

HERMENEUTICS AND CONTEMPORARY UNDERSTANDINGS OF ISLAMIC SOURCES

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‘Hermeneutics’, says Anthony C. Thiselton, ‘explores how we read, understand, and handle texts, especially those written in another time or in a context of life different from our own’¹. Although not restricted to sacred texts, the discipline of hermeneutics has been particularly prominent in the Christian tradition with various approaches to the interpretation of the Bible developed throughout the textual history of the Biblical texts. This latter has come to be known as biblical hermeneutics². In Islamic discourse, ‘hermeneutics’, at least linguistically speaking, is a relatively recent term³. But even though the formal employment of the term to the Islamic textual sources is relatively recent, the Islamic tradition has always been involved in interpretative discourses around both the Qur’an and the Hadiths – the two sources which hold authority for Muslims. This paper attempts a brief exposition of two recent hermeneutical approaches, Liberation and Feminist hermeneutics⁴, to the Islamic sources and how these approaches open up space for a contemporary understanding of Islam.

A. Liberation Hermeneutics of the Qur’an

Originally borne out of developments within Latin American Catholic Theology⁵, Liberation theological approaches to biblical interpretation and theology have been applied to both the Quranic and the Hadith texts to arrive at understandings of these sources which extend their interpretative horizons. One thoroughgoing example of this approach is the work of Farid Esack, *Qur’an, Liberation and Pluralism*⁶. Esack, whose work is informed by the pragmatics of activism and racial struggle in Apartheid South Africa of the 1970s and 1980s, applies what he terms a

¹ Anthony C. Thiselton, *hermeneutics: An Introduction*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2009, p. 1.

² According to Thiselton Biblical hermeneutics ‘investigates more specifically how we read, understand and respond to biblical texts’ (Thiselton, *ibid*, p. 1)

³ Farid Esack, *Qur’an, Liberation and Pluralism*, Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1997. P. 61

⁴ Feminist hermeneutics, at least as appropriated in the work of Asma Barlas, is a form of liberation hermeneutics. If we grant this, then both ‘liberation hermeneutics’ strictly defined and ‘feminist hermeneutics’ are merely two forms of the same hermeneutical approach (or ‘hermeneutic’)

⁵ With the seminal work of Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, London: SCM Press, 1974

⁶ Farid Esack, *Qur’an, Liberation and Pluralism*, Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1997

‘South African qur’anic hermeneutic of religious pluralism for liberation’⁷to [re]interpret the Qur’an’s portrayal of the grounds for being counted as being in total submission to Allah (*Islam*) and being excluded from His salvation (*Kufr*). It is interesting to consider how his hermeneutical approach aided in arriving at a quite radically non-traditional understanding of Islam.

Methodology of Esack’s Liberation Hermeneutics

Esack’s liberation hermeneutic of the Qur’an builds upon a number of methodological premises which are shared by traditional Interpreters of the Qur’an, but he goes further than traditional exegesis in the applying of these ideas. First, his work is premised on the notion of ‘progressive revelation’⁸. This concept, which has diverse layers of meaning⁹, in the Quranic context, implies that God’s revelation comes to Man in a progressive gradual manner which reflects, as Esack understands it, ‘the realities on the ground and the needs of the community being spoken to’¹⁰. Although Islamic theology generally holds the Qur’an to be ‘uncreated’ and to have come to the Prophet ‘independently of his will’¹¹, it is also believed that the revelations came in bits. Esack quotes Surah 17: 106 which he translates as ‘a Qur’an which We only gradually unfolded so that you may recite it to the people step-by-step and (therefore) We have revealed it only in pieces’¹². For Esack, going beyond the usual understanding of this principle which, in one sense, is traditionally taken to mean that the Qur’an has superseded the previous ‘revelations’ (of the ‘people of the book’ i.e. Jews and Christians), the notion of progressive revelation attests to the nature of God as being ‘actively engaged in

⁷ Esack, p. 12.

⁸ Esack, p. 54

⁹ There are several layers embedded in the notion of ‘progressive revelation’. First, is the idea that the Qur’an has now replaced the previous ‘revelations’ of Jews and Christians. Then, there is also the idea of ‘*naskh*’ which refers to ‘the repeal of some Qur’anic texts that are said to have been blotted out of existence’. *Naskh* also captures the idea of ‘the abrogation of some earlier commandment of the Qur’an by the later revelations, while the text containing those commandments remained in the Qur’an’; ‘the abrogation of prophetic practice by Qur’anic injunction’; and ‘the abrogation of Qur’anic injunction by prophetic practice’. (Esack, *ibid*, 57-58)

¹⁰ Esack, p. 54

¹¹ Victor Danner, *The Islamic Tradition*, Warwick, N.Y: Amity House, 1988.

