for instance, made it clear in the 1980s that any political dissent would be confined to party politics, the Brotherhood strategically shifted their language from demanding *shari'a* implementation to the right to establish parties, participate in national elections and publish newspapers.⁹⁹ Far from relinquishing their objective of establishing an Islamic state, they decided to play the regime's own game and to lobby for their interests through the existing system, even if this system worked against them. Therefore, the accenting of the historicity of Islamism, as embodied in the scholarship of Esposito and the so-called liberal camp, is integral because it allows us to appreciate the complexity, the ever-changing character of this global phenomenon.

Yet despite this reappraisal of Islamism, there is an enduring pattern of continuity between both 'camps': specifically, equating political Islam with Islamism. So the political scientist Mohammed Ayoob, using the two terms interchangeably, defines Islamism as "a form of instrumentalization of Islam by individuals, groups and organizations that pursue political objectives;"¹⁰⁰ the French intellectual Olivier Roy maintains that Islamism is a movement that "conceives of Islam as a political ideology;"¹⁰¹ the political scientist Nazih Ayubi argues that political Islam is "the doctrine and/or movement which contends that Islam possesses a theory of politics and

scripture – cutting off the thief's hands – can be found in Q. 5:38-39. It is important to note that Muslims, right from the dawn of Islam, have hermeneutically grappled with these verses in light of their own circumstances, a famous example being the second caliph 'Umar ibn al-Khattab (d. 644), who rendered the punishment for theft void during a famine. See Asad, *The Message of the Qur'an*, 174. For a discussion of *zina* and its prescribed penalty, cf. pg. 103-104 in this thesis.

⁹⁹ Alison Pargeter, *The Muslim Brotherhood: The Burden of Tradition* (London: Saqi, 2010), 44.

¹⁰⁰ Ayoob, 2.

¹⁰¹ Olivier Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam*, translated by Carol Volk (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1994), ix.

the State”¹⁰² (that is, Islamism); and Salwa Ismail, another political scientist, presents Islamist politics as “the activities of organizations and movements that mobilize and agitate in the political sphere while deploying signs and symbols from Islamic traditions;”¹⁰³ to offer several definitions. In other words, Islamism has effectively attained hegemony over the meaning of political Islam. The scholarship of the political scientist Peter Mandaville is one of the few exceptions to this rule, observing that not all Muslim political actors who are motivated by Islam and draw upon Islamic traditions and symbols identify with the Islamist project of creating an Islamic state.¹⁰⁴ Here, Mandaville refers to the alternative framework of ‘Muslim politics’ proposed by anthropologist Dale Eickelman and political scientist James Piscatori. The term Muslim politics, Eickelman and Piscatori argue, allows us to widen the scope of Muslim political activity considerably, as it entails “a contest over people’s understandings of and wishes for social order” and the usage of Islamic symbols and languages to frame, to legitimize such contestation.¹⁰⁵ Islamism, then, is simply one expression of Muslim politics. While political Islam continues to be generally (though, as we have just seen, not exclusively) equated with Islamism, radical Islam continues to be defined in terms of global ‘Jihadi’ organizations like al-Qaeda. Mandaville, for instance, argues that “Radical Islamism,” a term that he uses synonymously with “radical Islam,”¹⁰⁶ has two defining features that differentiate it from mainstream Islamism: firstly, a transnational vision that seeks to construct a “pan-Islamic polity or renewed caliphate,” thereby challenging the legitimacy of the nation-state; and, secondly, the use of “violent struggle (*jihad*)” as a legitimate

¹⁰² Nazih Ayubi, *Political Islam: Religion and Politics in the Arab World* (London: Routledge, 2006), ix.

¹⁰³ Ismail, 2.

¹⁰⁴ Mandaville, 20-21; 58.

¹⁰⁵ Eickelman and Piscatori, 5.

¹⁰⁶ Mandaville, 261.

means to attain this objective.¹⁰⁷ This juxtaposition of radical Islam as a global *jihadi* movement with mainstream Islamism as a national and mostly peaceful one can now also be found in more popular literature. For example, the Iranian-American intellectual Reza Aslan, in *How to Win a Cosmic War: Confronting Radical Islam* (2009), parallels Mandaville's approach, emphasizing the transnational, borderless discourse of "Jihadists" like al-Qaeda and contrasting it to the national character of mainstream Islamist movements, such as the Brotherhood.¹⁰⁸

Towards a New Understanding of Political and Radical Islam

As this dissertation has documented, Esack, Engineer, Wadud and Barlas all have expressly politicized discourses, exemplified by their commitment to a comprehensive justice. While they are involved in specific struggles, they constantly make connections with other forms of oppression and express their solidarity with struggles against such oppression. Their liberationist discourses thus range from critiques of racial apartheid and communal violence to global capitalism and American imperialism. Their writings, moreover, challenge the very meaning of 'politics' and 'the political.' These terms are commonly used to describe activities and institutions related to public governance, especially within the framework of the modern nation-state, such as political lobbying and elections, the activities of the government bureaucracy and the military.¹⁰⁹ But these exegetes exhibit a much broader understanding of politics, of what constitutes the political, for oppression is not perpetrated by the state alone but exists in the fabric – that

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 239. He nuances this argument by giving the example of the Islamist movement *Hizb al-Tahrir* (literally, 'The Party of Liberation'), which seeks to establish a global Islamic caliphate but operates at the national level – setting up branches in countries throughout the world – and eschews violence.

¹⁰⁸ Aslan, 29-30.

¹⁰⁹ Mandaville, 5-6.

is, the languages and practices – of everyday life. So in addition to national and international affairs, they address local issues like the stigmatization of people living with HIV/AIDS and religious exclusivism in the Muslim community, both with regard to non-Muslims as well as their own coreligionists. The quest for gender justice – which, as we have seen, is crucial for all the interpreters in this thesis, in particular Wadud and Barlas – is perhaps the most compelling example of a political discourse that deeply problematizes conventional approaches to politics. Indeed, feminists have played a pioneering role in transforming our understanding of the political. This redefinition was, in fact, a central aspect of second-wave feminism (1960s–the present), as captured in its famous credo: “the personal is political.”¹¹⁰ Whereas first-wave feminism (1830s–1920s) focussed on women’s suffrage and civil rights,¹¹¹ second-wave feminism collapsed the divide between public and private, underscoring the complex, layered nature of women’s suffering. Now equally political were issues that had previously been considered private, familial affairs like “abortion and reproductive rights, violence against women, sexual harassment, child care, and housework.”¹¹² Politics was radically redefined, therefore, as being any space wherein power relations existed, in this specific case, in which power was exercised by men, resisted by women. Although Wadud and Barlas do not identify as feminists, their liberationist readings, as well as those of Esack and Engineer, clearly (if not explicitly) subscribe to this understanding of the political as pervading every aspect of human life. In their writings, problems of patriarchy, stigma and religious chauvinism are as pressing as those of occupation, imperialism and global poverty, for any space in which oppression is

¹¹⁰ Miriam E. David, *Personal and Political: Feminisms, Sociology and Family Lives* (Stoke on Trent, UK: Trentham Books, 2003), 28.

¹¹¹ Ibid, 1.

¹¹² Ann Bookman and Sandra Morgen eds., *Women and the Politics of Empowerment* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), 8-9.

perpetrated is an acutely political one. In other words, while the political vision of Islamism is to establish an Islamic *state*, which may or may not include social justice, the political vision of Islamic liberation theology is to build an inclusive and just *society*, a new social order wherein justice, dignity and compassion permeate all aspects of life.

