PSC

Uncrossed bridges: Islam, feminism and secular democracy

Asma Barlas
Ithaca College, New York, USA

Abstract

In this article I review two contrasting approaches to Muslim women's rights: those that want Muslims to secularize the Qur'an as the precondition for getting rights and those that emphasize the importance of a liberatory Qur'anic hermeneutics to Muslim women's struggles for rights and equality. As examples of the former, I take the works of Nasr Abu Zayd and Raja Rhouni and, of the latter, my own. In addition to joining the debates on Muslim women's rights, this exercise is meant to illustrate that secular attempts to undermine Islam also undermine the prospects for rights and democracy in Muslim societies. In fact, I see the secular project in Muslim societies as a form of self-harm. Lastly, I revisit Antonio Gramsci's critique of democracy as a way to query the title of the İstanbul Seminars, 'The Promises of Democracy'.

Before I discuss my chosen topic, I want to comment on the format and agenda of the İstanbul Seminars, starting with their stated goal of enabling 'close encounters across all divides'. Although I find the intent itself admirable, I have to wonder how far *any* encounter can go if it occurs within a predetermined framework, which is not to argue against structures, of course, but to recognize their constraints. For instance, framing the 2012 theme as 'The Promises of Democracy' puts the very thing in which we are being called on to have faith beyond critique itself by treating it as a given. Moreover, people

Corresponding author:
Asma Barlas, Director, Center for the Study of Culture, Race and Ethnicity, Ithaca College, 953 Danby Road, Ithaca, NY 14850, USA.
Email: abarlas@ithaca.edu

who believe in the promises of democracy usually also believe that secularism is a self-evident and universal good and not everyone may share their conviction. However, there is little space to contest it if secularism also remains off the table in discussions.

Similarly, the seminars' definition of claims to justice, economic decision-making and Muslim women's rights as the 'pre-political conditions for democracy' forecloses other ways to talk about the political. Certainly, I would argue just the reverse, that struggles for justice and rights occur in arenas that are always political. This is because politics constitutes the ideological terrain on which unequal power relationships, of gender, race and class, get played out which means that little is ever pre- or non-political. Lastly, I am not sure what to make of the seminars' tag line, 'philosophers bridge the Bosphorus'. Do philosophers regard themselves as being exceptionally well-suited to the enterprise of bridge-building between the 'imagined geographies'[1] of East and West? And, if this is not a throwback to the old orientalist binary between Islam and the West, then why allude to the Bosphorus? Also, what sorts of bridges can one build if one starts with some problematical assumptions?

In any event, I raise these questions not just as incipient critiques of the seminars but also as a way to anticipate the slant of my own commentary, which is in two parts. In the first, I contrast two differing approaches to Muslim women's rights: those that want Muslims to secularize the Qur'an as the precondition for having any rights and those that make the case for rights and equality from within a Qur'anic framework. As examples of the former, I have taken the works of Nasr Abu Zayd, the celebrated Egyptian thinker, and of Raja Rhouni, a new-wave Moroccan feminist, and, of the latter, my own. In the last part of the article, I outline some problems with the secular project in Muslim societies, as I call it, and also revive Antonio Gramsci's critique of democracy as a way to raise certain questions about its promises. My primary motive in undertaking this exercise is to affirm the importance of an anti-patriarchal Qur'anic hermeneutics to Muslim women's struggles for equality.[2] A related one is to suggest that secular attempts to undermine Islam also undermine such struggles. In fact, secularism in Muslim societies also undermines the promise of democracy if by this we mean a comprehensive regime of rights and liberties.

Since the question of Muslim women's rights is tied up with debates on how to interpret Islam's teachings, I will focus on Abu Zayd's[3] and Rhouni's key arguments about how Muslims should treat their religious texts, especially the Qur'an.

Interpreting the Qur'an

Essentially, Abu Zayd believed that Islam was in need of a reformation which could only come about if Muslims stopped viewing their 'religious texts as repositories of truths, from which [to] retrieve an egalitarian Islam'.[4] To this end, he urged them to rethink the status of these texts, especially of the Qur'an, which, he argued, was better regarded as a historically produced discourse incorporating both divine and human voices than as a sacred text. He felt that if Muslims were to do this they would be freed from the need 'to recontextualize one or more passages in the fight against literalism and fundamentalism or against a specific historical practice that seems inappropriate for our modern contexts'.[5] Indeed, they might even be freed from the interpretive enterprise as a whole.

