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**“Believing Women” in Islam**  
Unreading Patriarchal  
Interpretations of the Qur’ān

*by Asma Barlas*

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**Do they not reflect  
on the Qur'an, or is it  
that their hearts have  
locks upon them?**

**The Qur'ān (47:24)**



## CHAPTER 4

### The Patriarchal Imaginary of Father/s Divine Ontology and the Prophets

Invent not similitudes  
For God: for God knoweth,  
And ye know not.

The Qur'ān (16:74)<sup>1</sup>

God has said: "Take not  
(For worship) two gods:  
For [God] is just One God  
Then fear Me (and Me alone)."

The Qur'ān (16:51)<sup>2</sup>

Islam, I began this work by saying, need not be read as a religion of the Father/fathers, that is, as a patriarchal religion, if by patriarchy we mean father-rule and/or a politics of male privilege based in theories of sexual differentiation. Both forms of patriarchy associate the male/masculine with the Self, knowledge, truth, and sovereignty, while representing the woman as different, unequal, or the "Other."<sup>3</sup> In monotheistic religions these representations draw on a patriarchalized view of God, whereas in secular contexts they are based in specific claims about biology and culture. I thus visualize patriarchy as a continuum and move between its different poles in interpreting the Qur'ān. I hope to show that the Qur'ān challenges the constitutive myths of patriarchy and that it does not inherently or symbolically (biologically or culturally) privilege males, masculinity, fathers, or father-right/rule. Beyond that, I will show that the teachings of the Qur'ān are radically egalitarian and even antipatriarchal.

I substantiate this claim by examining the nature of Divine Self-Disclosure and the Qur'anic narratives of the prophets Abraham and Muhammad. Specifically, I focus on the Qur'an's repudiation of the patriarchal imaginary of God-the-Father and the irreconcilable conflict between Islamic monotheism (*Tawhid*) and theories of father-right/male privilege. In this context, I examine the Qur'an's refusal to sacralize the prophets as real or symbolic fathers, as well as its sustained critique of the historical practice of fathers' rule. In Chapters 5 and 6, I explain why we cannot derive theories of male privilege or sexual inequality and differentiation from the Qur'an's position on sex/gender, sexuality, the family, and marriage. Together, these chapters aim to clarify the scriptural basis of sexual equality in Islam and to challenge feminist claims that patriarchy has God on its side and conservative ones that "the Islamic family was to be essentially male-worshipping" (Bouhdiba 1985, 11).

## I. (Re)presenting God

Since "a culture's idea of divinity is central not only to that culture's religious life but also to its social, political, familial institutions and relationships,"<sup>4</sup> how we define God has implications not only for patriarchies but also for a theology and hermeneutics of liberation. In other words, "sacred knowledge [as] master knowledge"<sup>5</sup> has the power to shape our views not only of God but also of our own moral, social, and sexual self-worth and relationships. As such, when sacred knowledge is used to engender or sexualize God (humanize or anthropomorphize God) as male, it also underwrites male privilege since men acquire power from "the fact that the source of ultimate value is often described in anthropomorphic images as Father or King."<sup>6</sup> Indeed, feminists believe that it is the "exclusively masculine symbolism for God, for the notion of divine 'incarnation' in human nature, and for the human relationship to God" that reinforces sexual oppression (Daly 1973, 4).

Since the use of sacred knowledge to engender God or, rather, to represent God as male impedes a theology of liberation, attempts to depatriarchalize theology and to evolve a liberatory hermeneutics start by engaging the sexual/textual politics of sacred misrepresentation. In this context, some theorists favor degendering "the word *God*" (Ramshaw 1995, 19), while others want to reengender God by recovering God's "female guises" (Raschke and Raschke 1995). Yet others have sought to revive the ancient goddess cults as a counterpoint to masculinist constructions of God. In spite

of the differences between them, however, all three approaches reveal that the problem as scholars see it ultimately is not so much that a specific *sex* has been ascribed to God, but that a specific *meaning* has been ascribed to this sex historically, one that has served to legitimize sexual hierarchy and inequalities. Arguably, then, it is not God's representation as male that is problematic but our own definitions of male/ness; that is, sexed representations of God are problematic only to the extent that specific constructions of gender are. Nonetheless, as long as our views of gender remain questionable, so does God's depiction as Father/male. That is why, in my own analysis, I begin by examining the nature of Divine Self-Disclosure in the Qur'an before discussing the various "Creator models"<sup>7</sup> Muslims have formulated.

### Divine Self-Disclosure

The single most essential aspect of God's Self-Disclosure in the Qur'an is that God is One, hence Indivisible; this principle of Divine Unity (*Tawhid*) extends to the idea that God is Incomparable, hence Unrepresentable. Both separately and together, these doctrines preclude associating forebears, partners, or progeny with God, or misrepresenting God as father, son, husband, or male. I will, therefore, consider each proposition in turn.

Monotheism would not be monotheism if it were not based in the idea of God's Indivisible Unity. As the Qur'an repeatedly warns and confirms, "Your God is One God" (16:22; in Ali, 661). In fact, one entire Sūrah is dedicated to the theologeme of Divine Unity:

Say: [God] is God,  
The One and Only;  
God, the Eternal, Absolute;

[God] begetteth not,  
Nor is [God] begotten;

And there is none  
Like unto [God].

The Qur'an (Sūrah 112; in Ali, 1806)

God is Absolute and God's nature is Unity. *Tawhid*, as Merryl Wyn Davies (1988, 58) points out, is the foundation of "the Islamic conceptual fabric," and, as a concept, it rules out the notion of "dichotomy, of mutually opposed difference. Any reduction to mutually opposed difference would be

false opposition, a reductive destruction of balance." Thus, the very manner in which the Qur'ān describes God's Unity rules out binary modes of thinking that structure patriarchal thought.<sup>8</sup>

Since God is Indivisible, God's Sovereignty also is indivisible. No one—other deities, or divine consorts and offspring, or humans—can partake in it; *shirk*, the symbolic extension of God's Sovereignty to others, is the only unpardonable sin mentioned in the Qur'ān. In explaining why God and God's Sovereignty are Indivisible, the Qur'ān states that, had there been multiple gods and many sources of Divine Sovereignty, "behold, each god Would have taken away What [each] had created, And some would have Larded it over others!" (33:91; in Ali, 889). In contrast to the existential and moral chaos unleashed by polytheism, monotheism makes for a just and coherent moral universe, since God—as Toshihiko Izutsu (1964, 129) reminds us—never does any wrong (*Zulm*) to anybody; rather, God in the Qur'ān is an ethical construct associated with the concepts of truth and justice. Indeed, the idea of God's Justness is integral to God's Unity (monotheism). As L. E. Goodman (1996, 16) says, "God here is universal, not local or parochial," an "Absolute [Who] brooks no evil" (22). In fact, it is the

goodness of God, integrating all affirmative values, that renders the God of Abraham<sup>9</sup> universal. Had evil remained, conflict would be ineradicable—one deity or tribe of deities for one value or farrago of values and another deity or swarm of deities for another. Moral coherence would be lost and, with it, the very possibility of an idea of God. (Goodman, 28)

God's Unity thus is foundational to "the intellectual advance [that represents the] purgation of evil from the idea of the divine," since it is only "when dualism finally yields to monotheism and acknowledges the insubstantiality of evil and the pure reality of the Good" that evil is nullified (Goodman 1996, ix, 29).

God's Unity means not only that God has no partners but also that God is neither Son (Christ) nor Father (of Christ or of other deities). Allegations to the contrary by the Jews, Christians, and polytheists during the Prophet's lifetime, led the Qur'ān to admonish them unendingly. Says the Qur'ān,

In blasphemy indeed,  
Are those that say  
That God is Christ  
The son of Mary.

Say: "Who then  
Hath the least power  
Against God, if [God's] Will  
Were to destroy Christ  
The son of Mary, his mother,  
And all—every one  
That is on the earth?"

The Qur'ān (5:19; in Ali, 246–47)

Christ, the Qur'ān repeatedly clarifies, was a prophet who forbade his own deification and sacralizing God as his Father:

Christ Jesus the son of Mary  
Was (no more than)  
An apostle of God,  
. . . . .

Say not "Trinity": desist:  
It will be better for you:  
For God is One God:  
Glory be to [God]:  
(Far Exalted is [God]) above  
Having a son.

The Qur'ān (4:171; in Ali, 234)

The Qur'ān also condemns Jewish sacralizations of God as father; as it says:

The Jews call 'Uzair a son  
Of God, and the Christians  
Call Christ the Son of God.  
That is a saying from their mouth;  
(In this) they but imitate  
What the Unbelievers of old  
Used to say: God's curse  
Be on them: how they are deluded  
Away from the Truth!

The Qur'ān (9:30; in Ali, 448)

The Qur'ān is equally severe in castigating the polytheists who, it says, "falsely, Having no knowledge, Attribute to [God] Sons and daughters. Praise and glory be To [God Who is] above What they attribute to [God]!" How, asks the Qur'ān, "can [God] have a son When [God] hath no consort?" (6:100–101; in Ali, 319). When another Āyah condemns the polytheists for ascribing only daughters to God, it is not because God deems them less worthy than sons; it is because the polytheists assign to God "what they hate (for themselves)" (16:62; in Ali, 672). Not only did the Arabs of the Prophet's time regard the birth of girls as a calamity, but they buried many alive, a practice God condemns as utterly heinous and promises to punish.<sup>10</sup> That it is no better to ascribe sons to God than it is daughters is clear from numerous Āyāt, including those quoted above.

