

A POST-COLONIAL HERMENEUTICAL CRITICISM OF BIBLICAL AND QUR'ANIC TEACHINGS ON WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP

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Abstract: *In our time, women's rights have been significantly improved especially in politics, education, and economics. However, women have still faced strong obstacles to fully participate at the decision-making level in some religious institutions. Gender-biased religious texts are often quoted to silence and discourage women from going forward. Instead of reinterpreting the gender-biased texts as feminist scholars often do, this paper will deconstruct the process of textual production and interpretation by using the lens of feminist post-colonial hermeneutics. It does this by taking the two case studies of the Biblical and Qur'anic teachings on women's leadership. It argues that the process of textual production and interpretation of these texts were influenced by colonialism and patriarchy of their time.*

Key words: *Post-colonial Hermeneutics, Women's Leadership*

INTRODUCTION

In our modern time, despite progress in human rights and gender equality movements, women's leadership has still been an issue especially among religious institutions or societies which affiliate with a religion. For example, in Christian institutions, "opposition to female ordination was based on the notion that female clergy were unnatural masculine, shirking their obligations to

home and family, and prone to being shameless and unchaste."¹ If they are to get ordained, they have to meet requirements which are not required of men. For instance, a denomination in Indonesia only ordains female pastors after they pass the virginity test (while men do not submit to this rule). In Myanmar, women only get ordained after long years of celibacy and when

¹ Hope S. Antone, "Asian women and Christianity," *In God's Image* 28.1 (2009): 28.

their menstruation ends.² In Vietnam, women from the Evangelical Church of Vietnam, the biggest and oldest Protestant denomination in the country, have been denied ordination. The highest position that a woman can hold is female preacher. Constitutionally they are required to be celibate (which is not applied to their male counterparts) to enter the cleric order and never get ordained as male clergy.³

Similarly, Muslim women in many Muslim societies have still faced discrimination and subordination in family, in religious institutions and in society. For example, in Indonesia, there was a case that the Muslim fundamentalists condemned a woman who ran for a presidential election. The Marriage Law of Indonesia 1/1974 explicitly restricts women's responsibility to the role of housewives in the household while men are to be household leaders. Village meetings are

exclusively for men.⁴ Though Muslim community in Indonesia has made a progressive step to give women space to build their own prayer houses and women can perform religious rituals in these houses as men do, such a progress has been made with great effort and struggle from the Muslim women.⁵ However, there is still segregation between men and women in religious leadership. Women can only lead women while men are allowed to lead both.

Unfortunately, the subordination of women gets its justification in the sacred texts in both traditions. Antone listed at least three often quoted biblical passages that deny Christian women's ordination and religious leadership:

- (1) 1 Timothy 2:11-14: "*A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be*

² Ibid.

³ Le Ngoc Bich Ly, *Struggles for Women-Inclusive Leadership in Toraja Church in Indonesia and the Evangelical Church of Vietnam: Agency and Structural Change* (Geneva, Globethics.net, 2017).

⁴ Hindun Anisah and Nehik Sri Hidayat, "Women and Islam," *In God's Image* 28.1 (2009): 55-61.

⁵ Siti Syamsiyatun, *Serving Young Indonesian Muslim Women: The Dynamic of Gender Discourse in Nasyiatul Aisiya 1965-2005* (Saarbrücken: Lambert Academic Publishing, 2010), 66.

silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner.”

- (2) Ephesians 5:22-24: “*Wives, submit yourselves to your husbands as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.*”
- (3) 1 Peter 3:1-2, 6: let wives “*be in subjection to your own husbands” and have “chaste conversation coupled with fear.*”⁶

For the Islamic tradition, according to Anisah and Hidayati, the often quoted Qur’anic text to subordinate women is from Surah IV: 34 which reads:

“Men are the protectors and maintainers (qowwamun) of women, because God has given the one more (strength) than the other, and because they support them from their means.

⁶ Antone, “Asian women and Christianity, 27.

Therefore the righteous women are devoutly obedient, and guard in (the husband’s) absence what Allah would have them guard. As to those women on whose part ye fear disloyalty and ill conduct, admonish them, refuse to share their beds, beat them; but if they return to obedience, seek not against them Means (of annoyance).”

