

# Muslim Women in Europe: In/Between Worlds<sup>1</sup>

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This journal article is the transcript of an online keynote delivered by the political scientist Asma Barlas at the opening of a conference organized by IFIME on the theme *Europe's Muslim Women! Muslim Women of Europe?.*"

**Abstract:** This work argues that European Muslim women face a dual marginalization shaped by longstanding European Islamophobia and patriarchal interpretations within many Muslim communities. It traces how medieval European depictions of Islam and Muslim women continue to inform contemporary stereotypes, including the treatment of the veil as a symbol of oppression. The analysis contrasts these portrayals with the diverse realities of Muslim women's lives and the social double-binds they navigate. Turning inward, the study critiques classical Qur'anic exegesis for masculinizing God and misreading a small number of verses as mandating gender hierarchy. It proposes that the Qur'an's core theological principles — divine unity, incomparability, and justice — support an egalitarian and antipatriarchal interpretation. Ultimately, the work calls for renewed, ethically coherent Qur'anic scholarship in which Muslim women play a central role.

**Keywords:** Muslim women, Islamophobia, Patriarchy, Qur'anic interpretation, Gender Equality

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## Introduction

I am honored to have been invited to this conference, although in truth, I do not know much about European Muslim women's lives other than what friends have shared and I have read in the news, since the longest stretch I have lived in Europe was for three months in 2008 when I was teaching at the University of Amsterdam. That was a rather demoralizing experience in some ways, as were visits to other European cities, as I got to see that Muslims—especially women who wear a hijab—are a hyper-visible and denigrated minority in many European countries. This is in contrast to the US, where Muslims are just one minority among others and do not dominate the political landscape or public consciousness in the same way. Of course, this slightly changed after the 9-11<sup>2</sup> attacks on the country by a group of mostly Saudi men. However, in general, European antipathy to Islam has much older roots than it does here: in fact, it dates from medieval Europeans' first encounters with Islam over 1,000 years ago. Moreover, while it targets all Muslims, it has had a disproportionate impact on women, who unfortunately also encounter

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<sup>1</sup> This is a lightly edited text of my keynote delivered via Zoom on November 26, 2022. It draws on prior work, some of which is listed in the Bibliography.

<sup>2</sup> I give the year to distinguish these attacks from the ones the U.S. CIA carried out on 9/11/1973 on Chile, which resulted in the death of the democratically elected prime minister, Salvador Allende.

discrimination from other Muslims due to the popular belief that the Qur'an ordains women's subjugation to men.

I will explore the implications of this double-bind for European Muslim women, which results from living in a liminal space in-between their own communities and the secular societies in which these are located. This is not to say they are merely victims of both; rather, my point is that the historical and ideological *situatedness* of their lives makes Muslim women vulnerable to both to Islamophobia and the sexism of Muslim cultures. As examples of Islamophobia, I will take European representations of the Prophet, Islam, and women, and as evidence of Muslim sexism, dominant interpretations of the Qur'an as a male-privileging text that allegedly discriminates against women. I will end by contrasting this with my own reading of the Qur'an as liberatory and antipatriarchal. In using the word Muslim, I do not assume that everyone who is born one is observant, nor that observant Muslims know the Qur'an: in fact, over 80% do not read it, according to surveys. However, non-observant Muslims are not exempt from the repercussions of Islamophobia, just as observant Muslims who do not know the Qur'an are not exempt from the impact of how the minority reads it.

## 1. A Preface

Before speculating on the situatedness of European Muslim women's lives, I want to say a few words about my own. I was born and brought up in Pakistan, the world's second largest Muslim country, and—starting at about the age of eleven—was taught to read the Qur'an. However, since none of the maulvis who tutored me knew Arabic, I only found out what I was reading through an English translation in my teens. At the time, I did not know that this was a notoriously bad one, nor that the Islam with which I was growing up significantly departed from Qur'anic teachings. In fact, as I later discovered, it violated the Qur'an's conceptions of God while also propagating very questionable claims about its position on men's authority over women.

