

Islam and Body Politics: Inscribing (Im)morality¹

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I am honored to have been asked to speak at this conference on religion and the politics of the body, specially since I'm not a philosopher or a theologian or even a theorist of the body. That you invited me nonetheless must mean you believe in the possibility of conversations across disciplinary exclusions. I certainly do!

Let me start by saying that I have amended my charge a bit so that in addition to talking about the "Islamic tradition and inter-religious issues,"² I will also be discussing non-Muslim European³ attitudes to Islam and Muslims. Not to do so in a European setting would be disingenuous and amount to telling only half the story. My paper is therefore in two parts although both are about the politics of mapping morality and immorality onto Muslim bodies.

The two bodies I will consider are very dissimilar. One is female and I will look at how it appears in Islamic discourses on veiling. My intent is to uncover the dissonances between Muslim tradition⁴ and the Qur'an as a way to show that the scripture itself makes no negative claims about women's bodies, contrary to what many people assume. The other body is that of the Prophet and I will look at European depictions of it as a modern-day terrorist and the medieval Antichrist. This will allow me to trace the discursive overlaps between secular and Christian representations and also to speculate on what these say about the West itself.

I should anticipate the point of undertaking this exercise given that the bodies are so different as is the process of inscribing them. In one case, it involves drawing on religious referents and in the other on secular and, in one, the aim is to hide the body from view or from a certain *type* view and, in the other, to bring it literally to life and into the public gaze as a ghastly specter. Yet, the end result in both instances is to make the body into a site for establishing difference. My intent to explore the sexual and political implications of this difference.

¹ I want to thank Ulises Mejias and Naeem Inayatullah for helping me to clarify some arguments.

² Sigridur Thorgeirsdottir, e-mail message to author, March 25, 2009.

³ From here on, I use "European" as excluding Muslims knowing this is a misleading usage but referring to "non-Muslim Europeans" every time is cumbersome.

⁴ I question the notion that a tradition is "Islamic" if it is antithetical to Qur'anic teachings since Muslims regard the Qur'an to be the word of God.

Women's bodies and veiling

To look at the female body through the veil may seem strange but the discourses and practice of veiling say a great deal about it. Veiling, we know, inscribes the body literally, by covering it and figuratively, by serving as a marker of identity. This is not to say that the veil itself has only one form or that veiling⁵ means the same thing to all women. For some, it is a freely chosen symbol of protest and a public assertion of independence, visibility, and difference, specially in secular societies. For others, it is a socially-enforced mode of subordination to men that is enacted through the anonymity and conformity of concealment in public. Yet, in all cases, the veil is seen as an embodiment of *female* virtue even though Muslim tradition regards the female *body* itself as morally corrupt/ing.

Muslim tradition

Thus, depictions of veiled women as “the repositories of morality,”⁶ turn out to mask a view of the body as pudendal and polluting. This idea surfaces in Qur’anic exegesis some six centuries after the Qur’an’s own revelation. Whereas in the early years of Islam, scholars held that both men and women could show those parts of their bodies that were not pudendal, by the thirteenth century, some exegetes had declared the entire body of a free⁷ woman pudendal and, by the seventeenth, even her face and hands. Some went so far to call the gaze itself a “messenger of fornication.”⁸ One finds the same sense of pudency⁹ in the hadith, or narratives, about the Prophet’s life that also were compiled centuries after his death. These disparage women as “evil temptresses, the greatest *fitna* [temptation] for men,” “unclean over and above menstruation,” “morally and religiously defective,” “the larger part of the inhabitants of Hell, because of their unfaithfulness and ingratitude towards their husbands,” and as having “weaker intellectual powers” than men.¹⁰ Muslim sexual ethics also exhibit a “fear of the demonic power of sex,” and out of this “fear of the uncontrollable, dangerous, and yet fascinating power of sex develops the tendency to see all the dreaded (hence hated) aspects of life in woman.”¹¹ The role of family institutions, in this

⁵ I am less interested in the specificity of the veil than in justifications for veiling, or covering, and so I use the words “veil” and “veiling” rather loosely.