The overtly political discourses of liberationist and female exegetes, especially in light of Islamism's hegemony over political and radical Islam, force us to redefine the meaning of these two terms. Mandaville offers a sound critique of political Islam, pointing out that it implies that understandings and practices of Islam exist that are not political and "just religious,"¹¹³ adding that any rejection of politics is itself "a particular sort of political act."¹¹⁴ Despite this insightful observation, I would like to reclaim political Islam as an analytical category, drawing upon our earlier discussion of contextual theology. Describing the difference between contextual theology and the fact that all theology is contextual, the Christian scholar Angie Pears writes:

As a general rule 'contextual theology' is used to refer to that theology which *explicitly* places the recognition of the contextual nature of theology at the forefront of the theological process. ... This is different from the claim that all theology is contextual. One is a theological stance which places and celebrates context at the centre of the theological enterprise, and the other an epistemological claim about the contextual nature of all theology.¹¹⁵

In a similar vein, I argue that while all understandings and practices of Islam, by virtue of their existence within a web of power relations, are inescapably political, 'political Islam' is an engagement with the faith that is self-consciously political, that explicitly situates itself within a wider political project. This definition has two implications. Firstly, though it includes Islamism, it is certainly not restricted to it and can accommodate alternative Islamic political discourses like those of Esack, Engineer, Wadud and Barlas. Secondly,

¹¹³ Mandaville, 20.

¹¹⁴ Ibid, 6.

¹¹⁵ Pears, 1.

just as there is nothing innately oppositional about contextual theology – theoretically, it simply foregrounds one’s context, irrespective of whether it is marginalized or privileged – so, too, there is nothing inherently oppositional about political Islam. That is, political Islamic actors can be staunchly opposed to the status quo or thoroughly aligned with it. Consider our discussion of Islamism in Egypt. In this definition, Islambuli’s assassination of Sadat is clearly an example of political Islamic action. But, for that matter, so is Muhammad Syed Tantawi’s (the highest ranking religious official at al-Azhar, the prestigious Cairo-based *madrasa*) invitation to a leading Israeli rabbi, Yisrael Meir Lau, to partake in religious dialogue in 1997.¹¹⁶ In the context of Egypt, which has had a highly unpopular peace treaty with Israel since 1979, this invitation by a prominent supporter of the regime was plainly part of a larger political project: namely, normalizing Egyptian-Israeli relations.¹¹⁷ Unsurprisingly, it was met with widespread condemnation in Egypt. And just as liberation theology reflects a particular form of contextual theology, privileging contexts of oppression as its hermeneutical point of departure, radical Islam, I argue, is a specific expression of political Islam: dissident, oppositional, protest-oriented. What makes radical Islam radical, therefore, is not a transnational basis or an espousal of violence (though these features may figure into select forms of radical Islam), but an underlying commitment to challenge and fundamentally revamp the existing, oppressive status quo. This definition thus echoes the original meaning of the word “radical” – which entails “supporting complete political or social reform,” as well as “departing from the

¹¹⁶ Geneive Abdo, *No God but God: Egypt and the Triumph of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 64.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

tradition,”¹¹⁸ from established practices – and is, in fact, precisely how scholars of other religions routinely use the word.¹¹⁹ What makes this definition compelling is its plurality, effectively encompassing the vast spectrum of radical Islamic thought and action in all its diversity, and of which liberationist and women’s readings of the Qur’an are a crucial component. In so doing, it dethrones the hegemony of global *jihadi* movements over our understanding of radical religiosity in an Islamic context.

I would like to end here with a note of clarification. One may be tempted to refer to liberationist and female exegetes as ‘liberal Muslims,’ as exemplars of ‘liberal Islam,’ especially given their arguments for religious pluralism, both amongst Muslims of different interpretive shades and with members of other faith traditions. However, this designation is misleading, if not blatantly inaccurate, for a couple of reasons. Firstly, it fails to capture the revolutionary thrust of their readings, their express solidarity with the marginalized against the powerful. As this thesis has shown, Esack, Engineer, Wadud and Barlas are not interested in modest reforms, but in a lasting, structural transformation in the relations of power. Indeed, insofar as modest reforms are proposed by the status quo as a means of evading more meaningful change, they may well be opposed to the language of reform altogether. Their Islamic discourses, therefore, are anything but ‘moderate,’ at least from the perspective of the privileged. Secondly, the term liberal, which is used in political contexts to denote an individual or a group who favours free

¹¹⁸ Catherine Soanes ed., *Paperback Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 686.

¹¹⁹ For instance, see Bradstock and Rowland, *Radical Christian Writings: A Reader*, which is an anthology of letters, tracts, sermons and scholarship, making a case for a historic tradition of speaking truth to power in Christianity. Figures include the early Palestinian convert Justin (d. 165) and his renunciation of worldly riches in favour of communal living; the charismatic preacher Gerrard Winstanley (d. 1676) and his support of the Digger Movement in England, which sought to create a property-less society; and the American activist Dorothy Day (d. 1980) of the Catholic Workers’ Movement, which cared for the homeless in New York City, living in voluntary poverty.

trade,¹²⁰ neoliberal being its most militant form, is at loggerheads with the progressive discourses of these intellectuals, upholding economic justice and condemning free-market capitalism as a root source of global suffering. For example, we saw that Barlas espouses a Marxist critique of politics and economics,¹²¹ and that Engineer supports socialism and state-controlled markets as alternative systems, pointing out that their concern for the commonwealth makes them compatible with Islamic teachings of wealth redistribution, of the material wellbeing of all.¹²²

Conclusions

Liberationist and women's readings of the Qur'an are significant because they shed valuable insight into the emergence of thematic exegesis in contemporary Islamic thought. Firstly, they reflect the desire to partake in a direct engagement with scripture, unmediated by the commentaries of classical scholars. This mode of reading marks a historical rupture with past exegetical practices, which, as a genealogical tradition, were essentially interpretations *of* interpretations. Part and parcel of such a direct engagement with the Qur'an has been the tendency to read the text holistically. This is an inevitable, hermeneutical outcome of a thematic approach, as the reader must sift through the entire scripture with a particular subject in mind. Secondly, the interpretations of these exegetes reveal the centrality of one's subject position in thematic reading. There is nothing random about the choice of topic, as this choice is directly informed by the environment, struggles and problems facing the reader. So Wadud and Barlas, as women living in

¹²⁰ Soanes, 482.

¹²¹ Cf. pg. 272 in this thesis.

¹²² Engineer, *Islam and Liberation Theology*, 87.

patriarchal societies, focus on gender equality; Esack, as an activist engaged in an anti-apartheid movement characterized by interfaith solidarity, explores the twin themes of liberation and pluralism; Engineer, as a Muslim living in an environment plagued with communal conflict between Hindus and Muslims, examines social justice, peaceful reconciliation and interfaith relations. Thematic commentary, therefore, is a highly effective, exegetical vehicle for contextual theology – that is, the conscious foregrounding of one’s context in the hermeneutical process – as the interpreter can focus on those topics that speak to her/his interests and needs. This is clearly a more pro-active role than in a sequential exegesis, in which the interpreter has to cater to the changing subjects of successive verses. There is an important parallel, then, between the rise of thematic reflection and contextual theology in Islam. Thirdly, the interpretations of these exegetes betray the underlying relationship between thematic commentary and print culture. Compared to traditional commentaries, which are massive works that often run upwards of twenty volumes, thematic commentaries are remarkably succinct, single-volume texts. Furthermore, they are easily accessible to readers, who can purchase them at bookstores or even order them online. Print culture, I have argued, has played a decisive role in this transformation. The emergence of the printing press in Muslim societies, coupled with the spread of mass education and thus dramatically higher rates of literacy, exploded the ranks of Islamic knowledge production. Non-traditionally trained exegetes like engineers, physicians and humanities scholars now began to partake in the interpretive task. Print culture did not only ‘massify’ the producers of Islamic knowledge but also its consumers, as Qur’anic commentaries increasingly appeared in public media like journals, newspapers and popular books. These historical developments, in turn,

exerted a lasting influence on the craft of commentary. For in order to address such a large audience, in order to sustain the interests of, and speak to the issues facing, its new and mostly lay interlocutors, scriptural exegesis had to shift from a lengthy and convoluted sequential format to a more concise and lucid thematic approach.

