

Woman's Identity and the Qur'an: A New Reading

by Nimat Hafez Barazangi

Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004. 172 pp. \$59.95

“Barazangi brings a bold new perspective into the debate by calling those interested in the field to step out of the usual debates and methodologies. She creates new grounds by forgoing altogether the use of gender as a unit of analysis and instead introduces the Qur’anic concept of Taqwa, which can be simply translated as “moral discernment. A truly bold departure emphasizing the openness of the Quran as a text across time and space, and freeing its reader from being bound to the interpretations of any group in any given time, even including the very first generation of Muslims, whom she argues did not fulfill the gender mandate of the Quran. Barazangi’s work could far reaching influence, if properly read, especially on the journey of democracy in Muslim societies as she proposes the Self-Learning of Islam curricular framework to generate pedagogical guidelines for a policy-oriented scholarship. She hopes this could take place as this debate could shift the practice of Muslim jurisprudence into a community-based consultative practice since, she argues, community-based consultation is the first principle of Qur’anic governance.” *Journal of Law and Religion* (XXV, No.1, 2010)

“Her [Barazangi’s] approach is unusual for the importance she places on the individual’s relationship with the Qur’an, which, in her view, supersedes considerations of history and previous generations of interpretations. This sometimes leads her to the fairly radical step of questioning the prophet’s behavior.” *Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies* (Volume 4, Fall 2008)

“Barazangi critiques what she sees as the excessive reliance on accepted Qur’anic interpretations and calls for a continual interpretation of the holy text by each individual Muslim. That is the most novel aspect of the work, and it certainly represents a fruitful pedagogical approach as it would encourage critical thinking.” *Wagadu* (A Journal of Transnational Women’s and Gender Studies, Volume 4, Summer 2008).

“Her argument that women must exercise their spiritual autonomy and approach the Qur’an afresh, without prior interpretations and biases that men attribute to the text is well constructed. She states that the ‘female is an autonomous moral being who has direct relationship with God as her only Guardian’ (Barazangi, p. 78). I was moved by her reminder about women’s moral autonomy in the Qur’an, their independence to read and interpret the text for themselves.” *azizahmagazine.com* (Volume 4, 4 Fall 2006).

"The book is to be applauded for weaving together fascinating and complex arguments that challenge some of the beliefs inherent in the patriarchal Islamic discourse... Barazangi's book is an excellent resource for young women and men who wish to claim and identify with Islam. As a Muslim woman myself who has been grappling with issues of gender justice and woman's autonomy in Islam the book has proved to be an invaluable reference." — *Arab Studies Quarterly* (Winter 2007, V.29, No. 1).

“Those with even a cursory acquaintance with Islam will realize that here Barazangi is not only taking on the entire traditional patriarchal-oriented Muslim *Ulama* but doing so on their own terrain by forcing them to go back to the Qur’an. Notice also, however, that she is by implication suggesting that the self-identity of Muslim women does not have to reside in the notion of the ‘emancipated Muslim woman’ as defined by the current alternative of ‘Westernization’.” *Comparative Education Review* (August 2006, V. 50, No. 3).

“Elegantly written and intelligently argued, this is an exceptional book in which the title, for once, does not promise too much. Barazangi, a research fellow at Cornell University, is a scholar to watch with a mind to admire. In a field littered with the strident, the clumsy, the redundant, the intellectually dishonest, and the overtly partisan, she skirts all those traps with grace and shows a way to move forward the grid-locked discussion over core Islamic values—especially but not only those concerning women.” — *The Middle East Quarterly* (Summer 2006, V. XIII, No 3).

“A Highly Liberating Document for Women. Syrian-American author Nimat Hafez Barazangi’s book ...is an attempt to provide a totally new perspective to the debate on status of women in Islam. She has provided an altogether new interpretation

to the Qur'anic identity of the Muslim women.” —Islamicvoice.com/May2006/BookReview.

"A valuable contribution to the Islamic scholarship-activism explosion of the 21st century"—[The Middle East Journal](#) (Summer 2005, V. 59, No. 3).

“The central question in Barazangi’s argument is: Why has the authority to interpret ‘religious’ texts been exclusive to male religious elites? She believes that nothing will change the condition of Muslim women and the Muslim society unless women are recognized as having the same authority to interpret the Qur’an. Her strategy ... is reflected in her proposal of the curricular framework, “Self-Learning of Islam, as a means of self-realization and self-identity grounded in the Qur’an. The strength of the book resides in her using the Qur’anic pedagogical dynamics as the philosophical basis for Muslim women to develop an integrative curriculum that proposes a shift in learning, knowing, teaching, and the application of the Islamic worldview, in which the learner will also move towards the intended gender revolution, as an integral part of the Qur’anic principle of social and economic justice, while simultaneously balancing the tension between pluralism and secularism.” —[Anthropology & Education Quarterly](#) (September 2005, V. 36, No.3).

“Barazangi has done a commendable job of articulating a major concern in contemporary Muslim life—the traditional role of women vs. their active participation in an ever-changing global community. She draws a parallel between the struggle of Muslim women and the hurdles faced by the women’s suffrage movement in America. *Woman’s Identity and the Qur’an* is a good read and I highly recommend it to anyone interested in Islamic education in general and in the struggle of Muslim women in particular”.—[Teachers College Record](#) (2005, V.107, No 11).

"Readers of this work will learn that the Qur'an speaks to men and women with one voice, that men and women are equal when it comes to the worship of God. Thus, the male-dominated practices of several centuries derive not from divine revelation but from human error."— [Charles E. Butterworth, University of Maryland](#).

“An original and uncompromising study of the Qur'anic foundations of women’s identity and agency, this book is a bold call to Muslim women and men to reread and reinterpret the Qur’an, Islam's most authoritative source, and to discover within its revelations an inherent affirmation of gender equality.” —[University Press of Florida](#).

