

# Controversies in Islam



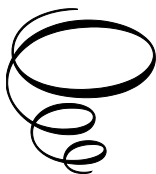
# Controversies in Islam:

*Religious Law, Qur'anic Ethical  
Imperatives, and Higher Moral  
Objectives*

By

John Andrew Morrow

**Cambridge  
Scholars  
Publishing**



Controversies in Islam: Religious Law, Qur'anic Ethical Imperatives,  
and Higher Moral Objectives

By John Andrew Morrow

This book first published 2023

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Copyright © 2023 by John Andrew Morrow

All rights for this book reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

ISBN (10): 1-5275-0172-8

ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-0172-0

“Speak the truth” (Qur’an 3:17)



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Praise for the Book .....	ix
Acknowledgements .....	x
Preface .....	xi
Chapter 1 .....	1
Wife-Beating in Islam: A Slap in the Face of the Sacred	
Chapter 2 .....	7
The Prophet Muhammad and the Children of Israel	
Chapter 3 .....	15
Hail Mary, Mother of Jesus	
Chapter 4 .....	25
Comparing Medina's Constitution and the Covenants of the Prophet with the U.S. <i>Bill of Rights</i>	
Chapter 5 .....	31
Pluralism Contradicts the Qur'an! Or Does it?	
Chapter 6 .....	44
Islamic Law and Punitive Laws	
Chapter 7 .....	53
Jihad, Terrorism, War, and Peace	
Chapter 8 .....	56
Polygyny or Monogamy: That is the Question	
Chapter 9 .....	66
The Age of 'A'ishah	

Chapter 10 .....	128
Women and Gender Relations	
Chapter 11 .....	140
Black Muslims and Race Relations	
Chapter 12 .....	149
Christians, Jews, and Other Religious Communities	
Chapter 13 .....	159
The Spectrum of Islam	
Chapter 14 .....	164
Democracy and Other Forms of Governance	
Chapter 15 .....	169
Reason and Revelation	
Chapter 16 .....	175
The United States, Israel, and Saudi Arabia	
Chapter 17 .....	178
The Covenants of the Prophet: A Call for Coexistence, Friendship, and Fellowship	
Chapter 18 .....	188
Love and Hate in Islam	
Chapter 19 .....	199
Islam in the West: Past, Present, and Future	
Chapter 20 .....	208
The Covenants of Compassion, the Prophet of Pluralism, and My Inner Journey	
Works Cited.....	217
Permissions.....	230
Index.....	231



## PRAISE FOR THE BOOK

“Courageous, venturesome, and thought-provoking. This book is a must-read for daring minds and sincere souls looking for the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. It is an invitation to read the Qur’an in light of the Qur’an and to rediscover its lost richness and vastness. This valuable contribution is a timely wake-up call to free our readings from those who imposed themselves upon Islam for fourteen centuries. Dr. John Andrew Morrow, a master of Islamic sciences for over three decades, provides a much-needed call to reconnect with the Qur’an as a book of love, and rethink Islam beyond forgeries and ill-intentioned misinterpretations.”

—**Dr. Abla Hasan, Associate Professor of Arabic, Nebraska University**

“*Controversies in Islam* by Dr. John Andrew Morrow is an exceptional book by an internationally acclaimed scholar of Islam whose meticulous research and phenomenal learning in areas of critical contemporary significance makes him one of the foremost Muslim thinkers of our times. In this 20-chapter book, Dr. Morrow examines a number of issues which have been a subject of intense debate among various groups of Muslims, as well as between Muslims and people of other faiths, especially Jews and Christians. The openness, honesty and courage with which Dr. Morrow has engaged in such a challenging task makes this book a rare accomplishment. For me personally - as a Muslim feminist theologian who has built a theology of women’s empowerment on Qur’anic ethics - what is most valuable in *Controversies in Islam* is Dr. Morrow’s core emphasis on the universalism of the ethical framework of the Qur’an. Central to this framework are God’s Grace (Love and Compassion) and Justice in which Dr. Morrow grounds both his philosophy and his activism. I am deeply inspired by Dr. Morrow’s vision of a unified and egalitarian human community in which barriers of hate or bigotry have been replaced by bonds of love. *Controversies in Islam* takes us all -- Muslims, Jews, Christians, women, men, people of all colors, classes, castes, and political affiliations - beyond controversies to emotional, intellectual, and spiritual wholeness.”

—**Dr. Riffat Hassan, Professor Emerita, University of Louisville**

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I acknowledge all those who deserve acknowledgment and thank all those who deserve thanks.

## PREFACE

*Controversies in Islam* was written upon the request of a Muslim friend who provided a list of topics that concerned him and that he wanted me to address. Due to the blow-back that any constructive criticism of Islam and Muslims is bound to receive on the part of those conditioned to obey blindly and who are incapable of independent thought, the man who inspired this book remains anonymous.

Despite his considerable wealth and influence, the fact that I must occult the identity of the man who commissioned this work is telling in and of itself. While Muslims clamor for rights and liberties, and complain about Islamophobia, the radicals among them have no tolerance for freedom of expression when it is not in their favor. They want the freedom to promote their extremist and intolerant Islam and attack others. However, they wish to silence others, including Muslims, from exercising their freedom to criticize certain interpretations of Islam as well as the actions of misguided Muslims.

Since I am protected by the First Amendment, I enjoy freedom of religion and freedom of speech, as do other citizens of liberal, secular, Western democracies. Consequently, I am well within my right to criticize certain aspects of Islam as well as the actions of some Muslims. That being said, most of the ideas expressed in this work could never be expressed, in any form or fashion, in most of the Muslim-majority nations of the world. After all, “even non-Muslim authors who are sympathetic to Islam, such as Karen Armstrong, John Esposito, and Lesley Hazelton, have been banned in Malaysia and Pakistan, only for slightly differing from orthodox religious narratives” (Akyol 2021: 89).

