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**“Qur'anic Hermeneutics: Navigation of Modern Dilemmas”
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In rethinking methodologies for reading, understanding, and applying the teachings of the Qur'an, three recent or contemporary Muslim modernists—Fazlur Rahman, Mohammed Arkoun, and Asma Barlas—forge distinctive approaches to addressing core challenges of modernism. In particular, components of these authors' hermeneutical approaches provide insights into how to resolve or at least balance several of “modernity's irreducible dilemmas” as described by S.N. Eisenstadt (607).

The paper is organized around three such dilemmas. For each concern, I consider responses put forward by Rahman, Arkoun, and Barlas. In general, their responses have much in common, and so are considered collectively. But they also differ in some respects, which I attempt to note. I conclude the examination of each dilemma by attempting to extract, from the authors' writings, an approach to accommodating or synthesizing the contradictory tendencies at its core.

The authors researched have written on numerous themes relating to modernism. I have therefore narrowed my focus to selected works by each: Asma Barlas' *“Believing Women” in Islam*, portions of Mohammed Arkoun's *Rethinking Islam*, and Fazlur Rahman's *Islamic Methodology in History*, as well as chapters from his *Major Themes of the Qur'an* and *Islam and Modernity*. I further narrow my topic by focusing on how the tensions associated with modernity play out within the realm of Qur'anic interpretation. This is a logical starting place, given the Qur'an's central role in any Islamic movement. It also reflects what I regard to be a common impulse behind both the modernist platforms and efforts to fathom revelation—namely, the human urge to move forward, to construct, whether in our exterior or interior lives, a future of purpose, coherence, and meaning.

In the paper’s final section, I summarize my findings and conclusions, and propose that although Barlas, Rahman, and Arkoun stand outside the mainstream of Western modernist thought, they nevertheless can offer much to its ongoing development.

Modernist Dilemmas in Light of Contemporary Approaches to the Qur’an

The first and second columns of the table below present core dilemmas that Eisenstadt associates with a variety of modernities. Some dilemmas are most likely to arise *within* a particular modernist program, while others distinguish modernities from one another. On a practical level, whether the tensions are intra- or inter-modernity is of less concern than their potentials to cause “violence, terror, and war,” “repression and dislocation,” and new forms of “modern barbarism” (Eisenstadt 610-11). In light of these negative potentials, the possibilities suggested by the third column are of particular interest.

OPPOSING TENDENCIES Identified by Eisenstadt as contributing to modernity’s “irreducible dilemmas”		APPROACHES TO BALANCING TENDENCIES Suggested by Muslim modernists’ methodologies for reading Qur’an
pluralistic and accepting of diverse approaches	totalistic and absolutising	pluralism recognized without becoming grounds for relativism
emphasizing sovereignty of reason and freedom of moral choice	opposing rationalism; emphasizing submission to divine commandments	reason valued without being made sovereign; freedom of choice seen as essential to submitting to divine commandments
Pragmatic	Utopian	efforts to translate Qur’anic ideals into practical action without sacralizing the profane

Pluralistic versus Absolutising

Eisenstadt points out that within modernist movements, tensions frequently develop

between, on the one hand, the aspiration to accommodate “pluralistic, multifaceted visions, and practices” and “[accept] the existence of different values, commitments, and rationalities,” and, on the other hand, the pull toward “the conflation of...different values and rationalities in a totalistic way, with a strong disposition to their absolutisation” (595-96, 606).

Such tensions are evident in Rahman, Barlas, and Arkoun’s accounts of historical and contemporary developments in Qur’anic interpretation. Each author argues that absolutisation of particular readings of scriptures have compromised the *umma*’s vitality. They stress that the Qur’an, if understood correctly, should inspire diverse visions and practices. Its message is polysemic—possessed of multiple meanings and thus “open to variant readings” (Barlas 5). Even the companions of the Prophet (pbuh) differed in their understandings of some verses, and as far as history recounts, the fledgling Muslim community made no effort to impose conformity on them (Barlas 35; Rahman, *Modernity* 144).

