Still Quarrelling over the Quran Five Interventions

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In this article, Barlas joins the debates on the right and authority of Muslim women to interpret the Quran.[1] As a way to move the conversation beyond simply asserting or refuting the right of this or that person to read the Quran on this or that condition, she distinguishes between different types of interpretations and authority. Simultaneously, she attempts to come to grips with the tensions between an individual believer's reading of the Quran and that of the community.

On subjectivity

Some scholars argue that in order to interpret the Quran, one must avoid all subjectivity. I do not agree with this proposition since, to be human, is to live a life that is politically, economically, sexually, culturally, and historically situated and subjectivity is merely the effect of encountering and comprehending the world through this situatedness. It is, therefore, unavoidable. Hence, instead of pretending that we encounter texts from some pure or abstract location outside the confines of time and space, we need to be open, honest, and self-conscious about the material and ideological sites from which we read them. In fact, that is one of the pre-requisites for entering into the hermeneutic circle.

My first thesis, then, is that no Quran interpreter can avoid subjectivity because it is an inescapable human condition. At best, we can be more or less cognizant about how our subject positions shape our readings of a text.

On language and interpretation

Another common idea is that only those people who have mastered Quranic Arabic should be allowed to interpret the Quran. I also disagree with this idea since it suggests that there is only one type of scriptural interpretation and seems to confuse translation with interpretation.

In its most basic sense, interpretation is simply the act of giving meaning to what we read, so one does not need to be a language expert or a philologist to read a text interpretively since one does that anyway merely by virtue of reading it. Moreover, mastering a language does not ensure that we will arrive at the best or only valid reading of a text. If it did, the Quran would not have distinguished between better and worse readings of it[2]; the Prophet's companions would not have differed in their understanding of some *ayat*[3]; Muslims would have had a universally agreed upon interpretation of the Quran; and scholars like al-Ghazali would not have held that each *ayah* has possibly 60,000 meanings.

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The point that I am making is that interpretive differences are not reducible to language alone but also have to do with an interpreter's methodology, epistemology, theology, and sexual politics. I will give two examples from Quranic exegesis to support my claim.

The first applies to those cases where, no matter how well scholars know Arabic, they cannot agree on the meaning of a word. A good example is *idribuhunna* in verse 4:34 that most scholars read as "to beat" thereby interpreting the verse as giving a husband the right to beat his wife. However, the root of this word, *daraba,* has several different meanings—including "to go away"—and the Quran itself uses this word in seventeen different senses. So, the fact most interpreters have chosen one meaning, and the worst, and that most Muslims refuse to accept alternative interpretations as legitimate has less to do with language than with the sexual politics of patriarchies that want to maintain male power over women.

Second, we may agree that a word can be interpreted in different ways, but that still does not mean that we will even get to the heart of the Quran's teachings. For instance, the Quran asks us to read it for its best meanings. We may be open to accepting alternative meanings of best—like finest or most excellent—but that does not necessarily mean that we will be able to get to the moral, social, or historical content of the word. That is because what we understand by "best" or "finest" will depend on our morals, our theology, the type of society in which we live, the time period in which we live, and so on. Thus, knowing Arabic cannot help us to categorically define the best meanings of the Quran.

The discipline of Quranic exegesis itself attests to the limitations of language in yielding a complete understanding of the Quran. Thus, from the earliest times, scholars have known that the Quran has at least two levels of meaning. *Tafsir*, as we know, focuses on the exterior or apparent meanings, while *ta'wil* concerns itself with their interior or esoteric meanings. Indeed, an entire tradition in Islam—the Sufi—is based on trying to recover the interior meanings of the Quran through an array of spiritual practices including gnosis.

Hence, my second thesis is that while the Quran lends itself to language analysis, interpreting it does not necessarily require a mastery of Arabic since interpretation is not an exercise in philology.