Works that call for moderation, like Mustafa Akyol’s (b. 1972) *Islam without Extremes*, “was banned in Malaysia... merely for arguing that Islam should not be imposed by force” (2021: 89-90). The reporter and author was even detained for eighteen hours in Malaysia, where he had been invited to give a lecture, on grounds that his teachings were unauthorized and violated *shari‘ah* law (Akyol 2022: xxii-xxvi). “With such a zeal to ban anything that they find ‘un-Islamic’ or Islamically incorrect,” warns Akyol, “authoritarian Muslims are imposing ignorance on their societies and enfeebling the Muslim mind” (2021: 90). From Indonesia to Morocco and from Iran to Sudan, political and religious

leaders, and ignoramus Islamist fanatics, accuse anyone who opposes their brutal, savage, and hate-filled versions of Islam of being heretics and apostates, and are all the more willing to murder them.

It is disconcerting that Muslims who criticize wife-beating, forced marriages, child marriages, sexual harassment, sexual abuse, female genital mutilation, pedophilia, prostitution, human trafficking, polygyny, substance abuse, racism, bigotry, intolerance, violence, sexism, misogyny, gender discrimination, convert-phobia, femicide, slavery, cruel and inhumane punishment, terrorism, authoritarianism, despotism, and totalitarianism place their lives in peril while those who promote these practices are placed on pedestals. Espouse an ethical universal Islam, a religion of peace, love, and justice, which upholds values as opposed to vices, and you will make millions of Muslim enemies. Oddly enough, when Jews, Christians, secularists, and humanists take a stand on such social issues, they are rarely condemned, threatened, intimidated, or murdered by members of their own communities.

Radical Muslims are willfully blind to their own faults, and violently reactionary to any constructive criticism. Promote pluralism, and they say that “the religion with God is Islam” (Qur’an 3:19), and that it must prevail over all others (Qur’an 9:33). Cite positive revelations regarding the People of the Book, and they cite the negative ones. Promote peace, tolerance, compassion, and patience, by quoting the Qur’an, and they cite verses of violence and argue that the former were all abrogated. Oppose slavery, and they will say that the Qur’an permits it. Oppose wife-beating, and they will insist that the Qur’an commands it (Qur’an 4:34). Oppose child marriages, and they will say that it is the sunnah of the Prophet as he married a six, seven or nine-year old girl (see Ali 2010: 35). Oppose the murder of non-Muslims, and they will cite the sword verse: “kill the infidels wherever you find them” (Qur’an 9:5). Oppose terrorism, and they quote God Himself who promises to “cast terror into the hearts of the unbelievers” (Qur’an 8:12).

It is not a matter of reforming Islamic beliefs. The foundations of faith and the branches of religion are not the problem. It is not enough to reform Islamic law. What we need to do is reform the very principles of Islamic jurisprudence according to an overarching ethical framework. The Muslim world is in the midst of a culture war. It is a war for the heart of Islam. However, as Liyakat Takim notes, “an Islamic reformation has to be an indigenous exercise” (2022: 16). It is not a matter of making Islam fit into the mold of another tradition, religious or secular (2022: 16). Since there is no freedom of expression in the Muslim world, the Islamic Renaissance will come from Europe and the Americas. The sun will rise up in the

West.

As far as Shi'i reformers are concerned, "the edicts of erstwhile jurists are neither binding nor necessarily applicable in the present age" (Takim 2021). After all, "no *faqih* interprets texts with a blank mind" (Takim 2022: 55). They are all "susceptible to their own prejudices and precommitments" (Takim 2022: 55). Shi'i reformers also argue "that there is a need to revise the traditional methodologies and basis for deducing juristic rulings" (Takim 2021). As Liyakat Takim points out, "the argument that juristic laws are malleable and subject to change, depending on circumstances and time, is not new" (2021). "The call for a new form of *ijtihad*," he notes, "has come not only from reformers like Mojtabeh Shabistari, 'Abd al-Karim Soroush, and Mohsin Kadivar, but also from those trained in the traditional seminaries like Ayatollahs Sane'i, Bujnurdi, Fadlallah, Mahdi Shams al-Din, Ibrahim Jannati, and Kamal Haidary" (2021). The fact of the matter is that "traditional *ijtihad* has failed to meet the challenges facing contemporary Muslims" (Takim 2021, see also Takim 2022: 3).

Although I am well-known as a promoter of peaceful, humanistic, and spiritual Islam, and an outspoken opponent of violent, radical, political Islam, even some of my moderate Muslim allies and supporters get upset when I move from the role of "apologist" to that of critic. "Why do you care so much about wife-beaters?" asked a friend in response to *The Most Controversial Qur'anic Verse*, intimating that it was below a spiritual person to concern himself with such lowlifes. "I don't," I responded, "I care about the women who are beaten, and the children who are exposed to such abuse, and I am deeply offended by claims that the Prophet Muhammad, the Qur'an, and God Himself condone domestic violence." The concern, however, kept on coming. "Why don't you just focus on the Covenants of the Prophet?" I was asked. I was informed that "the controversies you address distract from your work promoting religious pluralism." "By criticizing Islam and Muslims," I was counseled, "you empower the Islamophobes." "You are closing doors and placing yourself in peril," I was warned. Finally, I was reminded that "to speak the truth does not necessarily serve the truth."