⁶ 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.

⁷ This shows that definitions of pudency had to do with social status and not just the body.

⁸ See Barbara Stowasser, *Women in the Quran* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 27.

⁹ James Bellamy, “Sex and Society in Islamic Popular Literature,” in *Society and the Sexes in Medieval Islam*, ed. Afaf Marsot (Malibu: Undena Publications, 1979), 27.

¹⁰ Stowasser, *ibid.*, 32. There are only six or so misogynistic hadith among 80,000 that are treated as authentic. Notably, it is the hadith that make problematic claims about the Prophet’s marriage to Ayesha, a topic of unending and prurient interest in the West.

¹¹ Annemarie Schimmel, “Eros – Heavenly and not so Heavenly – in Sufi Literature and Life,” in Marsot, *ibid.*, 124.

view, is “to curb active female sexuality,”¹² even as women are described as passive objects for men’s pleasure.

In traditional Muslim discourses, then, the veil is meant to protect men by hiding the impure, but enticing, female body from them. However, the very power of this body to arouse men also makes it vulnerable to their sexual depredations which is why it must be veiled. Far from signifying female virtue, the veil points to a licentious and easily provoked sexuality, especially male sexuality, that can only be kept under wraps by literally wrapping up the female body itself.

Scholars of Jewish and Christian traditions will recognize some familiar themes here. As feminists have argued with respect to Christianity, for instance, outside the roles “of obedient wife and ever-nurturing mother”¹³ women are thought to be impure and dangerous and associated with sex which is deemed “unclean, sinful, and debilitating.”¹⁴ Hence the veiling of women to protect men's virtue and hence also the Christian emphasis on sexual abstinence and renunciation. However, alongside this there also exists a “grossly male view of sexuality” that justifies practices like female prostitution.¹⁵ As Barbara Stowasser has shown, such “Bible-related traditions, including their symbolic images of the female's defective nature, were seamlessly integrated into an Islamic framework”¹⁶ via the hadith. Perhaps such slippages were unavoidable given the “inter-religiously shared ‘worlds’”¹⁷ of Jews, Christians, and Muslims, but they have put Muslim tradition at odds with the Qur’an on many issues pertaining to women.

The Qur’an

This emerges from the Qur’anic verses on veiling, of which there are only four in the entire text, all addressed to the Prophet. If this seems inconsequential, one needs to recall that most Muslims take men to be in charge of women based on their reading of the word *qawwamun*¹⁸ in another verse. I cannot parse its various meanings here so I will just reiterate that these four verses address the Prophet and, by implication, *all* Muslims. I will consider these separately since I read them to be advocating two different models of veiling, one general and the other specific, and I will start with the latter:

O Prophet! Tell

¹² Ida Nicolaisen, “Introduction,” in *Women in Islamic Societies*, ed. Bo Utas (Copenhagen: Curzon Press, 1983), 6.

¹³ Turner, *ibid.*, 325.

¹⁴ Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (New York: Doubleday, 1970), 51.

¹⁵ Geoffrey Parrinder, *Sexual Morality in the World's Religions* (Oxford: One World, 1996), 226. As he points out, such ideas actually predate Judaism and Christianity.

¹⁶ Stowasser, *ibid.*, 23.

¹⁷ Steven M. Wasserstrom, *Between Muslim and Jew* (Princeton: University Press, 1995), 209.

¹⁸ See Azizah al-Hibri, “A Study of Islamic Herstory,” *Women and Islam*. 5, no. 2 (1982).

Thy wives and daughters,
 And the believing women,
 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]¹⁹ 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].²⁰

I cannot do an extensive exegesis and I don't know if one is needed since it must strike anyone reading these verses that they make *no* claims about the female body and nor do they suggest that the *jilbab* is meant to protect Muslim men and women from *one another*. Rather, women are asked to wear it in order to identify themselves to non-Muslim (*Jahili*) men, so that *these* men will not molest them. In seventh-century Arabia, as in many other societies of the time, the law of the veil signified "which women were under male protection and which were fair game."²¹ As I see it the law of the *jilbab* also signified that men's sexuality was tempered by restraint since the Qur'an assumes that even the worst among *Jahili* men won't harm a woman wearing it. However, this self-control was predicated not on hiding women's bodies but on men's resolve not to molest each other's women for fear of retribution. The veil thus demarcated boundaries between *men* even though it was worn by women. Such was, and is, tribal custom which is why I see the *jilbab* as having been space and time bound, hence as a specific mode of veiling in that it only acquired meaning in a particular social context.