Nor did I know that Europe had a millennium-long history of demonizing Islam despite the fact that I received a Eurocentric education in Catholic convents and graduated from a Presbyterian college, a legacy of British colonial rule in South Asia. For the most part, my textbooks did not mention Muslims or portrayed them as degenerates who had no history, let alone a civilization of which to speak. However, by now, I have spent more than half my life in the US, during which time I have come to read the Qur'an very differently from how I did before. In addition, I have discovered that Muslims were in the West before it became the West and indeed *allowed* it to become the West, since their learning, innovations and achievements also underpinned the European Renaissance and Enlightenment. On the other hand, Europe's history with Muslims includes not only colonization in the recent past but also gross misrepresentations of Islam, the Prophet, and the Qur'an over the course of several centuries.

## 2. Europe/West and Islam/Muslims

For instance, one of the earliest depictions of the Prophet by medieval Christians—including those who lived in Muslim-ruled Spain—was as the antichrist since they looked to the Bible and Christian history to explain Islam. As the historian Robert Southern says, this is how they came to read into Islam itself “the signs of a sinister conspiracy against Christianity,” and even that “total

negation of [it] which would mark the contrivances of Antichrist.”<sup>3</sup> Although their views of Islam began to shift after the first Crusade, Europeans still continued to paint pictures of it that were “only accidentally true.” To quote Southern again, “legends and fantasies were taken to represent a more or less truthful account of what they purported to describe. But as soon as they were produced they took on a literary life of their own [changing] very little from generation to generation.”<sup>4</sup> I think this is clear from the contemporary cartoons of the Prophet as a terrorist, a figure that seems to be a secular version of the antichrist. Thus, while the content of the two representations differs, their ideological *function* remains the same, namely to depict the Prophet and—by extension—Islam as the antithesis of Europe/West.<sup>5</sup>

I believe one can say something similar about European images of Muslim women, namely that these serve as a foil for European women and for casting aspersions on Islam’s purported sexual laxity and violence. For instance, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Muslim women were mostly shown as semi-naked concubines languishing in some sultan’s harem. Their images as sexual slaves sharply contrasted with those of Victorian women who were presented as pure and chaste and secluded in the privacy of their homes. However, as bodily exposure came to be seen as a sign of emancipation in the West, Muslim women were also increasingly depicted as being covered. Moreover, their head covering was/is treated as a symbol of their oppression, in contrast to—for instance—the habits of Catholic nuns, which are seen as signaling their religiosity and chastity. Naturally, the reality is that Muslim women wear the hijab or niqab or burqa, for *different* reasons. For some, it is a freely chosen marker of their religious or cultural identities and their difference in secular societies. For others, it is often a socially enforced mode of religiosity by male relatives. As such, representing *all* Muslim women who cover as oppressed not only ignores the complexity of their situations and choices but also seems to be the flip side of their representation as harem slaves. Moreover, common to both depictions is the *missing* image of the Muslim *man* as an overly sexualized predator/oppressor whose violence and misogyny are then ascribed to Islam and the Qur’an.

An example is the 2004 short film *Submission* by the Somali Dutch activist Ayaan Hirsi Ali and the filmmaker Theo van Gogh. This shows scantily clad Muslim women with bruises and phrases from the Qur’an on their bodies. According to Ali, she and van Gogh wanted to prove that the Qur’an itself incites sexual violence against women as a way to promote debates about it in the Dutch Muslim community. Any reasonable person would *know* that desecrating the sacred texts and symbols of a religion is not the best way to initiate a dialogue (even the title of the film was a provocation since Islam is also called submission, to God, of course). Given Hirsi Ali’s anti-Islamic record, it is difficult not to wonder whether she *wanted* to provoke violence to validate her criticisms of Islam and Muslims as barbaric, backward and violent. Moreover, this is exactly what happened when a Moroccan immigrant ended up killing van Gogh. As is customary for the Western media, instead of condemning *him*, it rushed to call the murder a “ritual slaughter” and a “home grown jihad,”<sup>6</sup> which showed that “traditional values have been eroded in a country

<sup>3</sup> R.W. Southern, *Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages*. Harvard University Press, 1962: 25.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 14; 28-29.