The Qur’an, according to these authors, is not only polysemic but organic and responsive. Indeed, it qualifies as an “interactive medium,” if one accepts Barlas’ suggestion that a comment by the Prophet’s wife Umm Salama shifted Qur’anic discourse towards greater gender-inclusivity (20). Rahman also suggests interactivity in his account of the revelation that reprimanded the Prophet (pbuh) for turning away from a man who sought his guidance (Qur’an 80:1-10) (*Major Themes* 84). For these authors, such responsiveness was not unique to the period in which the Arabic iteration of revelation descended (610-632 C.E.). Rather, it is an ongoing quality of revelation, still accessible even through the *mushaf* (Official Closed Corpus), if the latter is approached with receptivity. Rahman states,

...the Qur’an is a document that grew within a background, from the flesh and blood of actual history; it is therefore both as “straightforward” and as organically coherent as life itself. Any attempt to take it with a literalist,

partialist superficiality and lifeless rigidity will, to use A.J. Arberry’s phrase, “crush its gossamer wings to powder” (*Modernity* 144).

Arkoun similarly regards the form taken by the Qur’an as a springboard: “Qur’anic discourse faithfully preserves the living memory of symbolic creativity in a linguistic form declared to be inimitable” (22).

Yet, despite the “preserv[ation] of the living memory of symbolic creativity”—or perhaps *because* of difficulties inherent in juxtaposing “preservation” and “creativity”—the breadth of possible Qur’anic meanings fell victim to the absolutisation of limited interpretations. Polysemy yielded to tradition, as Rahman observes: “[T]he genesis and development of the whole Islamic tradition—the way the Qur’an and the *Sunnah* of the Prophet were approached, treated, and interpreted—was only one possible alternative among those available...” (*Modernity* 101).

Any one alternative, be it the formulation of Islamic tradition in general or the *tafsir* on a single *ayah*, is shaped by the background of the person who articulates it (Barlas 35). The proscription of alternative readings could, at least in theory, have enabled the *umma* to focus on alternatives presented by those individuals most capable of applying effective methods for extracting meaning from the Qur’an. Rahman notes, however, that “...the basic question of method and hermeneutics were not squarely addressed by Muslims” (*Modernity* 2). This omission left political and religious authorities free to apply more culturally-determined (and often self-serving) means of interpretation. Barlas argues that the results were especially detrimental to women, as the biases of classical scholars ended up inverting the revelation’s message regarding them. The Qur’anic verse referring to *jilbab* (33:59-60), for example, may in historical context be understood as indicative of *jabiliyya* decadence. But in time, it came to be understood as testimony to “female immorality” (Barlas 56-7).

The boundaries that gradually restricted Qur’anic interpretations may reflect in part a pre-modern tendency toward the absolutisation of one’s own views—a tendency that is

probably fading in the face of modernist reflexivity (see Eisenstadt 594). When Arkoun notes that "Al-Tabari could naively introduce each of his commentaries with the formula 'God says...'" (41), two levels of engagement are evident. First is Al-Tabari's engagement with the text; second is Arkoun's engagement with Al-Tabari's method, which expresses a "post-Heisenbergian" perspective. Yet other forces, more enduring than unreflexive scholarship, also underlie the absolutist trends in Qur'anic interpretation, forces that parallel on the micro-level some of the broader dilemmas that Eisenstadt attributes to modernist movements. One is the need to mobilize at least some degree of communal effort and vision to be able to move forward. In the case of Islamic methodology, Rahman states that "a considerable part of external solidarity of the Community was achieved at the expense of the inner density of the faith" (*Methodology* 89). A second tendency is for those in power to endorse religious teachings that perpetuate their status. Arkoun states that "what theological thought presents as religious 'orthodoxy' [is] the ideology of each group seeking to assert its supremacy..." (47). Barlas adds, "the state's ongoing involvement in sustaining the hegemony of conservative interpretive communities and of religious meaning has injected coercive power into the very heart of knowledge construction in many Muslim societies" (88). Historically, moves toward communal solidarity and consolidated power structures favored "restrictive modes" of Qur'anic understanding, to the point that such modes have become so entrenched that today "it is difficult to read [the Qur'an] in liberatory [modes]..." (Barlas 63).