Not only does God not stand in the *literal* relationship of son, father, husband, or partner to a divine pantheon, then, but God also does not stand in the *symbolic* relationship of a father (or jealous wife)<sup>11</sup> to human beings, either. Thus, the Qur'ān also rejects designations of God as a figurative father:

(Both) the Jews and the Christians  
Say: "We are sons  
Of God, and His beloved."  
Say: "Why then doth [God]  
Punish you for your sins?  
Nay, ye are but men,—  
Of the men [God] hath created:"

The Qur'ān (5:20; in Ali, 247)

Given the Qur'ān's unrelenting rejection of God's sacralization as Father, it seems unconscionable to read Islam as a theological patriarchy. If God can only be a *patriarch* or, rather, God can only be *patriarchalized*, to the extent that God can in fact be sacralized as *Father*, how can God's Self-Disclosure in the Qur'ān be interpreted as providing the basis either for patriarchalized views of God or for theories of father-right/rule based in such views? If God is not Father in Heaven in either a literal or a symbolic sense, how can fathers represent their rule on earth as replicating the model of divine patriarchy? And if—as the Qur'ān makes clear—we cannot, in what sense is God "on the side" of fathers or of patriarchy? Indeed, if God is not father, son, or husband, in what sense can God be male ("He")?

Ironically, while Muslims reject misrepresentations of God as father/male, most see no problem in continuing to masculinize God linguistically and to propagate, on the basis of this view, theories of male rule/privilege over women. One needs therefore to inquire into the paradox of masculinist conceptions of God and the idea of a symbolic continuum between God's Rule and man's in the absence of the Qur'ānic view of God as Father/male. This paradox, I believe, is a function of the Creator models in Ian Netton's (1989) words and of a semiotic collapse in Muslim theology between the signifier (the word "God") and the Signified (God), and I examine each in turn.

### Creator Models: (Re)theorizing the Divine

As the four Creator models—the Qur'ānic, the mystical, the allegorical, and the neo-Platonic—attest, Muslims have conceived of "their one God in several widely different ways" (Netton 1989, 2). Nonetheless, all "Islamic thinking about God, centers upon the divine names or attributes revealed in the [Qur'ān]" (Murata 1992, 9). Drawing on such Āyāt as "there is nothing Whatever like unto [God]" (42:11; in Ali, 1307) and "Glory be to God, the Lord of Inaccessibility, Above everything [ascribed to God]" (37:180),<sup>12</sup> the classical position (*tanzīh*) in dogmatic theology (*kalām*) began by declaring God Incomparable, hence Unrepresentable, especially in terms of "human form or human attributes" (Sherif 1985, 16). However, since this position stressed God's Transcendence to the exclusion of God's Immanence, it also ended up conveying the sense of a God whom (argued scholars such as ibn al-Arabi) "no one could possibly love since He was too remote and incomprehensible" (Murata, 8). The theological cost of rendering God incomparable, then, was also to render God remote, hence dissimilar to humans. This is why the sapiential tradition has concentrated on God's Immanence, interpreting it as nearness to, and similarity with, humans by way of *tashbīh*. However, even those Muslims who stress similarity, notes Murata (53), "give priority to incomparability" so as to remain within Islamic norms. As she says, *tashbīh* and *tanzīh* represent the two poles between which Muslims have tended to think about God, and both, I will argue, anthropomorphize God.

Thus, readings of Islam as a "theological patriarchy" emerge from within *kalām*, which "is locked into an approach that places God the King and the Commander (a close associate of God the Father) at the top of its concerns" (Murata 1992, 3). It seems God's very transcendence creates the desire to

render God intimate in uniquely human terms. Hence, it is *kalām* (and the *Shari'ah* that derives from it), says Murata, that establishes God's primacy as King/Lord/Ruler, and in one case, even as Father; however, the solitary reference, by ibn al-Arabi, to God as Father is anomalous both because of its Christian<sup>13</sup> connotations (Murata, 145), and because in Islam God's relationship to humans is ontological and ethical in nature, not consanguinal or contractual (Asad 1993).

It is not just *kalām* that anthropomorphizes God; so, too, does the sapiential tradition that, maintains Murata (1992, 79), seeks to establish a spiritual, as distinct from a social, matriarchy—by “affirming the primacy of God as Merciful, Beautiful, Gentle, Loving”—even though Muslim theologians “refuse to apply the word father (or mother) to God.”

If both *kalām* and sufism misrepresent God (by engendering God), so too do neo-Platonic models that represent God in terms of essences and attributes. According to Izutsu (1964, 48), the idea of God understood “as a transcendental ‘essence’ opposed to its ‘attributes’ is no longer a [Qur’ānic] concept in its original form.” Indeed, even the word “Allah,” he (51) says, does not “denote in philosophy simply the same thing as that living God of Creation and Revelation . . . so vividly depicted in the [Qur’ān].” God in the Qur’ān, insists Izutsu (49), can “epistemologically . . . only be an object of *ilm* [knowledge]. In other words, God can only be known to [humans] indirectly.” Even when the Qur’ān assigns an “immanent aspect” to God, the “Quranic Creator Paradigm,”<sup>14</sup> as Ian Netton (1989, 22) calls it, conveys the idea of “a God Who (1) creates *ex-nihilo*; (2) acts definitively in historical time; (3) guides His people in such time; and (4) can in some ways be known *indirectly* by His Creation” (my emphasis).

Although all Creator models (except the allegorical, which represents God in purely symbolic terms) anthropomorphize God, there is nothing in the doctrines of Divine Transcendence or of Divine Immanence that should lead us to do so. Thus, in its avowal that “there is none Like unto [God]” (112:4; in Ali, 1806), the Qur’ān establishes that God is Unique, hence beyond representation, and also beyond gender since gender is nothing but a representation of sex. In the ideas of Divine Transcendence and Incomparability, then, we have compelling theological reasons to reject God’s engenderment. In fact, inasmuch as the doctrine of Divine Immanence also recognizes Divine Incomparability, it provides equally compelling reasons to reject God’s engenderment. Even the sufis, who emphasize God’s Immanence (hence similarity to humans) do not reject the idea of God’s Incomparability;

says Murata (52). What they dispute is not the idea of incomparability, but that it is “the only valid point of view.” However, even if we do not take Incomparability as the only valid viewpoint, it is not necessary, even though it is difficult, to think and speak of divine similarity in sexed or gendered terms since there is nothing in the idea of Divine Immanence itself that should lead us to engender God.

To understand this point, it is necessary to recall that God’s engenderment results both from using gendered languages to speak about God and from labeling God’s attributes masculine or feminine. The sufis, for example, emphasize attributes they feel reflect “feminine” qualities like love, beauty, and compassion” (Murata, 56), even though the Qur’ān itself does not define God, or these qualities, in such terms. Similarly, the Qur’ān speaks of God’s love for humans; it is theology that, in translating this theme, declares God “similar” (*tashbih*) in some fashion to His Creation,” and it justifies this move by referring to such Āyāt as “Wherever you turn, there is the face of God” (2:115, in Murata, 9). However, references to God’s face, or hands, or even to God’s attributes, are insufficient in themselves to allow us to depict God as a “distant, dominating, and powerful ruler” or as “a strict and authoritarian father” or as “a warm and loving mother” (9). Rather, such portrayals stem from imposing onto Divine Ontology a system of gender dualisms and binary thought in which men are defined as stern, distant, and authoritarian and women as close, loving, and gentle. Yet nothing in the ideas of distance and sternness renders them (or God) male (*kalām*), or love and nearness that renders them (or God) female (sufism). Nonetheless, such ideas of the masculine and feminine principles infuse Muslim conceptualizations of God, even as their own views of *Tawhid* (Divine Unity) suggest that God incorporates, but also transcends, all (gender) dualisms and oppositions.

### God and the Masculine and Feminine Principles

Muslim mystics and scholars, says Seyyed Hossein Nasr (1987, 185), interpret “the Quranic statement that God reveals Himself in the Universe through His Names” to mean that “Being manifests itself through its Qualities.” Humans see these qualities as manifesting the masculine and feminine principles and, since we view these principles as being opposed to each other, as also manifesting opposites. Thus, God is “the all-comprehensive reality, the coincidence of opposites, in whom all characteristics are found”

(Murata 1992, 95). God is the First and the Last, the Evident and the Immanent, the Subduer and the Bestower, the Expediter and the Delayer, the Exalter and the Abaser, the Creator of Death and the Alive, and on, as the ninety-nine beautiful Names of God reveal. According to Murata (93), these opposing attributes have led sufis and scholars to search for the “deepest roots of polarity in the Real.” Since God’s Reality as manifest in the cosmos “can be described by opposite and conflicting attributes,” she says, the cosmos too can be viewed “as a vast collection of opposites.” However, not only does this collection “display the activity of the single Principle,” but “opposing forces [are not] absolutely opposed,” rather, they are “complementary or polar” (10–12). Polarity, as Roger Ames defines it, is to be understood as a “holographic” view of the world, not as duality. The difference, he says, is that the separateness implicit in dualistic explanations yields a view of “a world of ‘things’ characterized by discreteness, finality, closedness, determinateness, independence, a world in which one thing is related to the ‘other’ extrinsically.” In contrast, polar explanations give rise to

a world of “foci” characterized by interconnectedness, interdependence, openness, mutuality, indeterminateness, complementarity, correlativity, coextensiveness, a world in which continuous foci are intrinsically related to each other. (Murata, 10)

Polarity thus manifests not the exclusion implied by duality, but the relationship of opposites within an internally differentiated organic unity. (However, as Murata says, the distinctiveness of polarity emerges only through a critique of duality, hence the latter’s usefulness for defining certain theological positions.)

