



**Barazangi, Nimat Hafez.** *Woman's Identity and the Qur'an: A New Reading.* Gainesville, Florida: University Press of Florida, 2004. 172 pp. ISBN 0-8130-2785-3. \$59.95

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As research fellow at Cornell University, Barazangi's stated purpose is not only to speak in a Muslim/feminist voice, but also "to create a new venue for exploring and engaging the sources of Islamic education and Islamic higher learning within the framework of the Qur'anic mandate and call to self-identity" (p. 18). Her work also attempts to stimulate discussion about the Qur'an in the community as a whole. Her thesis is that the Qur'an, Islam's sacred text, gives both men and women equal rights but has been largely misinterpreted throughout history by male interpreters. Hence, from a Qur'anic perspective, a woman is not a secondary "principle" of the human creation but is a primary principle in the human pair of male and female. Thus, women's participation in reading and interpreting the Qur'an is long overdue and a necessary step in the struggle towards recognition of their full humanity.

The book is divided into five chapters: Pedagogical Reading of the Qur'an; The Religio-Moral Characteristics of the Qur'an and the Story of Creation; Autonomous Morality and the Principle of Modesty; Gender Equality and Equilibrium; Self-Identity and Self-Learning: A Shift in Curriculum Development. Barazangi argues that, although Muslim women embrace the Islamic worldview as rational and just, their social realities suggest quite the contrary as they strikingly contradict the ideals of Islam. In her view, a pedagogical reading of the Qur'anic story of creation leads to a renewed understanding of human trusteeship and women's morality and modesty, as well as equality and *taqwa* ("piety" that she translates as "equilibrium") from within the Qur'an itself. The author discusses the importance of recognizing the positive contributions made by self-identified Muslim women maintaining that such



recognition may not only lead toward a comprehensive change within the social fabric of Muslim societies, but also toward participatory policy-making based on a new inclusive understanding of the Qur'anic principle of justice, including gender justice.

Within her pedagogical redefinition of Islamic religio-morality and its potential impact on Muslim attitudes toward women's morality and education, Barazangi critically analyses the works of three Muslim women scholars: 'A'isha 'Abd al-Rahman, Amina Wadud, and Aziza al-Hibri. She maintains that the lack of leadership initiative in affirming a woman's autonomous Religio-morality, as represented in the works of these women, contributes to the separation between the formative and perceptive, even when these women discuss the favorable Qur'anic status of women. Barazangi sees these women as succumbing to the "interpretation of complementarities," arguing that this reflects their "unwillingness to question the prevailing social structure, or their inability to self-identify with the Qur'an in a pedagogical sense" (p. 78). Moreover, the Qur'anic assertion that the female is an autonomous moral being with a direct relationship with God as her only Guardian should not be compromised but rather asserted even if it leads to controversy. Only then can the Qur'anic social revolution involving gender justice be practiced.

The central question in Barazangi's argument is: Why has the authority to interpret 'religious' texts been exclusive to male religious elites? She believes that nothing will change the condition of Muslim women and the Muslim society unless women are recognized as having the same authority to interpret the Qur'an. Her strategy to achieve such an objective is reflected in her proposal of the curricular framework, "Self-Learning of Islam" (S-LI), as a means of self-realization and self-identity grounded in the Qur'an.

The book is marred by a few technical problems such as the author's delayed explanation of her definition of *taqwa*, a Qur'anic word commonly interpreted as "piety." Although Barazangi's interpretation of the word as "equilibrium" might fit certain contexts in the Qur'an, she needed to clarify the term early in the book instead of merely giving her new translation of it. In addition, there are a number of typographical errors, including spelling inconsistencies of a few Arabic transliterated words such as the word *prophet* that sometimes appears with a capital (P) or a small (p) and the misspelling of *Qur'anic* as [Qur'nic]. Furthermore, the transliteration of the Arabic word *kashafnā*, meaning "we unveiled," is missing a letter (a) between the



letters (h) and (f) and the Arabic noun *qiwama*, literally meaning “authority,” is transliterated as *qawama*, perhaps inadvertently.

Such minor deficiencies, however, do not reduce the value of the book as an important addition to several contributions made by Muslim scholars calling for a gender inclusive reading of the Qur’an. In addition to drawing attention to a number of prevalent misinterpretations of the Qur’an, especially with regard to women’s issues, the strength of the book—as alluded to earlier— resides in the proposal Barazangi makes in chapter 5, in which she uses the Qur’anic pedagogical dynamics as the philosophical basis for Muslim women to develop an integrative curriculum that proposes a shift in learning, knowing, teaching, and the application of the Islamic worldview. In this proposed project, the learner is placed at the heart of the curricular process and these same Qur’anic dynamics become the medium through which the learner will also move towards the intended gender revolution, as an integral part of the Qur’anic principle of social and economic justice, while simultaneously balancing the tension between pluralism and secularism.

This book is useful for readers engaged in teaching and research given the unique perspective it provides of the Qur’an from a woman’s standpoint. Although some Muslim women scholars preceded Barazangi in providing a female reading of the Qur’an, her proposal of a shift in curriculum development constitutes an important aspect intended to help students equip themselves with the educational tools needed to move from theory to practice and to ultimately change the prevalent social structure and eliminate oppressive practices, reverse negative conceptions of woman’s morality, and restore her human dignity. This, Barazangi argues, is the ultimate message of the Qur’an. In the final analysis, this revolutionary book challenges prevalent androcentric interpretations of the Qur’an that have unfortunately endured for centuries.

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