Finally, liberationist and women's readings of the Qur'an are significant because their expressly political character forces us to redefine political and radical Islam. In mainstream Western discourse, Islamism is portrayed as a virulently violent transnational phenomenon that seeks to erect a pan-Islamic caliphate. The desire for an Islamic state is represented as intrinsic to Islam, in which the separation of Church and State is, so the argument goes, an impossibility. This popular discourse has not remained uncontested, as academics have revisited Islamism extensively. Shifting from an essentialist analysis to a contextual one, they have pointed out that most Islamists are peaceful, have sought to operate within a more democratic system and have national agendas. Furthermore, those Islamists that espouse violence (generally) do so as a result of government repression, of being excluded from the political process. But despite the major differences between these two camps, there is a key pattern of continuity: namely, equating political Islam with Islamism. Radical Islam, in turn, continues to be reduced to militant and transnational *jihadi* groups. Liberationist and women's exegeses, however, problematize this conflation, exposing the hegemony of Islamism over our understanding of political and radical Islam. As we have witnessed throughout this dissertation, Esack, Engineer, Wadud and Barlas have deeply politicized discourses and uphold a thoroughly comprehensive approach to liberation, ranging from critiques of international and domestic politics to issues of gender and race, class and stigma. Their understanding of

the political thus moves beyond conventional descriptions of politics as being tied to the state and concerned with governance. Instead, politics exist in any space wherein power is asserted, resisted, negotiated. Our definitions of political and radical Islam need to accommodate the discourses of these exegetes. Drawing upon the distinction between contextual theology and the epistemic reality that all theology is contextual, I have argued that while all readings of Islam are inescapably political, 'political Islam' is an engagement with the faith that is *explicitly* political, whether that be challenging or supporting the status quo. 'Radical Islam,' moreover, is a particular type of political Islam: dissident, rebellious, at odds with the powers that be. So while certain forms of radical Islam may endorse violence, function at a global level and support the creation of a pan-Islamic state, these are not its defining features. Indeed, to posit them as such is to play into the hegemony of Islamism over the political and the radical. Rather, at its core, radical Islam is an understanding and practice of the faith that is in confrontation with the oppressive status quo, calling for and struggling towards a fundamental reworking of the social order. This is the vocation of the radical Muslim.

APPENDIX:

Qur'anic Citations

- Q. 2:25** “And give glad tidings to those who have believed and have done righteous deeds, that for them shall be gardens with rivers flowing beneath; whenever they are provided with its fruit for nourishment, they will say, ‘This is what we were provided before,’ and they were given something resembling it. In it there will be pure spouses (*azwajun*) for them, and they will remain in it forever.”
- Q. 2:51** “When We made an appointment with Moses for forty nights, you took the Calf in his absence (for worship), and you were wrongdoers.”
- Q. 2:53** “And We gave Moses the Book and the Criterion, so that you might be guided.”
- Q. 2:55** “And when you said, ‘O Moses, we will not believe in you until we see God face to face.’ Thereupon a thunderbolt (of punishment) seized you as you looked on.”
- Q. 2:79** “So woe to those who write the Book with their own hands and say, ‘This is from God,’ that they may sell it for a small profit. So woe to them for what they have written, and woe to them for what they earn!”
- Q. 2:124** “And when his Sustainer tested Abraham with certain words, and he fulfilled them, God said to him: ‘I am making you an *imam* of humankind.’ When Abraham asked, ‘And from my progeny as well?’ God said, ‘My pledge does not extend to the unjust.’”
- Q. 2:170** When they are told, ‘Follow what God has sent down,’ they say, ‘We will rather follow what we have found our fathers following.’ What, even if their fathers neither applied any reason nor were guided?
- Q. 2:177** “Righteousness does not lie in turning your faces toward the East or the West. Rather, righteousness lies in believing in God, the Last Day and the angels, the scriptures and the prophets, and disbursing wealth, despite your love for it, among your kin, the orphans, the wayfarers and the beggars, freeing the slaves, observing your devotional obligations, and paying the *zaka* (the annual almsgiving). Those who keep their promises when they make promises, and those who are patient in misfortune and hardship and in the heat of battle. It is they who have proved themselves true, and it is they who are the righteous.”

- Q. 2:187** “You are permitted, on the night of the fast, to go into your wives (*al-rafathu ila nisa'ikum*): they are a garment for you, and you are a garment for them. God is aware that you used to deprive yourself of this right, so He has turned to you in His mercy and removed this hardship from you. So now have intercourse with them (*bashiruhunna*), and seek what God has ordained for you, and eat and drink until the white line of dawn appears clear from the dark line. Then complete the fast until nightfall, and do not have intercourse with them (*la tabashiruhunna*) while you dwell in confinement in the mosques. These are God's limits, so do not approach them. Thus does God clarify his signs for humankind so that they may become pious.”
- Q. 2:219** “They ask you concerning wine and gambling. Say: ‘There is a great sin in both of them, and some profits for the people, but their sinfulness outweighs their profit.’ And they ask you as to what they should spend (in the way of the poor). Say, ‘All that is surplus (*quli al-‘afwa*).’ Thus does God clarify His signs for you so that you may reflect.”
- Q. 2:221** “Do not marry idolatresses until they embrace faith. A faithful slave girl is better than an idolatress, though she may impress you. And do not marry (your daughters) to idolaters (*wa la tunkihu al-mushrikina*) until they embrace faith. A faithful slave is better than an idolater, though he may impress you. These invite unto the Fire, but God invites unto Paradise and forgiveness by His leave, and He makes clear His signs for humankind, so that they may take heed.”
- Q. 2:237** “And if you divorce them before you touch them, and you have already settled a dowry for them, then pay them half of what you have settled, unless they forgo it, or someone whose hand is in the marriage tie forgoes it. And to forgo is nearer to piety; so do not forget graciousness among yourselves. Indeed, God sees all that you do.”
- Q. 2:255** “God – there is no God except Him – is the Living One, the All-Sustainer. Neither drowsiness befalls Him nor sleep. To Him belongs whatever is in the Heavens and whatever is on the Earth (*lahu ma fi al-samawati wa ma fi al-ard*). Who is it that may intercede with Him except with His permission? He knows that which is before them and that which is behind them, and they do not comprehend anything of His knowledge except what He wishes. His seat extends over the Heavens and the Earth, and He is not wearied by their preservation, and He is the all-Exalted, the all-Supreme.”
- Q. 2:256** “There is no compulsion in religion. Rectitude has become distinct from error. So one who rejects the powers of evil and has faith in God has held fast to the firmest handle, which shall never give way; and God is all-Hearing, all-Knowing.”

