Gabeba Baderoon | **Revelation and Religion:**
Representations of Gender and Islam[1]

Introduction

As the anniversaries of 11 September 2001 mount, and the event is increasingly sedimented in our understanding of the contemporary world, one calibration of the significance of meanings of the event is the place of religion in public discussions today. Paradoxically, while talk about religion peaks, one of the most important challenges we face today is to understand religion in necessarily complex ways. In one sense, on 11 September 2001 the world became suffused with the significance of the religious. Religion entered and was invoked in the public space in vastly expanded, yet, I would argue, fundamentally constricted ways.

Orientalism, which has created an opacity around Islam, has, less overtly, complicated the understanding of religion itself. The problem is an intriguing one: when one talks about religion, one is actually talking about Islam. This is because Islam has come to be seen as 'religion', with connotations of irrationality, anti-modernity and regressiveness. As a result, other forms of religion-based action seem to have eluded or disavowed the label. As the name for irrationality, religion seems to suit Islam perfectly. Other forms of religion, however, have not disappeared from this crude radar, not, arguably, because they have a claim to greater rationality, but because the opacity surrounding Islam clouds the term 'religion'. It has thus become at once commonplace, and very difficult, to speak about religion. In some ways, it may be argued that the basis of some of these misunderstandings is that religion itself is misunderstood.

The secular thesis which informs the conventional view of religion in the West assumes religion is most appropriately practised in a private enclave in contemporary life. In public spaces, the practice of religion is seen in very specific and carefully framed occasions. South Africa, for instance, has a hard-earned understanding of the dangers of an official state practice which placed religion in the service of *apartheid* ideology, and, subsequent to 1994, has ensured that in the public arena religion is practised in carefully measured spaces. On public television, for example, religion appears in specified timeslots.

While creating a necessary distinction between state and religion, one implication of such compartmentalisation is that it may privatise discussion of religion and religious exegesis, giving little value to intellectual work in the arena and service of religion, and may remove a crucial level of engagement and debate between social and intellectual forces on the one hand, and religious ones on the other. Effectively, this reduces the scope of discussion, exchange, complexity, contradiction, change and growth. The disengagement of religion from other parts of the social sphere may have unintended effects. Religion not only becomes a mark of otherness, but is itself othered.

Yet religion is not always absent from the public sphere. In fact, despite its repression from public visibility, religion continues to be profoundly present in crafting a sense of the contemporary world. And in one area of contemporary life, religion is often invoked prominently: in the case of crisis and conflict. At an obvious level, it has a significant role in providing an understanding of experiences of transgression and violence.

Religion has provided both the West and the Islamic world with some of its most convincing narratives about conflict, and seems to offer compelling answers to the complex questions of the day. Notions of right and wrong gain a level of clarity and conviction which can be traced, sometimes in surprisingly direct ways, to the force of religion. The contested thesis of Samuel Huntington - that the West and Islam are on a path of clashing civilisations - continues that very old, and very convincing-sounding rhetoric. The narrow formulation of right and wrong is deeply attractive in moments of crisis.

The presence of others

In this section I consider the notion that the psychic is indisputably political, and that questions of subjectivity play a central role in history. French philosopher Julia Kristeva asserts that the unconscious dynamics by which we are formed into a self *that is not the other* is a profoundly political one. This self that is not the other embeds itself in the discourses, or symbolic order, of political epochs. Change comes about when we engage with this nexus of the unconscious and the social. This claim is particularly provocative when examining the fantasies that underlie visions of the East held in the West. Amit Rai analyses the psychoanalytical dynamics of colonialism, and concludes that the colonial project 'produced the Orient as pure alterity'.[2] Under the structure of relations under colonialism, the East became the Other of the West, simultaneously unknowable *and* also the very grounds of possibility for the Western subject. This structure has lingering implications for the contemporary era.

In the United States, part of the shock of the 11 September events was to realise how little was known about Islam. Islam was thus discovered by the US as a vast unexplored territory, and, since 11 September, has become the site of a hesitant yet overdetermined encounter in a postcolonial era. On the non-commercial National Public Radio, many Arab-American artists have been spending their time simply testifying to the humanity of Arabs and Muslims.

In South Africa it is unusual to find Muslims being placed in this position. The reason is that in South Africa, Islam has a long, complex and *visible* history. In addition, our national preoccupation with racism and division makes the notion of the humanity of Muslims both more explicable and more deeply interwoven into daily experience in significant parts of the country. Consequently, the range of representations of Islam in South Africa is broader, less fragile, and more open to contradiction and innovation. In the mid-1990s, the country had learned the costs of reductive media representations of Islam in dealing with the matter of People against Gangsterism and Drugs (PAGAD). With Pagad, the South African media faced the task of contextualising this group's use of Islamic iconography without resort to the conclusion that it *represented* Islam. The group itself was a creature of the media, partly because it learned the advantages of playing to the stereotypes which drew most attention. These familiar images too it learned from the media.