This verse is often interpreted that husbands have the rights to command and discipline their wives. Men are placed as leaders in any situation. It has become “a tool to legitimate men’s leadership” and “prohibit women from becoming leaders.”⁷

OBJECTIVES

In this paper, I will examine these gender-biased texts through the lens of postcolonial hermeneutics. My purpose is not to interpret these texts but to question the production and interpretation of these texts and the politics behind them. My question is: Why and How were these texts produced and interpreted the way they were? The answer to this question will contribute to a deeper understanding

⁷ Anisah & Hidayat, “Women and Islam,” 56.

women's suppression to leadership in both religious traditions. The author's choice of moving beyond textual interpretation into the source criticism is, first of all, because there are sacred texts which are irredeemable because they are projection of human beings' greed and evil to the level of God such as the treatment of women as property, justification of slavery, ethnic cleansing, human sacrifice, and men's right to divorce their wives without any justification. For such texts, human evil desires must be exposed to restore justice.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Postcolonial hermeneutics is a lens that looks beyond the cloud of religious authority and monopoly of truth since it questions the very claim of authority of the Scriptures.⁸ This method will help the writer investigate the human motives and contextual influence on the production of the texts

and their interpretation without any religious constraint. Moreover, postcolonial hermeneutics incorporates non-religious aspects into the study of religious texts such as gender and politics. According to Sugirtharajah, postcolonial hermeneutics focuses on the whole issue of expansion, domination, and imperialism as central forces in defining the ideology of sacred texts and their interpretation. It treats the sacred texts as product of colonial encounters and examines how colonial intentions or assumptions informed and influenced the production of the texts.⁹ For Kwok Pui-lan, sacred texts should not be naively seen as religious texts but should be treated as political texts which are "written, collected, and redacted by male colonial elites in their attempts to rewrite and reconcile with history and to reconceptualize both individual and collective identities under the shadow

⁸ R. S. Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and the Third World: Precolonial, Colonial and Postcolonial Encounters* (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 265.

⁹ R. S. Sugirtharajah, "Charting the Aftermath: A Review of Postcolonial Criticism," in *The postcolonial Biblical Reader*, ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah, 7-32 (Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 17.

of the empires”.¹⁰ A postcolonial feminist interpretation of the Bible (and the Qur’an) needs to investigate the gender power relations and the reinforcement of patriarchal control over spheres where the elites could exercise control. Postcolonial feminists argue that patriarchy and colonialism must be analyzed together since gender inequalities are essential to the structure of colonial authority.¹¹ Therefore, using postcolonial hermeneutics will help the author expose the gender relations and political intention behind the misogynistic texts and their interpretations.

METHODOLOGY

This paper employs feminist-post-colonial hermeneutics of textual production and interpretation process. Literature review is the main method of data collection.

¹⁰ Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination & Feminist Theology* (Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 8-9.

¹¹ Pui-lan, *Postcolonial imagination*, 65-66, 80-81.

MAIN ARGUMENT

Employing the above hermeneutical theories, I will argue that patriarchy and colonialism influence the production and interpretation of the Biblical and Qur’anic negative teachings on women’s leadership. Under the influence of these two powers, gender equality vision is sacrificed first for the survival in the case of Christianity and for expansion in the case of Islam and later for the indulgence in male power and privilege of institutionalized Christian and Muslim traditions. Above all it is not the religious but political causes that underlie the production and interpretation of these misogynistic texts.

FINDINGS

COLONIAL AND PATRIARCHAL INFLUENCE IN THE FORMULATION OF BIBLICAL NEGATIVE TEACHINGS ON WOMEN’S LEADERSHIP

As Kwok Pui-lan remarks that “the Bible is a repository of the writings and traditions of the Hebrew people, who had been for centuries under the

political yoke of the powerful Babylonian, Assyrian, Persian, Greek, and Roman Empires”¹², the New Testament’s misogynistic teachings of women’s leadership (1Timothy 2:11-14; Ephesians 5:22-24; 1Peter 3:1-2,6) cannot be treated as purely divinely-guided texts but as a product of the church’s politics in the face of the colonial powers or the Greco-Roman Empire. As a religious minority, the Christian church started to sacrifice its gender-equality vision to adapt to the patriarchal imperialistic system as a strategy for survival. This gender politics was later reinforced by the religious male elites to keep their power and privileges when Christianity became an imperialistic religion.