- Q. 3:3-4** “He has sent down to you the Book with truth confirming what was (revealed) before it; and He had sent down the Torah and the Gospel before as guidance for humankind, and He has sent down the Criterion. Indeed, those who defy the signs of God, there is a severe punishment for them, and God is All-Mighty, an Avenger of Evil.”
- Q. 3:7** “It is He who has sent down to you the Book. Parts of it are definitive verses, which are the mother of the Book, while others are metaphorical. As for those in whose hearts is deviance, they pursue what is metaphorical in it, courting temptation and courting its interpretation. But no one knows its interpretation except God, and those firmly grounded in knowledge say: ‘We believe in the Book; the whole of it is from our Lord.’”
- Q. 3:13** “There was certainly a sign for you in the two armies that met: one army fighting in the way of God and the other faithless, who saw them (the army of the faithful) to be twice (their own number). God strengthens with His help whomever He wills. There is indeed a lesson in that for those endowed with insight (*u’lil absar*).”
- Q. 3:16-17** “Those who say, ‘Our Sustainer! Indeed we have faith. So forgive us our sins, and save us from the punishment of the Fire.’ They are the patient and the truthful, the obedient (*al-qanitin*) and the charitable, pleading for forgiveness at dawn.”
- Q. 3:67** “Abraham was neither a Jew nor a Christian. Rather, he was a submitting monotheist (*hanifan musliman*), and he was not one of the polytheists.”
- Q. 3:137** “Many precedents have come to pass before you, so travel in the land and see the punishment of those who gave lie to the truth.”
- Q. 3:185-86** “Every soul shall taste death (*kullu nafs in dha’iqatu al-mawti*), and you will indeed get your recompense in full on the Day of Resurrection. Whoever is delivered from the Fire and admitted into Paradise has certainly succeeded. The life of this world is nothing but the wares of delusion. You will surely be tested in your possessions and your souls, and you will surely hear from those who were given the Book before you and from the polytheists much affront; but if you are patient and Godwary, that is indeed the steadiest of courses.”
- Q. 3:190-91** “Indeed, in the creation of the Heavens and the Earth and in the alternation of night and day are signs for those who possess intellect (*u’lil albab*). Those who remember God when they stand, when they sit and when they lie down on their sides, and reflect on the creation of the Heavens and the Earth, (saying:) ‘O Our Sustainer! You have not created this in vain. All glory be to you, and save us from the punishment of the Fire!’”

- Q. 4:1** O humankind, be conscious of your Sustainer, who has created you from a single soul (*nafsin wahidatin*), and from it created its mate (*zawjaha*), and from the two of them dispersed men and women in multitudes.
- Q. 4:11** “God enjoins you concerning your children: for the male shall be the like of the share of two females...”
- Q. 4:15** “Should any of your women commit a grave indecency, produce against them four witnesses from yourselves, and if they testify, confine them (*amsikuhunna*) in their houses until death finishes them, or God provides a way for them.”
- Q. 4:40** “Indeed, God does not wrong anyone, not even the weight of an atom, and if it be a good deed He doubles it, and gives from Himself a greater reward.”
- Q. 4:57** “As for those who have believed and have done righteous deeds, We shall admit them into gardens with rivers flowing beneath, to remain in them forever. In it there will be pure spouses (*azwajun*) for them, and We shall admit them into a deep shade.”
- Q. 4:95** The faithful who sit idle, other than those who are disabled, are not equal to those who fight in the way of God with their wealth and lives. God has exalted those in rank who fight for the faith with their wealth and lives over those who sit idle. Though God’s promise of good is for all, He has granted His favour of the highest reward to those who struggle in preference to those who sit at home.
- Q. 4:125** “Who has a better religion than him who submits his will to God, being virtuous, and follows the creed of Abraham, a *hanif*? And God took Abraham as a friend (*khalilan*).”
- Q. 4:129** “You will not be able to treat your wives with justice, even if you are eager to do so, and so do not allow yourselves to incline towards one to the exclusion of the other, leaving her in a suspended state. But if you put things in order and are God-conscious, indeed God is all-Forgiving, all-Merciful.”
- Q. 4:135** “O you who believe! Be maintainers of justice and witnesses for the sake of God, even if it should be against yourselves, or (your) parents and relatives, and whether it be (someone) rich or poor, for God has a greater right over them. So do not follow your desires, lest you swerve from justice, and if you distort the testimony or disregard it, God is indeed well aware of what you do.”

- Q. 4:171** “O People of the Book! Do not exceed the bounds in your religion, and do not attribute anything to God except the truth. The Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, was only a messenger of God and His Word that He cast toward Mary and a spirit from Him. So believe in God and His messengers, and do not say, ‘(God is) a Trinity.’ Desist (from such a creed)! That is better for you. God is but the One God. He is far too immaculate to have any son. To Him belongs whatever is in the Heavens and is on the Earth, and God suffices as trustee.”
- Q. 5:8** “O you who believe! Be maintainers, as witnesses for the sake of God, of justice (*al-qist*). Ill feeling for a people should never lead you to be unjust (*alla ta’dilu*). Be fair (*u’dilu*) – that is nearer to piety (*taqwa*), and be wary of God. God is indeed aware of all that you do.”
- Q. 5:38-39** “As for the thief, whether man or woman, cut off their hands as a requital for what they have earned. (That is) an exemplary punishment from God, and God is all-Mighty, all-Wise. But whoever repents after his wrongdoing and reforms, then God shall accept his repentance. Indeed, God is all-Forgiving, all-Merciful.”
- Q. 6:38** “There is not an animal on the land, nor a bird that flies with its wings, but they are communities like yourselves. We have not omitted anything from the Book (*ma farratna fi al-kitabi min shay’in*). Then they will be mustered toward their Sustainer.”
- Q. 6:79** “Indeed, I [Abraham] have turned my face towards Him who originated the Heavens and the Earth, as a *hanif*, and I am not one of the polytheists.”
- Q. 6:91** “They did not regard God with the regard due to Him when they said, ‘God has not sent down anything to any human.’ Say: ‘Who then revealed the Book that Moses brought, a light and guidance for the people, which you make into separate sheets for show, while you conceal much of it, though through it you were taught that which you did not know before, nor even your fathers knew?’”
- Q. 6:98** “It is He who created you from a single soul, and appointed a place of sojourning and a place of resting. We have indeed made Our signs clear for those who understand.”
- Q. 6:100** “They make the jinn partners of God, though He has created them, and carve out sons and daughters for Him without possessing any knowledge. Immaculate is He and exalted above what they allege!”
- Q. 6:103** “No human vision can encompass Him, yet He encompasses all vision, for He alone is Unfathomable, all-Aware.”