As theorists observe, there is in polar explanations a sense of a “higher order unity [that] supersedes contradictions,” much like the “unifying function of the dialectic” (Grosz 1990, 65). And it is such a view of unity that underpins Islamic conceptions of God. Inasmuch as it does, it also challenges both “orthodox” and feminist Muslim assertions that there is a strict separation of masculine and feminine principles in Islam (Bouhdiba 1985; Sabbah 1984). Such views ignore that Muslims throughout the ages have understood *Tawhid* to signify multiplicity-in-unity, meaning that all principles (masculine or feminine) are interconnected in the totality of God’s Being. Thus, among God’s attributes are ones we label “feminine,” like loving, creating, nourishing, forgiving, being patient, compassionate,<sup>15</sup> and so forth. At the same time, however, God also is stern in justice, power-

ful, and a ruler, attributes we think of as masculine. However, the Qur’ān itself does not engender (masculinize or feminize) God’s attributes, and even though femininity and masculinity “have figured very strongly in interpretation of the Qur’ān,” they have done so without explicit Qur’ānic sanction, argues Wadud (1999, 22).

Polarity—or the interconnectedness of opposite principles—defines not only God’s Reality but the reality of humans as well who, says Murata (43), being “made in the form of God [also] manifest the whole.”<sup>16</sup> This means, in effect, that women and men do not embody mutually exclusive or opposite attributes; rather, they incorporate both masculine and feminine attributes.<sup>17</sup> In a polar conception, women are not women because they manifest a lack (defined in terms of feminine traits) and men are not men because they possess what women lack (masculine traits). Rather, *each* manifests *the whole*.

Indeed, if Islam were to designate women and men as opposites (man as the Self and woman as the Other, man as having and woman as lacking something), it could not reasonably hold them to identical standards of moral praxis; lacking knowledge, rationality, the ability to reason (attributes associated with the masculine/Self), women would be unable to understand, or act upon, Divine Truth. The Qur’ān does not, therefore, define women and men in terms of sex or gender attributes; rather, it teaches that humans were created from a single Self (*nafs*), possess the same attributes, and have the same capacity for moral choice, reasoning, and individuality (see Chapters 5 and 6). As such, there is nothing in the concept of divine incarnation in humans, or in monotheism itself, as feminists allege, that is anti-women. In fact, inasmuch as the idea of *Tawhid* allows for a holistic view of human identity, it is liberatory not only for women but also for men.<sup>18</sup>

### Language and the Semiotic Collapse

It is not only social constructions of gender, including our ideas of masculinity and femininity, that have led Muslims to anthropomorphize God; so have the discursive strategies they have employed to read the Qur’ān. In particular, masculinist representations of God result from the tendency to collapse the signifier (the word “God”) with the Signified (God); that is, to confuse gendered languages with God’s Reality. On the other hand, the tendency to represent men as sovereign/rulers over women arises not only in masculinized representations of God, but also in misreading the

Qur'ān's position on human subjectivity (vice-regency) which is interpreted as establishing men's superiority over women.<sup>19</sup> It is thus through a double movement, a semiotic one and an analogical one, that God is masculinized and men deified.

The semiotic collapse of the Signified with the signifier dates from medieval times, but few scholars have studied it or its implications for Muslim masculinizations of God. In fact, Netton (1989, 3), who uses modern linguistic and semiotic theories to analyze medieval Muslim theology, locates the opposite tendency in it: toward a semiotic *disjuncture* resulting from its adherence to the theme of Divine Transcendence. This adherence, he says, grew out of a desire to *rid* formulations about God of "grosser anthropomorphisms [by] stripping God . . . of all human attributes." As Netton (331) explains it, however, the problem is that once we

accept a theory of God's utter transcendence after the frequent manner of so many of the medieval philosophers, and then say that "God knows," or "God has knowledge," the theologeme "divine knowledge" is basically meaningless in deconstructive terms, since what does it really mean to predicate knowledge of a transcendent divinity?

According to Netton, then, it was theology's attempt to deanthropomorphize God that occasioned a "radical break between the . . . signifier and the signified," leading logically to the "prospect of an endless semiosis" and semiotically to a "paradigm of imperfect signification." In such a context, he argues (1989, 331), even the term "God" becomes "almost equally meaningless."

To me, however, Netton's example shows that far from emptying out the term "God" and thereby making it meaning-less, Muslim theology *invested* it with a specific, patriarchal/ized meaning by continuing to assume that God's Transcendent Reality was male ("He"). The semiotic disjunction thus is also a semiotic *collapse* since God has been masculinized in the midst of efforts to rid our ideas of God of human attributes! Indeed, efforts to deanthropomorphize ideas of God have never involved finding a suitable theological *language* to speak about God. Not only do Muslims collapse gendered terms with God's Reality (masculinizing God by a mere use of words rather than by means of a sound theological argument), but they also fail to consider the ways in which gendered meanings subvert the Qur'ān's purposes. For example, rendering the word *insān* as "man" even where such a usage runs counter to the Qur'ān's intent gives a totally different mean-

ing to its Āyāt for, if *insān* did refer only to man, then women would be "exempted from almost all the Islamic injunctions" (Shahab 1993, 403).

The androcentric nature of language is, of course, likely to create persistent problems in signification. It may therefore be that "because all our words fall short of His reality, a huge range of more or less unsatisfactory ways of talking about God is positively desirable" (Tugwell in Netton 1989, 134). However, when some modes of God-Talk<sup>20</sup> are always undesirable to the same group of believers (women), and for the same reasons (their paternalism or sexism), it is time to say that some unsatisfactory ways of talking about God are, in fact, worse than others. The Qur'ān itself offers us better ways to talk about God by using terms like *Rabb* and Allah, that have no human counterpart or equivalent. It is thus all the more troubling when we translate such terms as "King" or "Lord," which not only are androcentric but which also fail to convey the sense of creatorship and sovereignty implicit in terms like *Rabb* and Allah. In fact, words like king and lord encourage false analogies between God's Sovereignty and man's, even though the two are wholly different, as I will argue below. Similarly, confusing words like "He" or "Himself" with God's Reality—which the Qur'ān also conveys in sex/gender-neutral terms as "We, Us, I"—subverts the rich pluralism of scriptural language, reducing God's Reality to one term or attribute.

Even when the Qur'ān refers to God as "He," it does not mean that God is male, or like one. As the Qur'ān says, God cannot be explained by way of similitude (by comparison with another). In that God's representation as "He" or as "King/Lord" is, in fact, premised on our idea of males and what we take to be definitive about their social or sexual roles, it is a similitude, and thus contrary to the Qur'ān's injunctions. As the Qur'ān's teachings suggest, humans (hence our languages) cannot comprehend, much less define, God; moreover, God's recourse to human language is meant only to communicate with us in words we can understand, not to delimit God's Reality. However, instead of recognizing the limitations of language, Muslim theology confuses it with Divine Reality, ignoring how this confusion results in humanizing God. And, of course, when "anthropomorphisms succeed in containing God, we have no God; we have instead a glorified image of ourselves" (Ramshaw 1995, 21).

It may be that the only way we know how to think or talk is from within our own sexed/engendered bodies and experiences; moreover, as Gail Ramshaw (1995, 20) says, in "a century obsessed with sexuality, it is difficult to image a being beyond sexuality." However, what we need is an anamnes-

tic practice,<sup>21</sup> a working toward an unrepresentable something that allows us to think and speak differently than we otherwise could. Unfortunately, however, there is much at stake for most Muslims in *not* learning to think or speak differently, given the real and symbolic value of masculinist images and language in sustaining male privilege. Masculinizing God is the first step in positing a hierarchy in which males situate themselves beneath God and above women, implying that there is a symbolic (and sometimes literal) continuum between God's Rule over humans and male rule over women. However, the assumption, no matter how indirect, that God's Sovereignty and man's are coextensive fundamentally misreads the nature both of Divine Sovereignty (hence the doctrine of *Tawhid*) and of human vice-regency. (As my discussion in later chapters shows, it also misreads the Qur'an's definitions of faith and human equality.)

### Divine Sovereignty, Human Vice-Regency

I noted above that God's Sovereignty is a function of God's Unity, which is absolute and extends over all living and nonliving worlds and is not contingent on human approval or acceptance of it, though faith hinges on our voluntarily accepting it. (This is why the "master-slave" metaphor<sup>22</sup> cannot convey the sense of willed submission to Divine Truth that defines Muslim praxis.) In contrast, human vice-regency is finite and a trust from God and not meant to further one's own personal power or glory; as the Qur'an says, "If any do seek For glory and power,—To God belong All glory and power" (35:10; in Ali, 1155). The concept of vice-regency derives from the term *khilafah*, a word the Qur'an uses twice for humans, not just for men. As a verb, *khilafah* signifies succession, and Muslim scholars believe it has a dual meaning:

that of [hu]mankind in general succeeding, according to God's will, to the inheritance of the earth; as well as the implication that each generation of [hu]mankind succeeds the other in assuming the obligations of the status of *khilafah*. (Davies 1988, 92)

In other words, the idea of vice-regency is not contingent on sex, and while it is a relational term (Davies, 92), it does not mean that humans are vice-regents *over one another*. Rather, they are vice-regents *on earth*, on which they nonetheless have been warned not to walk "with insolence" (17:37; in Ali, 704).

That humans are vice-regents over the earth and that their vice-regency

is a trust from God emerges from Āyah 33:72: "Verily, We did offer the trust [of reason and volition] to the heavens and the earth, and the mountains: but they refused to bear it because they were afraid of it. Yet [humans] took it up" (in Davies 1988, 92). The concept of trust, or *ammanah*, says Davies,

entails responsibility and the notion of rights and duties implicit in the terms of the trust. The *khilafah* has been entrusted to inherit the earth, to have the use of all the bounties for the sustenance and enrichment of [hu]mankind's life on it. The capacities of *fitrah* [human nature] are the means to be employed so that the status and role of the *khilafah* can be enjoyed. . . . Since all men and women are *khilafah* there is a basic equality in their rights of access to and enjoyment of the bounties of earthly existence. (93)

There is thus no reason to assume that only males are vice-regents on earth, much less vice-regents over women.