The feminist scholar, Fiorenza, reconstructs the Biblical stories of women in the early church and shows that early Christianity was a movement of discipleship of equals.¹³ During Jesus’ ministry on earth, he always encouraged women to be his disciples

and sent them as his very first apostles to spread the good news about his resurrection. He praised Mary above Martha for her pursuit of learning God’s word (Luke 10: 38-41). Jesus showed himself to the women first after his resurrection and sent them to tell the good news to the men (Matthew 28, Mark16, Luke 24, John 20). In the early church, both men and women were equal missionary partners and apostles. Women were active in leadership and church ministries such as Phoebe, Prisca, and Junias (Romans16). The early Christian movement is an inclusive and egalitarian movement without any racial, class and gender discrimination as attested in Galatians 3:28 “*There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*” However, the egalitarian charismatic movement initiated by Jesus Christ did not last long due to the persecution and pressure to assimilate to the wider patriarchal culture of the imperialistic Greco-Roman Empire. The Jesus’ egalitarian charismatic movement took place in the context of Jewish society as an internal religious reformation of

¹² Ibid., 7-8.

¹³ Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins: In Memory of Her* (New York: Crossroad, 1994).

Jewish tradition. However, after Jesus, the movement was continued by his disciples, especially Paul, in a different context: the context of Roman Hellenism and the movement had missionary aims.¹⁴ The emergent and growing Christian movement posed a threat to not only the Jewish religion but also the Greco-Roman culture since Christian lifestyle was different.

Gay describes that the Greco-Roman culture followed a hierarchy ranging from God to human beings. The male gods were on the top of the hierarchy. Next were the virgin goddesses. The aggressive goddesses that posed a threat to the divine society were pushed to the bottom. Male gods' sexual affairs with male and female mortals and immortals were seen as the exercise of power over the 'other' and expansion of the gods' dominion. The Greek philosophers of the time restricted women's leadership by creating separate cults for men and women. For instance, Plato said in *Laws* 8.828 (quoted by Gay), "They shall have festivals for women,

¹⁴ Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 82.

distinguishing those which ought to be separate from men's festivals and those which ought not."¹⁵ Under the Greco-Roman Empire, women, non-citizens, and slaves were not allowed to partake in civic cult. Instead, imperial priests and citizens offered sacrifices on behalf of them. Women were refused to perform cults or prayer for the city in times of trouble because it was believed that a god did not approve women's cult performance. Being colonized by the Greco-Roman world, the Jewish religious system also followed a hierarchy with the male high priest on the top, then male worshippers and finally the women and children in the lowest status.¹⁶ This is the very context that early Christian movement encountered and struggled to establish itself.

As an emergent sub-culture cult, which observed the mystery elements, recognized the prophetic roles of both males and females, and gave rise to women's leadership, Christianity posed

¹⁵ Eh Tar Gay, "Colonial Impact on Women's Leadership Roles in Early Christianity," *In God's Image* 30.2 (2011): 33.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 34-35.

a threat to the patriarchal Greco-Roman religious and cultural order. Indeed, by 200 CE, Christians were severely persecuted such as imprisonment, torture, and confiscation of property under the Roman Empire due to their rejection to conform to the religious cults and cultural behavior of the Empire.¹⁷ To avoid persecution by the imperialistic power, the church gradually assimilated to the religious and cultural Greco-Roman system regarding women's proper place and behavior. According to Mary Rose D' Angelo, quoted by Pui-lan, under the reign of Trajan and Hadrian in the late Roman order, the construct of masculinity and gender relations in accordance with the imperial family values, which required submission of wives, children and slaves, was "seen to be necessary."¹⁸ Torjesen described that, under the Greco-Roman empire, both Jewish and Christian theologians started to argue that it was improper for women to hold authoritative positions

in the public places. For them, the good woman was a chaste woman.¹⁹ Therefore, the anti-women Christian texts (1Timothy 2:11-14; Ephesians 5:22-24; 1Peter 3:1-2,6) can be seen as a product of the influence of the colonial/imperial religious model during this period. These texts reflect the pyramid model of power and gender relations with women at the bottom of it. Particularly, women were barred or restricted to leadership roles in both private and public spheres. The church established a hierarchy with God on the top, then Jesus as the head of the church, and husband as the head of wife.

This shows that the Christian Church, because of its survival and fear of persecution by the powerful colonial/imperialistic Greco-Roman Empire, sacrificed the egalitarian vision initiated by Jesus. Fioreza argues that it might be a necessity for the

¹⁷ Mary Pat Fisher, *Living Religions* (5th edition) (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1991), 305.