Though he never put it this way and even invoked a 'democratic hermeneutics', in actuality, Abu Zayd found all interpretive approaches objectionable. Thus, he chastised modern hermeneutics for justifying the 'historicity and hence the relativity of every mode of understanding', while also legitimizing the idea 'that our modern interpretation is more appropriate and more valid'.[6] In a different vein, he faulted classical jurists, as well as reformists and Islamic feminists, for reading the Qur'an as a text because, according to him, doing so meant taking a 'focal point that will always point to God'. As he put it,

> ... feminist hermeneutics faces the problem that as long as the Qur'an is dealt with only as a text – implying a concept of author (i.e. God as divine author) – one is forced to find a focal point of gravity to which all variations should be linked. This automatically implies that the Qur'an is at the mercy of the ideology of its interpreter. For a communist, the Qur'an would thus reveal communism, for a fundamentalist it would be a highly fundamentalist text, for a feminist it would be a feminist text, and so on.[7]

In Abu Zayd's view, then, it is this focal point, which claims to be 'universal – the irrevocable and the eternal truth' – that leads to ideologizing the Qur'an. Yet, even as he blames different interpretations of the Qur'an on its authorship, he simultaneously ascribes them to standpoint epistemologies (the stance of its readers). However, not only did he seem unaware of this inconsistency in his position but he also thought one could end the 'crisis of interpretation and counter-interpretation'[8] by dispensing with *asl* readings of the Qur'an (readings that purport to be true), and, indeed, with the idea of universal truths and by abjuring foundationalist approaches to Islam.

Rhouni, who calls herself a post-foundationalist, follows closely in Abu Zayd's footsteps and says that, like him, she also believes 'in the virtues of the contextual approach to the founding texts'. She describes this as follows:

> I disagree with the methodology that chooses to give a more progressive, or egalitarian, meaning to a verse and presenting [*sic*] it as the truth, when it has the means to do so, while resorting to the idea that such and such verse needs to be contextualized in order to discover its contingency, when it reaches a semantic dead-end.

This is, of course, less a description of contextualization than it is a statement about Rhouni's own preference that one should either interpret a text or contextualize it. At another point, she reframes this a bit differently: 'I disagree with the approach that reinterprets verses to invest them with a more modern and more egalitarian meaning, on the one hand, and that resorts to a historical and contextual reading when no progressive meaning can possibly be invented, on the other hand.'[9] As it turns out, then, what she is objecting to is not just combining two strategies to read the Qur'an, but reading it in an egalitarian mode. This seems to be a rather inexplicable, and even indefensible, position to hold given the problems its patriarchal interpretations create for Muslim women, but she does not explain why she opposes egalitarian readings.

Perhaps her clearest description of contextualization is that it should be a 'systematic and pondered approach that recognizes and asserts the Qur'an's historicity'.[10] By this she

means what Abu Zayd does: seeing it 'as originally an oral discourse involving divine and human communication *rather than a divinely authored text* that has been revealed to all humanity regardless of its context of production, or historicity'.[11] However, even as she denies the Qur'an's sacrality, she insists that adhering to this view does not amount to a 'denial of its divine origin'.[12] Finally, she, too, argues that Muslims need to get out of 'the vicious circle of "truth talk"'[13] by abandoning *asl* readings of the Qur'an.

There are several theoretical and logical flaws in Abu Zayd's and Rhouni's arguments but I will only outline a few. First, it is terribly naive to think that one can end interpretive pluralism or do away with 'truth-talk', by treating the Qur'an as a discourse or by disavowing the idea of truth. Discourses, no less than texts, are open to different meanings and even those who do not believe in truths are not beyond interpretive quibbling and 'truth-talk' of their own, as is clear from Rhouni's and Abu Zayd's own claims. Even their assertion, that there are no universal truths – a classic case of self-refutation – rests on our willingness to accept it as being universally true.