¹² Esack, *ibid*, p. 55. A. Yusuf Ali translates this verse as ‘(it is) a Qur’an Which We have divided (into parts from time to time) In order that though mightiest recite it to men at intervals: We have revealed it by stages’ (Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur’an: Text, Translation and Commentary*, Dar Al Arabia, 1968). His commentary on the verse also notes that ‘all revelation is progressive’ which is in keeping with Esack’s point.

the affairs of this world and of humankind’¹³ and evidences a ‘Divine entity who manifests His will in terms of the circumstances of His people, who speaks to them in terms of their reality and whose word is shaped by those realities’¹⁴

The need to emphasise the notion of progressive revelation, for Esack, is to provide a corrective to what he adjudges as rather ahistorical understandings of the Quranic revelation which, in attempt to preserve the utter otherness of the Qur’an, end up committing to a picture of a God who is removed from the realities of the day-to-day lives of His people. Esack’s hermeneutical approach, in keeping with the deliberately orthopraxical bias of liberation theology, seeks to emphasize the link between the Revelation of God (that is, the Qur’an) and the lived experiences of the recipients of that revelation. The motivation for the emphasis by Esack is grounded within his analysis of the historical and socio-religious context of apartheid South Africa¹⁵. Esack notes how a certain ‘conservative’ reading of the Qur’an by some Muslims was implicated in morally justifying the refusal of some Muslims to actively participate in the fight against racial, economic and political oppression suffered by black South Africans who, in the main, were non-Muslims¹⁶.

In articulating what he terms the ‘hermeneutical keys’ for his liberation hermeneutic, Esack expands upon a number of Quranic concepts and notions. The first is *Taqwa* which, quoting Jafri, he defines as ‘heeding the voice of one’s conscience in the awareness that one is accountable to God’¹⁷. *Taqwa* is spoken of in numerous places in the Qur’an. Esack cites Qur’an 92:4-10, 49:13, 10: 63; 27:53; 41:18, 4:77, 6:32, 12:57 and a few others. The notion of *Taqwa* provides, for Esack’s hermeneutic, amongst other things¹⁸, the linking of ‘commitment to God’ as being

¹³ Esack, *ibid*, p. 54

¹⁴ Esack, *ibid*, p. 60.

¹⁵ This is the focus of the first chapter of the book.

¹⁶ Esack, *ibid*, p. 39. Esack distinguishes this ‘conservative’ school from the ‘progressive’ camp which he belonged and whose organisations were at the vanguard of forging solidarity with non-Muslims others in the struggle against apartheid

¹⁷ S.H.M. Jafri, “Particularity and Universality of the Qur’an with special reference to the Term *Taqwa*, in *Proceedings of the International Congress for the Study of the Qur’an*, Canberra 1980, edited by A. H. Johns. Canberra: Australia National University, p. 113-29. In Esack, *ibid*, p. 87

¹⁸ *Taqwa*, for instance, ‘ensures that interpretation remains free from both theological obscurantism and political reaction, as well as from the purely subjective speculation of individuals’ (Esack, *ibid*, p. 89)

‘an inseparable part of a commitment to God’.¹⁹ The second notion is *tawhid* which captures the idea of the unity of God. In Esack’s hermeneutics of liberation for pluralism, *tawhid* implies that God cannot be divorced from issues which are felt to be ‘profane’ or secular. In other words, orthodoxy must not come at the expense of orthopraxis. God is concerned about all areas of life. Esack puts it thus: ‘viewing *tawhid* as a hermeneutical principle means that different approaches to the Qur’an – philosophical, spiritual, juristic or political – must be regarded as components of a single tapestry’.²⁰ A liberation hermeneutic of the Qur’an, one learns from Esack’s exposition, necessarily implicates involvement in the secular, not only the so-called ‘sacred’. Similar re-appropriations of the Islamic notions of *nas*, *mustad’af*, *Qist*, and *jihad* complete Esack’s grounding of the basis for his hermeneutical approach. These keys are employed to furnish a new understanding of three Qur’anic terms: *Iman*, *Islam* and *Kufr*.