¹⁸ Pui-lan, *Postcolonial imagination*, 91.

¹⁹ Karen Jo Torjesen, *When Women Were Priests: Women's Leadership in the Early Church and the Scandal of Their Subordination in the Rise of Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1995), 37-38.

institutionalized church to adopt patriarchalism on the socio-political ground; but it cannot be justified on the theological ground. She also reasons that the socio-political justification of the patriarchalization of the church as the historical necessity for survival poses a danger that it is justified as the only way for the survival of the church.²⁰ That means the survival of the church requires the subordination of women and the marginalized others. This theologically goes against the spirit of Jesus' gospel and ministry. This church, if survives, a step betrays Jesus' cause for its own comfort and power.

Provided that patriarchalism of the church was historical necessity for survival under the imperialistic Greco-Roman Empire, would there be any difference in the treatment of women when the Christian Church itself became an Empire? According to Pui-lan, patriarchal privileges are what men cannot easily give up. In many cases, they "want to re-inscribe male-dominated norms to protect their

"manhood."²¹ In fact, when Christianity became the religion of the Roman Empire since Constantine the Great in the fourth century, the Church continued its indulgences in worshipping male authority and privileges through its monopoly of the canonization of sacred texts and interpretations regarding women.

With the politics of rooting heresy and consolidating the power and hierarchy of the Church, the church councils formulated the New Testament canon which left out many voices of women. The Gospel of Mary was a notable one. This Gospel testifies that Mary of Magdala was a receiver of Jesus' special teaching and became a leader among the disciples.²² Instead, anti-women texts were included to silence and exclude women from leadership. The passages in 1Timothy 2:11-14; Ephesians 5:22-24; 1Peter 3:1-2, 6 are typical examples.

Misogynistic practices were executed to reinforce the patriarchal system. The story about Hypatia (370-415 CE), head of the Neoplatonic

²⁰ Fiorenza, *In memory of her*, 80, 83.

²¹ Pui-lan, *Postcolonial imagination*, 91.

²² *Ibid.*, 8.

school of philosophy in Alexandria is an example. She was well-known for her mathematical and astronomical accomplishments. When seeing the Christian mobs burned down the world famous library of Alexandria, she spoke against it, saying: "Reserve your right to think, for even to think wrongly is better than not to think at all" and "To teach superstitious as truth is a most terrible thing." Bishop Cyril condemned her as immoral because of this and her unmarried status. It is believed that Bishop Cyril incited a Christian mob to kill her, dragged her body into the church and cut it into small pieces. On the contrary, Bishop Cyril became Saint Cyril of Alexandria after his death. The Victorian Anglican clergyman, Charles Kingsley, wrote a novel on Hypathia to teach women that they should not overstep their "ordain" place in society (as told by Antone).²³

Perhaps the most powerful weapon used to exclude women from leadership was the monopoly of textual interpretation by church fathers and theologians to subordinate women

throughout the church history. The following misogynistic interpretations are a few examples:

Origen: "*For it is improper for a woman to speak in an assembly, no matter what she says, even if she says admirable things or even saintly things; that is of little consequence since they come from the mouth of a woman.*"

Thomas Aquinas: "*As regards the individual nature, woman is defective and misbegotten, for the active force in the male seed tends to the production of a perfect likeness in the masculine sex; while the production of woman comes from a defect in the active force or from some material indisposition, or even from some external influence.*"

Thomas Aquinas: "*Although both man and woman were granted rational souls by God, woman's was weakened by being associated with a feeble body; the soul in a female is often unable to 'keep a firm grip on things' and hence falls into various sins, due to its relation with female physicality. Due to this female weakness conception and birth are the two unique 'help' which wives can give their husbands; for any other tasks, another man would be better suited. Even in the sex act, the husband's role is seen as the 'more noble' activity, whereas the wife's role is projected as one*

²³ Antone, "Asian women and Christianity," 27.

of passive receptivity, typical of womanhood."