The finite nature of human vice-regency and its trust-like nature are clear also from God's admonishment to David:

O David! We did indeed  
Make thee a [vice-regent]  
On earth: so judge thou  
Between [humans] in truth  
(and justice):  
Nor follow thou the lusts  
(Of thy heart), for they will  
Mislead thee from the Path  
Of God: for those who  
Wander astray from the Path  
Of God, is a Penalty Grievous,  
For that they forget  
The Day of [Account].

The Qur'an (38:26; in Ali, 1223)

Even a prophet and a king like David is not infallible inasmuch as he is capable of "following the lusts" of his heart, and even the vice-regency of a prophet and a king like David is a trust from God, not a function of his own sovereignty over humans. Significantly, even the vice-regency of a prophet and king like David is meant to establish God's Rule on earth, not his own.

To establish that humans are not rulers/sovereign in the same way that God is would be to belabor an obvious point to believers. But, if we concede that, how can we then extrapolate from God's Rule/Sovereignty over humans to man's over woman? Yet, exegetes customarily draw on both views of man as vice-regent (and ruler) and of God as King, Lord, and Ruler, to advocate men's dominion over women, in some cases even ordering wives to prostrate themselves before their husbands (Tabrisi in Murata 1992, 176), a form of worship Muslims reserve solely for God. Similarly, following a *hadīth*, most Muslims hold that ingratitude to a husband is like ingratitude to God (Thanawi in Metcalf 1990, 23), explicitly equating God and husbands. In much the same vein, Muslims who reject ibn al-Arabi's depiction of God as Father nonetheless accept the typology deriving from his portrayal that represents fathers as the high, spiritual aspects of existence, and mothers as the low, corporeal ones. This is so in spite of the fact that the Qur'ān elevates mothers over fathers (see Chapter 6), as does tradition. However, not only is it rank hubris to associate males with God in this way, but the mis-association also violates the concept of *Tawhīd* that places God above such correspondences and also establishes the principle of the indivisibility of God's Sovereignty.

Misrepresentations of God as male, and of male sovereignty as being coextensive with that of God, derive not from the Qur'ān, then, but from the tendency to anthropomorphize God on the one hand, and to misconstrue the theme of vice-regency on the other. Such misrepresentations are common not only among "orthodoxies," but also among many Muslim feminists who routinely assail Islam's "paternalistic" and "uncompromising monotheism" (Hussain 1994), drawing on representations of monotheism itself as unremittingly misogynistic. As I have argued, however, monotheism as embodied in the doctrine of *Tawhīd* is vital not only to a purification of our idea of God but also to our being able to *reject* patriarchalized misrepresentations of God and, along with these, theories of father-right or male privilege. The idea of *Tawhīd* also is essential to our idea of humans as inherently good and as manifesting "*the whole*" (Murata 1992, 43; her emphasis). By rejecting gender dualisms and binaries, we open up a space to theorize human subjectivity in terms that respect the complete equality and humanity of women and men.

## II. Desacralizing Prophets as Fathers

we worship  
None but God;  
... we associate  
No partners with [God];  
... we erect not,  
From among ourselves,  
Lords and patrons  
Other than God

The Qur'ān (3:64)<sup>23</sup>

The Qur'ān challenges misrepresentations of fathers as surrogates of a divine patriarch by rejecting the mythos of God-the-Father. Likewise, the Qur'ān challenges the concept of father-right by refusing to sacralize the prophets as real or symbolic fathers. I illustrate this now by (re)reading the Qur'ānic narratives of the prophets Abraham and Muhammad. To understand the point of my reading, it is necessary to recall that patriarchy has ranged from traditional modes in which the father was symbolically the "common father of all those . . . under his authority,"<sup>24</sup> to classical ones based in theories of political obedience and rights, to modern and contractual forms. Here I concentrate on the first definition of patriarchy because I wish to examine the Qur'ān's position on father-right. In later chapters, I will interpret its teachings with the definition of modern patriarchy in mind.

### God, Abraham, and Abraham's Father

Usually exegetes in all three monotheistic religions read Abraham's narrative as confirming his status as a patriarch<sup>25</sup> rather than as *displacing* father-right and thereby subverting the imaginary of the prophet-as-father. The latter reading, though, is con/textually plausible and is actually more congruent with the idea of *Tawhīd* (the indivisibility of God's Sovereignty).

The Qur'ānic story of Abraham opens with his search for God, which begins when God shows him "the power And the laws of the heavens And the earth" so that he might discern God's Reality (6:75; in Ali, 309). At the outset, however, Abraham confuses the manifestations of God's Power ("signs of God") with God's Reality:

When the night  
Covered him over,  
He saw a star:  
He said: "This is my [Rabb]."  
But when it set,  
He said: "I love not  
Those that set."  
When he saw the moon  
Rising in splendour,  
He said: "This is my [Rabb]."  
But when the moon set,  
He said: "Unless my [Rabb]  
Guide me, I shall surely  
Be among those  
Who go astray."  
  
When he saw the sun  
Rising in splendour  
He said: "This is my [Rabb];  
This is the greatest (of all)."  
But when the sun set,  
He said: "O my people!  
I am indeed free  
From your (guilt)  
Of giving partners to God.  
  
"For me, I have set  
My face, firmly and truly,  
Towards [God] Who created  
The heavens and the earth,  
And never shall I give  
Partners to God."

The Qur'ān (6:76–79; in Ali, 309–10)

In the Qur'ān's narration, Abraham arrives at Divine Truth through a dual process of reasoning and spiritual submission (*islam*), and it is this process that brings him to an awareness of his father's sin of *shirk* (extending God's Sovereignty to others, in this case to false gods) and ultimately to a break with him. Incidentally, false gods are not just idols; there is he who takes

"for his god His own passion (or impulse)," says the Qur'ān (25:43; in Ali, 935). The break between father and son occurs when Abraham, having come to recognize God's Reality, confronts his father in an exchange that truly is instructive for determining the Qur'ān's position on father-right:

Behold, he said to his father:  
"O my father! why  
Worship that which heareth not  
And seeth not, and can  
Profit thee nothing?  
  
"O my father! to me  
Hath come knowledge which  
Hath not reached thee:  
So follow me: I will guide  
Thee to a Way that  
Is even and straight."

The Qur'ān (19:42–43; in Ali, 776; my emphasis)

Thus Abraham begins by rejecting his father's *gods*, and then his father's *authority*, calling on his father to follow him instead, challenging the very core of father-right as it is structured in patriarchies (where the father derives his authority from his assumed association with God, knowledge, and truth). This inversion is not meant, however, to establish Abraham's authority over his father, as the Qur'ān makes clear, but that of Abraham's God; and only after his father rejects God does Abraham reject his *father*. In effect, what leads Abraham into the conflict with his father is his "uncompromising monotheism"; as such, the conflict between his (belief in) God and (obedience to) his father is necessarily a conflict between monotheism and patriarchy (in its traditional sense). Indeed, Abraham's break with his father is embedded in a larger discourse that seeks to uncover the tensions that have existed historically between God's Rule and fathers' rule. As the Qur'ān details it in the Abrahamic narrative and in others, the struggle to establish God's Rule constantly has run up against the ways of the fathers who were "void of wisdom and guidance" (2:170; in Ali, 67). This theme is palpable in Abraham's address to his community:

Behold! he said  
To his father and his people,

"What are these images,  
To which ye are  
(So assiduously) devoted?"

They said: "We found  
Our fathers worshipping them."

He said, "Indeed ye  
Have been in manifest  
Error—ye and your fathers."

They said, "Have you  
Brought us the Truth,  
Or are you one  
Of those who jest?"

He said, "Nay, your [Rabb]  
Is the [Rabb] of the heavens  
And the earth, . . . Who  
Created them (from nothing):  
And I am a witness  
To this (truth)."

The Qur'ān (21:51–56; in Ali, 834)

The basis of the polytheists' faith as they themselves declare it is adherence to patriarchal traditions, and it is this practice that Abraham attacks, with God's full approval, as the Qur'ānic narrative makes clear. In fact, Abraham attacks not only this practice but its material culture as well by breaking the polytheists' idols and then challenging them to get the biggest idol to identify him as the culprit. On their ensuing confusion, he asks why they take for "Worship, besides God, Things that can neither Be of any good to you Nor do you harm?" (21:66; in Ali, 836). Unable to persuade him of their logic and evidently at a loss for inventiveness, the polytheists—his father among them—determine to consign Abraham to a fire, from which he is saved by God's Mercy. As a righteous man, Abraham prays to God on his father's behalf and is told that God's Mercy is not for those who persist in espousing falsehoods after the truth has reached them.

Central to Abraham's embrace of God, and the condition for the embrace, then, is his break with his father. The conflict between God's Rule

and father's rule at the heart of Abraham's story also finds exposition in the Qur'ān's warnings to believers to "fear (The coming of) a Day When no father can avail Aught for his son, nor A son avail aught For his father" (31:33; in Ali, 1089). For believers, then, the Rule of God (monotheism) must take precedence over the rule of fathers (patriarchy) and the pursuit of worldly success, which, the Qur'ān reminds us, is transitory.

One could perhaps argue that Abraham's story, as well as the Qur'ān's disapproval of misguided fathers, applies only to unbelievers; that God's bestowal of prophethood on Abraham and his line is meant to replace the rule of unbelieving fathers with that of believing fathers. In other words, it is possible that the Qur'ān disapproves of fathers' rule only when it conflicts with God's Rule, which is to say it is opposed to a specific *content* of father-right and not to its *form*. However, the Qur'ān itself offers evidence against such a reading. Three themes in particular are relevant here: First, the Qur'ān seeks to establish the rule not of believing fathers but of their God (God's Rule takes precedence over the institutions of prophethood, fatherhood, and motherhood); second, while the Qur'ān extols Abraham and his line, including the Prophet Muhammad, it does not do so by valorizing them as fathers; finally, the Qur'ān does specify parental, as against paternal, rights, but never in terms of sovereignty or rule over children (I consider this last point in Chapter 6).