According to conservative Muslims, however, this context continues to exist in most Muslim societies and in all Western ones that they regard as modern forms of *Jahiliyya*. Whatever one's views on the subject of *Jahiliyya*, however, the truth is that the *jilbab* cannot operate in the West like it did in pre-Islamic Arabia or like it does in its Saudi-ruled successor. This is because in Western states, a woman's defense against men is not her dress but laws against sexual abuse and harassment, laws that most Muslim states have yet to formulate. This may have something to do with reading the second set of verses on veiling as also putting the onus of male behavior on women even though the verses address both men and women and advocate what I consider to be a general model of dressing and behaving:

¹⁹ This is the translator's interpellation since the Qur'an doesn't make this distinction.

²⁰ 33:59-60 in A. Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Quran* (New York: Tahrike Tarsile Quran, 1988), 1126-27.

²¹ Gerda Lerner in Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 15.

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 except
What (must ordinarily) appear
Thereof; that they should
Draw their [*khumur*] over
Their bosoms and not display
Their beauty except to²² . . .

. . . and there follows a list of male relatives in front of whom women do not need to observe these restrictions.

It may have been the quandary of nailing down the exact meaning of beauty and what can “ordinarily appear” that drove frazzled exegetes to decree the entire female body pudendal so as to put an end to debate and doubt. My own view, however, is that scriptural ambiguities exist for a reason; if the Qur’an asks women to cover their bosoms but leaves other allusions imprecise, it may be because what it means to generalize is a concept of modesty, not Arab dress.²³ And, when it does speak of dress, it suggests that the veil is more than an article of clothing; it is a mode of sexual deportment. Hence the instruction to men and women to lower their gaze, a command that only makes sense if men can see women’s faces. If one can read into it the idea that the gaze induces one to fornication, as some Muslims did or do, one can also read it as cautioning against male scopic activity, as feminists call it. In either case, what is significant is that the Qur’an extends the notions of modesty and purity also to men. From this I infer that, in an Islamic society, both women and men will behave in a way that will not require veiling as a means to protect women from predatory men. (The disturbing truth, of course, is that the public domain is not a safe space for women in many Muslim societies, even if they are veiled, and it is not a very hospitable space for them in many European societies if they are.)

²² 24: 30-31; in Ali, *ibid.*, 904-905.

²³ See Amina Wadud, *Qur’an and Woman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

Lastly, while these verses treat women's and men's bodies differently, they do not impute morality to one or impiety to another. In fact, they also make no claims about the body or about male or female sexuality. In the latter context, I should note that missing from the Qur'an are what Jeffrey Weeks has called the tortuous "Judeo-Christian disquisitions on the sins of the flesh."²⁴ Moreover, unlike "Patriarchal religion and ethics," the Qur'an does not "lump the female and sex together as if the whole burden of the onus and stigma [attached] to sex were the fault of the female alone."²⁵ In fact, not only does the Qur'an not stigmatize sex, but, it teaches that a good marriage should incline to mutual love, mercy, and *sukun*, a term implying sexual fulfillment.²⁶

Recognizing the centrality of sex is not the same as pandering to male sexuality, however. Even the Qur'anic provisions on polygyny are not about male (or female) sexual desire, but about securing justice for female orphans.²⁷ A great deal is also made of the Qur'anic reference to women as *harth*, a word many people interpret as land and, hence, as property. However the Qur'an does not designate a wife her husband's property and, for whatever it is worth, it also refers to Paradise as *harth*. Even in a literal sense, *harth* doesn't mean property because there was no concept of property in land in the seventh century. That is why many early exegetes read it as a metaphor for sowing, hence, as a reference to vaginal sex. Under no circumstances, however, is *harth* an invitation to sexual abuse since the Qur'an forbids taking (inheriting) women against their wills as well as lewd and lustful behavior in a marriage.²⁸

