Muslim Response to the Fall 2017 McGinley Lecture

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I must begin this evening by thanking Fordham University, Father Patrick Ryan, and Sister Anne-Marie Kirmse for the invitation to participate this evening. It is always a pleasure to offer a response to the McGinley Lecture and to be in comparative conversation.

In my response, I intend to accept the invitation of Father Ryan and focus on contemporary trends in reform and renewal that are happening on what he described as the “outer boundaries” of the Muslim umma (community), specifically in the United States. This invitation aligns well with my areas of expertise and research: contemporary Muslim interpretation, Muslima (Islamic feminist) exegesis and theology, and comparative theology.

I will begin by exploring trends in early Islamic feminist interpretation, as a concrete example of contemporary Islamic reform. I will then offer some observations related to authority, renewal, methodological assumptions, and depiction of religious others. I will conclude by considering various religious “collisions” that frame these interpretations, and by proposing another possibility that envisions comparative engagement as a resource for faithful renewal (tajdid).

Contemporary Reform-Oriented Movements: Muslima and Islamic Feminist Interpretation

In contemporary Islamic interpretation, there are a multitude of reform-oriented movements. To provide a concrete example and in line with my research interests, I will focus on feminist or egalitarian reform-oriented movements in the US context. With more than three decades of contributions, this movement evinces internal diversity in both methods and
conclusions. There are however some dominant trends that define the contours of it as a reform movement.

To begin, many early and groundbreaking Islamic feminist and egalitarian interpretations positioned themselves largely as a recovery of the “real” Islamic tradition or the “real” meaning of Islamic texts. Egalitarianism was thus depicted as the central core of Islam and Islamic sources. Non-egalitarian manifestations, practices, and teachings associated with Islam were depicted as accretions and corruptions from the original egalitarian core. Thus, the “reform” process in this early movement consisted of retrieving the core message, and of delegitimizing other aspects of the historical tradition, including elements of exegesis, law, and practice.

This process manifested and continues to manifest in a heavy emphasis on and prioritization of the Qur’an. The Qur’an becomes the primary standard of reform. This is in many ways not striking; the Qur’an is a central touchstone of authority. Islamic feminist and egalitarian interpreters capitalize on this authority, referring to the Qur’an as the “inimitable, inviolate, inerrant, and incontrovertible” Word of God, a Word that is—according to Islamic feminist pioneers Asma Barlas, amina wadud, and Riffat Hassan—unified, intentional, and purposeful.¹ By privileging the Qur’an in this way, these scholars tap into the preeminent status the Qur’an holds within the tradition. They assert the legitimacy of their reforms by aligning with a pre-existing intra-Islamic notion of Qur’anic authority. Although they tap into this authority, they offer distinctive interpretations, arguing that the Qur’an is fundamentally egalitarian; that it depicts an un-differentiated human creation; that divine sovereignty rules out intra-human domination; and that the Qur’an is silent on women’s secondary status.²

In advocating that the core of authentic Islamic teachings and texts is egalitarian, Islamic feminists are left to explain apparent discrepancies; they are left to explain how seemingly
misogynistic, patriarchal, and androcentric interpretations and sources entered the tradition. With the Qur’an, elements of the text that appear to address men only or to correspond to patriarchal norms of male dominance and power are, drawing on Fazlur Rahman, commonly explained through the distinctions of universal and particular, or prescriptive and descriptive aspects of the scripture. Limitations and discrepancies, moreover, are attributed to context, language, and human interpretation, “never to the Qur’an itself.”

With ahadith, which are not described as the Word of God, but rather as human recollections of the actions, sayings, and tacit approval of Prophet Muhammad, one strategy is to co-opt classical ahadith assessment methods and re-authenticate the ahadith. Hassan does this with several ahadith that negatively portray women, and thereby argues that these ahadith are weak (da’if) or fabricated. Another common strategy is to account for discrepancies through notions of corruption and foreign transplantation, including from other religious and cultural traditions. Hassan adopts this strategy when she tackles widely held theological assumptions about the created superiority of men, specifically those that recount the events and disobedience of Adam and Eve in the Garden. She asserts, for instance, that the Qur’anic creation account of undifferentiated humanity must take precedence over ahadith that align with the Genesis 2 account of Eve’s creation from the rib of Adam. Patriarchal ahadith are attributed to other traditions and texts.

‘Aysha Hidayatullah—a third generation Islamic feminist scholar—describes Hassan’s approach as a Qur’anic “rib-ectomy” in which the Islamic tradition is purified and depicted as superior in relation to corrupting outside forces. This approach is particularly provocative because the authenticity of non-egalitarian aspects of Islamic tradition are undercut by tapping
into negative stereotypes of external texts and traditions, and by relying on constructs of authority that treat ‘non-Islamic’ as a synonym for ‘illegitimate.’

In relation to Islamic jurisprudence or law, Islamic feminists adopt various strategies, while all acknowledging that the existing tradition does contain some laws that appear to privilege men and restrict women. One common reform-oriented approach, found in the writings of Azizah al-Hibri, is to argue that true and Qur’anically derived Islamic laws are inherently egalitarian and provide numerous rights to women (such as the rights to own property, seek divorce, and maintain personal wealth) that other systems deny or have only recently asserted. In this approach, the presence of non-egalitarian laws is again explained through corruption of core Islamic teachings. This implies that the Islamic system is a perfect system, that it is sufficient for ensuring egalitarianism and justice. Therefore, the necessary action of reform is not one of contradicting original laws, but of removing cultural accretions and “distorted” understandings of the Qur’an that arise from those accretions, and then upholding original Islamic laws and rights. There may be some room for *ijtihad* (juridical reasoning)—a type of *tajdid*, renewal—yet at the same time the standard of reform lies in the past, at the origins.