When the Qur'ān extols Abraham and his line, it does so in order to establish their moral certitude as *believers* and not their real or symbolic status or rights as *fathers*; thus, when Abraham's progeny testify that they are following their fathers, they actually are attesting to following the *God* of their fathers:

Were ye witnesses  
When Death appeared before Jacob?  
Behold, he said to his sons:  
"What will ye worship after me?"  
They said: "We shall worship  
*Thy God and the God of thy fathers,*—  
Of Abraham, Isma'il, and Isaac,—  
The One (True) God:  
To [God] we bow (in Islam)"

The Qur'ān (2:133; in Ali, 54–55; my emphasis)

Incidentally, in Islam, references to the “God of our fathers” never devolve into views of God-as-father, unlike in the Hebrew Bible in which, says Paul Ricoeur (1974, 484), “Yahweh is ‘God of our fathers’ before being father.” However, according to Ricoeur (486), even in the Bible, “Yahweh’s ‘I am that I am’” dissolves “all anthropomorphisms, of all figures and figurations, including that of father.”

As the Qur’ān makes clear, then, believers are expected to submit to the God of believing fathers, not to the fathers themselves. Indeed, a central motif of the Abrahamic narrative is establishing Abraham’s own submission to God’s Will:

Behold! [Abraham’s *Rabb*] said  
To him: “Bow (thy will to Me):”  
He said: “I bow (my will)  
To [my *Rabb*].”

And *this was the legacy*  
That Abraham left to his sons,  
And so did Jacob;  
“Oh my sons! God hath chosen  
The Faith for you: then die not  
Except in the Faith of Islam.”

The Qur’ān (2:131–32; in Ali, 54; my emphasis)

What makes Abraham a believer is his willingness to yield up his will/sovereignty to God; he is thus not sovereign in the sense in which fathers are sovereign in traditional patriarchies where the legitimacy of their rule derives from its association with God’s Rule/Sovereignty. Submission to God’s Will, however, does not make one an associate in God’s Sovereignty, but *subject* to it.

Second, when God rewards Abraham and his line with the mantle of prophethood, God does so by designating Abraham an *imām* and not by anointing him as a symbolic patriarch/ruler:

And remember that Abraham  
Was tried by his [*Rabb*]  
With certain Commands,  
Which he fulfilled:

[God] said: “I will make thee  
An Imam to the Nations.”  
[Abraham] pleaded: “And also  
(Imams) from my offspring!”  
[God] answered: “But My Promise  
Is not within the reach  
Of evil-doers.”

The Qur’ān (2:124; in Ali, 52)

Etymologically, *imām* is related to *ummah* or community, and *umm*, or mother. In this Āyah, its primary meaning, says Yusuf Ali (1988, 52 n. 124), is to be

foremost: hence it may mean: (1) leader in religion; (2) leader in congregational prayer; (3) model, pattern, example; (4) a book of guidance and instruction . . . ; (5) a book of evidence or record . . . Here meanings 1 and 3 are implied.

In effect, the term *imām* is sex/gender-neutral<sup>26</sup> and is applicable to both humans and nonhuman things. Thus, God’s favors to Abraham do not entail sacralizing him as a symbolic father; rather, God designates Abraham an *imām*. Indeed, as the episode of his near-sacrifice of his son reveals, it is Abraham’s willingness to yield up his rights as father in favor of the Rule/Rights of God (his *de-sacralization* as father) that establishes him as a true believer in the Qur’ān’s account.

In the Qur’ānic account, the idea of the sacrifice appears to Abraham in a vision,<sup>27</sup> which he shares with his adolescent son, whom the Qur’ān does not name:

when (the son)  
Reached (the age of)  
(Serious) work with him,  
[Abraham] said: “O my son!  
I see in vision  
That I offer thee in sacrifice:  
*Now see what is*  
*Thy view!*” (The son) said:  
“O my father! Do

As thou art commanded:  
Thou will find me,  
If God so wills one  
Practising Patience and Constancy!"

So when they had *both*  
Submitted their wills (to God),  
And he had laid him  
Prostrate on his forehead  
(For sacrifice),

We called out to him,  
"O Abraham!

Thou hast already fulfilled  
The vision!"

The Qur'ān (37:102–5; in Ali, 1204–05; my emphasis)

Thus, it is only after Abraham's son freely, and in his own voice, consents to the sacrifice that they proceed further. The fact that Abraham does not assume his son's consent illustrates that, without it, the sacrifice would not carry moral weight in view of the Qur'ān's teachings about the voluntary nature of faith. It also shows that Abraham does not have the right of life and death over his son, as fathers did in traditional patriarchies (Abraham does not "rule over" his son). As the Qur'ānic account makes clear, it is the son's *expressed will*, not just the father's vision, that clears the way for the sacrifice, a fate from which God saves both; as the Qur'ān says tersely, this was "obviously A trial—" (37:106; Ali, 1205). Abraham, the dearly beloved prophet of God, cannot dispose of his own son as he wishes, even in the name of God, until his son, at his own discretion, agrees to it! And, once again, it is God Who saves a (believing) son from a (believing) father.

Traditionally, as noted, exegetes have read this account as establishing the primacy of father-right since, after all, it is Abraham who sets out to sacrifice his son and not the other way around. But such a reading transforms into a tale of patriarchal tyranny what clearly is a moral allegory about the consensual and purposive nature of faith, its primacy over kinship and blood, the existential dilemmas that can result from submitting to God's Will (especially where it comes into conflict with one's own life), and, not least, the insignificance of the father's will in comparison to God's Will. These themes infuse all of the Qur'ān's teachings, not just the Abrahamic

parable. Indeed, the Abrahamic parable is one way to illustrate these themes in intimately personal terms. Thus, they emerge also from God's counsel to the Prophet Muhammad and to all believers,

Take not  
For protectors your fathers  
And your brothers if they love  
Infidelity above Faith:  
If any of you do so,  
They do wrong.

Say: If it be that your fathers,  
Your sons, your brothers,  
Your mates, or your kindred;  
The wealth that ye have gained;  
The commerce in which ye fear  
A decline: or the dwellings  
In which ye delight —  
Are dearer to you than God,  
Or his Apostle, or the striving  
In [God's] cause; — then wait  
Until God brings about  
[God's] Decision: and God  
Guides not the rebellious.

The Qur'ān (9:23–24; in Ali, 444–45)

The Qur'ān does not mention daughters here, but then it is giving examples of what the Arabs of those times held dear. Those Arabs were practicing female infanticide and were unlikely to have found any references to daughters meaningful. Nonetheless, the Qur'ān's command applies equally to daughters. It instructs women, no less than men, not to take the males in their families (the heads of the family) as their protectors if doing so interferes with their practice of faith. Clearly, the Āyāt here were encouraging the pagans and polytheists of the Prophet's time to choose belief in God even if doing so led them to break with their families (as Abraham did with his father). However, what is significant is that the Qur'ān expressly legitimizes the principle of disobedience to males in their capacity as fathers, brothers, and so on. (It also mandates disobedience to parents on similar grounds; see Chapter 6.) To say that faith should take priority over social or

material attachments and accoutrements—a teaching that finds a powerful allegorical expression in Abraham’s story—is not to say anything about the legitimacy of father’s rule, or even to say anything out of the ordinary, at least to believers. But to suggest that for God’s Rule to exist, the father’s rule must either be broken (Abraham’s father) or subordinated symbolically to God’s Rule (Abraham *as* father) is indeed to say something revolutionary. Thus, it is not just that the Qur’ān seeks to establish the primacy of God’s Rule over father-right/rule; rather, in delineating the relationship between God’s Rule and father’s rule, the Qur’ān *dislocates* the latter. God comes to dis-place (not re-place) fathers. In fact, one Āyah expressly bids people to “Celebrate the praises of God, As ye used to celebrate The praises of your fathers” (2:200; in Ali, 80). (This does not mean that God wishes to *be* a Father, as the Qur’ān makes clear.) It is in light of this moral that the Qur’ān’s refusal to sacralize Muhammad, the Seal of Prophets, as a symbolic father also becomes so significant, as I argue below.

There is one additional way in which Abraham’s story can be read as illustrating the Qur’ān’s opposition to father-right, and this has to do with how the Qur’ān—through the Abrahamic story—defines faith itself. Thus, when God accepts Abraham’s prayer to make his line *imāms*, God does not promise them all freedom from evildoing; as the Qur’ān says, God “blessed [Abraham] and Isaac: But of their progeny Are (some) that do right, And (some) that obviously Do wrong, to their own souls” (37:113; in Ali, 1206; see also Āyah 2:124 above). In other words, faith is not a function of kinship or sex but remains transcendently personal, that is, in the reach of the moral personality alone. This theme finds an illustration not only in Abraham’s story, in which the son of a disbelieving father embraces Divine Truth, but also in Noah’s story, in which the son of a prophet breaks with this truth and becomes one of the lost. Similarly, the wife<sup>28</sup> of the prophet Lot is of those who disbelieve and is punished by God, whereas the wife of the unbelieving pharaoh is of those who believe and is saved by God. In all instances, the prophets pray on behalf of their kin to God but, as the Qur’ān tells us, no “bearer of burdens [can] Bear another’s burden . . . Even though he be nearly Related” (35:18; in Ali, 1158). Rather, says the Qur’ān, each soul must account for “herself,” and warns us to “guard yourselves against a Day When one soul shall not avail another, Nor shall compensation be accepted from her Nor shall intercession profit her Nor shall anyone be helped (from outside)” (2:123; in Ali, 51–52). In place of intercession the Qur’ān privileges the idea of individuals as free moral agents and as witnesses to their own deeds,<sup>29</sup> and in place of bloodlines, the idea of a morally defined commu-

nity, the *ummah*. That is why the Qur’ān describes the “nearest of kin to Abraham,” as “those who follow him . . . And those who believe” (3:68; in Ali, 140). Such a view of faith, says Arkoun (1994, 57), opens up

an infinite space for the promotion of the individual beyond the constraints of fathers and brothers, clans and tribes, riches and tributes; the individual becomes an autonomous and free person, enjoying a liberty guaranteed by obedience and love lived within the community.