This is why Muslims find the Dutch film, "Submission," so offensive because it shows semi-naked Muslim women with lines from the Qur'an—including parts of the *harth* verse—incribed onto their [bodies](#).²⁹ According to the film-makers, the point was to illustrate the Qur'an's own misogynistic nature. That is, of course, one reading of such images. However, given the history of Orientalism, I see these images as reaffirming Rana Kabbani's argument that European feelings about Muslim women have always "fluctuated between desire, pity, contempt and outrage."³⁰ The pity, contempt, and outrage are, I think, easy to see in such images; the desire, less so. However, what does the obsession with Muslim women's bodies—specially veiled ones—betray other than "the erotic investment in seeing?"³¹ And why is the object of that gaze invariably "made lacking what

²⁴ Jeffrey Weeks, *Sexuality and its Discontents* (London: Routledge, 1985), 65.

²⁵ Millett, *ibid.*, 51.

²⁶ See Mustansir Mir, "The Sura as a Unity," in *Approaches to the Quran*, ed. G.R. Hawting and Abdul-Kader Shareef (New York: Routledge), 1993.

²⁷ See verse 4:1 in Ali, *ibid.*

²⁸ See Asma Barlas, "Believing Women" in *Islam* (Texas: University of Texas, 2002), 160-65.

²⁹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Submission_screenshot.gif

³⁰ Rana Kabbani. *Europe's Myths of Orient* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1986), 26.

³¹ Meyda Yegenoglu, *Colonial Fantasies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 109; 110.

the subject has [but also made] ... threatening to the stable world of the subject by her radical difference?"

European images of the Prophet

One can ask the same question about European representations of the Prophet, that also reveal an obsession with Muslim bodies. However, unlike the "erotic investment in seeing" that leads to disrobing women, I want to suggest that it is the "real and symbolic wounds... stored in the archives of collective memory"³² that explain his derogatory images. Wounds, of course, signify trauma and, for the West, Islam remains a lasting trauma, in part because of its own "deeper incomprehension of the nature of the thing itself,"³³ as Robert Southern argues. My critique, however, focuses not on this lack of understanding but on the fact that offensive depictions of the Prophet have not changed much over time or, to put it more accurately, even when they have, their ideological premises have not and neither has their role in affirming the radical alterity of Islam in relation to the West. That is why I see these depictions as glimpses into Europe's own history and as sites where Europeans displace some of its traumatic events.

This is most obviously true of the Danish cartoons of the Prophet as a terrorist, an image that became almost immediately iconic. I believe this had to do with two things. First, it conjured up another, albeit recessive, likeness of the Prophet as the harbinger of the West's destruction in the form of the Antichrist (I will speak of this shortly). Second, the event to which the cartoons gestured, that "absolute event, the 'mother' of events, the pure event which is the essence of all the events that never happened," to quote Baudrillard, was nothing if not traumatic for the West. However, according to him, the trauma lay not in the violence as such but in watching a "spectacularly suiciding" U.S. that had called forth this violence by wielding such "unbearable power." Everyone "without exception," he insists, had dreamed of the destruction "because everybody must dream of the destruction of any power hegemonic to that degree." Whether or not the West's will to power also conceals within itself a will to its destruction, I cannot say. But, our collective salvation may well lie in getting rid of a power that has "engendered all that violence brewing around the world, and therefore this terrorist imagination which – unknowingly – inhabits us all."³⁴

Yet, these are precisely the kinds of issues the cartoons elided; in fact, by re-incarnating the Prophet as the very "Spirit of Terrorism," they enacted a double

³² Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting* (University of Chicago, 2004) 82.

³³ Robert Southern, *Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1962) 4.