**Observations**

I want at this juncture to make a few observations about these trends and strategies in early Islamic feminist discourse in relation to authority, renewal, methodological assumptions, and depiction of religious others.

The first such observation is that early Islamic feminist contributions often root authority in the past. While they respond to contextual and contemporary concerns, they seek to address those concerns by returning to the pristine beginnings and uncorrupted sources of Islamic tradition. They are, thus, reform movements that see the process of reform as a type of ‘retrieval’
or ‘return’ to origins. This mode of reform is powerful and evocative. It has also resulted in real change in the lives of women. I am however not convinced that it can be fully classified as a mode of *tajdid* (renewal).

This leads to my second observation. More recent works in Islamic feminist interpretation have begun to critique the limitations of the dominant mode of reform, including its assumptions about origins, sources, and methodology. Wadud, herself, today routinely invokes the necessity of theological and ethical reflection in addition to—omr beyond—textual exegesis alone.\(^\text{11}\) Fatima Seedat and Sa’diyya Shaikh explore the authority of present experience, meaning the way in which personal and communal experience does and should dictate the project of egalitarian reform.\(^\text{12}\) Aysha Hidayatullah and Kecia Ali criticize the methodology of some Islamic feminist approaches for demonstrating the same ideological rigidity and absolutism of other modern, but non-egalitarian approaches to exegesis, such as the Salafi approach.\(^\text{13}\) While they do not use the specific language of renewal, Islamic feminists—myself included—now routinely seek ways to move beyond reclamation and precedent alone, to broader methodologies, and to embrace experience. This reveals a new vision of authority; authority is in the past, and it is also very much in the present and future. I would also argue that this reveals a shift from reform as retrieval or return, to reform as renewal in the classical sense.

The third observation I will make relates to the way Islamic feminist discourse engages comparatively, that is, the manner it engages with and is engaged by other traditions. As should be evident, attribution of non-egalitarian aspects of Islamic tradition to other religions and cultures is a form of comparative engagement. It is not a positive one, although it can be expedient given a broader, contemporary reformist impulse premised upon the oppositional depiction of Islam and the “rest”, sometimes the “West.” As mentioned, in this view, non-
Islamic—or of non-Islamic origin—is synonymous with illegitimate. Again, this view runs throughout some Islamic feminist reform movements, and many other Islamic movements with less egalitarian or moderate goals.

It coexists, though, with another, external view of Islam. Equally oppositional and equally based upon superficial knowledge, this is the expectation that Islam is like and should be like other traditions, notably Christianity. In the context of today’s conversation, a concrete example of this is the diagnosis of the “malady” of Islam as being curable through an “Islamic Reformation.” This call is common and sometimes presented as apolitical. However, it is a call that is premised upon little understanding of Islamic traditions, a pseudo-evolutionary view of religious change and tradition, and an external projection of one tradition onto another.

In my perspective, both of these oppositional, comparative “collisions” impede reform and renewal, including the work of Islamic feminism.

The question thus becomes: Is there a way to foster more positive, productive comparative “collisions”?

**Productive, Comparative Collisions: Comparative Theology**

By way of concluding, I want to propose that there are interpretative approaches and strategies that reframe cultural and religious “collisions” as resources for actual renewal, as sparks of new insights and questions.

One such theological strategy—that I adopt in my most recent work—is comparative theology. Comparative theology, as defined by Francis X. Clooney, describes “acts of faith seeking understanding which are rooted in a particular faith tradition but which venture into learning from one or more other faith traditions…for the sake of fresh theological insights.” Comparative theology is the double process of venturing out of one’s tradition(s) to learn deeply
about and from other traditions, and then returning to one’s own tradition(s) with new insights, questions, and perspectives. The underlying assumption is that there are things that can only be learned in and through conversation with various “others.” This learning however cannot be premised upon superficial knowledge or caricatures, nor upon projections and assumptions of full parity among traditions. Rather, it is deep knowledge and attentiveness to incomplete similarities and differences that opens the possibility of learning new things.

In this process, we understand ourselves in new ways in the “light” of the other. It is important to emphasize that this does not mean that the objective of comparative theology is appropriation, direct cooptation, or abandonment of one’s own tradition(s). It is an assertion that we notice new facets of ourselves, our traditions, our sources, and our practices when they are illuminated by comparative engagement. We ask new questions of our traditions and, as comparative theologian Michelle Voss Roberts states, we “discover patterns hidden beneath the grooves of well-worn narratives.” We see new possibilities.

Of vital importance to comparative feminist theology—including Muslima Islamic theology—we are prompted to imagine new legitimate and rooted options beyond the dominant forms of theology, interpretation, and practice within our traditions. The comparative lens assists in penetrating the ‘unthought’ and the ‘unthinkable’, that is, those aspects of and possibilities within our own traditions that are obscured or rendered invisible by prevailing formulations of orthodoxy and interpretations of texts and practices. The goals of comparative theology therefore are transformation, imaginative theological reconstruction, and even transgression within and in conversation with the tradition(s) of the comparative theologian. These goals are goals of renewal (tajdid), and mark a new form of contemporary interpretation that seeks the rooted and faithful “what could be,” not just the past construction of what “was.”
NOTES


7 Hassan, “Feminism,” 254.


Fredericks, *Faith Among Faiths*, 178; Peter Phan, “From Soteriology to Comparative Theology and Back: A Response to S. Mark Heim,” in *Understanding Religious Pluralism*:


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