Although the concerns in question have varying degrees of validity, they lead to apathy. "If God wants to save Islam," I was told, "He will save it Himself." The fact of the matter, however, is that we are the deputies and representatives of God on earth. God gets things done through us, through the thoughts and actions of human beings. Should human beings have done nothing since the dawn of creation, waiting for God to act? As we survey the state of the world, do we sit still, and say

nothing about the pandemic of wife-beating in the Muslim community? Do we do nothing about the scourge of substance abuse? Do we ignore child abuse? Do we fail to protect Muslim women from sexual harassment? Do we turn a blind eye to female genital mutilation and child marriages? That is like doing nothing about pedophile priests because it makes the Roman Catholic Church look bad. This passive, shrug your shoulders, and do-nothing attitude is why Muslims failed to abolish slavery and concubinage until the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. With rare exception, they neither changed themselves nor did they change the conditions of their societies.

I am sorry but I simply cannot ignore the pressing issues of our time and the baggage of our past. The sins of the past weigh Muslims down like concrete shoes on a man sent to swim with the fishes. My conscience compels me to speak out. Natural Law, the rational discernment between good and evil, explodes from my heart like a geyser. As Edmond Burke (1729-1797) reportedly said: “the only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.” Or as Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1968), put it: “The ultimate tragedy is not the oppression and cruelty by the bad people but the silence over that by the good people.” While there are times when silence is a matter of survival, and dissimulation is the order of the day, there are also times when remaining quiet is complicity and inaction is a mortal sin.

Any responsible leader, like any dutiful parent, must give praise when praise is due and provide guided criticism when required. Parents who spoil their children, and fail to correct them and discipline them lovingly and non-violently, produce brittle, egotistical brats. Unless they are properly raised, they will dominate their parents and, when they grow up, cause damage to society. Respect for others must be ingrained. For trees to grow tall and strong, they must be straightened out. The same goes for people. My criticism of Islam is motivated by love. I want Islam to be Islamic. And for it to be Islamic, it must be Qur’anic. And for it to be Qur’anic, it must be moral and ethical. It must be compatible with reason. And it must be aligned with the primordial religion of truth: *sophia perennis et universalis*.

As Liyakat Takim writes, “rulings should not just be legal, more importantly, they should be moral” (2021). “To date,” laments Takim, “the ethical outlook of Shi‘i theology, with its emphasis on the ability of reason to differentiate good from evil, is not reflected in Shi‘i jurisprudence, where the law is frequently divorced from both reason and ethics” (2021). The situation in some, but not all, forms of Sunnism is all the more dire. “In order to make Islamic jurisprudence more ethical,” argues Takim,

Muslim scholars will have to incorporate principles like justice, dignity, and judgements of reason (*'aql*) in their legal deliberations so that these principles play more central and decisive roles in determining how the sources are interpreted and applied. (2022: 5)

The fact remains that pressure has been mounting for centuries. Moderate, mainstream, traditional, civilizational, Qur'anist, progressive, spiritual, socially committed, secular, modernist, liberal, revivalist, reformist, and revolutionary believers are boiling below the surface of Muslim society like molten lava. The tectonic plates are shifting. It is only a matter of time before the moderates melt the extremists. Perhaps the analogy is all wrong. Let me try again. If extremist Muslims have set the world on fire, then moderate Muslims are like glaciers in a coming Ice Age that will put out the blazes and set the stage for a new and verdant world.

If Islam fails to be reformed, namely, realigned with reason, ethical imperatives, and higher moral objectives, most Muslims will embrace secular liberalism and humanism in relatively short order. What happened in Europe and the Americas - the shift from religion to secularism - will happen in the Muslim world. It may happen gradually or it may occur precipitously as it did in some parts of the Western world, such as Quebec, where, in a matter of weeks, an entire ethnic group, the Catholic French Canadians, abandoned the Church in favor of secularism. They went from one of the most religious societies to one of the least between 1960 and 1970. The seismic shift was not measured in decades, years, or months, but in weeks. Within the blink of an eye, church attendance declined from over 95% to less than 4%. The same phenomenon is expected to take place in much of the Muslim world. Muslims, even those who believe, are rapidly rejecting retrograde Islam. Some may leave Islam entirely; however, most, I am inclined to believe, will become nominal, secular, or spiritual Muslims. Radical, political, Islam is not a viable option. It has been overwhelmingly rejected. Like all plagues, it is bound to perish. The path of hate cannot defeat the path of love. The Islam of death cannot triumph over the Islam of life.

Despite minor differences in matters of faith, Muslims will be indistinguishable from secular Jews and Christians - as is the case with many of them already. A minority of Muslims will claim to be orthodox or even ultra-orthodox. Some will identify as conservatives, and others will define themselves as reformed Muslims. Most, however, will become secularized. They may uphold Islamic beliefs and rituals; however, they will reject so-called Islamic law as outdated, antiquated, and inconsistent with Qur'anic ethics and spirituality. Others will profess to be agnostics, and smaller numbers will embrace atheism. They will go from "There is

no god but Allah and Muhammad is His Messenger” to “There is no god.” Not only are the Islamist fanatics alienating Muslims, but they are also pushing them out of Islam and religion entirely.

For Islam to survive and flourish, it must move from the Dark Ages to the Renaissance. Muslims must move from an Islam of Obscurantism to an Islam of Enlightenment. Deeply disillusioned with the horrors committed in the name of Islam, many Muslims direct their disgust at Islamism. However, as Mustafa Akyol warns, “the disillusionment ... can turn against Islam, the religion, itself” (2019). Most Muslims wish to live in democratic, liberal, and secular states. “If Islamists and conservatives keep their old ways,” he stresses, “they may face a radical version of the Enlightenment: fiercely anticlerical and decidedly antireligious, reminiscent of what turned France against a hegemonic Catholic Church” (2019).

*Controversies in Islam* is aimed at academics; however, it should also appeal to some educated readers and laypeople. Although it contains extensive articles that will stimulate scholars, it also features pieces that appeal to a more widespread audience. In a departure from academic convention, many of the articles are succinct and written with style. The book consists of a series of short thought bytes along with some more substantive studies. Its purpose is to provoke reflection and inspire critical thinking, tolerance, reform, and revival. It addresses issues of importance to Muslims and non-Muslims in the West and the East.