Difficult as it may be, the task of reinstating liberatory readings is undertaken by Rahman, Arkoun, and Barlas. Frederick Denny describes Fazlur Rahman as striving "[t]o recover the Qur'an...as it was intended to be: the reliable, dynamic guidance that provides the principles for all imaginable circumstances, problems, developments, and opportunities that its faithful community will encounter..." (105). This description could also apply to Barlas and Arkoun, though their emphases differ from Rahman's. Barlas

advocates “critiquing the methods by which Muslims produce religious meaning and rereading the Qur’an for liberation” with an eye toward determining whether the Qur’an “teach[es] or condone[s] inequality or oppression,” or, conversely, “permit[s] and encourage[s] liberation for women” (1, 4). Arkoun speaks more sweepingly of the need for a reexamination of the phenomenon of revelation in general (not just its Qur’anic manifestation), “beyond the dogmatic definitions that continue to safeguard the mobilizing ideological force of revealed religions.” Only such creative investigations can “penetrate to the *radical imaginary* [defined by Castoriadis as ‘the common root of the actual imaginary and of the symbolic’] common to the societies of the Book/books” (9).

Rahman states succinctly the premise of Muslim modernists’ confrontation with the tendency to absolutise particular interpretations of scripture. “The Qur’an and the *Sunnah* were given for intelligent moral understanding and implementation, not for rigid formalism” (*Methodology* 80). Elsewhere he states, “The Qur’an, as the Word of God...represents the depth and breadth of life itself; it will refuse to be straight-jacketed by intellectual and cultural bias.” “Yet,” he adds, “we must keep clear of pantheism and relativism, the most attractive and powerful of all spiritual drugs” (*Major Themes* 16). Therein lies the modernist “rub” from a faith-based point of view. While Muslim modernists insist that no single Qur’anic interpretation may be prefaced with “God says,” it is axial to Islam that God *does* speak—through revelation. The modern relativism that deems all human efforts to grasp Divine messages to be as subjective and therefore as valid (or invalid) as all others not only discredits the Qur’an but also cripples Islam’s inherent capacity to inspire. Barlas states, “the interpretive process is open to question, not the revelation itself” (34). Arkoun makes clear the need to honor revelation as a venue for pluralism. “Revelation is the accession to the interior space of a human being—to the heart, the *qalb*, says the Qur’an—of some novel meaning that opens up unlimited opportunities or backcurrents of meaning for human existence” (34).

Muslims therefore bring to Eisenstadt’s pluralist-versus-absolutist dilemma a third concern: that of relativism. This concern complicates matters on one level, but on another, it may open up new ways to balance the pluralist-absolutist diad. In particular, the guidelines that Rahman, Barlas, and Arkoun propose for Qur’anic interpretation are notable for maintaining pluralism and eschewing absolutism, while also honoring the original Qur’anic discourse as an absolute that prevents pluralism from becoming unprincipled relativism. These guidelines may be summarized as follows:

- Rather than approaching the Qur’an in a literalist and verse-by-verse manner, they advocate reading it holistically and identifying “general principles” that may then be applied to diverse situations (Barlas 8; Rahman, *Major Themes* xi).
- General principles or themes are regarded as means to weigh multiple interpretations (not to erect singular interpretations). Rahman extracts principles by finding “a number of conjectural proofs which *converge* upon an idea”(*Modernity* 20-2). Barlas posits three recurring concepts to be used as a backdrop for understanding “God’s Self-Disclosure”: “Divine Unity, Justness, and Incomparability” (13).
- Rahman, Arkoun, and Barlas suggest that to understand the Qur’an, one must place its pronouncements within their historical context. Rahman calls on Muslims “to distinguish clearly between normative Islam and historical Islam.” He explains:

If the spark for the modernization of old Islamic learning and for the Islamization of the new is to arise, then the original thrust of Islam—of the Qur’an and Muhammad—must be clearly resurrected so that the conformities and deformities of historical Islam may be clearly judged by it...[T]his resurrection may be accomplished...by studying the Qur’an’s social pronouncements and legal enactments in the light of its general moral teaching and particularly under the impact of its stated objectives...on the one hand and against the background of their historical-social milieu on the other (*Modernity* 141).