[Re]interpreting *Iman*, *Islam* and *Kufr*

Iman, in traditional Islamic understanding, is ‘faith’. Its synonym is ‘belief’ and it is contrasted with unbelief. Those who have *Iman* are the *Mu’min*, that is, the believers. In Qur’an 8:2-4²¹, for instance, ‘*Mu’ mimun*’ are the ‘believers’ who respond to Allah with *Iman*; with faith. Habib Ali Al-Jifri notes that there are two senses of the word: ‘the first is the faithfulness (*amana*) that is the opposite of treachery, meaning the heart’s assurance; and the other is belief’.²²

Islam means ‘to surrender’. *Iman* and *Islam* are closely related. In the Hadith of Imam Abu Muhammad al-Husayn ibn Mas’ud al-Baghawi, the Prophet is reported to say “‘surrender’ a name for outward actions, and ‘faith’ a name for inward beliefs. This is not because actions are not part of faith, or that belief of the heart is not part of surrender; rather, it is a detailed explanation of a totality which

¹⁹ Esack, *ibid*, p. 87.

²⁰ Esack, p. 93.

²¹ “The believers are only those who, when Allah is mentioned, their hearts become fearful, and when His verses are recited to them, it increases them in faith; and upon their Lord they rely - he ones who establish prayer, and from what We have provided them, they spend. Those are the believers, truly. For them are degrees [of high position] with their Lord and forgiveness and noble provision”. (Translation of Al-Anfal)

²² Habib Ali Al-Jifri, *The Concept of Faith in Islam*, Amman: The Royal Aal Al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, 2012. P. 11.

is, in fact, one single thing, the sum of which is called 'religion.'"²³ From this way of looking at it, the outward actions which constitute Islam are the Five Pillars (*Shahada, Salah, Zakat, Sawm, Hajj*) while Iman is 'faith in God, His angels, His books, His messengers, and so on'.²⁴ *Iman* and *Islam* are the distinguishing marks of the *Mu' min*; the true Muslims.

In contrast to the possession of *Iman* and the practice of *Islam*, *Kufr* is the Qur'anic word for 'unbelief' or 'disbelief'. The term features quite prominently in the Qur'an as it appears well over four hundred times.²⁵ *Kufr* has been generally seen to have two senses. The first sense captures under it those who do not have faith and who do not practice *Islam*; those who have not submitted to Allah. In short, those who do not have *Iman*. This is the sense communicated in Qur'an 64: 6 where it says 'That was because there Came to the apostles with clear signs, but they said "shall (mere) human beings Direct us? So, they rejected (The Messages) and turned away. But Allah can do without (them): and Allah is Free of all needs, worth of all praise'.²⁶ In another but related sense, *Kufr* also means 'ingratitude'.²⁷ The person who as *Kufr* is referred to as *kafir* (unbeliever). Faruq Sherif comments that 'those who maltreat God's messengers and the faithful; who stubbornly refuse to accept guidance, relying on the habits of their ancestors; who follow the ways of Satan; who prohibit others from obeying the commandments of the Qur'an...' ²⁸ are all considered in the Qur'an to be *kafir*. The punishment for *Kufr* is Allah's curse and eventually the blazing fire of Hell.²⁹

Esack takes issues, not with the Quranic texts which speak to these notions themselves, but with traditional interpretations of these texts which he feels to have so thinned out their meanings to arrive at 'an ever decreasing Chosen' and 'an ever-increasing Frozen'.³⁰ By this, Esack means that traditional understandings of

²³ Cited in Al-Jifri, *ibid*, p. 18.

²⁴ Al-Jifri, *ibid*, p. 19

²⁵ As noted in the Oxford Dictionary of Islam "Kufr".

²⁶ Translation of Abdullah Yusuf Ali

²⁷ This is the sense of Qur'an 2: 152: 'Then do ye remember Me; I will remember You. Be grateful to Me, and reject not faith' (Translation of A. Yusuf Ali)

²⁸ Faruq Sherif, *A Guide to the Contents of the Qur'an*, Reading: Ithaca Press, 1995. P. 124-125.

²⁹ Qur'an 34:64 notes that 'Verily God has cursed the Unbelievers and prepared for them the blazing Fire' (translation of A. Yusuf Ali).