Chapter one deals with the issue of domestic violence in the Islamic tradition. It summarizes the findings delivered in detail in *The Most Controversial Qur’anic Verse: Why 4:34 Does not Promote Violence Against Women* (2020). This is the article that inspired the book. It is the small seed that grew into a sequoia. As the seminal study establishes, it has been the consensus of Muslim scholars throughout the ages that husbands are allowed to beat their disobedient wives. The verse in question, however, can and must be reinterpreted in a non-violent way.

Considering the Judeophobic and anti-Semitic current that runs through segments of the Muslim community, and which sometimes hides behind the façade of anti-Zionism, chapter two reminds open-minded and open-hearted Muslims about the positive relations between the Prophet Muhammad and the Children of Israel and the possibility of pardon, peace, and reconciliation. Violent reactionary resistance is not the only option. Dialogue, diplomacy, and compromise can also be the order of the day.

While Muslims love Jesus in theory, they show little love for him in practice. Namely, few walk in the path of love: most walk in the path of the law. Since there was Jesus in Muhammad and Muhammad in Jesus, the more Muslims know about Jesus, the more they know about Muhammad. If



Jews view Moses as the embodiment of divine law, and Christians view Jesus as the incarnation of divine love, Muslims are meant to balance both. Consequently, Muslims have much to learn from the love of Jesus Christ. Chapter three serves as a starting point.

Marcus Garvey (d. 1940) wanted African Americans to return to Africa. Noble Drew Ali (d. 1929) wanted them to be loyal American citizens. The Nation of Islam called for racial segregation, the creation of a separate state for the Africans of the Americas, along with prayers and patience while awaiting the destruction of white supremacy by God Himself in the Person of W.D. Fard (who disappeared in 1934). For Islamists, America is the Great Satan, the big brother of the Little Satan, known as Israel. The Islamists call upon us, Western Muslims, to betray our people, yet they offer us little to nothing in return except ever increased racism, sexism, and intolerance.

No. Our place is here, and our loyalty is here. At least here, we have rights and freedoms absent in the so-called Muslim world. We have the right to criticize and petition our governments without putting our lives in peril. We have the right to freedom of thought, religion, and association. We would be risking our liberty and lives if we tried to exert these rights in Muslim-majority nations. Consequently, by reminding Muslims of the influence of Muhammad's Covenants on the *Constitution of the United States* and the *Bill of Rights*, we reaffirm our loyalty to this land, our patriotism, our pride, and our place in this secular, democratic, and pluralistic republic. We will not be among the traitors. We will not pledge allegiance to foreign potentates. This is the core of chapter four.

While, in my view, Islam is inherently pluralistic and the Qur'an and the Prophet valued religious diversity, I am cognizant that there are those who wish to make Islam absolutist, authoritarian, intolerant, supremacist, and totalitarian. The religious leaders in question reject the multiplicity of religion. They deny religious diversity. They claim that Moses and Jews were Muslims with a capital "M," and that they followed Islam with a capital "I," unable or unwilling to recognize that they were Muslims with a small "m" and that they followed Islam with a small "i." They claim that the only religion with God is Islam, as they conceive it, when, in reality, Islam's superlative status lies in the fact that it recognizes that there are as many paths to God as there are human souls. The pluralism of the Qur'an, the *Constitution of Medina*, and the covenants of the Prophet inspired the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, the *Declaration of Independence*, and the US *Bill of Rights*. Islamists wish to deprive Islam of its essential virtues, its values, and its most admirable accomplishments and turn it into an imperialistic and totalitarian religious and political ideology. This is the

underlying message of chapter five.

For some Muslims, especially the conservatives and Islamists, Islam is so-called Islamic law. To defend Islam and to spread Islam means one thing and one thing alone to these myopic Muslims: to impose *shari'ah* law. Little do they know that what passes for “Islamic” law and jurisprudence is neither divine nor prophetic in origin. “What is imposed is not ‘God’s law,’” explains Mustafa Akyol, “but the law of Wahhabi clerics, Shiite ayatollahs, or Shafi‘i jurists” (2022: 192).

“In his study on the malleability of Islamic juristic rulings,” writes Takim, “Bujnardi (b. 1942) states that Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) does not necessarily reflect the divine law” (2021). The laws in question were produced at particular times and places for particular times and places. If there was a period in which jurisprudence was fluid, it eventually became fixed, and its followers became fixated. In their zeal to defend the letter of the law, Muslims have betrayed its spirit. Consequently, we must call into question the continuation of certain Islamic punitive laws, which is the subject of chapter six.

Since non-Muslims often associate Islam and Muslims with jihad and terrorism, chapter eight examines issues of war and peace in Islam in a novel and innovative way. It provides an entirely new explanation for the Prophet’s battles that go beyond the minor jihad and the greater jihad, and the defensive jihad and the aggressive jihad. As chapter seven suggests, the sacred struggle of the Prophet was the promotion of pluralism and religious freedom. It was very much the covenants of the Prophet Muhammad put into practice.

If terrorism is the line of attack used by Islamophobes to persecute Muslims, there was a day when the main criticism was the practice of polygyny. Though rare, occurring in less than one percent of Muslim marriages, polygyny can pose problems, particularly when it violates the very purpose for which it was conditionally permitted in this first place. Chapter eight poses a pertinent question: has the time come to limit or abolish polygyny? The answer is a resounding yes.