Arkoun points to an even broader need for historicization, recommending that believers of all kinds

envisage the question of meaning not from the angle of unchanging transcendence—that is, of an ontology sheltered from all historicity—but in the light of historical forces that transmute the most sacred values, those regarded as most divine by virtue of their symbolic capital and as inseparable from necessarily mythical accounts of the founding, and from which each ethnocultural group extracts and recognizes what it calls identity or personality (9).

- Also advocated is a second facet of “historicization,” which involves adapting Qur’anic guidance for the current era. In the rare passages that refer directly to legislative issues, for example, Rahman states that the Qur’an “clearly displays a *situational* character”— “so situational,” he argues, in the case of statements pertaining to war, “that they can be regarded only as quasi-legal and not strictly and specifically legal” (*Methodology* 10). Qur’anic legislation must therefore be extracted on the basis of *ratio legis* (the principle of the law). If a time comes when legislation does not “faithfully and correctly [realize] the *ratio*,” then “the law has to be changed.” Rahman faults traditional lawyers, who “generally stuck to the letter of the law and enunciated the principle that ‘Although a law is occasioned by a specific situation, its application nevertheless becomes universal’” (*Major Themes* 48). Summarizing the dual processes of historical contextualization, he writes:

In building any genuine and viable Islamic set of laws and institutions, there *has to be a twofold movement*: First one must move from the concrete case treatments of the Qur’an—taking the necessary and relevant social conditions of that time into account—to the general principles upon which the entire teaching converges. Second, from this general level there must be a movement back to specific legislation, taking into account the necessary and relevant social conditions now obtaining (*Modernity* 20).

Barlas concurs, calling Rahman’s first stage “reading behind the text” and his second “reading in front of the text” (22-23, 25).

- While Rahman breaches the wall of sacrosanct Qur’anic interpretations by means of historical analyses, Barlas and Arkoun advocate bringing a wider array of

scientific and social scientific instruments to the battle. For Barlas, “Western/feminist theories” may “serve as helpful points of departure” in rethinking Qur’anic exegesis (she argues, however, that it is important to avoid projecting feminist interpretations onto the Qur’an; rather “God’s Self-Disclosure” should be “the hermeneutic site from which to read the Qur’an”) (13, 25). Arkoun states at the start of *Rethinking Islam* that he approaches his topic “by systematically choosing...a bundle of methods taught by the social sciences rather than one method privileged over all others” (1). Indeed he does, drawing from the fields of psychology, philosophy, social-linguistics, cultural anthropology, law, international relations, and comparative religion, as well as classical and contemporary Islamic studies. For him, open-endedness of methodology is essential to accessing the multiplicity of meanings within the Qur’an.

The interpretative strategies summarized above reform Islamic approaches to the Qur’an in ways consistent with the modern value of pluralism. At the same time, they avoid casting the Qur’an as one more random phenomenon in a relativistic universe. They suggest one response to the “pluralist versus absolutising” dilemma: an appreciation of pluralism that does not descend into an absolutist insistence on relativism.

Reason and Freedom of Choice versus Submission and Taqlid

A second tension noted by Eisenstadt distinguishes modernities that emphasize the related concepts of “the sovereignty and autonomy of reason” and “the importance of moral choice” from movements (which may or may not be modern) that downplay the importance of rationality and “emphasiz[e]...the submission of human will to divine commandments” (601, 605, 608).