<sup>5</sup> I discuss these representations in Asma Barlas, “Would Spinoza Understand Me?” in *Re-understanding Islam*. Amsterdam: Van Gorcum Press, 2008.

<sup>6</sup> CBS, 60 Minutes, “Slaughter and ‘Submission,’” August 20, 2006.

roiled by...Muslim extremism.”<sup>7</sup> The segment of *60 Minutes* (a CBS TV show in the US) that I have referenced was called “Slaughter and ‘Submission,’” while the title of the article from which I have quoted blared: “The Netherlands not so Dutch Anymore.”

However, the fact that I have problems with the film or media coverage of van Gogh’s murder does not mean that Muslims do not justify violence against women based on their reading of specific verses in the Qur’an, notably 4:34. While I will speak about that shortly, meanwhile I will note that the practice of veiling exemplifies the double-bind of European Muslim women’s lives since both those who wear the hijab as well as those who do not are subject to harassment, and even legal penalties depending on where they are living. Thus, women who wear a hijab/niqab in Europe are seen as flaunting its secular values and face punitive measures, such as being excluded from certain public jobs. On the other hand, those who do not wear a hijab or burqa in some Muslim countries are seen as flaunting Islamic values and face criticism and sometimes violence.

### 3. Muslims and Veiling

If European desires to rip the veil off Muslim women reveal their own “erotic investment in seeing,”<sup>8</sup> Muslim views of veiled women as “repositories of morality,”<sup>9</sup> mask degrading views of their bodies as pudendal, polluting, and promiscuous. One finds this view in Qur’anic tafsir, the hadith, and Muslim sexual ethics. To recap, for about six centuries after the Qur’an was revealed, scholars held that men and women could show those parts of their bodies that were not pudendal. However, starting in the thirteenth century, some exegetes began claiming that a woman’s face and hands were also pudenda and that even the gaze was a “messenger of fornication.”<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, the hadith call women unclean and “evil temptresses, the greatest *fitna* [source of conflict] for men,”<sup>11</sup> while Muslim sexual ethics conveys a “fear of the uncontrollable, dangerous, and yet fascinating power of sex,” and “the tendency to see all the dreaded (hence hated) aspects of life in woman,”<sup>12</sup> who is associated with sex. Veiling is then meant to protect *men’s* virtue by hiding female bodies from *their* gaze.<sup>13</sup>

However, this view is completely antithetical to the Qur’an’s teachings about dress, on which there are two main sets of verses, which I will consider in turn. The first mentions wearing a *jilbab* in social and historical conditions that clearly no longer exist:

O Prophet! Tell  
Thy wives and daughters,  
And the believing women,

<sup>7</sup> Mike Corder, “The Netherlands not so Dutch Anymore,” AP, November 22, 2006.

<sup>8</sup> Meyda Yegenoglu, *Colonial Fantasies*. Cambridge University Press, 1988: 109.

<sup>9</sup> Pauline Turner, “Religious Aspects of Women’s Role in the Nicaraguan Revolution.” In *Women, Religion and Social Change*, ed. Yvonne Haddad and Ellison Findly, Albany: SUNY, 1985: 325.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Barbara Stowasser, *Women in the Quran, Traditions and Interpretation*. Oxford University Press, 1984) 27.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>12</sup> Annemarie Schimmel, “Eros—Heavenly and not so Heavenly—in Sufi Literature and Life.” In Afaf Lutfi Marsot (ed.), *Society and the Sexes in Medieval Islam*. Malibu, CA: Undena, 1979: 124.

<sup>13</sup> For an extended analysis, see Asma Barlas, “Embodying Islam and Muslims: Religious and Secular Inscriptions.” In Marius Timmann Mjaaland, Ola Sigurdson and Sigridur Thorgeirsdottir (eds.), *The Body Unbound*, U.K.: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010.

