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Response to Barlas - 2

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Response

Linda Schulte-Sasse

Especially in our Western technocracy, we can't be reminded often enough that to read a culture is to read its own reading strategies: to examine what it chooses as its foundational text and what it gleans as the text's "true" meaning. Asma Barlas demonstrates forcefully that a preoccupation with reading is hardly an esoteric, egg-headed exercise, but one with very real consequences.

Her remedial reading strategies target two willful misreaders of Islam. The first is like Reverend Lovejoy of the TV show *The Simpsons*, who divides the world into "three great religions: Christianity, Judaism, and miscellaneous." She is the Western speed reader who glosses over Islamic culture, translating surface manifestations into familiar words: terrorism, misogyny, that guy whose name just happens to sound like a swear word, Saddam. We can almost hear this reader thinking: I know just enough about Islam to know I want out of there, but not without my daughter. While this first reader is oblivious to her own illiteracy, the second, "inside" reader knows the text by heart, or the parts of it that seem to endorse heartless deeds. Like the first reader, he is also an author, this time of a reverse projection of something called "Western feminism," whose imagined decadence and unnaturalness lets him avoid looking at himself in an unflattering light.

To be persuaded that this reading problem is not unique to Islam, we need look no further than our own recent history, where we find feminism facing a very different challenge. The events surrounding President Bill Clinton's impeachment involved less a crisis of morality, I would argue, than of a critical literacy permitting a reflected engagement with texts, whether fictional, religious, legal, or political. Certainly the impeachment story was not about a specific book like the Quran being distorted. But it was about a linear, fundamentalist notion of text used to legitimate an attempted coup d'état. The House "Managers" had a field day with texts whose meaning was open neither to ambiguity nor interpretation, but merely invoked as figures of identification: from "America" to "Truth" — which, we were assured, is "absolute" — and, crucially, to the "Law."

The Managers incessantly conjured Law as an affective object, a source of "love" and "pride," and not as a principle subject to interro-

gation and contestation; hence, they always already excluded from consideration the possibility of the law's perversion. Law was transformed from a secular to a sacred text as each listener was invited to join a community of those interpellated by it. It wasn't until that construct known as "The American People" just said no to these machinations that the Managers suddenly became what columnist Frank Rich called "born again relativists."

If Quranic misreadings serve to beat women down, the Republican Right resourcefully took the only route left in the West: to beat feminism at its own game, to appropriate phenomena heretofore known as "feminist issues," like sexual harassment. As feminists or just thinkers we were stuck, torn between distaste at adolescent behavior and the realization that the "investigation" into and "revelations" about this behavior were far more prurient, not to mention dangerous, than the acts themselves.

But one of the good things to come out of impeachment may be that feminism had to face its own epistemological contradictions. All of a sudden a crucial feminist tenet, that the personal is political, was poised to undermine its own presupposition, was threatened by its own surplus. We saw the possibility that by demanding that total truth be rendered public, we may engage in the totalizing operation that constitutes another "ism" — totalitarianism — a system that forcibly infuses the private with the public sphere. After arguing for years that sexist creeps could not hide behind the privacy defense (remember Senator Packwood's diaries?), we were caught with our own pants down, outwitted by the morality squad to which we gave birth.

The point is not that feminism was wrong in asserting that the personal is political — it certainly was not wrong — but that every epistemology needs now and then to examine its own assumptions, to be thrown into a state of therapeutic dyslexia. Impeachment called for feminism, too, to keep vigilantly rereading and rewriting its own texts. You might say it offered feminism a much-needed sensitivity training on the precarious balance of private and public in a democracy.

We have such a vigilant reader in Asma Barlas. But from what position is Professor Barlas speaking; what is her relationship to her own legitimizing text? I appreciate Barlas's courage in taking what she calls a precarious position, a position at odds with what she anticipates to be

the secular humanist norm at a place like Macalester College. Though I share most of her views, I happen not to believe as she does, so the loveable Macalester liberal in me wants to proclaim that I “respect” Barlas’s religious convictions, thereby ending the conversation. But that would be what Richard Nixon liked to call “the easy way.” Instead, I will critique, as opposed to criticize, her position on two points, ultimately aiming at an endorsement of her essay.