The role of reason in cultivating *islam* and *iman* has been a focus of Muslim

modernists since the mid-1800s. In opposition to Muslims who advocate *taqlid*, Rahman, Arkoun, and Barlas (like their canonical and post-canonical predecessors) argue that *ijtihad* is essential if humans are to extract from God's message guidance suited to each day and age. Denny says that in Rahman's view,

[t]he Qur'an certainly is the fundamental authority and its commands must be obeyed; but without the believers' intellectual exertions (*ijtihad*) to comprehend and apply it within the often confusing and contradictory circumstances of historical process, it will languish as a prisoner of dead tradition instead of being permitted to shed its full illumination and regenerating power in the Umma and the world (105).

Barlas regards analytical reasoning as essential to Qur'anic interpretation, and criticizes al-Ghazali, who (according to her reading) "held that real knowledge comes only through unmediated religious experiences and intuition and not through rational or philosophical inquiry" (15, 80). Rahman similarly faults premodern Muslim revivalists for having no interest in defining a "rationally reliable" approach to Qur'anic interpretation (*Modernity* 143).

Why, according to these authors, is reason so important to applying Qur'anic guidance? Partly because "[t]he Qur'an is obviously not intelligible purely by itself," and because even with the additional instruction provided through the example of the Prophet (pbuh), "at [the Prophet's] death the Muslims inherited...no detailed, intellectually worked-out system of thought" (*Methodology* 9; *Modernity* 23). Therefore, writes Rahman, "between the Qur'an and the 'Ideal *Sunnah*' on the one hand and the *Ijma* or *Sunnah* [in the sense of common practice], on the other, there lies the inevitable activity of *Qiyas* or *Ijtihad*" (*Methodology* 15). In other words, applications of Qur'anic guidance depend upon an intermediate step that involves independent, rational thought. Communal processes of reasoning also apply, entering at the stage of *Ijma* and being put into practice through the *Sunnah* of the community. Explaining the early Islamic aphorism, "The *Sunnah* decides upon the Qur'an; the Qur'an does not decide upon the *Sunnah*," Rahman states "that the Community, under the direction of the spirit (not the absolute

letter) in which the Prophet acted in a given historical situation, shall authoritatively interpret and assign meaning to Revelation" (*Methodology* 20; cf Barlas 68).

Both Barlas and Rahman argue that Muslims who oppose rational reinterpretations of the Qur'an overlook the central role that reason played in constructing classical interpretations in the first place. "Many Muslims," writes Barlas, "hold that modern readings of the Qur'an...are tainted by biases, while...they embrace the religious knowledge produced by a small number of male scholars in the classical period as the only objective and authentic knowledge of Islam" (24).

In sum, these authors urge rational, up-to-date methodologies of Qur'anic interpretation, and by implication, rational approaches to living life Islamically. They depart from the classical modernist's belief in "the sovereignty of reason" not by dismissing reason, but rather by demoting it from sovereignty. Reason is, in their eyes, incapable of "knowing" everything. Even if it were conceivable that a person could intellectually grasp the *mushaf* in its entirety, the intellect would be several steps removed from encompassing all wisdom, for the *mushaf* is not the Qur'anic discourse, and the Qur'anic discourse is not "the Archetype of the Book" (Barlas 34, 39; Arkoun 38). Arkoun points out that the Qur'an itself distinguishes between

...on the one hand, *umm al-kitab* ("the mother of the book"), referring to the celestial Book, the archetype containing the inaccessible, mysterious totality of the Word of God; [and] on the other, *al-kitab* ("the book"), *al-qur'an* ("the reciting"), *al-dbikr* ("the account"), and *al-furqan* ("the distinction between right and wrong")—all words used to designate the book as manifest in history... (16).

The intellect, then, is an essential tool for interpreting the book in each period, but it falls short of accessing, let alone having sovereignty over, the "mysterious totality of the Word of God."

Arkoun goes a step further to suggest that reason should be shaped in accordance with revelation. "We must postulate a *plural, changing, welcoming* sort of rationality, one

consistent with the psychological operations that the Qur’an locates in the heart...” (37; emphasis added). If, as modernists propose, it is essential to apply rationality in the process of understanding of divine commandments, then Arkoun seems to be arguing that we must equally apply Qur’anic insights to understanding the functions of rationality.