³⁴ Jean Baudrillard. "The Spirit of Terrorism," *Le Monde*, 2 November 2001.

displacement, of the trauma of 9.11.2001³⁵ and the West's complicity in global terror, because, to the extent that the Prophet and Islam are terrorists, the U.S./ West is not. This was also the point of those came to the defense of the cartoons in the wake of the predictable (and hoped for!) Muslim backlash: that Islam itself calls to violence. Rather cleverly, the right to vilify the Prophet got tied up with the right to free speech in this defense as well. It is true that free speech gave the cartoonists free rein to slander him but, historically, attacks on the Prophet or on Islam were never contingent on free speech or secular sensibilities, or, for that matter, on knowledge of Islam or even contact with Muslims. To put it bluntly, Europeans have always felt free to say rather execrable things about Islam even when they lived in conditions of unfreedom themselves, as in the Middle Ages. That they now rely on free speech to impugn Islam or Muslims should tell us that speech permits not only satire and critique but also assertions of power and dominance. In a different context, Saidiya Hartman argues that the "exercise of power [is] inseparable from its display," which is why domination depends on being able to represent power. Referring to the slave-holders in the ante-bellum U.S., she argues that a "display of mastery [over the slave] was just as important as the legal title to slave property."³⁶ I believe something similar happens when critics of Islam assail its sacred symbols at will, like the Danish cartoons did. Displays of epistemic and polemical violence are meant to demonstrate mastery over Muslims and, to the extent that free speech enables this, I believe it is part of a larger economy of control and not a free-floating signifier of freedom.³⁷

Not all representations of the Prophet have been about mastery, however. In fact, his earliest representation as the Antichrist can best be understood in the context of intra-Christian struggles. As Tomas Mastnak points out in this regard, it is only when "Western unity" started to express itself as Christendom that Muslims also became the "normative enemies of Christianity."³⁸ He traces this unity to the Peace of God and the Truce of God both of which, rather ironically, culminated in the first crusade. "A new kind of holy war grew out of the holy peace,"³⁹ and this "peace war" meant that "not only could the individual soldier be absolved of his sins, but the use of arms as such could be freed from sinfulness." Eventually, Christian violence was "diverted to the non-Christian outside world" with the pope promising "the glorious reward of martyrdom"⁴⁰ to all those willing to brandish their sword against the Saracens.

³⁵ Ariel Dorfman reminds us that the 1973 CIA coup against Salvador Allende in Chile was also carried out on a 9/11. <http://www.duke.edu/web/forums/dorfman.html>.

³⁶ Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 7.

³⁷ I make this point in detail in "Would Spinoza Understand Me? Europe, Islam and the Mirror of Difference," in *Understanding Islam: A double critique* (Holland: Van Gorcum, 2008).

³⁸ Tomaz Mastnak, *Crusading Peace* (California: University of California Press, 2002), 96.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 1. As Mastnak points out the "Holy war in the Christian tradition ... found its model in the wars of Yahweh," 61.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 27-29; p. 34; p. 53

It was thus in the High Middle Ages that Christians came “to find in Islam and its founder the signs of a sinister conspiracy against Christianity. They thought they saw in its details – and they knew very few – that total negation of Christianity which would mark the contrivances of Antichrist.”⁴¹ Southern ascribes this view to a reliance on Biblical exegesis to explain Islam and to the “ignorance of a confined space,”⁴² by which he means a geographical distance from Muslims. However, since it was the Christians who lived in “the middle of Islam”⁴³ (Muslim Spain), who first saw the Prophet as the Antichrist, I don’t quite accept his second thesis. What is important, however, is that even though Christian ignorance about Islam underwent changes between the Crusades and the Reformation, its images of the Prophet did not. He continued to appear as the Antichrist for over two centuries until the Calvinists, in their “war against the idols,”⁴⁴ declared the Catholic Church and pope to be the real thing.