- Q. 6:114** “‘Shall I seek a judge other than God, while it is He who had sent down to you the Book, well-detailed (*mufassalan*)?’ Those whom We have given the Book know that it has been sent down from your Sustainer with the Truth, so do not be one of the sceptics.”
- Q. 7:29** “Say: ‘My Sustainer has enjoined justice (*amara rabbi bi al-qist*).’ Set your hearts (on Him) at every occasion of prayer, and call unto Him, putting your exclusive faith in Him. Just as He brought you forth in the first place, so will you return.”
- Q. 7:136-37** “So We inflicted Our retribution on them, and caused them to drown in the sea, because they had denied Our signs and had been heedless of them. Whereas we made the people who had been downtrodden heirs to the eastern and western parts of the land that We had blessed. Thus was your Sustainer’s promise unto the Children of Israel fulfilled, for they were patient in adversity; and We destroyed what Pharaoh and his people had built and what they used to erect.”
- Q. 7:189** “It is He who created you from a single soul, and from it created its mate, that you may live as companions.”
- Q. 7:199** “Take the surplus (*khudhi al- ‘afwa*), bid what is right and turn away from the ignorant.”
- Q. 8:38** “Say to the disbelievers: if they desist (from turning people away from God’s path), then what is already passed shall be forgiven. But if they revert, then they should remember the precedent of the ancients.”
- Q. 9:24** “Say (O Muhammad): ‘If your fathers and your sons, your brothers, your spouses, and your kinsfolk, the possessions that you have acquired, the business you fear may suffer, and the dwellings you are fond of, are dearer to you than God, His Messenger and to struggling (*jihad*) in His way, then wait until God issues His command, and God does not guide the transgressing lot.’”
- Q. 9:31** “They have taken their rabbis and monks as lords besides God, and also Christ, Mary’s son; though they were commanded to worship only the One God, there is no god except Him. He is far too immaculate to have any partners that they ascribe (to Him).”
- Q. 9:34** “O you who believe! Indeed, many of the rabbis and monks wrongfully eat up the people’s wealth, and bar (them) from the way of God. Those who treasure up gold and silver, and do not spend it in the way of God, inform them of a painful punishment.”

- Q. 9:70** “Has not the account of those before them come to them, of the people of Noah and ‘Ad and Thamud, of Abraham and Midian, and all the inhabitants that were destroyed? Their apostles had come to them with clear proofs; and God did not surely wrong them, they wronged themselves.”
- Q. 10:83** “But none believed in Moses, except some youths from amongst his people (*illa dhurriyyatun min qawmihi*), for the fear of Pharaoh and his elite that he would persecute them. For Pharaoh was indeed mighty on the Earth and one of the excessive ones.”
- Q. 11:90** “Beg your Sustainer to forgive you, and turn to Him. Indeed, my Sustainer is compassionate (*rahim*) and loving (*wadud*).”
- Q. 11:117** “Your Sustainer would never destroy the townships unjustly, while their inhabitants were righteous.”
- Q. 14:24-26** “Have you not regarded how God has drawn a parable (*daraballahu mathalan*)? A good word is like a good tree: its roots are steady and its branches are in the sky. It yields, by the leave of its Sustainer, fruits in all the seasons. God draws parables (*wa yudribullahu amthalan*) for humankind so that they might reflect. And the parable of a bad word is that of a bad tree: uprooted from the ground, it has no stability.”
- Q. 14:34** “He gave you all that which you asked of him. Should you try to count God’s blessings, you would never be able to count them. Indeed, the human being is most persistent in wrongdoing, stubbornly ingrate (*kaffar*).”
- Q. 15:10-13** “Certainly We had sent messengers before you to similar communities, and there did not come to them any messenger but that they used to deride him. That is how We let it pass through the hearts of the guilty, so that they will not believe in it, and the precedent of the ancients has already passed.”
- Q. 15:29** “And when I have fashioned him and breathed into him of My spirit (*wa nafakhtu fihi min ruhi*), then fall down (O angels) before him in prostration.”
- Q. 15:90-93** “Even as We sent down on the dividers, who have made the Qur’an into shreds, by your Lord, We will question them all concerning what they used to do.”
- Q. 16:22** “Your God is One God. Those who do not believe in the Hereafter, their hearts are in denial, and they are arrogant.”

- Q. 16:58-59** “When one of them is brought the news of a female (newborn), his face becomes darkened and he chokes with suppressed agony. He hides from people out of shame at the news: shall he retain it (the girl) in humiliation, or bury it in the ground?! Look! Evil is the judgement that they make.”
- Q. 16:89** “The Day We raise in every nation a witness against them from amongst themselves, We shall bring you as a witness against these. We have sent down the Book to you as a clarification of all things (*tibyanan li kulli shay’in*) and as a guidance, a mercy and good news for those who submit.”
- Q. 16:112-13** “God draws a parable (*wa daraballahu mathalan*): a town, secure and peaceful. Its provision comes abundantly from every place. But it was ungrateful towards God’s blessings. So God made it taste hunger and fear because of what they used to do. There had certainly come an apostle from among themselves, but they called him a liar, so the Punishment seized them while they were oppressors.”
- Q. 16:120** “Indeed, Abraham was a nation obedient to God (*ummatan qanitan lillahi*), a devout monotheist (*hanifan*), and he was not one of the polytheists.”
- Q. 17:23-24** “Your Sustainer has decreed that you shall not worship anyone except Him, and He has enjoined kindness to parents. Should one or both of them reach old age in your presence, do not say ‘Fie!’ to them nor chide them, but speak to them noble words. Lower the wing of humility to them, out of mercy, and say, ‘My Sustainer! Have mercy on them, just as they nourished me when I was a small child.’
- Q. 17:45** “When you recite the Qur’an, We draw a hidden curtain (*hijaban masturan*) between you and those who do not believe in the Hereafter.”
- Q. 17:82** “Step by step, We bestow from on high through this Qur’an that which is a cure and a mercy to those who believe, and only adds to the loss of the evildoers.”
- Q. 17:106** “A discourse which We have gradually unfolded, so that you (O Muhammad) may read it out to humankind in stages, seeing that We have bestowed it from on high step by step.”
- Q. 18:45-46** “Draw for them the parable (*wadriblahum mathala*) of the life of this world. It is like the water We send down from the sky. Then the earth’s vegetation mingles with it. Then it becomes chaff, which the winds freely blow about. And it is God who determines all things. Wealth and children are an adornment of the life of this world, but lasting righteous deeds are better with your Sustainer in reward and in hope.”

- Q. 18:55** “What is there to keep people from attaining to faith now that guidance has come to them, and from asking their Sustainer to forgive them for their sins – unless it be (their wish) that the precedent of the ancients be visited upon them, or the punishment to appear right before their eyes?”
- Q. 19:22-26** “Thus she conceived him, then withdrew with him to a distant place. The birth pangs brought her to the trunk of a date palm tree. She said, ‘I wish I had died before this and become a thing forgotten, unremembered.’ Then a voice called to her from below her, saying ‘Do not grieve! Your Sustainer has made a spring to flow at your feet. Shake the trunk of the date palm tree, ripe dates will drop for you. Eat, drink, and be comforted. Then, if you see any human, say: ‘Indeed, I have vowed a fast to the all-Beneficent, so I will not speak to any human today.’”
- Q. 21:48** “Indeed, We gave Moses and Aaron the Criterion, as a light and reminder for the Godwary.”
- Q. 22:39** “Those who are fought against are permitted (*udhina lil ladhina yuqatiluna*) (to fight) because they were being oppressed, and God is indeed able to help them.”
- Q. 22:77-78** “O you who believe! Bow down and prostrate yourselves, and worship your Sustainer, and do what is good, so that you may be felicitous. And struggle for the sake of God with a struggle that is worthy of Him (*wa jahidu fillahi haqqa jihadi*). He has chosen you and has laid no hardship for you in the religion, the creed of your father, Abraham. He named you those who submit themselves to God (*al-muslimun*) before (that is, in the previous scriptures), and in this (that is, the Qur’an), so that the Messenger may be a witness over you, and that you may be witnesses over humankind. So maintain the prayer, give the mandatory almsgiving and hold fast to God. He is your master – how excellent a master and how excellent a helper!”
- Q. 24:2** “As for the fornicatress and the fornicator, strike each of them a hundred lashes, and let not pity for them overcome you in God’s religion, if you believe in God and the Last Day, and let a group of the faithful witness their punishment.”
- Q. 24:4-5** “As for those who accuse chaste women and do not bring four witnesses, strike them eighty lashes, and never accept any testimony from them afterwards. They are transgressors, excepting those who repent after that and reform, for God is indeed all-Forgiving, all-Merciful.”
- Q. 24:6-9** “As for those who accuse their own wives, but have no witnesses except themselves, then let him swear upon God four times that he is telling the truth, and a fifth time that God’s curse be upon him if he is lying. The

punishment shall be averted from her by her swearing upon God four times that he is lying, and a fifth time that God's curse be upon her if he is telling the truth."