Inevitably, Barlas and I could read the Quran and still be reading different books; I read words, she reads the Word. My question aims not at her practice or investment, but at its theoretically-grounded premise that God’s word is “there” in the Quran if only we can or could find the “right” mode of reading it. I am reminded of a friend who likes to say, “I don’t misunderstand you correctly.” If God’s word is rendered accessible only through the flawed and infinitely misreadable medium of language, how can we separate the message from its medium and say the medium is, alas, imperfect but the message is pure?

This is an old dispute indeed, and in Western tradition, the problematic nature of truth and text was, of course, a concern of the Enlightenment. Perhaps *the* seminal example is Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s drama *Nathan the Wise*, in which the Muslim Sultan Saladin demands that the Jew Nathan tell him which of the three religions is the true one. In place of a clear-cut answer, Nathan offers a story about a father in a fix because he’s supposed to decide which of his three sons to leave the family heirloom to, a precious ring that makes its bearer pleasing to God and man. Unable to decide which son is most deserving, the father has a goldsmith make two facsimiles, which turn out to be so perfect that the father himself loses track of which is the original ring. It is the boys who are in a fix after the father dies, each one outraged to learn they all received “the” ring from dad. Each son battles to prove that his ring is the true one, but the judge hearing their case is not interested in examining the rings—a transparent metaphor for the three religions. In fact, judging from the sons’ behavior, he speculates that the real ring must have gotten lost. Instead of passing a verdict, the judge prescribes a task: the sons should go out into the world and win the love of their fellow humans and come back in many, many years, when a wiser judge than he will be able to tell which ring, as shown by its benevolent effect, is the true one. In other words, the judge ascribes legitimacy not to an object or text, but to

social-historical practice, suggesting that the value in a religion is in what it does in this life and not in its co-option of Truth.

While Lessing's story is anchored in patriarchy with its privileging of the father as the subject who is supposed to know, both the biological and the symbolic father divest themselves of authority. They refuse the patriarchal mandate to choose and privilege, to confer cultural authority on one truth. If the real ring "probably got lost," the very concept and, indeed, importance of absolute truth or authenticity is called into question — even if we need to live as if there were such a truth. And Nathan responds to the demand for an "either-or" answer by telling a *story*, an aesthetic construct that offers no revelation but instead demands more work, more interpretation. Alternatively, you could say that Nathan's story, though "only" a story, is the *only* way to set the reflexive process in motion and that it must be pursued endlessly because to conclude it would be to defeat its point. Hence, Nathan's story is shaped like the rings it's about.

The power of Lessing's text is its insistence on *limitation*: of paternal authority, of textuality, and of truth itself. The more the aesthetic construct "involves" us and the Sultan, the more it seduces us to want to know how it's going to turn out, and the more resolutely it refuses to deliver. In place of closure and the verdict we crave, we're left with the judge's ironic promise that some imaginary future judge, "wiser than I," will have the answer. Already in 1779, Lessing knew better than to wait for Godot.

Though the point of Lessing's play is religious tolerance, it flies in the face of any religion by proclaiming truth to be partial and relative, hence ultimately nonexistent. In this sense, it recalls the claims of contemporary critical theory. In presenting her own project, Barlas draws convincingly on theories of signification to critique repressive, false reading strategies. However, the moment she posits that the Quran is *the* Truth, she necessarily executes a discursive switch that shuts down argument. We're back to that dubious "respect." When I "respect" somebody else's faith, it's because I can't argue for or against it. It is also not uncommon in the West to find a critical theory grounded on the unfixability of meaning making inroads into religious discourses grounded in an ultimate meaning. Let me give a hyperbolic example. At a church service not long ago, I heard a sermon peppered with casual references to postmodernism and deconstruction(ism). What, I asked myself, is deconstruction doing in a sermon that is guiding its congregation toward a truth with which Congressman Tom Delay

might be comfortable? Is modern religion like capitalism, which, with its infinite resiliency, makes capital out of its own critique?