Eisenstadt recognizes that modernities may be challenged not just by pro-reason versus anti-reason pressures, but by related modes of decision making and action.

Speaking specifically of religiously inspired modernities, he writes,

Fundamentalists criticized [other modern programs’ emphasis on the primacy of human will] from, as it were, the outside, emphasizing in principle the submission of human will to divine commandments, even if at the same time emphasizing— paradoxically enough—in a strongly modern mode, the importance of moral choice (605).

For Muslims, the Qur’an is the most significant concrete means available for becoming aware of divine commandments. In considering Islamic modernism, then, one would expect to find methodologies of Qur’anic analysis at the heart of Eisenstadt’s confrontation between submission and moral choice. Such methodologies *are* at the heart of Islamic modernism; but at least in the cases of Arkoun, Barlas, and Rahman, the methodologies put forward are based on a paradigm that renders Eisenstadt’s “paradox” moot.¹ Arkoun’s explanation of *islam* points to a harmony rather than conflict between the exercise of will and submission to God. Translating *islam* as resignation to the divine is “quite inappropriate,” he states. He elaborates:

Believers are not resigned before God. They experience outpourings of love toward God, a transformation pulling them toward acceptance of that which God proposes, because God, by revelation, raises human beings to his own level. This elevation elicits a human feeling of gratitude toward the Creator who has heaped creatures with good things. There is thus established a relationship of loving and grateful obedience between Creator and creature (15).

¹I don’t mean to deny that confrontations between choice, free will, and the exercise of reason, on the one hand, and submission to perceived divine commandments, on the other, regularly arise in the lives of individuals and communities. But these confrontations may stem as much from the ways people perceive choice, will, reason, divinity, and guidance as from genuine incompatibilities.

Barlas hints at such a loving relationship when she refers to “God’s communicating with us in order to reform us” (3). Rahman also describes a process of communication, though from a different angle. Citing Surah Araaf, ayats 172-173, he writes:

...every person and every people have continuously to search their own consciences, and, because of [the] engraving upon their heart, which represents the Primordial Covenant, none may take refuge in the excuse that they have been preconditioned by their “hereditary memory,” by the set ways of “our forefathers.” The primary task of the prophets is to awaken man’s conscience so that he can decipher the primordial writing on his heart more clearly and with greater conviction (*Major Themes* 24).

Elsewhere, in considering late-twentieth-century *salafiyya* movements, Rahman suggests that because these movements refuse to honor autonomy of reason and will, they fail to grasp the true meaning of submission to divine guidance.

...how can a piece of history be literally repeated? ...Muslims must perform and enact in the twentieth century that whose moral and spiritual dimensions match those of the Muslims’ performance in the seventh and eighth centuries. But this means not just a simple “return” to the Qur’an and the *Sunnah* as they were acted in the past but a true *understanding* of them that would give us guidance *today*. A simple return to the past is, of course, a return to the graves (*Methodology* 143).

Here as in other places, Rahman and the other two authors give no indication of a conflict between “submission of human will to divine commandments” and “moral choice.” Where Eisenstadt sees paradox, they see complementarity.

Pragmatism versus Utopianism

A third dilemma posited by Eisenstadt is also addressed in the Qur’anic methodologies proposed by Rahman, Arkoun, and Barlas, though with less consensus. This is the dilemma between orientations that are “instrumental and pragmatic” and those that center around “utopian” aims (603, 606).

The challenge of juggling pragmatism and utopianism, and the ways in which this challenge has influenced interpretations of the Qur’an, are recognized by each author. Barlas states that the classical methodology that became rigid and exclusivist actually

"began as the opposite...It originated in attempts—by...al-Shafi...—to make the *Sunnab* paradigmatic"—that is, to find a methodology that would "authorize interpretive variations within an Islamic framework." But instead, she explains, al-Shafi "ended up generating a paradigm that enabled its users to further their own hegemony..." (79). The pragmatic, paradigm-based methodology that al-Shafi envisioned thus became dogmatic and consequently utopian, in the sense of positing ideals detached from pragmatic considerations. Rahman discusses al-Shafi's influence at length, underscoring the stages whereby approaches to Qur'anic interpretation that were selected based on their practicality in one era later became reified as doctrines which were, in many cases, inadequate to address changing circumstances.