That they should cast  
 Their [*jilbab*] over  
 Their persons (when abroad)  
 That is most convenient,  
 That they should be known  
 [as free women, not slaves]<sup>14</sup> and not molested  
 [by the] Hypocrites,  
 And those in whose hearts  
 Is a disease, and those who  
 Stir up sedition in the City [al-Madina].<sup>15</sup>

As might be obvious, these verses are asking the Prophet—not husbands or fathers or brothers or sons—to advise women to don a *jilbab* and they make no claims about women’s bodies. They also do not claim that the *jilbab* is meant to protect Muslim women and men from *one another*, nor do they describe it as relating to a woman’s virtue. Its only stated function is to identify Muslim women to *Jahili*, namely non-Muslim men, to deter *these* men from molesting the women. Since women slaves were not allowed to cover themselves, the veil was an indicator of being a free woman.

To put this “law of the veil” —which prevailed not only in Arabia but also in Europe at that time—in historical context, it denoted “which women were under male protection and which were fair game.”<sup>16</sup> It was therefore the fear of retribution at the hands of women’s *male* relatives that kept sexual predators from assaulting or harassing them. If this had not been the custom, the *jilbab* also would not have meant anything in the social milieu of tribal Arabia, and since that milieu no longer exists, the *jilbab* also no longer functions as it once did. It is true that many Muslims regard their own and Western societies as *Jahili*, or ignorant, and on this basis insist that women must continue wearing something like the *jilbab*. However, most countries now have laws against sexual predation and the onus is no longer on women to protect themselves by wearing certain clothing. More to the point, the second set of verses on dress in the Qur’an tells both men and women that they are responsible for their own purity and cautions both of them to behave modestly:

Say to the believing men  
 That they should lower  
 Their gaze and guard  
 Their modesty: that will make  
 For greater purity for them ...  
 And say to the believing women  
 That they should lower  
 Their gaze and guard  
 Their modesty; that they  
 Should not display their  
 Beauty and ornaments expect  
 What (must ordinarily) appear  
 Thereof; that they should

<sup>14</sup> This is the translator’s interpellation since the Qur’an does not make such a distinction.

<sup>15</sup> The Qur’an, 33:59-60. A. Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Quran*, New York: Tahrike Tarsile Quran, 1988: 1126-27.

<sup>16</sup> Gerda Lerner quoted in Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*. CT: Yale University Press, 1992: 15.

Draw their [*khumur*] over  
 Their bosoms and not display  
 Their beauty except to<sup>17</sup> . . .

Here follows a list of male relatives in front of whom women do not have to observe these restrictions. Regarding ambiguities about what can “ordinarily appear,” while some scholars ruled that a woman’s face must also be covered, the Qur’an’s instruction to men to lower their gaze only makes sense if men are *able* to see women’s faces (and the other way around). Again, these verses also do not say anything about women’s bodies or sexuality, although—unlike the *jilbab* verses—they also apply the notion of purity to men. Finally, as might be apparent, these verses are not history or culture-bound in that they convey universal principles that are eternally normative.

#### 4. Muslims, Women, and the Qur’an

The fact that Muslims rarely consider the significance of the Qur’an’s reference to purity in relation to men is unsurprising since our cultures are embedded in ideologies of male supremacy and even depict husbands as their wives’ earthly gods. Indeed, most Muslims seem to think that Islam is “male-worshipping,”<sup>18</sup> which creates another double-bind in Muslim women’s lives, being caught between serving God and serving men. In fact, in some societies, women cannot even fully serve God because the Islam practiced in these societies bears little relation with the Qur’an’s teachings. This is true not only of Pakistan but of all Muslim countries, especially Saudi-ruled Arabia, Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, and clerically-ruled Iran.