Second, there is no methodological taboo against analysing both the meanings of a text and also its relationship to a given context. Far from being a hermeneutical sleight of hand, as Rhouni implies, it is a standard practice to do both, and not just among Islamic feminists. As for her and Abu Zayd's notions of contextualization and historicity, not only are they confusing but they also conflate authorship, historicity and contextualization. One can historicize and contextualize a scripture without calling its authorship into question by reading 'behind' it; that is, by explaining the historical contexts in which it was revealed and the moral universe and the social conditions of the people to whom it was initially addressed. This is what allows believers in all ages to differentiate between teachings that are universal in their scope and those that were aimed at particular historical circumstances. In fact, being able to make this determination is what it means to read 'in front of' the text, which is to say, to reinterpret it from our own location in the present so as to recontextualize it. In effect, all texts have multiple contexts and the Qur'an is no different on this score.

Interestingly, Abu Zayd, Rhouni and others who favor contextualizing the Qur'an (a nice euphemism for secularizing it) fail to do so themselves by ignoring the belief structure within which it is embedded. Put simply, to be an observant Muslim is to have faith in a God who speaks and whose speech (the Qur'an) is timeless, thus binding on one until eternity. It is these beliefs *together* that make the Qur'an the 'source of truth and the means of realizing it in action' for Muslims.[14] As both the 'methodology of ascent to God'[15] and a guide 'for action in this world',[16] it is in fact the 'quintessential source and language' of faith.[17] This is why urging Muslims not to view it as a text, or to view it as a historically produced text, or as a part human/part sacred discourse, or to say 'no' to the text, or to move 'beyond' the text, etc., all the while paying lip-service to our right to be Muslims, is so rankly deceitful. Of course, in the end, the ones who are deceived are not those who know that 'only in faith can they find the meaning and possibility of life',[18] but those who imagine that they can shake this conviction. Even so, this does not make their strategy any less underhanded.

Lastly, Abu Zayd's and Rhouni's criticism of Islamic feminists for reading the Qur'an on behalf of women's rights (in a modern and egalitarian way) suggests that they think only secularists have the right to speak about rights. However, there is no reason why

Muslims cannot do so from their own religious perspectives. Since this is what I have done myself, I should explain why I read the Qur'an as a liberatory text.[19]

I do so partly on the basis of God's self-disclosure in the Qur'an, in particular, its emphatic repudiation of the patriarchal imaginary of God as father. This refusal to engender and sexualize God, I argue, also militates against viewing patriarchy (the chief instrument of women's oppression in Muslim societies) as reflecting divine sanction or providence. For, why would a God who is above sex/gender and who promises not to transgress against the rights of others, as the Qur'an teaches, fall prey to shoddy sexual partisanship or hatred by privileging men over women or advocating the oppression of women? Indeed, not only does the Qur'an not oppress women, but it also affirms that women and men originated in the same self, have the same capacity for moral choice and personality and, as God's vice-regents on earth, have a mutual duty to enjoin the right and forbid the wrong.[20] This is the second reason I read the text on behalf of women's rights, because of its ontic view of sexual equality.

I also take this view, which I consider to be foundational to the Qur'an's episteme, as the template for interpreting those verses that differentiate between women and men with respect to certain social issues. It is these verses, or, rather, a couple of lines, that most Muslims interpret as evidence of God's partiality to men. What is significant, however, is that the Qur'an itself does not present difference as inequality since it does not define the differing rights and roles of women and men in terms of their biology (sex) or make the claim that men are superior to women because they are males or that women are inferior to men because they are females. In fact, missing from it entirely is gender symbolism of this sort.

Naturally, I am hyper-aware of the few words and lines in the text that speak to male authority but I view these as reflecting the fact that the Qur'an's first audience was a 7th-century tribal Arab patriarchy in which men *did* exercise certain types of authority. For the Qur'an to have dealt with this reality is not to say that it therefore advocates 'patriarchal norms, since that was the historical condition in which [it] was revealed'.[21] Dealing with a historical contingency is not the same as upholding it as a norm. Besides, the Qur'an is meant to be a universal text which means that it is

> ... not bound *to* any society's history or even *by* history; it could not be, because what is historically contingent (particular) cannot be prescriptive (universal). What is prescriptive in the Qur'an is not history, society, or patriarchy, but certain principles.[22]

And, these principles are conducive to modern and egalitarian readings. After all, a scripture encompasses a horizon of ethical possibilities and the Qur'an's own counsel to read it for its best meanings[23] confirms that we do not need to link it to just one historical context or to one reading alone since our understanding of what is best is itself changeable. This is what allows us to realize its liberatory promise over time.