The pastor's gift of a suffix, turning deconstruction into deconstructionism, testifies to a perverse side effect of Jacques Derrida's success that fundamentally undermines him. To expose the endless chain of meaning contained in a text in spite of itself *cannot* be an "ism." In other words, by turning Derrida into his own worst enemy, a prophet, and his technique into a teaching, the pastor unwittingly achieved the perfect revenge. Asma Barlas is a far cry from this, but an analogy lies in her enlisting critical theory as her ally only to harness its implications: deconstructing reading is a good thing until we reach a more acceptable reading. (I will return to this, however, to argue that on a political level Barlas's maneuver is defensible, even necessary.)

My second point of critique involves the opposite move, not harnessing a text but imagining it to be unharnessed. By reading the Quran as antipatriarchal (indeed, wouldn't a sacred text, God's word, transcend all man-made structures?) might Barlas overlook social inscriptions of patriarchy in that text? To debunk claims that the Quran prescribes female oppression is not the same as to show the text to be antipatriarchal, and I will argue that at least some examples she cites are infused with the assumptions of patriarchy.

To clarify my argument I'm going to commit heresy and look at patriarchy in an unfeminist way; to read it with, not against, the grain. Even more outrageously, I'm going to say that patriarchy is not necessarily to be equated with the bad. In its own understanding, patriarchy is an order grounded in paternal responsibility as well as privilege. Historically, this paternal discourse entered European politics precisely along with a moral (as opposed to a Machiavellian) imperative, reflected in terms like "founding fathers" or the German *Landesvater*. If you think I'm talking about some ideology of yesteryear, ask yourself what Tipper Gore was doing in that photomontage at the Democratic National Convention that gave a new meaning to the word "embarrassing." Tipper's literal presentation of an image (multiple images) of Al Gore as the devoted father of a nuclear family was premised on the ideological assumption that this is the necessary precondition for him to play the same role for the nation *qua* family — the obvious subtext being the failed father Clinton. (We can also thank Clinton for the only new element here: the introduction of a heretofore prohibited sexuality into this discourse of family. Gore "legalized" Clinton's transgressive presidential passion by performing the famous Kiss on none other

than his wife of thirty years. He thus crossed a line in family discourse and in the polls, making political capital out of an oxymoronic logic linking passion and marriage; and what could be more oxymoronic than to link passion and Al Gore?)

Of course, the contribution of feminism was to read the fine print of patriarchy and tease out another word with the same root: patronizing. We came to see that patriarchy excludes, infantilizes, and “others” women and other groups within its structure. But excluding, infantilizing, and othering does not by definition mean *mistreating*, and Barlas’s example of the Quran sanctioning polygamy if the second wife is an orphan represents precisely an example of patriarchal benevolence. Wife #2’s social positioning as a parentless child mandates that the “just” man assume the role of surrogate parent. An *antipatriarchal* position need not dismiss patriarchal benevolence within an existing context (would we rather see the woman starve?) but would uncover infantilization as its precondition.

And is the story of Abraham antipatriarchal because an ungendered God strips the father of his authority? As in Lessing’s drama, the very preoccupation with paternal privilege echoes a patriarchal structure. But more importantly, the Quran’s God assumes the ultimate patriarchal *function*, that of Law — to recall Rumpole of the Old Baily — he/she/it who must be obeyed. In other words, because patriarchy is above all a structure, certain of its operations allow gender to take precedence over sex; a woman can assume a patriarchal function, as I do when I grade my students, indeed, when I teach them. I am assuming the position the fathers in Lessing’s drama willingly abdicate: the agent of knowledge and of selection.

What is God doing in the case of Abraham? An irreverent look at the story might go like this. God says, “Kill your son to prove your loyalty,” and after making Abraham go that far says, “I was just kidding. I only wanted to see if you’d do it.” Psychoanalysis has a term for this vision of God: a castrating God. Castration — meant here in a metaphoric sense of denying patriarchal privilege — and the fear of castration are what patriarchy is all about. I am even tempted to connect this reading of a sadistic God to abusive social practices, remembering that the more “castrated” humans feel, the stronger our tendency to seek out someone weaker yet (which is doubtless a source of patriarchal abuse). Is the implication, then, that the antidote to abuse is to stabilize patriarchy and hope the Promise Keepers keep their

promise? How can men feel “whole” without needing illusions of phallic domination?