While there are many reasons for this disjuncture between Qur’anic principles and Muslim practices, I believe that classical knowledge has Islamized male worship by masculinizing God and depicting the Qur’an as male-privileging. For instance, Islamic theology takes the Qur’an’s linguistic references to God as He as a license to render God male even though the Qur’an insists that God is unlike all creation and even forbids us to use similitude—or comparison—for God, for example:

Say: [God] is God,  
 The One and Only;  
 God, the Eternal, Absolute;  
 [God] begetteth not,  
 Nor is [God] begotten;  
 And there is none  
 Like unto [God]. (112)

However, despite other verses to the same effect, Muslims map gender onto God thus refuting the Qur’an’s own descriptions of God. They also misrepresent six or so verses (out of over 6,000 in the Qur’an) as mandating a gender hierarchy.

Thus, classical tafsir of 4:34 and some other verses claims that God prefers men, gives them a degree of superiority over women, makes them women’s guardians, allows them to marry multiple wives, and—to hit a disobedient one—gives them double a woman’s share in inheritance and elevates their testimony over women’s. However, several recent studies have

<sup>17</sup> The Qur’an 24: 30-31; in Ali, *ibid.*, 904-905.

<sup>18</sup> As he puts it, the Muslim family is essentially male worshipping. Abdelwahab Boudhiba, *Sexuality in Islam*. Translated by Alan Sheridan. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985: 11.

taken issue with these claims, many on linguistic grounds alone. For instance, *qawwamun* in 4:34—which most Muslims take to mean guardians and even rulers—also denotes financial upkeep (which is also how some classical exegetes read it). I will also note that being *qawwamun* is a husband's *role* rather than his *right* since it is contingent on his being able to provide for his wife, which not all husbands can do. Additionally, the word “prefer” in 4:34 does not refer to divine preference for *men* but the fact that God prefers to give more resources to some men than to others.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, clearly God also gives more to some women than to some men, as we know from the example of the Prophet's wife, Khadijah. Regarding a wife's *nushuz*, Muslims interpret this to mean disobedience to the husband; however, the Qur'an also says that a wife can seek a divorce if she fears her husband's *nushuz*. Therefore, we either have to agree that husbands must obey their wives or we have to look for another meaning of *nushuz*. Finally, the word that Muslims translate/ interpret as “strike”—which allows them to read 4:34 as the “wife-beating” verse—also means to leave, separate, cite, etc. If we take it to mean wife-beating, it contradicts all other Qur'anic teachings that tell spouses to dwell together in love and mercy (*sukun*) and instruct men to treat their wives kindly, including those they are divorcing and even those *who are their enemies*.

One can also offer similar counter-interpretations of other verses. For instance, the Qur'an does not allow all men to marry multiple wives and even forbade the Prophet to marry more wives at one point. Again, in the Qur'an, polygyny is meant to ensure justice for *orphans*: in other words, the Qur'an only allows *some* men who are taking care of orphans to marry more than one under certain conditions but it says that monogamy is better. In its words, God “has not made two hearts for any man.”<sup>20</sup> Likewise, the *darajah*—or degree—that men have over women refers to a husband's minor advantage in a divorce, although it is unclear whether the advantage lies in his being able to pronounce a divorce or initiate a reconciliation with a wife he is divorcing. Moreover, both parents inherit equal shares from a child's estates and a wife's testimony counts for more than her husband's if he accuses her of adultery on his own witness. In such an instance, the Qur'an says she can refute his charge on *her* own witness and—if she does—her word is the last (although we never hear of this mode of evidence).

Nor do we adequately appreciate the fact that even within the confines of a seventh century tribal patriarchy, the Qur'an addressed women and their concerns, admitted their evidence in legal cases, broke the silence on their abuse, gave them inheritance rights, forbade men to inherit them (which they could do in pre-Islamic Arabia on the death of their fathers), gave them a say in marriage contracts, and banned a pre-Islamic form of divorce on the pleas of a wife. It also tasked husbands with caring for their families and being just to their wives, divorced wives, and orphans in their care, and it included fathers in its injunctions about child-rearing while warning that God will call to account all those who kill their girls (so much for “honor” killings). Most importantly, the Qur'an taught that men and women are ontologically equal since they originate in the same self.