On translation

In light of this, I understand the insistence on mastering Arabic as an argument about the need to read the Quran only in Arabic; i.e., as an argument against translating it. I agree that translating the Quran requires one to have mastered Arabic and several scholars (all men until now) have given us translations that most Muslims accept as reliable. It thus seems reasonable to argue that if we can read the Quran in translation, we can also interpret it in translation. But, while Muslims may accept translations of the Quran, they discourage their use for interpreting it on the grounds that the translated Quran is not the real Quran.

Clearly, since the Quran was revealed in Arabic, a special symbolism attaches to being able to read it in Arabic. However, to claim that the Quran in translation is not real implies that its ontological status—its "reality," so to speak—derives from its being in Arabic rather than from its being God's speech. This is a theologically unsound notion since the Quran's ontological status has to do with its relationship to God, not to human language. Thus, divine speech is real in *all* languages because its reality stems from its being *God's word*, not from being in a given *language.*

If the Quran is a universal text, as Muslims believe, then its universality lies in its being equally real in all languages, and not just in one. In what way can the Quran be universal when non-Arabs, non-literates, non-males, are excluded from understanding or interpreting it in light of the faculties and grace given them by God?

My third thesis, then, is that the Quran is real in all languages and is as open to being interpreted or misinterpreted in these languages as it is in Arabic.

On authority

If I am right that the Quran is a universal text, that knowing Arabic cannot ensure interpretive unanimity or accuracy, that the only way to decipher it is not just through language analysis and that no reading of it can be objective, then it seems necessary to rethink our view of who has the right to interpret it. The Quran itself has made it obligatory for each one of us to use our own intellect and reasoning to interpret it; it does not say that only males, or Arabs, or scholars can, or should, interpret it. In other words, it does not tie interpretive rights to race, sex, class, or even literacy. Literacy and scholarship have never been the hallmark of prophets or sages, or, for that matter, of most believers who have usually been unlettered. To assume that these people cannot understand the Quran because they lack scholarly knowledge is to disregard aspects of the Quran's religiosity and universality and to confuse knowledge of God's words with their "inner meanings,"[4] a distinction the Quran itself makes. Potentially, anyone can arrive at these inner meanings through reflection.

The Quran does, of course, ask us to learn from and teach one another and a certain pedagogical role is part of the moral praxis of both women and men whom the Quran urges to enjoin the just and forbid the wrong.[5] This type of moral pedagogy does not, however, allow us to claim a monopoly on religious knowledge or inerrancy in our understanding of it and nor is it based in the sort of institutionalized authority that Muslim interpretive communities have come to claim over the centuries.

Most significantly for our purposes, the Quran does not bind us to the moral authority of earlier generations without thinking through things for ourselves. It censures those who insist on following "the ways of their fathers," a phrase that we can read literally as referring to rule by the father/husband (patriarchy),[6] or, more generally, to traditions passed down over time. The Quran also warns us that if our parents try to make us "join in worship [with God] things of which *thou hast no knowledge*, then obey them not."[7] These verses appear in particular contexts of course, but their message is clearly universal: we can only grasp divine truth by and for ourselves without any compulsions or constraints. Is this not why the Quran forbids coercion in matters of faith and religion?

On individuals and the community

Naturally, when we read a scripture within a community, our understanding of it can never be wholly free of the community's understanding of it. Indeed, if there is a conflict between them, we are pressed to subordinate the personal to the communal in the name of tradition, or rather, the dominant view of tradition. How, then, can we take individual responsibility for interpreting the Quran?

This is a complex issue because, for Muslims, community and faith, or "ummah and *din* are mutually defining and they give distinctive characteristics to the Islamic view of communal existence."[8] But, if this means that we can only practice our *din* to its full potential within a moral community, it does not mean that a community is, by definition, moral. Nor does it mean that living in a community frees us from the necessity of making interpretive choices for ourselves. After all, if communal readings of the Quran were inerrant and we could rely blindly on them, why would the Quran protect our individual right and freedom to read it in light of our own knowledge and reason? Is it not because no one is infallible and no one can decide for another how to approach God? Is it not because God wants to give each of us the opportunity to respond to God's call as best we can? If so, is it not reckless disregard and self-defeating for us to refuse this charge?