Even in his diminished role as an antichrist, however, the Prophet seems to have been a cause of distress for men like Luther. Confronted with “the Turk and his religion at our very doorstep,” he turned to warn the people “lest, either moved by the splendor of the Turkish religion and the external appearance of their customs, or offended by the meager display of our own faith or the deformity of our customs, they deny their Christ and follow Muhammad.”⁴⁵ To those who feared that, by reading the Qur’an, “weak minds might be corrupted as it were by an infection,” Luther replied that no “religion or doctrine about the worship or invocation of God [could] be true that utterly rejects the prophetic and apostolic writings.”⁴⁶ Yet, in the midst of his own struggles with the devil, he confesses that the “abominable Muhammad almost became my prophet.”⁴⁷ I do not know enough about Luther’s life and works to understand the meaning of his confession but it is possible to read into the “abomination” an indictment not only of the Prophet but also of Luther himself for his momentary lapse in having very nearly embraced him.

Finally, I want to mention two other images of the Prophet that entered Europe’s imaginations more or less abidingly. One was as the devil, Mahound (revived by Rushdie in *The Satanic Verses*), and the other was as a heathen idol. In fact, the term mammetry “emerged ... meaning the worship of images of idolatry, a false religion.”⁴⁸ Later glossed as puppet, the term was “a reworking – via Old French

⁴¹ Southern, *ibid.*, 24.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 17.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁴⁴ I borrow this from Carlos Eire, *War Against the Idols* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

⁴⁵ Quoted in Sarah Henrich and James L. Boyce, “Martin Luther – Translations of Two Prefaces on Islam,” *Word & World*, Volume XVI, No. 2 (Spring 1996): 250-266; 260.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 264.

⁴⁷ Minou Reeves, *Muhammad in Europe* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 127.

⁴⁸ Reeves, *ibid.*, 88.

– of the proper name Mahomet,” argues Jonathan Gil Harris. Removed from this context, it became “a signature repeatedly reiterated and counter-signed in medieval and early modern English writing – as idol, devil, Catholic, puppet, and desirous young woman.” What links these mamnets, Harris says, “is their stigmatization as false images that are lifeless or mechanistic. In this, they are ontologically opposed to truth and life.”⁴⁹

One could say the same about the Prophet’s depiction as the Antichrist because, while this designation gave Islam “a niche in Christian history,”⁵⁰ it was in ontological opposition to truth and life as Europe’s Christians saw them. This is also true of his contemporary depiction as a terrorist which also locates him in ontological opposition to truth and life, as the West sees them. If one image draws on Biblical references and the other on secular, both are nonetheless apocalyptic inasmuch as both portray the Prophet as the cause of the West’s ruin.

Conclusion

In wrapping up this talk, I want to draw out some similarities between how both “the” Muslim woman’s body and that of the Prophet become sites for mapping difference. Obviously, in one case the difference is sexual and in the other political but, in both, it appears not as a form of variation, but, of opposition and deviance. Even so, the two cases are not as dissimilar as they may appear to be.

It is apparent from the first body I discussed that difference is conceived of in religious terms and is meant to define and demarcate sexual identities. What may be less obvious is that Muslim understandings of the Qur’an are partly a function of the political contexts in which the Qur’an was, and is, interpreted. As I pointed out, many misogynistic claims about women and their bodies were read into or out of it over a period of several centuries. The historical gradualism attests to changes in the social and political structures of Muslim societies which also influenced their approach to religious knowledge. Yet, most Muslims, both conservative and progressive,⁵¹ persist in their belief that the Qur’an itself is anti-women and patriarchal. Such claims don’t make it so but they do keep Muslims from accepting liberatory readings of the Qur’an as legitimate, or recognizing the inter-relatedness of history and hermeneutics, text and context, method and meaning. The result is a recycling of a historically dated exegesis and, with it, pejorative notions about women’s bodies and also their rights.

⁴⁹ Jonathan Gil Harris, “The Untimely Mammet of Verona,” unpublished paper, 2009. Harris’s own brilliant reading of the mammet opens up possibilities of seeing in it “an anomaly that refuses the ontological and temporal partitions which divide us.”

⁵⁰ Southern, *ibid.*, 25.

⁵¹ See, for instance, Ibrahim Moosa, “The Debts and Burdens of Critical Islam,” in *Progressive Muslims*, ed. Omid Safi (Oxford: Oneworld, 2003).