<sup>19</sup> This is Azizah al-Hibri's point. Quoted in Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, Cambridge University Press, 1999: 71.

<sup>20</sup> The Qur'an, 33:4. In Ali, *ibid.*, 1102.

For all of these reasons, I contend that the “hierarchy verses”<sup>21</sup> are historically specific in that they dealt with existing gender relations in the tribal Arab patriarchy that was the Qur’an’s first audience. I also read them through the lens of the Qur’an’s foundational teachings. However, these are not arbitrary choices since the Qur’an itself refers to the contextual—namely historical—nature of some of its content, asks that we foreground its foundational verses of clear meaning, tells us to read it as a whole instead of dividing it into “arbitrary parts,” and enjoins us to adhere to the best in it.<sup>22</sup> For this purpose, I interpret the Qur’an’s injunctions about men’s and women’s social roles and rights in light of its ontological claims about the creation of men and women from a single *nafs* (self), as well as the fact that God made them both *khalifa* (vice-regents) on earth, named them one another’s *awliya* (guardians), promises to judge them by the same standards and reward and punish them for the same reasons:

For Muslim men and women,--  
 For believing men and women,  
 For devout men and women,  
 For men and women who are  
 Patient and constant, for men  
 And women who humble themselves,  
 For men and women who give  
 In charity, for men and women  
 Who fast (and deny themselves).  
 For men and women who  
 Guard their chastity, and  
 For men and women who  
 Engage much in God’s praise,--  
 For them has God prepared  
 Forgiveness and great reward.<sup>23</sup>

According to tradition, this verse was revealed after the Prophet’s wife Umm Salamah asked why God was speaking only to the men.

Although I emphasize such verses over the hierarchy ones, my overall approach to the Qur’an is to interpret it in light of its statements about God. This is because I believe that as God’s speech, we should not interpret it in ways that contradict its statements about God. In more formal terms, I take God’s self-disclosure (i.e., how God describes God in the Qur’an) as the theological and hermeneutical framework for my reading. Moreover, I focus in particular on three divine attributes out of God’s many attributes—God’s unity, incomparability, and justice—and I read each of these attributes as being incompatible with theories of male privilege.

To briefly explain, the precept of *Tawhid* not only affirms God’s unity but also the absolute nature of God’s sovereignty in which no else can participate or partake. To do so would be to commit *shirk*. As such, I argue that men who posture as their wives’ earthly gods or rulers or guardians or as intermediaries between women and God are guilty of *shirk* since these roles allow them to

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<sup>21</sup> This is what Aysha Hidayatullah calls verses that are read as establishing unilateral male authority over women. *Feminist Edges of the Qur’an*, Cambridge University Press, 2014.

<sup>22</sup> For a fuller account of the Qur’an’s “auto-hermeneutics,” as I call it, see Asma Barlas, *Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur’an*. Texas: University of Texas Press, 2019; especially Chapter 1.

<sup>23</sup> The Qur’an: 33:35, in Ali, *ibid*, 1116-7. Whenever I’ve mentioned this verse in past talks, no Muslim in the audience has been able to identify it by its number though everyone has known about verse 4:34.

exercise forms of sovereignty over women that only God can. On a different note, God's inimitability—namely the Qur'an's declaration that "*there is none like unto God*"—nullifies the idea that God is gendered or that God favors men and discriminates against women due to their sex/gender. In fact, as the Qur'an tells us, not only did God create men and women from the same self but they also "proceed from one another" in this world. Finally, the Qur'an says that God's justice lies in not doing *zulm*, namely in not transgressing against the rights of another.<sup>24</sup> However, if God promises not to transgress against the rights of another, then I think it is incoherent to read God's speech as condoning *zulm* against women. Insofar as patriarchies allow men to transgress against the rights God has given women, I take them to be forms of *zulm* and I argue that the Qur'an does not condone them.