³⁰ Esack, *ibid*, p. 114

these Quranic concepts have so construed them to reflect a rigid exclusivism which he considers the texts themselves not to favour. As he puts it:

‘One of the manifestations (and consequences) of the process of Islamic theology becoming more and more rigid was the reification of terms such as *Islam*, *Iman*, and *kufr*. In other words, these words are no longer seen as qualities that individuals may have; qualities that are dynamic and vary in intensity in different stages of an individual’s life. Instead, these terms are now regarded as entrenched qualities of groups, bordering on ethnic characteristics. The way these terms are employed in the Qur’an and, to a lesser extent, in exegetical literature, shows that the relationship between the earliest meanings of these terms and their present usage is rather frayed.’³¹

While not denying that the texts ‘appear to encourage religious exclusivism’³², he undertakes a ‘rediscovering and reappropriating’ of these notions and underpins his enterprise on Wilfred Cantwell-Smith’s conviction that God is ‘concerned with something that persons do, and with persons who do it, rather than with an abstract entity [called belief]’.³³ Esack’s survey of the Quranic discourse on *Iman* finds the notion to be closely linked with righteous conduct³⁴. Esack’s historico-critical reading of the Quranic sources enables him to find *Iman* in those outside the reified community of Islam (those outside the *Ummah*). He finds in Qur’an 16:106, 49: 7-8 and 58:22 reason to conclude that ‘*Iman* is a deeply personal response to God’ which ‘can not be confined to a particular socio-religious community’³⁵. In all, for Esack, the *mu’min* cannot be reduced to only those who are socio-religiously affiliated to reified Islam.

A similar interpretative approach is taken in Esack’s understanding of *Islam*. Drawing upon the research of others such as Muhammad Rashid Rida³⁶, Wilfred

³¹ Esack, *ibid*, p. 114-115

³² Esack, *ibid*, p. 115

³³ Wilfred Cantwell-Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, New York: Mentor Books, 1991, p. 111. In Esack, *ibid*, p. 115.

³⁴ His study draws upon the exegetical study of the terms in the literature by Qur’anic scholars from different theological persuasions within the Islamic tradition: Ibn Jarir al-Tabari (representing traditional exegesis), Mahmud ibn ‘Umar al-Zamakshari, Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (representing scholastic interpretation), Muhyi al-Din ibn-al ‘Arabi (representing the Esoteric tradition) and Rashid Rida and Muhammad Hussain al-Tabataba’i (representing more contemporary exegesis)

³⁵ Esack, *ibid*, 125

³⁶ Muhammad Rashid Rida, *Tafsir al-Manar*, Beirut: Dar al-ma ‘rifah, 1980. 12 volumes

Cantwell-Smith³⁷ and Jane Smith³⁸, he is convinced that a reified understanding of *Islam* does not fully capture the Qur’anic textual evidence on the subject. Esack finds in such texts as Qur’an 6:125, 39:22, 49: 17 and 9:74 reason to believe that *Islam* is primarily a personal response to God; a personal submission to the Supreme rather than overt affiliation to a socio-religious group. This understanding departs in significant ways from traditional ways of interpreting these passages but for Esack, even such ‘problematic’ texts as Qur’an 3:19³⁹ and 39:22⁴⁰ which, in traditional hermeneutics, are read as proof-texts of Islam’s superiority over other religions, when read in their historical context, ‘lead one to the understanding that the text embraces all those who submit to the will of God’⁴¹. In fact, Esack is able to conclude that ‘the Qur’an portrays a *muslim* as someone who submits to a divinity beyond, and more abiding, than that *muslim* and beyond reified religion’⁴²

Esack also pushes an interpretation of *kufr* that weakens the traditional definition of it in terms of those who do not explicitly share a belief in the doctrines of Islam. He is convinced that ‘according to the Qur’an, it is not labels that are counted by God, but actions that are weighed (Qur’an 2:177; 99:7-8)’ so that ‘one cannot hold hostage to the ethos of *kufr* which characterised their forebears, those who, by accident of birth, are a part of any group, nor others who subsequently emerge from it; nor can we do this to individuals who existed within that group, but were non participants in *kufr*’⁴³.

B. Feminist Hermeneutics of the Qur’an

Although the historiography of Feminism may well reflect a Western neo-Christian domination of the discourse, it would be mistaken to conclude that

³⁷ Wilfred Cantwell-Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, New York: Mentor Books, 1991

³⁸ Jane Smith, *A Historical and Semantic Study of the Term ‘Islam’ as seen in a Sequence of Qur’an Commentaries*. Montana: University of Montana Press, 1975.

³⁹ 3:19: ‘The Religion before Allah is Islam (submission to His Will): Nor did the People of the Book dissent therefrom except through envy of each other after knowledge had come to them. But if any deny the signs of Allah, Allah is swift in calling to account’ (Translation of Abdullah Yussuf Ali)

⁴⁰ 39:22: ‘Is one whose heart God has opened to Islam, so that he has received enlightenment from God (No better than one hard-hearted. Woe to those whose hearts are hardened against celebrating the praises of God! They are manifestly wandering (in error)’ [Translation of A. Yusuf Ali]

⁴¹ Esack, *ibid*, 133.