John Calvin: "*Political equality for women would be a deviation from the original and proper order of nature*" (quoted by Antone).²⁴

The above pieces of evidence have shown that colonialism and patriarchy have closely worked together to produce misogynistic Biblical texts and their interpretations against women's participation in leadership. Christianity started as an egalitarian charismatic movement against the patriarchal and oppressive elements in Jewish religion and Greco-Roman Empire. This movement, initiated by Jesus, attracted and included many women and men to serve as Jesus' disciples and apostles. However, the egalitarian charismatic vision was obstructed when the Church assimilated to the patriarchal hierarchy of the colonial/imperialistic Greco-Roman Empire for its own survival and comfort. For women, the patriarchalized Christianity can be viewed as the second

colonial/imperialistic power beside the Greco-Roman one. When the Greco-Roman Empire was Christianized during Constantine the Great, Christian male leaders did not give up patriarchal privileges but continued to strengthen this power through their deification of women's subordination, misogynistic practices and distortive interpretations of women to deny them the right to equal leadership. Therefore, it is naïve to view the anti-women Biblical texts in 1Timothy 2:11-14; Ephesians 5:22-24; 1Peter 3:1-2,6 as religious texts divinely guided, but they should be treated as political texts to serve the male elites' status and power. It is the misuse of religion to serve political purpose.

COLONIAL AND PATRIARCHAL INFLUENCE IN THE FORMATION OF THE QUR'ANIC NEGATIVE TEACHINGS AND INTERPRETATIONS ON WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP.

Similar to the Christian tradition, the Qur'anic teachings and interpretations on women's leadership were influenced by colonial and patriarchal powers. Colonial influence

²⁴ Antone, "Asian women and Christianity," 27-28.

of the Qur'anic teachings on women's leadership can be seen through the influence of Arab culture and Islamic politics of imperialism which altered the gender equality vision of the Qur'an. Women's subordination became the politics for the expansion of Islam in the face of the powerful patriarchal Arab culture and religious others. Later women's leadership was suppressed by the male elites' misogynistic interpretations to reinforce their patriarchal privileges.

The gender equality vision revealed in the Qur'an is the creation story (the Qur'an 4:1) stating: "*O mankind! Reverence your garden-Lord, who created you from single person, created, of like-nature, his mate, and from them twain scattered (like seeds) countless men and women; Fear God, through Whom you demand your mutual (rights), and (reverence) the wombs (that bore you): for God ever watches over you.*" Barlas argues that the origination of human beings from a single Self "is (or should be) sufficient to establish women and men as the

same and as equal."²⁵ The Qur'an also celebrates the leadership, independence and wisdom of Queen of Sheba (the Qur'an 27:23-42). Similar to early Christianity, early Islam is a radical movement of egalitarianism and inclusivity. In his early years of mission, Muhammad owed much to his beloved wife, Khadijah, who gave him consultation, financial, emotional and spiritual support. There was no distinction between males or females and frees or slaves. For instance, a dark-skinned Abyssinian slave named Bilal, who was among the first converts and bought out of prison by the Prophet's friend Abu Bakr, became the first *muezzin* (one who calls the people to prayer from a high place).²⁶ According to Fadl, numerous reports testified to women's active leadership in social and political life at the time of the Prophet. For example, A'ishah led a rebellion after the death of the caliph Uthman; Ghazalah and her husband

²⁵Asma Barlas, "*Believing Women*" in *Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 134.

²⁶Fisher, *Living Religions*, 362-3.

defeated Kufah in an anti-Umayyad rebellion and she led the men fighters in prayers in the Kufah mosque.²⁷ These are positive elements regarding women's leadership in the Qur'an and in the early Islamic community.

However, like the Christian tradition, the beautiful vision of equalitarian community did not last long. Patriarchy always finds ways to assert its power even to the level of the Divine. Like the Bible, the Qur'an includes both liberating and oppressive elements to women. As Sugirtharajah and Pui-lan have argued, it is naïve to view sacred texts as religious writings guided by the Divine because they are also product of history and politics of the elites to keep their power and privileges. An examination of the Qur'an and its context shows that the Qur'anic negative teaching on women's leadership in *Surah* 4:34 is a product of Islamic imperialism under the influence of local culture and religions.