Visibility in the public sphere is not an uninflected virtue. Simply to call for increased visibility is not a sufficiently reflective or powerful political tool. The *context* in which one becomes visible is crucial. Tracking the profile of Islam makes for a revealing exercise, since Islam

has gained visibility in the West under very specific conditions. The theorist Mahmut Mutman shows that before the oil crisis of the 1970s, Islam rarely appeared in the US media. It was in the context of a 'threat to the American way of life' that Islam and Arabs became more familiar features in the media landscape.

The matter of representation is significant here because it is the way in which religion enters the public space of discussion. How things are represented shapes how they are understood. The persistent narrowing that results from patterns of constricting and reductive representations means that some people's lives seems less valued, their struggles less valid, the complexity of their choices less evident, their variety less imaginable. It is our role as members of a contested public sphere to ensure that religion, crucial to a layered and appropriate understanding of the contemporary world, is not veiled by otherness.

Gender

In the twenty-first century, it is most interesting to look at representations of women in the Muslim world. The problems of such women have been among the most-ignored topics in an area that otherwise gains heavy attention. Discussions of women's rights under Islam (particularly inflected by attention to the Taliban) have gained vastly more attention since 11 September 2001. From being largely ignored, women in Afghanistan, for instance, were transformed into highly visible subjects. This 'rediscovery' of gender in Afghanistan was accompanied by an unfortunate absence of context, history and women's agency. In fact, gender was highly functional, and women there became a visible symbol of the reasons, and legitimacy, for declaring war on Afghanistan. Women were made part of the vocabulary of crisis. Subsequent to the war, the attention given to gender proved perfunctory, and attention rapidly moved elsewhere. In post-11 September 2001 discourse, women have been made into part of the vocabulary used to tell the 'real' story, which is not about them.

Historically, the image of the veiled Muslim woman has had heavily symbolic meanings in the West: it is 'an icon of the otherness of Islam and is denounced as a symbol of Muslim women's oppression'.[3] Thus, the image signals for the West the *problem* of Islam. However, Helen Watson points to an important ambivalence: 'Outrage at its signal of oppression, or a romanticized view of the veil as part and parcel of the exotic, sensual Otherness of oriental traditions'.[4] Thus, in Orientalist discourse, the veiled woman has also signalled something else. From the sixteenth century, Eastern women have been represented in colonial literature and art as mysterious and knowing, yet, importantly, also convertible and assimilable. Shahnaz Khan points out that:

> While much Orientalist discourse focused on the liberation of Muslim women from Islam there was also an aspect of Orientalist/colonialist discourse that pointed to the availability of Muslim women.[5]

The veil drives the desire of the European coloniser to enlighten the Islamic world and deliver its women from oppression. This fantasy requires a certain kind of response from Occidental Man - a galloping certainty and unambiguous manliness, both to rescue the

helpless Oriental woman, and subdue the threat of the Oriental man. Criticism from the American right of George W. Bush's conduct of the war in Afghanistan as 'dainty', despite the use of cluster bombs and 'daisy-cutter' bombs, suggests that this fantasy is present at some level in the envisioning of the current conflict.

What happens to women as a result of such discourses is that we become the material for symbol. Our real struggles, desires and achievements are relegated to metaphor. Dangerously for women in situations of conflict, their actions and their bodies become part of the vocabulary for more powerful sectors to communicate with one another. So, in Algeria and Afghanistan, schools that teach girls are targeted for attack.

The challenge for gender activists and others is to return women to the realm of the real, and out of the exclusive domain of symbol. I argue that sustained and serious analysis of the impact of gendered assumptions that underlie media images can contribute to such change.

Conclusion

The visibility of the events of 11 September 2001 poses a challenge in itself. After thousands of words and images, the events of that day ask us to imagine a human connection, the literal meaning of sympathy, with the 2,795 people who died in New York City, Washington DC, and Pennsylvania. Their deaths are achingly visible to us. That day also asks us to imagine their deep human connection with other people. Perhaps religion is most profoundly present in inviting human beings to imagine a connectedness with one another.

Endnotes

[1] This is a condensed version of a much longer article, 'Revelation and Religion: Representations of Gender and Islam in Media, Recalling 11 September 2001 from a South African View'.

[2] Amit Rai (1998) '"Thus Spake the Subaltern …": Postcolonial Criticism and the Scene of Desire', in Christopher Lane (ed.) *The Psychoanalysis of Race,* pp. 91-119.

[3] Helen Watson (1994) 'Women and the Veil: Personal Responses to Global Process', in Akbar Ahmed and Hastings Donnan (eds) *Islam, Globalization and Postmodernity*, London and New York: Routledge, pp. 141-59.

[4] Watson, ibid, p. 153.

[5] Shahnaz Khan (1998) 'Muslim Women: Negotiations in the Third Space', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society,* 23, no. 2, pp. 463-94.