The very structure of faith in Islam, then, is at odds with (traditional) patriarchy. Faith privileges the Rights and Rule of God (freedom) over the rule of even believing fathers (necessity, tradition). Since moral freedom “is achieved only by moving towards God” (Murata 1992, 79), the rule of the father, which sets up man as a parallel node of authority over women and children, becomes an impediment to faith. It therefore matters little whether or not the father is a believer (the content of father-rule is immaterial); it is the very form of father-rule (its assumed parallelism to God’s Rule) that is unacceptable.

#### Prophet Muhammad and Symbolic Father/hood

The Qur’ān’s opposition to father-right continues to surface in its account of the Prophet Muhammad’s life. The opposition is discernible in its narration, for the benefit of the Prophet and of believers, of the history of unbelief against which God’s messengers<sup>30</sup> had to contend. It also is discernible from God’s refusal to anoint the Prophet as a symbolic father. The Qur’ān’s opposition to the idea of male rule and sovereignty, on the other hand, emerges from its delineation of the relationship between God and prophets on the one hand, and from the nature of the Prophet Muhammad’s marital relationships (which we can deduce from the Qur’ān and Tradition) on the other.

In the Qur’ān’s telling, the conflict between belief and un-belief has manifested itself historically as a struggle between God’s Rule and fathers’ rule (following the ways of the fathers, or ancestors). As God tells the Prophet, whenever God

sent a Warner  
Before thee to any people,  
The wealthy ones among them  
Said: “We found our fathers  
Following a certain religion,

And we will certainly  
Follow in their footsteps.”

He [the Warner] said; “What!  
Even if I brought you  
Better guidance than that  
Which ye found  
Your fathers following?”  
They said: “For us,  
We deny that ye (prophets)  
Are sent (on a mission  
At all).”

So We exacted retribution  
From them: now see  
What was the end  
Of those who rejected (Truth).

The Qur’ān (43:23–25; in Ali, 1328–29)

Plainly, then, following their fathers has led people to reject God, and their rejection has been the cause of their destruction. This antagonism between monotheism and traditional patriarchy is evident from a number of narratives in the Qur’ān, including that of Moses. When Moses takes God’s message to Pharaoh, his people ask him if he has “Come to us to turn us Away from the ways We found our fathers following” (10:78; in Ali, 504). Similarly, it is the Arabs’ adherence to their fathers’ ways that keeps them from embracing Islam and the Prophet Muhammad. As the Qur’ān says:

When it is said to them:  
“Come to what God  
Hath revealed; come  
To the Apostle”;  
They say: “Enough for us  
Are the ways we found  
Our fathers following.”  
What! even though their fathers  
Were void of knowledge  
And guidance?

The Qur’ān (5:107; in Ali, 275)

Adherence to patriarchal traditions has kept not only unbelievers from the path of God but also many believers (People of the Book, i.e., Christians and Jews), who, says the Qur’ān, “take their priests And their anchorites to be Their lords in derogation of God . . . Yet they were commanded To worship but One God” (9:31; in Ali, 448). The very persons entrusted with interpreting sacred knowledge have misled people, both because of perversity in their hearts (2:7; in Ali, 123) and their cupidity, which drives them to “Devour [in falsehood] the substance of [insān] And hinder (them) from the Way of God” (9:34; in Ali, 449). (This scathing criticism of professional interpreters of sacred knowledge, who claim to be intermediaries between God and believers, may be why Islam did not ordain a clergy.)

It is in the context of the history of this conflict between monotheism and patriarchy that we need to interpret the Qur’ān’s categorical assertion that even though he is “closer To the Believers than Their own selves” (33:6; in Ali, 1104), “Muhammad is not The father of any Of your men, but (he is) The Apostle of God, And the seal of the Prophets” (33:40; in Ali, 1119). While this Āyah meant to clarify the Prophet’s relationship to his adopted son, its assertion that he does not stand in the symbolic relationship of father to his own community returns us once again to the role of fathers, and it does so by refusing to consecrate them! From the denial of symbolic fatherhood to the Prophet, which exegetes pass over in silence, I derive the lesson that, in Islam, God’s Rule displaces rule by the father, whether or not the father is a believer. At the same time, the concept of *imām* (which does not give the sense of rule/sovereignty and is not sex/gender specific) displaces the *imaginary* of the father altogether. In other words, the Qur’ān views fathers in a fundamentally different way than patriarchies do (see Chapter 6 as well).

Given that the Prophet is not sacralized as father, is it also a mere coincidence that he loses his father, Abdullah, in his own infancy, and all his sons in theirs; that only his daughters survive, at a time and in a place when people viewed girls as a curse? Or, do these events in his life illustrate the superficial nature of many of our priorities and the Qur’ān’s moral that neither fathers, nor progeny, nor spouses, nor wealth, nor false gods will stand people in better stead than God’s Mercy? Is that not why the Qur’ān reassures the Prophet, when he stands alienated from his entire tribe, that he will not find those

who believe  
In God and the Last Day,  
Loving those who resist

God and [God's] Apostle,  
Even though they were  
Their fathers or their sons,  
Or their brothers, or  
Their kindred. For such  
[God] has written Faith  
In their hearts, and strengthened  
Them with a spirit  
From [God's Self].

The Qur'ān (58:22; in Ali, 1518)

In other words, believers are expected to define social ties and relationships through faith, hence the Islamic perception of a community united by a shared *moral* worldview rather than by blood, sex/gender, race, or age. (Significantly, the first to join the new *ummah* were a woman—Khadijah, the Prophet's first wife, twice widowed, some fifteen years older than he, and a merchant<sup>31</sup>—and Ali, his cousin, a preteen youth.)

In the absence of valorizations of Muhammad as a symbolic father, there remains the complex issue of how best to interpret the Qur'ānic injunctions to obey and follow him while also not taking one another “for lords.” Clearly, the Prophet is a role model for Muslim women and men,<sup>32</sup> both in his capacity as prophet and as a moral individual whose character embodies the best of the masculine and feminine traits as we describe them. Thus, he is said to have been unyielding and stern in justice and yet also “a man of kindness, gentleness, integrity, and humility”<sup>33</sup> who had “a mild and forgiving disposition, and disliked unpleasantness and cruelty.”<sup>34</sup> Indeed, his nature and habits are “those we may think of as particularly feminine: he is humble, gentle, given to few words, eager to serve others, always ready to work with his own hands, pious beyond measure. He keeps his gaze lowered.”<sup>35</sup> In other words, the Prophet was unconventional by the hyper-masculinist standards not only of traditional Arab culture,<sup>36</sup> but also by modern ones, that disparage tenderness, gentleness, and humility in men. In Muhammad, therefore, all Muslims have an exemplary model for emulation. The problem, however, is that in their desire to live by his standards and ethics, most Muslims have ended up canonizing his *Sunnah* (praxis) and even elevating it over the Qur'ān itself, which—for reasons I explained in Chapter 3—is inappropriate. How, then, do we find the balance between following the Prophet and not idolizing him? The Qur'ān itself makes clear

that following and obeying the Prophet means obeying and following *God*, not idolizing the *Prophet* himself. (This is why Muslims are offended by the old European way of referring to them as Muhammadans.) It is on the basis of this distinction between God and prophets that Islam also denies divinity to Christ. To those who sacralize prophets, the Qur'ān says that

It is not conceivable that a human being unto whom God had granted revelation, and sound judgment, and prophet-hood, should thereafter have said unto people, “Worship *me* beside God”; but rather [did he exhort them], “become [*Rabbani*] by spreading the knowledge of the divine writ, and by your own deep study [thereof].” And neither did he bid you to take the angels and the prophets for your lords: [for] would he bid you to deny the truth after you have surrendered yourselves unto God? (3:79–80; in Asad, 79; emphasis in original)

(*Rabbani*, says Asad (79 n. 62), is someone devoted “to the endeavour to know the Sustainer (*ar-rabb*) and to obey Him.”) The Āyāt not only make a clear distinction between God and prophets, but they also can be read as establishing the primacy of the Qur'ān (Divine Writ) over the narratives of the Prophet's life and praxis (*Ahādīth*). This may seem obvious, but, as I noted earlier, Muslims interpret the Qur'ān by way of the *Ahādīth* (and thus by way of the Prophet's assumed *Sunnah*), rather than the other way around (using the Qur'ān to determine the accuracy of both as recorded by Muslims). They also take the Prophet's *Sunnah* (as textualized in the *Ahādīth*) to abrogate the Qur'ān, practices that, from the Qur'ān's perspective, seem inadmissible. To be sure, one cannot obey the God of the prophets without obeying the prophets and, in order to obey the latter, we need knowledge of their life and practices (*sunnahs*). However, the Qur'ān clarifies that the *sunnahs* of the prophets cannot outweigh Divine Writ, nor, indeed, do we need to emulate the prophets themselves inasmuch as that can result in glorifying them. As the Qur'ān says, “Muhammad is only an apostle; all the [other] apostles have passed away before him: if, then, he dies or is slain, will you turn about on your heels?” (3:144; in Asad, 89). The point, evidently, is to contrast Muhammad's mortality with God's Immortality, and the absence of prophetic sovereignty with the Reality of Divine Sovereignty. God is Ruler, Sovereign, Savior, not Muhammad. The Qur'ān, argue scholars, makes clear that “Muhammad was a human being, and therefore fallible; the Prophet himself urged the first Muslim community to discriminate between his opinions as a human being and his teachings as a prophet” (Davies 1988,

59). Consequently, reversing the relationship between the Qur’ān and his *Sunnah* or sacralizing his *Sunnah* (thus encouraging its ritualized imitative-ness) contravene both the Qur’ān’s and his own teachings.