According to Gibb, the teachings of the Qur'an correspond well with the social, religious and political situation of the Muslim community during the Prophet's time. The development of early Muslim community can be divided into two major stages. In the first stage, Islam was a personal religion revealed to Muhammad in Mecca. It was merely religious and did not tie to any social-political system. In response to this period, the Qur'an teaches about human beings in general and in equal terms. However, in the second stage, Muhammad and his followers migrated to al-Madina where there was a large community of Jews and Christians. Here Islam became an established community and asserted itself as a religious-political system. To accommodate the local culture and religions especially Judaism and Christianity, Muhammad started to establish laws and instructions on different issues such as interfaith relations, marriage, divorce, inheritance and others. In this period, the Qur'an has specific teachings about women and

²⁷ Khaled Abou El Fadl, *Speaking in God's Name: Islamic Law, Authority, and Women* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2001), 229-230.

their relation to their husband.²⁸ Here the equal image of women and men in the previous passages in the Qur'an altered into a hierarchical relationship between men and women. *Sura 4:34* is an example. This teaching gives men the authority over women even to the point of beating women to submission. Gibb also notices that the Qur'anic teachings during this period show a close acquaintance with the Biblical and post-Biblical material.²⁹ It can be inferred that Jewish-Christian tradition was a source of influence on the patriarchal teachings regarding women's submission. One obvious example of the arbitrarily imported practice from the Judeo-Christian tradition is the law of divorce which gives the husband the right to divorce his wife by merely declaring it without any reason or justification and without any intervention of any judicial

authority. This law has given the present Muslim scholars a hard time to redeem this Qur'anic teaching from gender injustice.³⁰

The Muslim feminist Wadud, though trying to defend the tradition, had to acknowledge that the Qur'anic reform of the local tradition regarding women had to submit to the powerful patriarchal system:

The established order within the Arabian peninsula at the time of the revelation was patriarchal: a 'culture built on a structure of domination and subordination ...' which 'demands hierarchy'...The Qur'an's accommodation of various social contexts has been viewed as implying support for the particular social order that existed in seventh-century Arabia.³¹

The Muslim feminist Barlas also agrees that the particular misogynistic practices of the Arab culture found its way to the teaching of the Qur'an. She describes that the Arab society in the seventh century did not view women as "human beings", or "moral agents" or "independent legal persons." A husband, according to Assyrian law,

²⁸ Hamilton Alexander Rosskeen Gibb, "Islam," in *Encyclopedia of the World's Religions*, edited by R. C. Zaehner (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1997), 169; Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 78-79.

²⁹ Gibb, "Islam," 169.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 179.

³¹ Wadud, *Qur'an and woman*, 80-81.

could pull his wife' hair, mutilate her ears and even smash her teeth with burnt bricks. Barlas also accuses that the influence of the "baal" marriage from the Old Testament, which establishes men's lordship over their wives, made women more dependent on men by the time of Islam's advent.³² Barlas also argues that such misogynistic practices were beyond the awareness of the Arabs at the time of the Qur'an's revelation. She even said that the "Arabs did not invent sexual inequality or discrimination; no society in the seventh century was egalitarian since no society at that time recognized women as full human beings, or as moral agents, or as independent legal persons."³³ It seems that Barlas becomes so busy to apologize for the patriarchal influence of the Qur'anic text to the point of designating ignorance or stupidity to the Arabs that she underestimates the gender politics played by the Arab male elites. These men were clever enough to realize how such inequality kept themselves in

power and privileged positions. Perhaps Muhammad was wise enough to anticipate the scenario if women were given equal rights. Islam would have lost its support and would not have survived. Like Christianity, institutionalized Islam decided to sacrifice its egalitarian vision for this particular historical political context. It adopted the patriarchal culture but made it sound religious by sprinkling some holy water. It legitimated males' domination over females but lessened the harshness by adding the principle of peace. Again women became the victim of male politics for the expansion of institutionalized religion.

Similar to what happened in Christian tradition regarding male's suppression of women's leadership, the Muslim tradition does not lack accounts showing how the Muslim male elites reinforce their patriarchal authority and privileges through their misogynistic practices and interpretations. Fadle shows that the history of Muslim community parallels with the males' persistent resistance to women's leadership even during the time when the Prophet was still alive. For instance,

³² Barlas, "Believing women," 145, 169-170.

³³ *Ibid.*, 169.