Although the issue did not bother them at all for thirteen-hundred years, since some found the thought of child marriages titillating and tantalizing, Western Orientalists and Islamophobes took advantage of changing mores and laws in the twentieth century to call into question Muhammad’s marriage to ‘A’ishah when she was supposedly nine years of age or younger. Moreover, while this is the age that most Muslims have come to believe that she was, the sources provide a wide variety of ages for ‘A’ishah at the time of her marriage to the Messenger of God. Although the age of ‘A’ishah poses problems, there are other issues of

even greater concern in our day and age, most outrageously, the permission to seek pleasure from prepubescent girls, including babies. Such is the sordid subject of chapter nine.

Chapter ten examines the issue of women and gender relations in Islam from a critical perspective. People have had enough of books on women's rights in Islam written by manifestly misogynistic men. Any objective person who reads such books concludes that they should be renamed *The Lack of Rights of Women in Islam*. Although Islam can elevate women, it can also debase and degrade them. Muslims, both men, and women, should tread cautiously and be careful what they wish for as they may get their wish. Since its bounds are so broad, and its interpretations so radically different, from the moderate to the extreme, and from the modern to the medieval, adopting *shari'ah* law is like opening Pandora's Box. Human rights offer the only acceptable boundaries for legal systems in the contemporary world. They are the covenant of our day and age; the standard to which all should be held.

Believers and apologists claim that Islam opposes racism. While this might be true Qur'anically, it is not necessarily true prophetically, namely, if one accepts the racist sayings attributed to the Prophet Muhammad and some of the twelve Imams. Moreover, even if the Qur'an appears to be anti-racist in principle, Islam, as interpreted by prejudiced men, can be overtly racist in both legal theory and practice. As victims of racism, discrimination, and marginalization at the hands of immigrant Muslim communities, Western Muslims of all races and ethnic backgrounds will find relevance in chapter eleven, which deals with black Muslims and race relations.

The Qur'an interpreted can be the Qur'an perverted. It all depends on the agent of exegesis. It can be a tool of tolerance or a weapon of intolerance. Chapter twelve, which examines the topic of Christians, Jews, and other religious communities, re-envisages relations between Muslims and non-Muslims on the basis of the Qur'an and the covenants of the Prophet Muhammad. While some Muslims talk the talk when it comes to coexistence, how many are really willing to walk the walk?

Although classical Islamic civilization was comparatively more tolerant than other cultures of the time, Muslims eventually became essentialists, reductionists, and authoritarian absolutists. Their attitude is that "it is my way, or it is the highway." Regardless of the sect, school, or branch of Islam to which they belong, some Muslims believe that they are right and everyone else is wrong. Such people pompously place themselves in the position of God, arrogantly professing the right to distinguish truth from falsehood and believers from unbelievers. With

genuine faith comes humility, the recognition that one might be right but that one might also be wrong. It places one's ultimate fate in the gracious hands of God. Hence, chapter thirteen encourages readers to develop a greater appreciation for the full spectrum of Islam and to defer disputes to the Divinity for judgment.

For some Muslims, believers of conversion and culture, Islam means Islamism: the intransigent opposition to the Western world in its entirety. And so, you have Muslim converts from the West, and the disillusioned children of immigrants, rejecting positive Western values and principles, such as civil and human rights, as well as secular democracy, in favor of Islamist totalitarianism and "enlightened" despotism. In the worst scenario, some become terrorists or terrorist sympathizers, while others become the cheerleaders for murderous dictators in the Middle East and beyond. As numerically small as they may be, such misguided Muslims need serious psychological, spiritual, and political care. If they are seeking moral and ethical values along with sound political principles that are indeed in accordance with the Qur'an and the teachings of the Prophet, they will find that they are more prevalent at home, in the West, than they are abroad. Hence, chapter fourteen examines secular democracy and other forms of governance from an ethical and moral point of view.

As short as it may be, chapter fifteen is as vital as it gets. As René Descartes' (d. 1650) dictum goes, *Cogito, ergo sum*, "I think, therefore I am." Although the Qur'an calls upon Muslims to think and reason, many Muslims have long rejected *'aql* or reason in favor of *taqlid* or blind following and uncritical acceptance. They turned away from the *ahl al-ray* or People of Opinion and surrendered to the *ahl al-hadith* or People of Tradition. In so doing, they doomed the Muslim world, and consequently, Islamic civilization collapsed. The harsh reality is that until they start thinking freely and critically, Muslim-majority countries will remain, in the uncouth words of President Donald J. Trump (b. 1946), "third world shitholes," regardless of how technologically and militarily advanced they become.

Chapter sixteen examines the so-called embodiment of evil itself, namely, the United States, Israel, and Saudi Arabia. When Muslims look at others, they may see ugliness and imagine that they themselves are beautiful. This chapter calls upon Muslims to take a good, hard look in a mirror, to see how ugly some of them have become. Despots who promise justice and prosperity, but fail to deliver, try to focus the attention of their people on real and imaginary enemies. This phenomenon is called scapegoating, and Muslims, more than others, are inclined to believe in conspiracy theories.

“Memories of Medina” examines the socio-political and spiritual method of Muhammad, the Messenger of God. How did he create a cohesive state? What were the key ingredients in the constitution that he created? Moreover, how can we learn from them today? That is the purpose of chapter seventeen. It shows the radical political Islamists for what they are: snake-oil salespeople, and contractors who build structures upon sand instead of solid ground. So let us remember and not forget.

Chapter eighteen deals with a question that begs to be asked. Is Islam a religion of love or a religion of hatred? Can the religion of Muhammad be redeemed? Does it contain principles that are compatible with liberty, democracy, and human rights? Beauty is in the eye of the beholder but so is ugliness.

As for chapter nineteen, it examines the history and role of Islam in the West, the challenges it faces, and the problems that it needs to overcome. While there are progressive and reformist forces in Islam, Muslim communities are continually being dragged down by obscurantist and regressive forces within their ranks, typically newly arrived refugees and immigrants, their rebellious, radicalized children, or overzealous Muslim converts, who are so eager to adopt every negative stereotype that they become easy to manipulate by Islamist handlers and/or intelligence agencies.

