There have been ripples of controversy in recent years over the difficulties of domestic marital violence across cultures. Ayesha Chaudhry’s book struggles with the history of Islamic religious interpretation that may have justified such an abuse of relationship based on the Quranic verse in Surah 4, verse 34, that calls for the obedience of wives to their husbands and seems to justify the hitting of wives by husbands in the case of disobedience even today (pp 23–24). The significance of such a debate cannot be underrated, especially when the research emerges out of a personal journey for the author (p 1). Chaudhry is one who longs to see a positive interpretation of the tradition, for a range of reasons which have to do with both the essential health of the Muslim community and its credibility – a longing prompted when she began to see a degree of inconsistency in the tradition (p 14).

As a Muslim woman, Chaudhry believes that there is one sacred scripture ‘to the exclusion of others’ (p 2). Thus, to live as a Muslim who receives what the Qur’an teaches is not an optional extra if she and others are to reflect something of the Qur’an in their lives and relationships. She therefore wants to discover what it means for men to have authority over women, and what obedience or disobedience (nushūz in Arabic), really mean in Surah 4:34.

Chaudhry looks at the intellectual history of reading the Quranic verse in question from the ninth century to the present day. She classifies these varied and often contradictory readings under two types: pre-colonial and post-colonial. Her main concern is to solve ‘the egalitarian–authoritative dilemma’ (pp 9–11): the pre-colonial tradition worked on what she regards as a ‘patriarchal cosmology’; the post-colonial worked on enhancing an ‘egalitarian cosmology’ (p 12). Here, she implicitly suggests that, without secular feminism (helped by colonialism), we might never have seen the urgency of this or the inconsistency of the previous positions (p 16). While she relates to studies on the role of colonialism in the development of post-colonial Quranic literature (p 198), she tends to the descriptive in her analysis of the Sitz im Leben of post-colonial texts, lacking a nuanced critique of the literature.

In the first three chapters, the author focuses on texts from the pre-colonial period. In Chapter 1, she struggles with the different possible meanings of the wider context of Surah 4:34. She examines the established tradition of...
asbâb al-nuzûl, the reasons for the revelation connecting the verse to narrative, Hadith (the body of sayings attributed to the Prophet Muhammad) and jurisprudence. In Chapter 2 she investigates the ethical background on disciplining wives. She discusses the different definitions of the various terms used but makes hardly any reference to theology or mysticism. Chapter 3 examines the different legal arguments, surveying the four legal schools in Islam. Despite the variety of frames of reference in the interpretation of this verse, Chaudhry concludes that the exegetes were monolithic in their patriarchal assumptions (p 40). They lead to similar conclusions, mainly that ‘the stances on the right of husbands to physically discipline wives shared essential similarities: the right to hit their wives if they committed nushûz’ (p 131).

In the second part of the book, Chaudhry focuses on the post-colonial readings, which shows a variety of reactions to modernity. These are divided into traditionalist, progressive and reformist readings. Modern traditionalist apologists tend to argue that the favouring of men over women is offset by the responsibility of earning a living, which is a legal obligation binding upon the husband, though the overall understanding was one of mutual rights, which were seen as standing in complementary balance (pp 162–168). Progressive scholars find a way of seeking authority from the Islamic tradition without adhering to its conclusions (pp 174–175). favouring Fazlur Rahman’s double movement theory of Qur’anic exegesis (p 175), Chaudhry shows how progressives break from the pre-colonial Islamic legal and exegetical traditions by interpreting wifely nushûz as sexual disloyalty (p 178), citing the references to both wifely and husbandly nushûz in Surahs 4:34 and 4:128. The reformist interpretations offer new and unprecedented meanings to the verse, breaking from the Islamic legal and exegetical traditions. Authority for the reformists is based on their reasoning alone (pp 185–194).

The author is right to suggest that there was a general agreement in the ‘pre-colonial’ period of patriarchal assumptions, but she does not discuss Sufi tafsîr, such as that of Ibn Arabî. She refers to the notable mediaeval exegete al-Tabârî and notes his occasional assuaging interpretations (pp 69–70, 74–75 and 78–79), but does not labour the point. The classical Muslim jurists were in disagreement over a number of key questions touching on women’s legal status. Hashim Kamali’s important article on divorce and women’s rights discusses these questions, but does not feature at all in this study.1 There have been other relatively recent attempts to challenge Western stereotypes of Muslim women but none of these important studies seem to feature in this book.2

The Qur’an for the Muslim, like the Bible for the Christian, cannot just be a passive text. The receiver is also a listener. Christians have had to deal with similar questions of interpretation. But the Christian cannot read the Bible fully without sitting at the table with Jesus, who is the ultimate interpreter. Without the Eucharist, the Christian could see the Bible either as a supernatural guide for individual conduct or a piece of detached historical record, mirroring the author’s ‘egalitarian–authoritative dilemma’.

Chaudhry’s conclusion, calling for the de-mythologising of the ‘Islamic tradition’ so that Muslims ‘can articulate and advocate for their creative interventions with authority’ (p 224), focuses on the need to engage with critical and historical studies alone. The same applies to Hadith: Muhammad can become the ally of the ‘fundamentalist’ as well as the liberal depending on the interpreter (pp 210–220). There is no doubt that good critical scholarship is an underappreciated gift of intellectual modernity among Muslim scholars as well as others; but this approach does not tease out the nature of Muslim identity itself as it relates to the Qur’an. Receiving what the Quranic text has to offer as a summons to the whole community (which is the orthodox understanding of the text as a literal summons of God) cannot happen if the commentators, be they traditionalist, progressive or reformist, are dominated by the time they think they occupy, so that anything coming from their commentaries is likely to be processed into whatever most concerns them now, subjected to the criteria by which they judge something as useful or useless for the time of their reading. Chaudhry herself seems to favour this relativist reading of the text (see pp 132, 171–172 and 203–206). Perhaps the ‘egalitarian–authoritative dilemma’ she faces is itself compounded by the collision of theologically inept or rootless accounts of the Qur’an; what is needed is a genuine theology of the Qur’an as the summons of God to the Muslim community. This book does not struggle enough to give us an answer to how the Muslim can avoid those two pitfalls.

Yazid Said
University of Tübingen
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