However, this part of my argument is not only based on this inferential leap but also based on applying a very clear definition of patriarchy to the Qur'an, unlike prior readers and critics who had made all sorts of claims about it. In the absence of a definition, we can all keep making claims about whether it is patriarchal or not patriarchal. Therefore, I describe patriarchy as a spectrum at one end of which is rule by the father/husband over women and children, and in religious patriarchies this rule is justified by drawing on images of God as male/father. At the other end of the spectrum—which is applicable to our own times—is a definition of patriarchy as a secular politics that privileges men and discriminates against women due to their biology. It is based on this definition that I call the Qur'an antipatriarchal.

Again, I do not have the time to go into my argument at length, but this is how I will sum it up. One reason I consider the Qur'an antipatriarchal is that it is the speech of an unsexed and ungendered God who rejects being called father. There are many passages claiming that God is not the father of Jesus and that some Jews and Christians call themselves God's progeny, God is not their father, literally or symbolically. The Qur'an also criticizes those who prefer to follow the "ways" of their fathers in preference to God.<sup>25</sup> All of these criticisms mean that there is no literal or symbolic relationship between God's authority over human beings and men's authority over women. This is the kind of authority that classical knowledge allows men to claim that as God is ruler in heaven, men are rulers over each other and women. However, they are not even kings, like King David. It is mentioned in the Qur'an that he only exercises his kingship not as a sovereign in his own right but as a subject of God's. Another reason I consider the Qur'an antipatriarchal is that it does not have a view of sexual differentiation. By this, I mean that it recognizes there are biological differences between men and women but it does not assign biology itself any gender symbolism. For example, it does not say that because you are male, these are the gender attributes you have, or because you are biologically female, these are the gender attributes you have. As Amina Wadud also notes, there is no concept of gendered man or woman in the Qur'an. Despite popular Muslim belief, not a single verse says that God gave men and women rights based on their sex/gender or that their biological identities make them unequal. If there is no theory of gender in the Qur'an, no concept of gender in the Qur'an, on what basis can we say that the Qur'an has normativized the gender hierarchy from seventh century Arabia? This is why I feel it is important to distinguish between the universal and the particular in the Qur'an's

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<sup>24</sup> Toshihiko Izutsu. *The Structure of Ethical Terms in the Koran*, Vol. 2. Tokyo, Keio Institute of Philological Studies, 1959: 152.

<sup>25</sup> Qur'an, 42:23-25, in Ali, 1328-29; *ibid.*

teachings, which we can do since the Qur'an recognizes its own location within history. It is only Muslims who refuse to because they think to recognize it is to nullify the Qur'an's sanctity and the universalism of God's word. However, the Qur'an's sanctity cannot be nullified by human beings because it is a function of its relationship with God rather than us. Furthermore, the Qur'an's universalism lies in the ability of every new generation of Muslims to read it in ever better ways.

These are some of the teachings that I feel are conducive for sexual equality and which allow observant Muslim women to claim that equality from within the framework of the Qur'an's teachings. I am not pretending that it is a feminist text: in fact, I reject the term feminist for my own methodology because it primarily derives from the Qur'an's teachings, although naturally I am influenced by feminism and feminist interpretations of other texts. The reason I put this out there is because it is very easy for Muslims to simply dismiss any liberatory reading of the Qur'an as feminist and feminism is not Islam. What we need today is new scholarship on the Qur'an and better ways of bringing its message of equality to Muslim societies. I believe Muslim women—wherever they are located, in Europe, their own countries, or the US—can play a crucial role in these tasks not only because we are most impacted by how the Qur'an is read but also because—as Umm Salamah's question to the Prophet shows—we have every right to be involved in the creation of religious knowledge. I often like to highlight that Umm Salamah was not literate, she was not a feminist, and yet she asked the Prophet why God was not speaking to us. This is also part of Muslim tradition and I hope that you will be among those who will follow the Qur'an's advice to adhere to and discover the best in its precepts.

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