The concluding chapter of this stimulating, thought-provoking, and polemical work moves from the theoretical to the practical. Sick and tired of mere talking, genuine Muslims wish to put the principles of the covenants of the Prophet into practice. Islam in action is what is desperately needed today. So do not just walk around the pool or dip your toes - take a dive and go swimming. The water of life will refresh you and reinvigorate you. The time is now and this is the Way.



# CHAPTER 1

## WIFE-BEATING IN ISLAM: A SLAP IN THE FACE OF THE SACRED

*“How can a book that - allegedly - openly advises husbands by saying, ‘Strike them’ (Q. 4:34), in cases of marital conflict, have any possible egalitarian interpretation with regard to gender?” Abla Hasan*

4:34, the so-called wife-beating verse, is one of the most controversial passages in the Qur’an. Consequently, it comes as no surprise that critics of Islam routinely beat Muslims over the head with it. The verse of abuse, or the abused verse, is typically translated and interpreted as follows:

Men are the managers of the affairs of women for that God has preferred in bounty one of them over another, and for that they have expended of their property. Righteous women are therefore obedient, guarding the secret for God’s guarding. And those you fear may be rebellious admonish; banish them to their couches and beat them. If they then obey you, look not for any way against them; God is All-high, All-great. (4:34)

As Mohamed Mahmoud admits in “To Beat or Not to Beat,” “this is one of those rare instances when a believer feels that he/she stands on a different and higher moral plane than that which the sacred scripture prescribes” (537). Alternatively, as Amina Wadud (b. 1952) has said, the verse poses some serious ethical challenges (200). Furthermore, while it is true that most Muslim scholars over the ages have asserted that husbands have the right to beat their disobedient wives, disagreeing only on its reasons and extent, the question begs to be asked: does the Qur’an honestly speak of striking spouses?

When it comes to interpreting the command to *idribuhunna*, which is traditionally rendered as “beat them” or “strike them,” scholars are faced with a series of choices. They can interpret the verse on its own. They can interpret it based on other related verses. They can interpret it based on the entire Qur’an. They can interpret the verse based on the *hadith* literature,

namely, based on prophetic traditions that permit disciplinary domestic violence or based on prophetic traditions that prohibit it. Scholars can also interpret the verse in its socio-cultural and historical context. They can also adopt a reformist approach or interpret it allegorically, in the Sufi style.

If we interpret 4:34 independently, then dozens upon dozens of interpretations for *idribuhunna* are in order as the verb *daraba* has nearly sixty different meanings. Although most commentators and jurists believe that the verb means “to beat” in the context of 4:34, Muhammad Hadi Ma’rifat (d. 2007), however, insists that the verse was abrogated. Many other scholars claim that it means “to beat lightly,” which is not the least bit reassuring.

The verb, however, has scores of other meanings, including “leave them,” “separate from them” or even “have sex with them” which are far more suitable in the specific context of the verse and more consonant with the Qur’an as a whole. The verb also means “stop them,” “hinder them,” “express your indignation to them,” “avoid them,” “turn away from them,” “ignore them,” “forsake them,” and “cover them.” Consequently, a linguistic interpretation, not influenced by secondary sources, provides the most semantic freedom and flexibility. Muslims have a moral imperative to ask themselves: what makes the most sense in the context of the verse?

If we interpret 4:34 based on other related verses, *idribuhunna* mean “beat them,” “hit them,” or “strike them” in a figurative fashion, that is, “strike them with a tuft of grass” or something similar. It was like God telling Ayyub or Job to strike his spouse with a “tuft of grass” rather than break his oath (38:44). This approach is known as interpreting the Qur’an by the Qur’an. The allegorical meaning of “beat them” is also supported by prophetic traditions found in the collections of Majlisi, Nu‘man, and Hilli. They stress that the command to “beat them” in 4:34 speaks of a symbolic strike that warns the wife that she risks being divorced. It is the last straw.

As Muhammad Hisham Kabbani (b. 1945) and Homayra Ziad (b. 1977) have noted, 4:34 can also be interpreted based on verses 66:10, 2:61, 3:156, 43:58, 57:13, and 24:31. If that is the case, the controversial command could mean “cite an example for them,” “strike a path for them,” “leave them,” “set up a barrier (between you and them),” or “lovingly draw them towards you.” These readings are reasonable. The last one is quite remarkable. Rather than call for violence, the verse would be calling for loving reconciliation.

If we interpret 4:34 in light of the entire Qur’an, we find that no other verse supports the violent reading of *idribuhunna*. All the related verses



encourage men to treat women kindly, gently, and lovingly. They stress spousal equality. Consequently, a violent interpretation is contradictory. Textual harmony and consistency are only maintained if 4:34 is interpreted non-violently.

In *Decoding the Egalitarianism of the Qur'an: Retrieving Lost Voices on Gender*, Abba Hasan argues that *idribuhunna* does indeed mean “strike them.” However, she argues that “the verse addresses the community with ways to punish women who violate laws; it is not related to the resolution of marriage conflicts” (76). In other words, the prerogative of punishment resides with the authorities.

If we interpret 4:34 based on the *hadith* literature, then we are faced with a paradox, since we have traditions that support domestic violence and others that oppose it. In one tradition, the Prophet wanted to intervene on behalf of a physically abused woman, but God prevented him. In another tradition, the Prophet warned men against beating their wives but caved under pressure placed upon him by ‘Umar. The next day, seventy women complained to the Prophet that their husbands had beaten them. Even though the women showed him their bruises, the Prophet stated that their husbands were not the best of men. In other words, he did not prohibit domestic violence, nor did he punish the wife beaters in question. In yet another tradition, the Farewell Sermon, the Messenger of God allowed husbands to beat their wives non-severely if they committed a manifest indecency, the meaning of which is disputed.