If the Qur’ān does not sacralize the Prophet as father, it also does not sacralize him as husband by designating him ruler, guardian, or manager over his wife’s affairs, or those of his people. As it says, “thou art One to admonish. Thou art not one To manage [people’s] affairs” (88:21–22; in Ali, 1729). Although these Āyāt, which exemplify the principle of the uncoerced nature of faith and of moral responsibility, are not directed at the Prophet’s relationships with his own wives, there are others that are, and none of them suggest that he forced compliance on his wives to God’s injunctions. Thus, according to Ahmed (1992, 56), after the Āyāt on veiling were revealed, the Prophet gave his wives the choice of remaining married to him or getting a divorce. Nor did the Qur’ān force the Prophet’s wives to obey God (or the Prophet). Instead, it held out to those who were righteous the promise of a doubled reward, and to those who were guilty of “manifest lewdness” a double punishment (33:30–31). The Qur’ān suggests that this exception is a function of the fact that his wives “are not like any Of the (other) women”<sup>37</sup> (33:32; in Ali, 1115). Presumably, as the Prophet’s consorts, they were required to be role models for the entire community and therefore carried a greater moral responsibility. As such, the Qur’ān holds them to standards of behavior it does not require of others. For instance, it asks them to speak to men not of their household from behind a curtain, not to remarry after their husband’s death, and to remain in their homes and not to go into public arenas to make a wanton display of themselves. However, there is controversy regarding the last injunction contained in Āyah 33:30. Arberry (1955, 124) renders it as “Remain in your houses; and display not your finery, as did the pagans of old.” According to some scholars, the Qur’ān placed this restriction on the Prophet’s wives because they were not permitted to remarry after his death. Others, however, argue that the word *qarna* (translated as “stay quietly in your homes”) was rendered as *qirna* (in Basra), meaning “have dignity and serenity.”<sup>38</sup> As Kaukab Siddique (1990) points out, the Qur’ān could not have required the Prophet’s wives to be sequestered in this way since it commands them to *udhkurnā*: to mention, teach, spread God’s Words which required their presence in the public arena; nor did the Prophet himself confine his wives to their home. (Two of his wives, the daughters of Omar and Abu Bakr—the first two caliphs of Islam—are said to have rebuffed attempts by their fathers to restrict them, saying that

if the Prophet did not do so, their fathers had no right to demand it of them either.)

By all indications, the Prophet did not behave like a traditional head of household in other matters, either. He is said to have done his own household chores including preparing his own food. Not only did his wives not wait upon him, but his status as God’s Messenger did not deter them from sometimes quarreling with him, and one of them divorced him by saying that she sought refuge in God from him.<sup>39</sup> There is no record that he ever abused them physically or verbally. Indeed, “for most of his life Muhammad himself respected and trusted women, was strongly influenced by a number of forceful females, and attempted to provide for equal participation of women in the religious life of the new community” (Smith 1985, 20). He also was far more progressive than his peers on the issue of children’s position in the community (Levy 1962, 91).

Yet, it is usually not these egalitarian aspects of the Prophet’s *Sunnah* that many Muslim men want to emulate today; rather, they place a great deal more emphasis on the fact of his multiple marriages, as also on the age of one of his wives, ‘Ayesha, which they use to legitimize marriages to little girls. In this context, it is important to be aware, first, that the Qur’ān permitted the Prophet to contract specific types of marriages as “a privilege for thee only, not for the (rest of) believers” (33:50; in Pickthall, 305). The privilege given to the Prophet seems to have been in his capacity as God’s Messenger and not as a man, otherwise, why would God have denied it to other men? Moreover, the Qur’ān also circumscribed the Prophet’s polygyny by forbidding him to “to take (other) women henceforth, nor that thou shouldst change them for other wives even though their beauty pleased thee” (33:52; in Pickthall, 305). However, as M. M. Pickthall (406) points out, the Prophet was allowed to marry more wives than were others “because, as head of the State, he was responsible for the support of women who had no other protector. With the one exception of Ayesah, all his wives had been widows.” Similarly, Wiebke Walther (1981, 34) notes that in “most of his marriages, if not in all of them [the Prophet] is said to have also had the solidarity of his community in mind.” As I will argue in Chapter 6, these standards do not apply to all men, and the Qur’ān does not, in fact, favor generalized polygyny. (It also is important to recall that the Prophet is said to have discouraged his son-in-law, Ali, from taking a second wife.)

As far as ‘Ayesha’s age at the time of her marriage to the Prophet is concerned, it is a matter of ongoing controversy among Muslims. Conserva-

tives (and Western Orientalists) put her age as low as nine years, based on *Ahādīth* that claim that she was playing with dolls when she got married. This could well be true since the concept of childhood is a relatively recent one, and the age of consent for women in most cultures in those days was quite low. (Even in the United States, the age of consent for women was between seven and ten as late as 1889 and was raised to eighteen only as the result of feminist campaigns.)<sup>40</sup> As such, there was nothing aberrant in the practice of marrying young girls fourteen centuries ago (though it is today, given that we now recognize children as children). On the other hand, however, Muslims who calculate ‘Ayesha’s age based on details of her sister Asma’s age, about whom more is known, as well as on details of the *Hijra* (the Prophet’s migration from Mecca to Madina), maintain that she was over thirteen and perhaps between seventeen and nineteen when she got married. Such views cohere with those *Ahādīth* that claim that at her marriage ‘Ayesha had “good knowledge of Ancient Arabic poetry and genealogy” and “pronounced the fundamental rules of Arabic-Islamic ethics” (Walther 1981, 75). However, most of what we know about ‘Ayesha, including the details of her marriage, are reconstructions that remain susceptible to interpretive controversy and manipulation in view of the very different meaning of her life for Sunni and Shī‘ī Muslims. (After the Prophet’s death, ‘Ayesha led an unsuccessful revolt against Ali, the Prophet’s cousin and son-in-law, the fourth caliph of Islam whom the Shī‘ī follow as *Imām*.) Not only are Muslims thus particularly invested in specific reconstructions of her life, but the most definitive work on it was begun a century and a half after her death. This work drew for its details on “oral reports transmitted over three to four generations” (Spellberg 1994, 2); thus, “even the earliest Arabic written sources on Aisha’s life already capture that life as a legacy, an interpretation.” As D. A. Spellberg puts it (191), in studying ‘Ayesha, one therefore is studying “male intellectual history, not a woman’s history, but reflections about the place of a woman, and by extension, all women, in exclusively male assertions about Muslim society.” To what extent estimates of ‘Ayesha’s age or the details of her marriage also embody displaced male desires must then permanently remain open to question. However, it is safe to say that men who wish to marry children today in order to indulge their sexual lusts under the guise of adhering to the Prophet’s *Sunnah* seem to have forgotten another crucial aspect of it: that the Qur’ān unequivocally rules against lechery in a marriage, as my discussion of its position on sexuality will show in Chapter 5. Given that the Prophet’s life was meant to ex-

emplify the Qur’ān’s teachings, it is safe to assume that his marriages were not, in fact, based in lust notwithstanding attempts to portray them as such. This is more than can be said for those who—on the pretext of following his *Sunnah*—are engaging in lecherous behavior that the Qur’ān repeatedly warns against.

## In Conclusion

The Qur’ān’s teachings about God and prophets, I have argued, clearly undermine the imaginary of “the Father/fathers” inasmuch as they do not allow us either to engender God (represent God as Father/male) or to condone theories of father-right/rule and male privilege. This is because if Qur’ānic monotheism is intolerant, as its feminist critics allege, it is intolerant of men/fathers arrogating to themselves rights that belong only to God.

It is true, of course, that the Qur’ān’s teachings recognize that, in patriarchies, men are the locus of authority, which may be why so many Āyāt are addressed to men. Here I refer not just to the use of the words *an-nās* or *bashar* (incorrectly translated as man), but also to Āyāt that explicitly address men (fathers and sons). There are those who read these Āyāt as, in fact, being inclusive of women; in other words, they believe that references to fathers actually are references to both male and female ancestors. If this is so, then my argument becomes moot (and the arguments of those who read such Āyāt as sexist become redundant). If, on the other hand, one takes many of the Qur’ān’s references as in fact addressing men, then my argument may serve to establish that the Qur’ān does not privilege fathers or males and that it takes the notion of father-rule and male privilege to task in a number of ways.

In this context, what seems to be worthy of comment in the Qur’ān is not that patriarchies exist, but that historically they have provided the core of resistance to Divine Truth. This is partly why the Qur’ān objects to the idea of father-right whether or not the father is a believer; that is, it opposes not only the content but also the form of father’s rule. At least, this is how I understand the Qur’ān’s delineation of the Rule of God vis-à-vis the lives of both prophets and ordinary humans. If my reading is correct, then it becomes possible to say that the Qur’ān is an antipatriarchal text, or at the very least, it can be read as one. Nonetheless, Muslims have not done so, both because of their own investment in patriarchy and because of their belief that the Prophet’s community is above interpretive error,<sup>41</sup>

- Early Islamic History*, ed. J. Bacharach et al. (Princeton, N.J.: Darwin Press, 1996), 243.
27. Some *ulama* were concerned less with the state's preservation than with their own; thus, when the Mongols—led by Hulagu—sacked Baghdad in the seventh/thirteenth century, a Shi'i *alim* gave a *fatwa* (religious decree) to the effect that a just infidel ruler was better than an unjust Muslim ruler! Etan Kohlberg, *A Medieval Muslim Scholar at Work: Ibn Tawus and His Library* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1992).
  28. This concept borrows from the works of Antonio Gramsci; I discuss it in detail in *Democracy, Nationalism, and Communalism: The Colonial Legacy in South Asia* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1995).
  29. Jacob Lassner argues that the “centralization of power and the cultivation of new political attitudes” was meant “to create for all public elements, a vested interest in the orderly process of government.” *The Shaping of Abbasid Rule* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980), 244. As Sourdel points out, the autocracy of society “cannot be said to be truly inspired by the principles of Islam; rather it was the result of the political order set up in Islamic countries.” *Medieval Islam*, 159.
  30. Collingwood as quoted in Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics*, 289.
  31. Interpretive power by itself cannot explain the persistence of certain interpretations. In this context, what Fedwa Malti-Douglas says of Ibn al-Batanuni, an Arab writer known for his misogyny, seems to be true generally: “His misogynist recasting of sacred history can only operate because the cultural forces behind it are extremely strong.” *Woman's Body, Woman's Word: Gender and Discourse in Arabo-Islamic Writing* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991), 7.
  32. This is Ricoeur's summary of Gadamer's position in *Hermeneutics*.
  33. The word “blasphemy” (*tajdid*) does not occur in the Qur'an, nor does the punishment of death for apostasy, which derives from the *Ahādīth*. Mustansir Mir, *Dictionary of Quranic Terms and Concepts* (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1987).