Finally, I do not agree with the claim that Islamic feminists are politicizing the Qur'an by rereading it or that they are 'islamiz[ing] the secular' by reading it on behalf of women's rights.[24] One does not need to be an Islamic feminist to know that interpretation is by its very nature political, if by the term we mean something along the lines I defined earlier. And, as the recapitulation of my reading of the

Qur'an illustrates, it is not just secularism's prerogative to make the case for women's rights, and nor does making it from a Qur'anic perspective Islamize the secular. Not only is this an absurd claim but it ignores that part of secularism's project is to secularize Islam.

Interpreting secularism and democracy

Earlier, I said that it is a secular illusion to think that Muslims will give up believing that 'only in faith can they find the meaning and possibility of life'. This is a quote from Tolstoy who wrote in *A Confession* that the reason people reject belief in God is 'so that we may yet again pose the question that confronts us all, and for which we do not have an answer'.[25] Perhaps some secularists have found the answers to this question or, what might be truer to say, perhaps secularism has freed them from the need of having to pose it. However, it has definitely not freed many of them from the need to embrace doctrinal certitude or to attempt conversion projects of their own. These appear, rather metaphysically, in the guise of both necessity and possibility; as, for instance, in arguments about the need to secularize the Qur'an and to privatize Islam and to put one's faith in democracy and rights, and so on.

Let me clarify: what I object to is not the conversion project that aims to introduce and/ or strengthen civil and political rights and liberties in Muslim societies. No rightminded person could quarrel with that. What I object to is the conversion project that aims to hollow out Islam from the inside by chipping away at the Qur'an. The fact that some Muslims are involved in doing this does not lend this strategy any legitimacy or make it more likely to succeed. If anything, assailing the religious beliefs of Muslims, and even just peddling the specious binary between Islam and democracy, Islam and women's rights, Islam and freedom, etc. makes it seem that Muslims can have only one or the other. The secular hope, clearly, is that they will opt for a regime of secularization that will gut their religion as the condition for ensuring them certain rights. Instead, and quite predictably, Muslims go on choosing Islam or, rather, those interpretations of it that are prevalent in their societies. Insofar as these are overwhelmingly patriarchal and inhospitable to certain ideas, Muslim women also go on being caught in a double bind. It takes little foresight to predict that, as long as this cycle remains in place, the Arab awakening, as Tariq Ramadan has rechristened it,[26] will not augur much for their rights in the Middle East and North Africa.

To make such an argument is not to deny that Muslim states in the MENA region *are* repressive. But, it is much too fraudulent to represent the sundry kings, dictators, sultans and emirs, who are being propped up by the USA and their own oil wealth, as the poster boys of Islam. Nothing in Islam justifies hereditary rule by royal or clan lineages or political dynasties and, as a matter of fact, the worst despotisms – in Syria, Iraq, Algeria, Egypt, Libya and Tunisia – were, or are, secular. As such, pitting secularism against Islam or, worse, against Islamism (a term I find utterly nonsensical) is not only pointless but it also narrows the political arena by presenting Muslims with false choices (Islam versus rights, etc.). Paradoxically, such a strategy also tends to gut secularism itself. By this I mean that, in the West, secular democracy allows citizens to claim not only political and civil rights and liberties but also religious freedoms (to believe what they

want and to practise their religions as they see fit). In contrast, in Muslim societies, secularism seems to require them to dismantle their core religious beliefs in order to savor the promises of democracy. Given such a prospect, it seems reasonable to ask why some people want this kind of secularism for Muslims.