As can be appreciated, the traditions in question paint the Prophet Muhammad in a poor light. What is more, both Muslim and non-Muslim scholars question their authenticity. While there are traditions in which the Messenger of God permits domestic violence, there are others in which he does the exact opposite. So, either he contradicted himself or changed his views, or one set of traditions is genuine while the other is fraudulent. It is equally possible that both sets of traditions are forgeries. Rather than represent the position of the Prophet, they represent the judgments of jurists who held opposite views on the subject.

If we dismiss the *hadith* literature as dubious, it is not a question of what the Prophet said instead of what the Prophet would have said. If Muhammad was sent as a “mercy to the worlds” (Qur’an 21:107), had a “sublime character” (Qur’an 68:4), and was a “model worthy of emulation” (Qur’an 33:21), undisputed facts that the Qur’an firmly establishes, then he could not have permitted men to beat their wives. In fact, in a tradition recorded by Daylami, which is sound in content, the Messenger of God commands men: “Do not beat your wives.” In a tradition recorded in Majlisi and Nuri, the Messenger of God says:

I am amazed at the one who strikes his wife, while he is more deserving to be struck himself. Do not strike your wives with canes because there is a legislative retaliation (*qisas*) for that. Rather, chastise them with a curtailment in their maintenance; thus, you shall gain felicity in this world and the next.

This tradition establishes the prohibition of wife-beating and suggests that men who beat their wives should receive a beating as punishment. Not only did the Messenger of God warn of punishment for domestic violence in this life, but he also warned of punishment in the next life. “Any man who slaps the face of his wife,” he stated, “Almighty God will order the Angel who oversees the fire to slap him on the face seventy times inside of hellfire” (Nuri). He also warned that “On Doomsday, I will be the enemy of him who hits his wife un-righteously. He who hits his wife will be rebellious towards God and His messenger” (Rebhani).

While Sunni and Shiite versions of the Prophet’s Farewell Sermon state that he permitted husbands to strike their disobedient wives in a way that was not severe, one account, recorded in Majlisi’s (d. 1699) *Bihar al-anwar*, says the exact opposite:

O you people! The women with you are assistants. They neither control harm for themselves nor benefits. Take them in the trust of God and make their private parts permissible by the word of God so there will be a right for you upon them, and for them upon you will be rights. And from your rights upon them is that they will not refuse your beds, nor disobey you in good deeds. So, when they do that, then for them would be their sustenance and their clothing with reasonableness [2:233], and do not hit them. O you people! I am leaving behind something that if you follow it, you will never go astray: the Book of God, Mighty and Majestic, so hold tightly to it.

As can be appreciated, this tradition causes a conundrum since the *textus receptus* of the Qur’an commands husbands to *idribu* their bad wives, a verb that can mean “beat them” or “strike them.” What can we make of this? The possibilities are as follows:

1) If we judge the *hadith* by the Qur’an, and the Qur’an says *idribuhunna* or “beat them,” while the *hadith* says *la tadribuhunna* or “do not beat them,” then the Qur’an is correct, and the tradition is a forgery concocted by a person opposed to domestic violence who wished to protect the rights and dignity of women.

2) If we interpret the Qur’an based on the *hadith*, the Prophet might have felt compelled to clarify that the meaning of *idribuhunna* was not “beat them” but another of its nearly sixty definitions. This would be

strange indeed. The Qur'an says *idribuhunna* or "beat them" and then the Prophet states that it means *la tadribuhunna* or "do not beat them." This would have caused considerable confusion among his followers. Why use the very same verb? Why not use a synonym? Why not provide the precise sense of the verb *daraba* in 4:34?

3) It could also be argued that 4:34 never said *idribuhunna* in the first place and that the Qur'an originally said *la tadribuhunna* or "do not beat them" and that misogynistic men changed the verse at some point prior to the canonization of the scripture. This would be the case of another Qur'anic variant preserved in Shiite sources and one that might explain the existence of traditions in which the Prophet Muhammad tells husbands not to beat their wives. The traditions in question, which say *la tadribuhunna* or "do not beat them," could trace back to the variant of the Prophet's Farewell Sermon which in turn was referring to a variant of 4:34. Considering that this interpretation conflicts with the reigning orthodoxy, few, if any, Muslims would give it any credence, with the exception of some academics.

If we interpret 4:34 in the context of its time, the universality of the Qur'an is called into question. It could be claimed, however, that 4:34 was not revealed regarding Muslims, but Jews. In Jewish law, as in Islamic law, women do not have the right to unilateral divorce. If a Jewish man strikes his wife, even symbolically, she is then entitled to sue for divorce, and a rabbi can read the divorce on her behalf. Since Medina was half Jewish when the verse was revealed, it might have been referring to a Talmudic practice.

If we interpret 4:34 from a reformist point of view, the verse could be categorized as descriptive instead of prescriptive and temporal instead of universal. Its violent reading would have to be rejected for rational and humane reasons. When it comes to such matters, Muslims have the right to say no as conscientious objectors.

Interpreting 4:34 allegorically in light of Sufi teachings reveals layers upon layers of meaning. The verse ends up reflecting the state and stage of one's soul. This is one of the most convincing interpretations of the verse in question. Rather than referring to husbands and wives, it refers to souls and spirits. It addresses the human heart. The very issue of wife-beating does not even arise.

If we interpret 4:34 in light of the spirit of Islam as a whole, the conclusions are clear: Islam forbids domestic violence. Abdulaziz Bayindir (b. 1951), a retired professor of Islamic law from the University of Istanbul, and chairman of the Sulaymaniyah Foundation, comprehensively presented this position. His seminal study, titled "Beating Wives or

Restoring their Rights to Divorce,” convincingly demonstrates that wife-beating is un-Qur’anic, un-prophetic, and un-Islamic.