⁴² Esack, *ibid*, 134

⁴³ Esack, *ibid*, 144.

feminism, however, defined, has not had any influence outside the Western neo-Christian tradition. Recent years, especially since the late 20th century, has seen a number of Muslim women who have sought to open up feminist interpretative domains for understanding the traditional Islamic sources – the Qur'an primarily but also the Hadiths. Asma Barlas is a prominent voice in this school of interpretation and a review of her feminist hermeneutic now follows.

For Asma Barlas, her feminist hermeneutic is not merely a religious appropriation of Western secular discourse on the topic but follows in fact from her reading of the Quranic texts. As she puts it 'I came to the realization that women and men are equal as a result not of reading feminist texts, but of reading the Qur'an'.⁴⁴ Again, she says 'while I am happy to acknowledge my debts to Western feminisms, I must confess that I do not view the project of women's "liberation" itself as being Western or feminist. Rather, I find such a project to be intrinsic to the Quran's teachings, which is why I remain sceptical of relying on Western feminisms and secularism for theorizing women's rights in Muslim societies' ⁴⁵.

Barlas is aware that in popular imagination and to some extent, even in learned circles, the image of Islam is that it is patriarchal and sexist with structured and theologically justified discrimination of women. But she finds the persistence of justifications of female inferiority in Islam not to be due to the Qur'an itself (just as Farid Esack's finds in his treatment of *Iman*, *Islam* and *Kufr*) but to how the particular reading of the Qur'an that has been dominant. The problem, putting it another way, is not with the texts but with their interpretations:

"The fact that the Quran has been read as a patriarchal text (i.e., as a text that privileges males and teaches the precepts of female inferiority and subordination to men), has to do with (a) its readings in/by patriarchies, (b) by means of a conservative method authorized by a handful of male scholars during the Middle

⁴⁴ Asma Barlas, "Qur'anic Hermeneutics and Women's Liberation", *Keynote speech presented at International Congress on Islamic Feminism, Barcelona, Spain, 2005*. P. 11. Cited in Liv Tonnessen, *Islamic Feminism, public lecture delivered at Ahfad university for Women, Sudan, 2014*. P. 2.

⁴⁵ Asma Barlas, "Muslim Women and Sexual Oppression: Reading Liberation from the Qur'an" *International Feminism: Divergent Perspectives*, Vol. 10, article 15, 2001. P. 118

Ages, (c) with the backing of the state, which became involved in defining religious knowledge from very early times”⁴⁶

Just as with Esack who draws upon certain traditional principles in Islamic theology to undergird his liberation hermeneutic for pluralism, Barlas finds in the doctrines of *Tawid* (God’s unity) and the divine attributes of Justice and inimitability reason to contest patriarchal readings of the Qur’an. The unity of God implies, for Barlas, that: ‘Inasmuch as theories of male privilege do both—by drawing parallels between God and fathers/husbands, misrepresenting males as intermediaries between women and God, or as rulers over women and thus entitled to their obedience — they violate the concept of Tawhid and must be rejected as un-Quranic’⁴⁷. God’s justice also means that the Divine does not do harm to the innocent while His inimitability entails a rejection of gendered representations of the divine. God is neither male nor female. It is with these lenses that Barlas reads the Qur’an and comes away with an understanding of the Qur’an that departs in significant ways from the traditional⁴⁸.

She is able to find in Qur’an 9:71 which reads ‘The Believers, men and women, are protectors, one of another: they enjoin what is just, and forbid what is evil: they observe regular prayers, practice regular charity, and obey Allah and His Apostle. On them, Allah will pour His mercy: for Allah is exalted in Power, Wise’⁴⁹ evidence of God’s unbiased affirmation of the sexes.

Conclusion

Farid Esack’s ‘liberation hermeneutics for pluralism’ and Asma Barlas’ ‘Feminist liberation hermeneutics’ represent interesting and bold departures from traditional interpretations of the Qur’an. Although critics have pointed to the limited influence of their approaches on the wider Muslim public and some have felt their works to be more influenced by Western worldviews (in spite of their

⁴⁶ Barlas, *ibid*, p. 120.

⁴⁷ Barlas, *ibid*, p. 128.

⁴⁸ Barlas admits that although both secular voices and ‘fundamentalist’ readings of the Qur’an would be suspicious and even dismissive of her hermeneutical approach, she is convinced that texts must be distinguished from their ‘mis/readings’ (Barlas, *ibid*, p. 123).

⁴⁹ translation of Abdullah Yusuf Ali

insistence to the contrary), their hermeneutics of the Qur'an and the Hadith are interesting illustrations of the dynamic nature of contemporary Islam.

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