- Q. 24:44** "It is God who alternates night and day. There is indeed a lesson in that for those endowed with insight (*u'lil absar*)."
- Q. 25:1** "Blessed is He who sent down the Criterion to His servant, that it may be a warner to all the nations."
- Q. 26:18-19** "(When Moses had delivered his message, Pharaoh) said: 'Did we not bring you up (O Moses) amongst us when you were but a child? And did you not stay with us for years of your life? And yet you committed that deed of yours, and you are truly one of the ingrates (*kafirin*).'"
- Q. 26:63-68** "And we inspired Moses thus: 'Strike the sea with your staff!' And it parted, and each part was as if it were a great mountain. Then We brought the pursuers near to that place. We delivered Moses and all who were with him. Then We drowned the others. There is indeed a sign in that, but most of them do not believe. Indeed, your Sustainer is the All-Mighty, the All-Merciful."
- Q. 26:192-95** "This is indeed (a Book) revealed by the Sustainer of all the worlds, brought down by the Trustworthy Spirit, upon your heart (O Muhammad) – so that you may be one of the warners – in a clear Arabic."
- Q. 27:29-35** "She said, 'O Nobles! Indeed an honourable letter has been delivered to me. It is from Solomon, and it begins in the name of God, the All-Beneficent, the All-Merciful. (It states:) 'Do not rise against me, but come to me in submission.' She said, 'O Nobles! Give me your opinion concerning my matter. I do not decide any matter until you are present.' They said, 'We are powerful and possess a great might. But it is up to you to command. So consider what you should command.' She said, 'Indeed, when kings enter a town, they devastate it, and reduce the mightiest of its people to the most abased. That is how they act. I will send them a gift, and I shall see what the envoys bring back.'"
- Q. 28:88** "And do not call upon any other god besides God; there is no god except Him. Everything will perish except His Face. All judgement belongs to Him, and to Him you will be brought back."
- Q. 29:40** "And We seized all of them for their crimes. Against some We sent a violent wind hurling stones, and some We seized with a mighty blast, and some We submerged under the earth, and some We drowned. It was not for God to wrong them; they wronged themselves."

- Q. 30:9** “Have they not travelled on the Earth and seen how the others before them had met their end? They were far more powerful than them, furrowed the earth and colonized it far more than they; and their apostles came to them with visible signs. It was surely not for God to wrong them; they wronged themselves.”
- Q. 30:21** “Among His signs is that He created for you mates from your own selves that you may take comfort in them, and He ordained love and mercy between you. There are indeed signs in that for a people who reflect.”
- Q. 33:32** “O wives of the Prophet! You are unlike any other women. If you are mindful of God, do not be too obliging in your speech, lest he in whose heart is a sickness should covet your person, and speak honourable words.”
- Q. 33:35** “Surely, men and women who have submitted themselves to God, men and women who are believers, men and women who are obedient (*wa al-qanitina wa al-qanitati*), men and women who are true to their word, men and women who are patient in adversity, men and women who are modest, men and women who give charity, men and women who observe fasting, men and women who guard their private parts, and men and women who remember God unceasingly, for them God has prepared forgiveness and a great reward.”
- Q. 33:53** “O you who believe! Do not enter the Prophet’s houses unless you are given permission, and when invited for a meal, do not come so early as to wait for it to be readied, but whenever you are invited enter at the proper time, and when you have eaten the meal, disperse without lingering for the sake of mere talk. Indeed, such conduct torments the Prophet, and he feels ashamed in asking you to leave; but God is not ashamed of expressing the truth. And when you ask anything of his wives, ask them from behind a curtain (*hijabin*). That is purer for your hearts and their hearts. You may not torment the Messenger of God, nor may you ever marry his wives after him. Indeed, that would be a grave matter with God.”
- Q. 33:62** “Such was the precedent of God among those before you, and you will not find any change in God’s precedent.”
- Q. 35:24** “Indeed, We have sent you [O Muhammad] with the truth as a bearer of good news and as a warner; and there is not a nation (*ummatin*) but a warner has passed through it.”
- Q. 35:42-43** “And they (the disbelievers) swore by God with solemn oaths that if a warner were to come to them they would be better guided than any of the other nations. But when a warner came to them it only increased them in aversion, acting arrogantly in the land and devising evil plots; and evil

plots beset only their devisers. So do they await anything except the precedent of the ancients? You will never find any change in God's precedent, and you will never find any revision in God's precedent."

- Q. 36:54-56** "No soul will be wronged the least that Day, nor will you be requited except for what you used to do. Indeed, today the inhabitants of paradise rejoice in their engagements – they and their spouses (*azwajuhum*), reclining on couches in the shade. For them will be fruits and whatever they ask."
- Q. 38:72** "And when I have fashioned him and breathed into him of My spirit (*wa nafakhtu fihi min ruhi*), then fall down (O angels) before him in prostration."
- Q. 39:6** "He created you from a single soul, then from it created its mate; and provided eight varieties of cattle for you. He formed you in the mother's womb, formation after formation in three (veils of) darkness. That is God, your Sustainer. To Him belongs all sovereignty. There is no god other than He. How then can you turn away?"
- Q. 39:18** "Those who listen to the Word and follow the best in it, they are the ones whom God has guided, and it is they who possess intellect (*u'lul albab*)."
- Q. 39:42** "God takes the souls (*Allahu yatawaffa al-anfusa*) at the time of their death, and those that have not died in their sleep. Then He retains those for whom He has ordained death and releases the others for an appointed term. There are surely signs in this for those who reflect."
- Q. 40:17** "Today, every soul shall be recompensed for what it has earned. There will be no injustice today (the Day of Judgement). Indeed, God is swift at reckoning."
- Q. 40:40** "Whosoever does evil will be requited in accordance with it; but whosoever does right, whether man or woman, and is a believer, will enter Paradise, where they will have provision in abundance."
- Q. 40:78** "Indeed, We have sent messengers before you. Of them are those We have recounted to you, and of them are those we have not recounted to you. An apostle may not bring any sign except by God's permission. Hence, when God's edict comes, judgement is made with justice, and, then and there, the falsifiers will become losers."
- Q. 40:85** "But their faith was of no benefit to them when they sighted Our punishment. (Such is) God's precedent, which has passed amongst his servants, and it is thence that the faithless will be losers."