A lack of consensus seems to arise among Rahman, Barlas, and Arkoun in their views regarding how the values and ideals put forward in the Qur'an can be translated into society while also retaining their foundation in sacred discourse. Arkoun writes,

...even now there unfolds in all Muslim societies a process that is just the reverse of that which led in the Qur'an to the purification of the sacred and its concentration in the person of God. This same sacred realm has become diffracted and dispersed; it has become incarnated in all the objects and all the works that mediate the divine for believers of diverse cultural and religious origin. An apologetic literature that finds predictions in the Qur'an of all modern scientific discoveries is one of the recent, significant metamorphoses of this diffraction and of these metaphors of the sacred realm mediated by Qur'anic verses. The claims that the Prophet and his Companions worked out and experimented with socialism, democracy, or the proclamation of the rights of man constitute still other examples (22-23).

Later he comments,

Contemporary exegesis offers another example of the semantic disorder and dangerous confusion about the Qur'an and what can be deduced from it in the current context of ideologies of liberation. This kind of exegesis leads one to forget the primary function of revelation: to reveal meanings without reducing the mystery...with an infinite capacity to signify things, including the truth of being (Arkoun 42).

Those who read Barlas as well as Arkoun may wonder whether her exegesis is not of the kind to which he takes exception. Her analysis of the story of Ibrahim and the command

to sacrifice his son casts light on Qur'anic portrayals of patriarchal authority (115-116)– but does such one-pointed analysis obscure broader themes of the story, such as trust, humility, and sacrifice, that have more far-reaching potentials to ameliorate oppression in all its forms rather than just its patriarchal forms? At what point does the urge to reexamine Qur'anic teachings in liberatory modes put the Qur'an at the service of liberation, rather than freeing humans to receive from the Qur'an its own liberating message?

This is the delicate balance that needs to be maintained in attempts to advance the Qur'anic ideal of "a viable social order on earth that will be just and ethically based" (Rahman, *Major Themes* 37). Arkoun, more so than Rahman and Barlas, conveys the challenge involved in interpreting revelation as a foundation for such attempts. But unlike the others, he does not (at least in *Rethinking Islam*) spell out in full a methodology for undertaking Qur'anic exegesis in ways that would avoid the diffraction of the sacred that he describes.

Conclusion

Each of the three dilemmas of modernity highlighted above is reflected in Rahman, Barlas, and Arkoun's commentaries on Qur'anic methodology. The first dilemma, arising from tensions between pluralism and absolutisation, is addressed by guidelines for interpretation that honor variant meanings yet steer clear of an all-encompassing relativism that could trivialize the concept of revelation. The second dilemma—a more complex interaction among notions of the sovereignty of reason and the free exercise of will, on the one hand, and the valuing of submission to divine commandments, on the other—is in part acknowledged and in part obviated by these scholars as they examine Qur'anic methodologies. The third and perhaps most problematic dilemma is described by Eisenstadt as a conflict between pragmatic and utopian modes, but might, in Islamic terms, be regarded as the difficult balancing act required to translate Qur'anic ideals into

practical efforts to better society without sacralizing the profane. This rephrasing of the challenge unfortunately does little to resolve it.

Viewed in the context of the full range of modernist and post-modernist thinking, the contributions of Rahman, Arkoun, and Barlas may seem negligible. Among Muslims, the latter two in particular are perceived as closer to the liberal edges of Islamic scholarship than to its mainstream. In the West, where their works have been written and published, they are part of a minority religious community rarely turned to for insights into modernity. Nevertheless, these authors' views could offer much to ongoing efforts to work out functional "post-modernities," for they tackle core tensions among and within modernities that other approaches may leave to fester.

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