Before I end and, in fact, by way of concluding this article, I want to raise some questions about democracy prompted by Gramsci's critique of it. The most notable feature of democracy for him was its continued reproduction of divisions between the 'rulers and ruled, leaders and led', which then led him to ask how 'the former are able to secure the latter's willing endorsement for their rule'.[27] It is in this context that he used the concept of hegemony 'for a differential analysis of the structures of bourgeois power in the West'.[28] He argued that the political ascendancy of the ruling class manifests itself 'in two ways, as "domination" and as "intellectual and moral leadership"',[29] and hegemony refers to its ability to achieve predominance through 'consent ... rather than force'.[30] This does not mean, however, that hegemony requires democracy or that democracy implies that the hegemony itself is strong. On the contrary, Gramsci believed that it was *weaker* forms of hegemony that manifest themselves in the form of both democracy and fascism.

Whatever its form, however, the hegemonic phase of a class is its most 'purely political' since it allows the class to transcend its own 'economic-corporative' interests to become an agent of 'more universal activities'.[31] It is during this phase that political alliances between classes become possible and these have the potential to transform national politics as well. By transformative politics Gramsci meant raising politics to a higher intellectual and moral *plane* and also achieving a new *type* of moral reform through revolutionary praxis, both of which require ideologically informed participation by the people in politics. In fact, for him, democracy was not a set of institutions but a mode of 'conducting politics based on creating the conditions for active political intervention by the mass of the people and aimed at abolishing the division between rulers and ruled'. If such a likelihood did not exist then he felt that appeals to the people also became 'pure demagogy'.[32]

While this does not mean that democracies 'are mere cosmetics on the face of coercion',[33] one could argue that this is what US and European democracies have become over the last decade, at least for many of their Muslim citizens. Moreover, the US's entrenchment in a state of eternal war and the slide into right-wing xenophobia in many European states testify to the limits of transformative politics even in secular democracies. My intent in noting this is not to make a case against democracy but to suggest that its promise is by no means assured even in the West and it is likely to be no different in the so-called Muslim world one day. So-called because although most Muslims live in a state of apartheid in Europe, we are all inhabitants of what Hava Lazarus-Yafeh called 'intertwined worlds'.[34] I find this to be a richer and more compelling metaphor for the world than the monochromatic image of it conjured up by terms like 'a secular age' and 'a secular world', self-referential phrases that mean little outside the US and Europe. What happened to the ideal, shared by Islam and secularism alike, of 'to each their own'? As I see it, without respect for religious and political autonomy and diversity, secular democracy will have no promise in Muslim countries regardless of how many bridges are built across divides. After all, bridges are meant to enable travel

in opposite directions and, without this possibility and mutuality, I feel some bridges are better left uncrossed.

Notes

This is a revised version of the talk I gave at the Reset-Dialogues İstanbul Seminars ('The Promises of Democracy in Troubled Times') that took place at İstanbul Bilgi University on 19–24 May 2012. Part of the article draws on a paper presented at a conference on 'Islamic New Thinking' in Essen, Germany, in June 2011.

1. I borrow the phrase from Said (1979).
2. I define such a hermeneutics in Barlas (2002).
3. Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd (2006).
4. This is Raja Rhouni's reading of Abu Zayd (2010: 272). Such an argument sounds counter-productive since it suggests that what is holding back reform in Islam are positive (egalitarian) interpretations of it.
5. Abu Zayd (2006: 98).
6. ibid.
7. ibid.: 91.
8. ibid.
9. Rhouni (2010: 14).
10. ibid. (2010: 256).
11. ibid. (2010: 260; emphasis added).
12. ibid. (2010: 257).
13. ibid. (2010: 272).
14. Denny (1985: 95).
15. Taha (1987: 148).
16. Fazlur Rahman (1982: 14).
17. El-Solh and Mabro (1994: 2).
18. Tolstoy (1987: 54).
19. See Barlas (2002) for a detailed exposition of this argument.
20. ibid., chs 5 and 6.
21. Moosa (2003: 125).
22. Barlas (2008: 25).
23. The Qur'an, 39:18; Ali (1988: 1241).
24. Seker.
25. Tolstoy (1987: 55).
26. Tariq Ramadan, public lecture, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY, April 2012.
27. Gramsci (1971: 144).
28. Barlas (1995: 22).
29. Gramsci (1971: 57).
30. Femia (1981: 31).
31. Barlas (1995: 24).
32. Gramsci (1971: 230).
33. Hobsbawm (1982: 32).
34. Lazarus-Yafeh (1992).

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