Regrettably, Muslims have not thought about the implications of such questions for the relationship between individual and communal readings of the Quran. Instead, we expect individuals to subordinate their interpretation of it to that of the ummah's because we confuse communal norms with Quranic norms. However, communal and Quranic norms are not always the same. For instance, the communal norm is to treat the Quran as the preserve of a small group of males, typically Arabs and often scholars. To me, however, this "norm" is a heresy masquerading as orthodoxy because it subordinates the Quran (the universal) to males, Arabs, and scholars (the particular). The Quran, however, belongs to all Muslims and it gives each one of us the right to struggle to arrive at an understanding of it as a test of our morality.

PHOTO BY RAMZI HAIDAR / © AFP, 2006

Lebanese women read the Quran, Beirut, 2006.

My fourth thesis then is that we should not privatize the Quran by making a group or individual the sole arbiters of its meanings; indeed, it is the ummah's obligation to ensure that all Muslims have free access to the Quran.

On (and in) practice

In principle, Quranic ideas of faith open up "an infinite space for the promotion of the individual beyond the constraints of fathers and brothers, clans and tribes, riches and tributes."[9] In practice, of course, Muslims have not actualized the promise of such views. Most women, in particular, have never had lives beyond the "constraints of fathers and brothers" for various reasons, including how Muslims have chosen to interpret the Quran.

While I do not blame the Quran for its anti-women readings—the burden lies squarely on its interpreters—I understand the bitterness of those who do. But, then, smearing Islam has become a vocation in the West these days, as has its opposite: recovering the "true" Islam in line with Anglo-European sensibilities. As Disraeli once said of the East, Islam is now a career. Even so, I draw comfort from the fact that for most Muslims, the venture of Islam can never be a policy issue tied to the political ambitions and financial apron strings of a superpower run amok who is chastising us for not being moderate enough.

I do not disregard the urgency of reform in Muslim societies, but I believe that it can only come from those who consider Islam to be their moral compass in this world. Meanwhile, I suspect that Muslim interpretations of the Quran are likely to remain unworthy of it. But, we do not have to settle for the worst, as we have done by embracing anti-women interpretations for so long. To strive for ever-better understandings of our scripture is a calling for all those who are moved by it. The test of a moral community and of moral individuality both is how far we can fulfil that calling by relying on what God has chosen to give us. That is my fifth thesis and also my conclusion.

Notes

1. This is an edited version of a talk I gave in Amsterdam at the ISIM Conference "Redefining Boundaries: Muslim Women and Religious Authority in Practice," on 24 June 2007. For a fuller discussion of my position, see Asma Barlas, "Believing Women," in *Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an* (Texas: University of Texas Press, 2002); and "'Holding Fast by the Best in the Precepts': the Qur'an and method," in *Changeable and Unchangeable: New Directions in Islamic Thought and Practice*, ed. Kari Vogt et al. (I.B. Tauris, forthcoming).
2. The Quran does this by asking us to read it for its "best" meanings, see 39:18.
3. See Mahmoud Ayoub, *The Quran and its Interpreters*, vol. 1 (Albany: SUNY, 1984).
4. See 10:39 in Muhammad Asad, *The Message of the Qur'an* (Gibraltar, 1980), 297.
5. See 9:122; in Asad, 285.
6. For my definition of patriarchy, see Barlas, "Believing Women," 11–13.
7. See 31:14–15 in Ali, 1083.
8. Merryl Wyn Davies, *Knowing One Another* (London: Mansell Publishing Ltd, 1988), 129–130.
9. M. Arkoun, *Rethinking Islam*, trans. Robert Lee (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1994), 57.

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