When it comes to scripture, the question of what is historically dated is not easy to answer and, in fact, one of the biggest challenges of interpreting the Qur'an is trying to differentiate between universal principles and historical contingencies. In this context, the traditional Muslim view is that since the Qur'an is God's word, we cannot historicize it because doing so would undermine its universal nature. The progressive Muslim view, on the other hand, is that Qur'anic norms are a function of "the historical condition in which the Qur'an was revealed."⁵² I do not adhere to either view. To regard the Qur'an as divine discourse means to see it as being timeless and "not bound to any society's history or even *by* history; it could not be, because what is historically contingent (particular) cannot be prescriptive (universal)."⁵³ What I believe "is prescriptive in the Qur'an is not history, society, or patriarchy, but certain principles,"⁵⁴ and these tend towards mutuality, love, and liberality between spouses.⁵⁵ Having said this, however, I agree that "one cannot proceed to the abidingness of the Quran, in word and meaning, unless one intelligently proceeds *from* its historical ground and circumstance."⁵⁶ Also, to make the Qur'an "immune from history is to make its own history irrelevant;" indeed, the text itself underlines "the necessarily periodic and contextual nature of its contents."⁵⁷

Accordingly, new readers of the Qur'an are faced with the task of winnowing out timeless principles from their historical forms so that we can continue to re-contextualize its teachings. An example are the verses on veiling from which we can infer the concept of sexual and moral decency within certain parameters or a command to dress like seventh century Arab women did and to regard this dress as having the same meaning in every society regardless of political or historical context. My preference, as you have seen, is to make the first interpretive choice because I think that understanding the Qur'an along such lines is essential for reconceptualizing not only women's bodies but their rights as well.

From the second body I talked about, that of the Prophet, it should also be clear that the difference mapped onto it is conceived of in religious terms even if those doing the mapping are secular and their purpose is to draw political boundaries between "us and them." I don't have to make much of a case that the medieval Christian representation of the Prophet as the Antichrist also grew out of specific interpretations of the Bible, or that this image was made to bear not only on inter-religious struggles, but also on intra-religious ones, or that these conflicts (the Crusades and the Reformation), were also political in nature. Similarly,

⁵² Ibid., p. 125.

⁵³ Asma Barlas, "'Believing Women' in Islam: Between secular and religious politics and theology," in *Reunderstanding Islam*, ibid., 25.

⁵⁴ Barlas, ibid.

⁵⁵ See Barlas, "*Believing Women*," specially chapters 5 and 6.

⁵⁶ Kenneth Cragg, *The Event of the Qur'an* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1994) 114; his emphasis.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

current depictions of the Prophet as a terrorist also serve a political purpose, which is to displace Western violence onto Islam, even though they also draw on religious referents. By this I mean both that the figure of the terrorist is a secularization of the Antichrist and that its purpose is to link Islam with terror; hence the phrase “Islamic terror,” which has no corollary in the form of “secular terror.” It is also telling that in the early days of the “war on terror” it was called a Crusade not just by bin Laden but also by the former U.S. president. In effect, religious imagery has been all around us since 9.11.2001 making it seem that the event had nothing to do with political concerns. In fact, when it comes to Muslims, we are assumed not to have political identities or aims or motivations.

In concluding, then, there don’t seem to be fundamental differences between conservative Muslim and secular Western politics of the body; in so far as both treat it as the location of moral weakness or evil, both rely on it as an “*imaginary anchor*”⁵⁸ to stabilize their own epistemic privilege. In one case it is the privilege of Muslim men (and also Europeans), that the body stabilizes and, in the other, of Westerners in general. One could thus say that Muslim women’s bodies have become sites of a double oppression, albeit one that is carried out in the name of religious ideals and secular freedoms. What this says about the putative differences between religion and secularism when it comes to the politics of the body, specially Muslim bodies, is not something I have considered. Perhaps we will get some clarity on this and other questions in our three days together.

⁵⁸ Quoted in Yegenoglu, *ibid.*, 49.