Ibn Umar (d. 73/692) reported that Meccan men objected the presence of women in public forums. This made the Prophet explicitly command them to let the women attend the prayers in mosques. Despite this explicit order, the men still forbid the women to join the night prayer. Again the Prophet had to intervene and order that women be allowed to prayers both day and night. These men justified their exclusion of women from public worship by manipulating the differences between male's and female's body. They pointed to the Jewish tradition arguing that women's menstruation was God's punishment for their insisting on attending the temples of worship. Umar also admitted that, "when the Prophet was alive we were cautious when speaking and dealing with our women in fear that a revelation would come [from God] concerning our behavior. But when the Prophet died we were able to speak and deal with them [more freely] (quoted by Fadl).³⁴ Another tradition says that when the Prophet died, he actually transferred his

spiritual light to Fatima, his favorite daughter. However, neither she nor her husband, Ali, participated in the election of the first caliph. Later the Shi'ite claimed Ali, instead of Fatima, as the legitimate heir.³⁵ After the Prophet's death, Muslim accounts show that there were women leaders such as A'ishah, Kharijiyyah, and Ghazalah who led rebellions. Such women's leadership was strongly opposed by Abu Bakrah and Abu Hurayrah who produced misogynistic teachings using the name of the Prophet.³⁶

For example, Abu Hurayrah told a story about the Prophet's proclamation of women as the majority inhabitants of Hell because they were ungrateful to men and intellectually defective and bodily disadvantageous.³⁷ Another tradition attributed to either 'Umar, Abu Hurayrah, or the Prophet stating that men should not follow women's advice. For instance, 'Umar said, "do the opposite of what women advise you to do, for in doing the opposite is a [great] blessing." Abu

³⁴ Fadl, *Speaking in God's name*, 223.

³⁵ Fisher, *Living religions*, 365-366.

³⁶ Fadl, *Speaking in God's name*, 229-230.

³⁷ Barlas, "Believing women," 145.

Huray also used the name of the Prophet to make a similar claim that, “If the day comes when...your affairs are controlled by women, then being below the earth will be better than being on its surface (i.e., it is better to be dead). Abu Kakrah even proclaimed that women’s leadership would surely end up in failure (quoted by Fadl).³⁸

Muslim feminist scholars have acknowledged that these misogynistic interpretations, putting in the mouth of the Prophet Muhammad, have been used by today’s Muslim male leaders to justify Muslim women’s inferior status and deprive them of the rights to spiritual, social and political leadership. They are forbidden to lead worship rituals (*imamah*) and political activities.³⁹ This means that the men of today and the men of the Arab society in the seventh century are not different. Barlas was wrong to defend that the Arab men were ignorant of gender equality. The fact is that many well-educated Muslim men of today’s world, who are well aware of gender equality

movement and scientific knowledge, still hold on to the anti-women teachings and want to resurrect the seventh-century society in this modern time. Perhaps the better explanation is not that the Qur’anic misogynistic texts and anti-women Islamic traditions could not avoid the influence of patriarchy and male-hegemonic imperialism but that it was the very choice of men in privileged positions regardless how well they knew about the Divine’s will and the injustices inflicting on women. Though feminists like Wadud and Barlas try to redeem the oppressive law by linking it to the Qur’anic intention for peace and harmony, this kind of peace was without justice because it was the peace defined for the benefit men. In the end it is the greed for power and privilege that have driven institutionalized religions to use the best tools they have to keep their positions. These tools can be the culture, physical strength, law, tradition, sacred texts and even God. Qur’an 4:34 can be regarded as one of religiously sanctioned political tools of the Muslim male elites to subordinate women. The reality of women’s

³⁸ Fadl, *Speaking in God’s name*, 225, 229.

³⁹ Anisah & Hidayat, “Women and Islam”, 58; Barlas, “*Believing women*,” 145-146.

oppression in Muslim communities all over the world has proven it.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, through the lens of postcolonial hermeneutics, I have shown that the production and interpretation of the Biblical and Qur'anic misogynistic sacred texts are deeply influenced by colonialism and patriarchy. In both traditions, gender equality vision was obstructed and sacrificed for the comfort and expansion of institutionalized Christianity and Islam under colonial and patriarchal powers. It was the political motive and men's greed for power that underlie the generation and interpretation of anti-women discourses in both traditions. The denial of women's rights to leadership and the worship of maleness were projected to the level of God. Both cases have shown that once religion is concerned with its own institution and power, it loses the power to uplift humanity, to confront and transform injustices. It is unfortunate that religion tends to become more oppressive and

exploitative power than non-religious powers since it elevates the unjust justification to the Absolute. Women's subordination status is both a sign of religious violence and a call to a continuous reformation of religion to restore justice and meet the needs of the time.

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