- Q. 42:11** “The Originator of the Heavens and the Earth, He made for you mates from your own selves, and mates of the cattle, by which means He multiplies you. There is nothing whatsoever like Him, and He is the all-Hearing, the all-Seeing.”
- Q. 42:51** “It is not possible for any human that God should speak to him except through revelation, from behind a curtain (*hijabin*) or send a messenger who reveals by His permission whatever He wishes. Indeed, He is all-Exalted, all-Wise.”
- Q. 43:22-24** “Rather they say, ‘We found our fathers following a creed, and we are indeed guided in their footsteps.’ And so it has been that We did not send any warner to a town before you (O Muhammad), without its affluent ones saying, ‘We found our fathers following a creed and we are indeed following in their footsteps.’ He would say, ‘What! Even if I bring you a better guidance than what you found your fathers following?!’”
- Q. 44:54** “So shall it be, and We shall wed them to black-eyed *huris*.”
- Q. 45:22** “God has created the Heavens and the Earth in truth, so that every soul may be recompensed for what it has earned and none shall be wronged.”
- Q. 48:22-23** “If the faithless fight you, they will turn their backs (to flee). Then they will not find any protector or helper. (Such is) God’s precedent that has passed before, and you will never find any change in God’s precedent.”
- Q. 49:9** “If two groups of believers fight one another, make peace between them. But if one of the groups aggresses against the other, fight the one who aggresses until it reverts to God’s ordinance. If it reverts, make peace between them fairly and do justice (*fa aslihu baynahuma bi al-‘adl wa aqsitu*). Indeed, God loves the doers of justice (*inna allah yuhibbu al-muqsitin*).”
- Q. 49:13** “O humankind! We created you from a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know one another. The noblest among you in the eyes of God are the most pious among you. Indeed, God is all-Knowing, all-Aware.”
- Q. 49:15** “They alone are believers who believe in God and His Messenger and thereafter have never doubted, and who struggle (*wa jahadu*) with their possessions and their lives in the way of God. It is they who are the truthful.”
- Q. 52:20** “They will be reclining on arrayed couches, and We will wed them to wide-eyed *huris*.”

- Q. 53:19-23** “Have you considered Lat and ‘Uzza? And Manat, the third one? Are you to have males and He females? That, then, will be an unfair division! These are but names that you have named – you and your fathers – for which God has not sent down any authority. They follow nothing but conjectures and the desires of the soul, while there has certainly come to them the guidance from their Sustainer.”
- Q. 55:26-27** “All that is on it (the Earth) is ephemeral, yet lasting is the Face of your Sustainer, majestic and munificent.”
- Q. 55:70-76** “In them are maidens good and lovely. So which of your Sustainer’s bounties will you both deny? *Huris* secluded in pavilions. So which of your Sustainer’s bounties will you both deny? Whom no human has touched before, nor jinn. So which of your Sustainer’s bounties will you both deny? Reclining on green cushions and lovely carpets.”
- Q. 56:17-24** “They will be waited upon by immortal youths, with goblets and jugs and a cup of sparkling wine, which neither causes them headache nor stupefaction, and such fruits as they fancy and such flesh of fowls as they desire, and wide-eyed *huris* like guarded pearls, as reward for all that they have done.”
- Q. 66:12** “And Mary, daughter of ‘Imran, who guarded the chastity of her womb, so We breathed into it of Our Spirit. She confirmed the words of her Sustainer and His Books, and she was one of the obedient ones (*al-qanitin*).”
- Q. 75:16-19** “Do not move your tongue (O Muhammad) with it to hasten it (the revelation). Indeed, it is up to Us to put it together and to recite it. And when we have recited it, follow its recitation. Then, its exposition indeed lies with us.”
- Q. 81:1-7** “When the sun is folded up, when the stars turn dim and scatter, when the mountains are made to move, when the ten-month pregnant female camels are neglected, when the wild beasts stampede on the run, when the seas are set afire, when the souls are sorted (*wa idha al-nufusu zuwwijat*).”
- Q. 81:8-9** “When the girl buried alive will be asked (on the Day of Judgement) for what sin she was killed.”
- Q. 85:14** “He is the Forgiving (*al-Ghafur*) and the Loving (*al-Wadud*).”
- Q. 90:8-17** “Have We not made for him two eyes, a tongue, and two lips, and shown him the two paths (of good and evil)? Yet he has not embarked upon the uphill task. And what will show you what is the uphill task? It is the freeing of a slave, or feeding the needy on a day of starvation, or an orphan

among relatives, or a poor person lying in the dust, while being one of those who have faith and who enjoin one another to patience, and enjoin one another to compassion.”

Q. 95:1-5 “Read! In the Name of your Sustainer who created; created the human being from a clot of blood. Read! And your Sustainer is the most Generous, who taught by the pen, taught the human being what he knew not.”

Q. 107:1-7 “Have you seen him who denies the faith? That is the one who drives away the orphan, and does not urge the feeding of the needy. So woe to those who pray but who are heedless of their prayer; those who show off, but deny assistance.”

SELECT GLOSSARY

<i>‘Adl:</i>	A Qur’anic term for justice, alongside <i>qist</i> .
<i>Ahl al-Hadith:</i>	‘The People of the <i>Hadith</i> ,’ denoting an Islamic reformist movement that took root in India in the nineteenth century and which places heavy emphasis on the <i>hadith</i> as a source of guidance.
<i>Ahl al-Kitab:</i>	‘The People of the Book.’ This is a Qur’anic term that refers to monotheistic communities that received revelation prior to Islam, such as Jews and Christians, thereby differentiating them from polytheists.
<i>Ahl al-Qur’an:</i>	‘The People of the Qur’an,’ denoting an Islamic reformist movement that emerged in the early twentieth century in India. Largely a reaction to the <i>Ahl al-Hadith</i> , the <i>Ahl al-Qur’an</i> emphasize that scripture is the only source that Muslims ought to follow and are staunchly opposed to the usage of <i>hadith</i> .
<i>‘Amil:</i>	A Dawudi Bohra term denoting a traditionally trained Islamic scholar who executes the wishes of the <i>da‘i</i> .
<i>‘Aml al-salihah:</i>	Righteous works.
<i>‘Aqida:</i>	Islamic creed or doctrine.
<i>‘Aql:</i>	Intellect or intelligence.
<i>Asbab al-nuzul:</i>	The ‘Occasions of Revelation’ literature, which records the various contexts wherein Qur’anic verses were revealed.
<i>Aya</i> (pl.: <i>ayat</i>):	Literally ‘sign,’ referring to a Qur’anic verse.
<i>Da‘i:</i>	A Dawudi Bohra term referring to the representative of the Hidden Imam, who is in occultation. Sayyidna Muhammad Burhanuddin (b. 1915) is the current <i>da‘i</i> .
Dalits:	Literally, ‘the Crushed People,’ denoting the so-called Untouchables of the Hindu caste system.
Dawudi Bohras:	A sub-sect of Shi‘a Isma‘ili Islam based largely in India and with a membership of approximately one million followers. According to the Dawudi Bohras, their twenty-

first imam – Tayyib abi al-Qasim (b. circa 1130) – disappeared and went into occultation. Since this time, a hereditary line of *da'is* has represented the Hidden Imam. Cf. the entries on '*da'i*' and 'Shi'a Islam.'

<i>Fiqh:</i>	Islamic jurisprudence.
<i>Fitra:</i>	Human nature, referring to the innate inclination of all human beings towards goodness.
<i>Fuqaha'</i> (s.: <i>faqih</i>):	Islamic jurists.
<i>Hadith</i> (pl.: <i>ahadith</i>):	A reported saying or action of Prophet Muhammad.
<i>Halaqa</i> (pl.: <i>halaqat</i>):	Religious study circles.
Hermeneutics:	In this thesis, the term is used in two distinct senses: the first as the <i>way</i> in which a text is interpreted and the second as the <i>study</i> of the strategies and problems of interpretation.
<i>Hijab:</i>	Literally, a 'covering.' This term is commonly used by Muslims to refer to the female headscarf.
<i>Ihya' al-sunna:</i>	The revival of the <i>sunna</i> .
<i>Ijtihad:</i>	Technically a legal device in the <i>shari'a</i> , <i>ijtihad</i> is now often used to refer to the use of independent, critical reasoning in Islamic reformist thought.
<i>Imam:</i>	This term has multiple meanings. Literally it means 'one who stands in front,' denoting a prayer leader. Imam can also be used as an honorific title for a religious scholar. The most significant usage of the term, however, is in the context of Shi'a Islam. Cf. the entry on 'Shi'a Islam.'
<i>Iman:</i>	Belief or faith in God.
<i>Iman bi-l ghayb:</i>	'Belief in the unseen.'
<i>Islah wa tajdid:</i>	'Reform and renewal.'
<i>Islam:</i>	Literally 'submission,' that is, to the one God.
Islamism:	In this thesis, the term is defined as a type of religious activism that seeks to establish an Islamic state, whether through militant or peaceful, democratic means.