Not for a second do these “philosophical” quibbles, however, stop me from endorsing Asma Barlas’s essay as a strategic/political project, a project to read women’s emancipation out of (her foes would say: into) the Quran, assuming that such a reading will enable a more just social world. As Lessing’s judge says, it will win the love of humankind. In other words, I do not need to *believe* in the Quran as she does to find her Quran appealing. Another source of this appeal is the subversion Barlas discusses of binary notions like faith and, to use that American gag word, critical thinking. She highlights the Quran’s challenge to Western binaries, suggesting an affinity with contemporary theories that likewise challenge those binaries. If Islam tells us that the road to faith is the intellect, psychoanalysis has argued that intellect and belief are constantly crossing wires, cross-pollinating, even when they seem distinct or contradictory. Freud jokes about the man who not only didn’t believe in ghosts, but was not even frightened of them. Knowledge (I know very well there’s no such thing as ghosts) does not contradict belief (just the same, I’m somehow scared of ghosts). Belief doesn’t lose its power through knowledge.

And how does the Quran’s insistence that the ultimate moral *agency* is *submission* to God ring in our Western ears? It seems weird, perhaps, given our schooling in individualist ideology. But this maxim accords precisely with both Kierkegaard’s and Derrida’s readings of the Abraham story.¹ Both point to a paradoxical contradiction between intersubjective and absolute responsibility, namely, that absolute responsibility requires that one be irresponsible in one’s empirical encounters with others. As Derrida puts it, “Abraham is faithful to God only in his absolute treachery.”² (Underscoring my claim that this is indeed a story rooted in patriarchy, he mentions the “utter absence of woman in this equation” as “hard to overlook,” and wonders whether the “logic of sacrificial responsibility” would be changed “if woman were to intervene in any consequential way.”)

We may be at an impasse about the ultimate nature of meaning, but more important is Asma Barlas’s insistence that reading *matters*, and that people *want* to read in ways that reaffirm themselves *vis-à-vis* an other. Yet if we impute this tautological desire to the bad readers, we

must confess it about ourselves as presumably good readers. As the saying goes, you don't become a Marxist by understanding Marx, you understand Marx because you're already a Marxist. If the patriarchs read the Quran patriarchally because they're already patriarchs (determined, as Barlas tells us, by a social context predating Islam and not unique to it), Barlas reads the Quran feministically because she's already a feminist (determined by contemporary developments). But so what? This ultimate arbitrariness on a theoretical level need not prevent us from just saying yes to a reading and with it a social project we believe is right. What remain are strategic problems. We know who needs to hear Asma Barlas's reading of reading: the two students we started out with, the Western slacker and the overzealous Islamic insider. But if reading is a precondition for liberation, how can these students be made to read right or at least "righter"?

As a child of 20th century America faced with this question, I involuntarily conjure thrilling, spectacular moments of enlightenment, as when attorney Clarence Darrow — immortalized by Spencer Tracy in Stanley Kramer's *Inherit the Wind* — put fundamentalism itself on the stand in the 1925 Scopes Trial on the teaching of evolution. When the prosecution entered "The Bible" into evidence, the defense countered with the objection at the heart of Asma Barlas's argument: "What is The Bible?" Much like Islamic patriarchs, the Scopes' judge rejected as "foreign" the defense's argument that, as a translation, the Bible was by definition an *interpretation*. And like certain Muslim clerics, he responded with an all too familiar decree: "Let your objection be overruled." Nonetheless, by trapping opposing council William Jennings Bryant in his own contradictions when Bryant admitted that the six days God took to create the earth may have been "periods" lasting millions of years, Darrow spectacularly won the trial and resolved the issue. Or did he? Why do about half of all Americans still believe God created humans in their present form? Why does the Scopes trial keep getting recycled? And why, indeed, is a very male God doing overtime in our presidential election?

Because the spectacular moment of enlightenment is just that: a moment of defamiliarization that doesn't have a prayer against those familiar and oh-so-reassuring readings. This doesn't mean that Asma Barlas, or we, should stop deconstructing readers and reading epistemologies. But we'll have to live with the kernel of *real belief* that, like the living dead, always comes back, always survives deconstruction... until many, many years (or "periods") from now, when that really

smart judge who can recognize the right ring tells us how to read with our minds and not with our guts.

Notes

1. Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, translated by David Wills (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995); and Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling—The Book on Adler*, translated by Walter Lowrie (New York and Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994).
2. Derrida, p. 68.