#### Chapter 4

1. In Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur'an: Text, Translation and Commentary*, 2nd U.S. ed. (New York: Tahrike Tarsile Qur'an, 1988), 676.
2. Ibid., 669.
3. Zillah Eisenstein, *Feminism and Sexual Equality: Crisis in Liberal America* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1984), 90.
4. Anne McGrew Bennett, *From Woman-Pain to Woman-Vision* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg Fortress, 1989), 7.
5. Penelope M. Magee, “Disputing the Sacred: Some Theoretical Approaches to Gender and Religion,” in *Religion and Gender*, ed. Ursula King (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1995), 107.
6. Caroline Walker Bynum, “... And Woman his Humanity: Female Imagery in the Religious Writing of the Later Middle Ages,” in *Gender and Religion: On the Complexity of Symbols*, eds. C. Bynum, S. Harrell, and P. Richman (Boston: Beacon Press,

1986), 1. There is, however, another way to look at God's designation as Father: as being symptomatic of the “return of the repressed on the instinctual level” (Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics*, 487). God's representation as not only father but also as spouse, argues Ricoeur, disassociates fatherhood from the act/concept of begetting.

By means of this strange mutual contamination of two kinship figures, the shell of literality of the image is broken and the symbol is liberated. A father who is a spouse is no longer a progenitor (begetter), nor is he any more an enemy to his sons; love, solicitude, and pity carry him beyond domination and severity. (Ibid., 489)

“Fatherhood is thus placed in the realm of a theology of hope.” Ibid., 490. Far from being easy, says Ricoeur, naming God father “is rare, difficult, and audacious, because it is prophetic, directed toward fulfillment rather than toward origins.” Ibid., 491.

7. Ian Netton, *Allah Transcendent: Studies in the Structure and Semiotics of Islamic Philosophy, Theology and Cosmology* (New York: Routledge, 1989).
8. Below and in Chapter 5, I explain why this is significant to the Qur'an's approach to (human) sex/gender.
9. The God of Abraham is also the God of the Qur'an and hence of Muslims, as I argue below.
10. See Chapter 6 on this point.
11. This is one of the Hebrew views of God, but it has been applied to Islam by some Muslim feminists like Fatna Sabbah, *Woman in the Muslim Unconscious* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1984). I critique Sabbah's arguments in “Texts, Sex, and States: A Critique of North African Discourses on Islam,” in *The Arab-African and Islamic Worlds: Interdisciplinary Studies*, eds. Kevin Lacey and Ralph Coury (New York: Peter Lang, 2000).
12. In Sachiko Murata, *The Tao of Islam: A Sourcebook on Gender Relationships in Islamic Thought* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1992), 8.
13. The concept of (God the) Father in Christianity only arises because of the concept of (Christ the) Son, argue Carl A. Raschke and Susan D. Raschke, *The Engendering God: Male and Female Faces of God* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995). However, in Islam, the question of Christ the Son does not arise.
14. According to Netton, all Muslims share this paradigm. *Allah Transcendent*.
15. Such a view is a far cry from depictions of “the eternal feminine” in terms of “hyper-emotionalism, passivity, self-abnegation, etc.,” as Mary Daly puts it in *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), 15.
16. And, yet, Murata sees no problems with recognizing, and even reifying, gender dualisms in her own work, by using the concepts of yin and yang to describe God's Reality and by assuming that Muslim constructions of gender are unproblematic.
17. Many Muslim philosophers and sufis recognized the presence of the feminine and masculine principles in both women and men, but they theorized femininity and masculinity in ways that, instead of promoting a polar view, introduced duality into them. For instance, Rumi held that a woman

also has masculine qualities, but these are the negative masculine tendencies of the soul as incarnate in Iblis [the devil]. And a “man” has feminine qualities, the positive feminine attributes of the soul at peace with God.

In Murata, *The Tao of Islam*, 317.

18. I assume, of course, that men also lose out in being defined in hyper-masculine terms.
19. This view arises also in misreading the Qur’ān’s position on human nature and sexual rights and relationships, which I discuss in Chapters 5 and 6.
20. The phrase is that of Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983).
21. I have drawn on Dawne McCance for this idea and definition. *Posts: Re-Addressing the Ethical* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1996).
22. See Sabbah, *Woman*, for a discussion of this metaphor.
23. In Muhammad Asad, *The Message of the Quran* (Gibraltar: Dar al-Andalus, 1980), 76 n. 50.
24. Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1988), 23. It may be true, as Pateman argues, that the contract is a “modern means of creating relationships of subordination.” Ibid., 118. However, it does not follow from this that the contract itself is patriarchal, as her argument seems to suggest. In this context, I am wary of those definitions of patriarchy that are so generalized as to have little specificity. Also, if we see everything as a reworking of patriarchy, we cannot ever hope to dislodge it, nor in fact to recognize challenges to it, such as those that I believe the Qur’ān poses.
25. Some new literature has come out since I wrote this chapter, in which women have begun to reread Abraham’s narrative.
26. A tradition says the Prophet appointed a woman to be *imām* of her household. Kaukab Siddique and Jane I. Smith, “Women, Religion and Social Change in Early Islam,” in *Women, Religion, and Social Change*, eds. Yvonne Y. Haddad and Ellison B. Findly (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1985), 31.
27. According to Asad, it was Abraham’s *understanding* and not necessarily God’s Will that led him to make the near sacrifice. Asad, *The Message of the Quran*.
28. Incidentally, Lot’s (and Noah’s) wives were punished for their ingratitude to God, not to their husbands, as commentators hold.
29. Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Quran* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1980).
30. The Qur’ān’s references (e.g., 21:7) to men as prophets are meant to clarify that only humans (*bashar/rijaalin*) and not angels were sent as prophets since the words *bashar/rijaalin* have three meanings: man, humans, and complete person—and are “used in the Arabic language for both sexes.” Rafi Ullah Shahab, *Muslim Women in Political Power* (Lahore, Pakistan: Maqbool Academy, 1993), 18. To assume that, since the Qur’ān does not mention woman prophets, it does not deem women worthy of prophethood is conjecture. If the Qur’ān’s silence on this issue can be read as indifference, it can also be read as an awareness of historical conditions. Clearly, in

patriarchies women prophets would have been at greater risk than men, all of whom suffered torment at the hands of their people.

31. Khadijah’s wealth did not alter the Prophet’s status, however, since he did not inherit from her and lived in poverty until the end of his life. Reuben Levy, *The Social Structure of Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962).
32. The fact that the Prophet is viewed as a role model for both sexes, argues Barbara Metcalf, is a “telling indication of the extent to which women and men are regarded as essentially the same, however different their social places.” *Perfecting Women: Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanawi’s “Bihishti Zewar”: A Partial Translation with Commentary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 242.
33. Ibid.
34. Levy, *Social Structure*, 201.
35. Metcalf, *Perfecting Women*, 242.
36. See Abdelwahab Bouhdiba, *Sexuality in Islam*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985); and Fedwa Malti-Douglas, *Woman’s Body, Woman’s Word: Gender and Discourse in Arabo-Islamic Writing* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991).
37. As Wiebke Walther points out, when the verses about the Prophet’s wives were revealed, the Prophet gave his wives a choice to remain with him or to leave; he “won them over with diplomacy and kindness” and not “by insisting on male superiority.” *Woman in Islam* (Montclair, N.J.: Abner Schram, 1981), 75.
38. The presence or absence of one diacritical mark changes the meaning of an entire Āyah, then. M. H. Sherif, “What is Hijab?,” *The Muslim World* 77, nos. 3–4 (July–October 1987).
39. Barbara Stowasser, “The Mothers of the Believers in the Hadith,” *The Muslim World* 82, nos. 1–2 (Jan.–April 1992): 14.
40. Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Really Are: Coming to Terms with America’s Changing Families* (New York: Basic Books, 1997).
41. See George F. Hourani, *Reason and Tradition in Islamic Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985). However, as Fazlur Rahman argues, there is no reason for Muslims to believe in their own “theoretical infallibility.” *Islamic Methodology*, 77.

## Chapter 5

1. In Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur’ān: Text, Translation and Commentary*, 2nd U.S. ed. (New York: Tahrike Tarsile Qur’ān, 1988), 178.
2. Susan Hekman, *Gender and Knowledge: Elements of a Postmodern Feminism* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1990), 79.
3. Barbara Stowasser, *Women in the Qur’ān: Traditions and Interpretations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 37. Stowasser here is referring to Muslim attitudes, but this view of the psycho-social difference between the sexes lacks a Qur’ānic referent as does the view of the principle of absolute sex/gender equality as “subversive,” as she herself points out.
4. See Toril Moi’s discussion of Helene Cixous in *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Lit-*