The command to literally “beat” so-called “bad wives” makes no sense in the context of verse 4:34. It makes no sense in the spirit of the Qur’an. It makes no sense in light of the authentic sunnah. It certainly makes no sense in light of the *sirah* or biography of the Prophet Muhammad, who never struck any of his wives.

Although scholars, jurists, and commentators from every imaginable school or branch of Islam have supported the right of husbands to beat their wives over the past fourteen hundred years, a re-examination of their arguments, and the evidence presented, shows that their case was flimsy. It relies on a myopic and atomistic interpretation of the verb *daraba*. It is colored by misogynistic culture. It relies on fraudulent prophetic traditions. Furthermore, it contradicts a large body of Qur’anic verses and genuine prophetic traditions. Based on the context, the content of the Qur’an as a whole, and the overwhelming majority of traditions attributed to the Prophet Muhammad, the verse seems to speak of separation.

When faced with conflicting interpretations of Islam and the Qur’an, Muslims would be well-advised to follow the advice attributed to the Prophet, that is, “Make things easy for the people and not difficult. Make them calm and do not repulse them” (Bukhari). As ‘A’ishah (d. 678) reported, “Whenever the Prophet had to choose between two options, he always opted for the easier choice” (Bukhari). Hence, following this principle, the gentlest interpretations of *idribuhunna* are the most appropriate. And truth stands clear from falsehood when the heart and the mind are in harmony.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE PROPHET MUHAMMAD AND THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL

*“And We did certainly give the Children of Israel the Scripture and judgment and prophethood, and We provided them with good things and preferred them over the worlds.” (45:16)*

The relationship between the Prophet Muhammad and the Jewish people is complex and nuanced. He was not only a descendant of Ishmael, the ancestor of the Arabs, but he was also a descendant of Isaac, the ancestor of the Jews. Although most Sunni sources state that the Prophet’s parents were pagans, Shiite sources stress that they were monotheists, suggesting that they belonged to the hanifs, namely, the small sect of rightly guided Arabs who had preserved the religion of Ishmael. However, early Christian sources indicate that the Prophet’s father, ‘Abd Allah, was Christian, while his mother, Aminah, was Jewish. She was, after all, buried in the cemetery of the Banu Najjar (Jebara 270). Had she not been Jewish, she could not have been buried there. Jewish law only permits Jews to be buried in Jewish cemeteries.

As contentious as these claims may be, and as sensitive as Muslims may be about the subject, due to inherent anti-Semitism, there is no doubt, according to surviving Islamic sources, that the Prophet’s great-grandmother, Salma bint Amr, was Jewish. Consequently, although he was mostly of Arab ancestry, Muhammad also had Jewish ancestry, thereby tracing back to Abraham, the first major monotheistic figure in history, from both sides of his family. His Jewish Banu Najjar roots are mentioned by al-Suhayli, al-Halabi, and others (Jebara 324). According to Jewish law, it should be remembered, the son of a Jewish woman is considered to be Jewish. The mere suggestion that Muhammad was the son and grandson of Jewish women is sufficient to infuriate some racist, intolerant Muslims.

Born and raised in the primarily polytheistic sanctuary of Mecca, Islamic tradition relates that Muhammad occasionally met Hanifs, Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians who traveled there for purposes of trade.

When he proclaimed prophecy at the approximate age of forty, Muhammad did not have a very receptive audience. However, the Negus of Abyssinia, who may have been a Judeo-Christian, received the Prophet's monotheistic message - which he presented as a revival of the teachings of Abraham, and in which he likened himself to the brother of Moses - with respect. As such, the sovereign offered refuge to the persecuted followers of the Prophet Muhammad.

The people of Yathrib, a city to the north of Mecca, offered the Prophet a permanent home. Composed of Arabs and Jews, the prosperous city had suffered from significant and self-destructive in-fighting. When word of the Prophet's leadership skills reached them, they invited him to function as a mediator to help put an end to turmoil and unite the divided community.

If Muhammad was of pagan Arab background, as claimed by some Muslim sources, he had much in common with the Arabs of Medina. If Muhammad was of Jewish ancestry, as claimed by some Muslim sources, he had much in common with the Jews of Medina. Apparently, the Jews of Arabia were expecting the rise of a new prophet or the arrival of the Messiah. Perhaps they placed their hope in Muhammad. If he were neither of pagan ancestry, nor Jewish by faith, he could have been perceived as objective and impartial.

The fact remains, however, that when Muhammad arrived in Medina, it was a Jewish family from the Banu Najjar, his relatives headed by Abu Ayyub, who functioned as his hosts (Jebara 192, 231, 333). In fact, not only were the Banu Najjar Jewish, but they belonged to a priestly clan. As the Talmud notes, the term *naggār* or carpenter signifies "learned, wise, and literate." The Qur'an attests to the fact that the Jews of Banu Najjar recognized Muhammad as part of their kith and kin. "Those to whom We gave the Scripture," it notes, "know him as they know their own sons" (2:146).

If these accounts are accurate, they bolster the claim that Muhammad's lineage was both Ishmaelite and Israelite. This could be seen as a source of pride and proof that Muhammad, the son of a Christian father, and a Jewish mother, was the fulfilment of both faith traditions. He was a descendant of Abraham, through both Ishmael and Isaac, and belonged to the House of Prophecy. This could explain why so many of Muhammad's supporters in the believers movement were Jews, Judeo-Christians, and Christians. It could also be argued that early Muslims concocted these lineages for the very purpose of providing such prestige and that the Jewish laws adopted by Islam were a product of its Medinan phase. Giving Muhammad a Jewish, Judeo-Christian, or Christian origin was preferable