<i>Isra'iliyat:</i>	A genre in the Islamic intellectual tradition that refers to prophetic stories and narratives derived from biblical (literally, 'Israelite') literature.
<i>Jahiliyya:</i>	Commonly translated in English as 'The Age of Ignorance,' this term refers to pre-Islamic Arabian society.
<i>Jihad:</i>	Literally 'struggle.' This term includes both physical combat and inner, spiritual exertion.
<i>Karbala:</i>	A shrine city in Iraq. The term is often used to denote a historic battle (680) that took place in the same city, which, at the time, was an open plain. Here, Husayn ibn Ali – the grandson of Prophet Muhammad and third <i>imam</i> of Shi'a Muslims – rebelled against the caliph Yazid. Husayn and his small band of followers were brutally massacred.
<i>Khilafa:</i>	This term has two distinct meanings. 'Caliphate,' or the Sunni institution of political leadership following the Prophet's death, is the most common understanding of the term. In a Qur'anic context, <i>khilafa</i> means 'trusteeship,' that is, the idea that God, at the beginning of time, appointed humankind as 'trustee' (<i>khalifa</i>) of the Earth. Humankind, then, will be accountable for its role as trustee on the Final Day.
<i>Kufr:</i>	Generally translated as 'disbelief' but also entailing the notion of ingratitude, of rejecting a gift.
<i>Madrasa:</i>	A traditional Islamic seminary.
<i>Matn:</i>	The substantive content of a <i>hadith</i> .
<i>Maulana:</i>	Literally, 'our master.' This is a term of respect that is often used in South Asia to address a traditional Islamic scholar.
<i>Mujahid:</i>	One who partakes in <i>jihad</i> .
<i>Mu'min</i> (pl: <i>mu'minun</i>):	One who believes.
<i>Muslim:</i>	Literally, 'a submitter.' That is, one who submits him/herself to God.
<i>Nafs:</i>	Soul.

<i>Praxis:</i>	The idea that theology ought to emerge in the midst of the collective struggle against oppression, and is characterized by a dialectical hermeneutic of action-reflection-action.
<i>Qist:</i>	A Qur’anic term for justice, alongside ‘ <i>adl</i> .
<i>Qital:</i>	Fighting in warfare.
<i>Sadaqa:</i>	Charity.
<i>Salafiyya:</i>	An Islamic reformist movement that emerged over the past two centuries and which emphasizes a return to the original practice of the <i>salaf</i> , or the first generations of Muslims.
<i>Salah:</i>	Islamic ritual prayer, performed five times a day by Sunni Muslims, three times a day by Shi’a Muslims.
<i>Salam:</i>	Peace.
<i>Sanad</i> (pl.: <i>isnad</i>):	A <i>hadith</i> report’s chain of narration. The <i>isnad</i> are classified into various levels of reliability, such as <i>sahih</i> (‘authentic’), <i>hasan</i> (‘good’) and <i>da’if</i> (‘weak’).
<i>Shari’a:</i>	Literally ‘the Way,’ denoting the inherited, legal tradition of Islam.
Shi’a Islam:	A minority branch of Islam that believes that the leadership of the Muslim community after the Prophet’s death should have fallen to Ali ibn abi Talib (d. 661), the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet, since authority, according to Shi’a Muslims, is vested within the Prophet’s family. Ali is referred to as the first <i>imam</i> (spiritual guide). Different Shi’a groups follow different hereditary lines of <i>imams</i> .
<i>Shirk:</i>	The association of partners with God and, thus, the antithesis of <i>tawhid</i> .
<i>Sira:</i>	The inherited corpus of biographical literature on Prophet Muhammad.
Sisters in Islam (SIS):	An influential Muslim women’s organization in Malaysia that advocates for women’s rights through an Islamic framework.
Sufism:	The mystical tradition of Islam.

<i>Sunna:</i>	This is a widely used shorthand for <i>sunnat al-nabi</i> , the custom or precedent of Prophet Muhammad.
<i>Sunnat al-awwalin:</i>	Literally, the ‘precedent of the ancients,’ referring to earlier peoples who had shunned the prophets and, as a result, were destroyed by God.
<i>Sunnat Allah:</i>	The custom or precedent of God.
Sunni Islam:	The majority branch of Islam that follows the <i>sunna</i> of the Prophet and his companions, as opposed to Shi‘a Islam, which follows the Prophet and his family. In terms of leadership institutions, Sunni Islam was distinguished by the caliphate (<i>khilafa</i>), an office that governed the Muslim community after the Prophet’s death. Unlike the imamate (cf. entry on ‘Shi‘a Islam’), the caliphate did not explicitly combine religious and political authority, although of course it, by virtue of being the political and symbolic head of Muslims, still had wider religious implications.
<i>Tadrij:</i>	‘Progressive revelation.’ A term that Esack uses, <i>tadrij</i> refers to the fact that the Qur’an was not revealed at one moment but rather gradually over a period of twenty-three years (610-32), addressing various problems and issues as they emerged within the burgeoning Muslim community.
<i>Tafsir:</i>	Literally ‘interpretation,’ referring to the historic exegesis of the Qur’an.
<i>Tafsir ‘Ilmi:</i>	Scientific commentary of the Qur’an, and which seeks to reconcile natural science with scripture.
<i>Tafsir mawdu‘i:</i>	Thematic commentary of the Qur’an.
<i>Tafsir musalsal:</i>	Sequential, verse-by-verse commentary of the Qur’an.
<i>Taqwa:</i>	Piety or God-consciousness.
<i>Tawhid:</i>	The central tenet of Islam, referring to the unity of God.
<i>‘Ulum al-hadith:</i>	The traditional sciences of the <i>hadith</i> .
<i>‘Ulum al-Qur’an:</i>	The traditional sciences of the Qur’an.
<i>‘Ulama</i> (s: <i>‘alim</i>):	Literally ‘those who know,’ denoting the historic, traditionally trained interpreters of Islam.

<i>'Ulama' al-nusus:</i>	Text scholars, or traditional Muslim scholars and, thus, those who have expertise in various Islamic texts like the Qur'an, the <i>hadith</i> and the <i>shari'a</i> .
<i>'Ulama' al-waqi':</i>	Context scholars, or specialists trained in 'secular' fields like the humanities, social sciences and natural sciences.
<i>Umma:</i>	The global Muslim community.
<i>Usul al-fiqh:</i>	The roots or principles of Islamic jurisprudence.
<i>Yawm al-din:</i>	Literally 'the Day of Religion,' referring to the Day of Judgement.
<i>Zaka:</i>	The annual almsgiving.
<i>Zina:</i>	Illicit sexual relations, such as premarital sex and adultery.
<i>Zulm:</i>	Oppression.

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