

Contending Complexities

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Thank you for inviting me to speak to you this evening. Last spring, when Scott Appleby phoned me about the launch of *Contending Modernities*, I was immediately intrigued. I have worked for many years in various forums of Muslim-Christian relations so I knew that Scott was proposing a project of significant scope and consequence. I am grateful to the University of Notre Dame for undertaking this initiative and hope that I can offer a few words that may prove helpful as the project progresses. My remarks will cluster under the three categories, or 'contenders', which structure the initial stage of this study: Islam, Catholicism and secularism.

The sacrality and sensuality of the Qur'an

Shortly after being promoted to full professor at the University of Toronto, I went back to graduate school. My family and friends found this a little odd, but there was a method to the madness. I had been teaching, lecturing and writing about the Qur'an for years, yet I felt there was something missing. I knew the Qur'an as a text and had devoted decades to research on its history and interpretation, publishing books and articles that drew upon more than a thousand years of Arabic and Persian commentary. But I had never studied the Qur'an like a Muslim scholar whose advanced preparation draws upon a full curriculum of Qur'anic studies.

So I took a sabbatical semester and spent it as a student in the religion faculty of a Muslim university in the Middle East. Like the other graduate students, I signed up for classes on theological hermeneutics, on the rhetorical interpretation of the Qur'an, on its legal and juridical passages, and on twentieth-century Shi'i and Sunni exegesis. I also enrolled in a practicum on the oral recitation or chanting of the Qur'an.

The experience was extraordinary in so many ways but two snapshots from that semester can serve to introduce the subject I want to stress. In my first days of class, I noticed that sometimes when two young women were sitting next to each other, one would turn the pages of the other's Qur'an. I watched this for awhile and then it dawned on me why this was happening. The second snapshot is related. During a class on contemporary Qur'an commentaries, I was seated with the Arabic text open on my lap. At one point in the lecture, the professor made a comment that I wanted to capture so I set

my notebook on top of the Qur'an page to record his remark. Immediately, I felt a fairly sharp poke in the ribs and, swinging around, saw my seatmate scowling at my notebook.

As Christian users of scripture, we don't think much about our physical relation to the text. We're not preoccupied with ritual purity when we pick up the holy book. But Muslims are. That's why a young woman will turn the Qur'an pages for her menstruating classmate. That's why I was jabbed for setting something on top of God's word. I use the phrase 'God's word' quite advisedly. The Muslim doctrine of revelation is far closer to a doctrine of dictation. The Arabic words on the page, the sounds heard in recitation, are exactly what God conveyed via the angel of revelation to his prophet, Muhammad.

For Muslims, the term 'sacred scripture' is more than an intellectual assertion. It has a carnal quality, involving the eyes, the ears and the lips, affecting the sense of taste¹ and touch. In ways quite different from the Bible, the Qur'an is a physical experience. As a father cradles his newborn and whispers a few Qur'anic verses in the infant's ear, a life-long aural immersion in God's word begins. In a few years, the child may begin to memorize some short verses, practicing their proper pronunciation and intonation. As this education proceeds, the young Muslim may advance to the study of *tajwid*, the elaborate discipline of Qur'anic recitation that can take years to master and whose professional practitioners are highly esteemed.

Immersion is visual as well as aural. The colossal calligraphy of Qur'anic verses embellishes monumental architecture across the Muslim world. The script and ornamentation of exquisite manuscript pages has drawn the gaze of believers for centuries. A religious culture that proscribes human portrayal has beautified the written word like few others. [A small aside: by happy coincidence, a current exhibition at the New York Public Library displays some extraordinary Qur'ans and Bibles.²]

The carnal experience of the Qur'an carries important consequences for initiatives, like *Contending Modernities*, that seek a comparative scriptural conversation. The Qur'an and the Bible operate differently within their respective religious traditions. One level of divergence is the physical, as I've just discussed. Another lies in what I would call 'scriptural self-consciousness.' To an extent unknown in either the Hebrew Bible or the New Testament, the Qur'an expresses an emphatic awareness of itself as scripture. A Georgetown University scholar who has been involved in the planning of this project, Fr. Daniel Madigan, S.J., has written at length about *The Qur'an's Self-Image*³ but I'll point to only two aspects of this phenomenon, one exegetical and the other theological.

A verse found early in the third sura/chapter of the Qur'an (Q 3:7) exhibits a strong self-reflective sense.⁴ It establishes hermeneutical categories, dividing the scripture into clear and ambiguous/allegorical passages. It assigns exegetical authority, lodging this with God alone or, in some

¹ For the early talismanic use of the Qur'an, see Travis and Zadeh, "Touching and Ingesting: Early Debates over the Material Qur'an," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 129 (2009): 443-466.

² "Three Faiths: Judaism, Christianity, Islam," on view through 27 February 2011.

³ Daniel A. Madigan, *The Qur'an's Self-Image: Writing and Authority in Islam's Scripture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

⁴ Jane Dammen McAuliffe, "Text and Textuality: Q. 3:7 as a Point of Intersection," in Issa Boullata, ed., *Literary Structures of Religious Meaning* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 2000) pp. 56 – 76.

readings, with God and the rightly-guided. It cautions against the ever-present danger of malevolent misinterpretation.⁵ All major commentators on the Qur'an from Abu Ja'far ibn Jarir al-Tabari in the late 9th century to Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i in the 20th have devoted extended attention to this verse.

If this first aspect of scriptural self-consciousness focuses inward on the text itself, the second scans externally, connecting the Qur'an to its antecedents. Many passages in the Qur'an place it within the continuous stream of divine revelation that includes, to use Qur'anic terms, both the Tawrat/Torah and the Injil/Gospel. But in the Muslim theology of revelation, this is not simply a matter of chronology, of what comes earlier and what comes later. It is a matter of supersession and abrogation. The Qur'an see itself as the culmination and completion of God's revelatory action, superseding and abrogating all previous scriptures.

The many 'Catholicisms' of our modernity

Again, I'll begin with some personal recollections. After my mother died, as we were preparing the family home for sale, I came upon a few grainy black-and-white snapshots that rekindled a long-forgotten childhood memory. I must have been about five or six years old and still living in Madison, Wisconsin when my mother bundled me into the car and we took off into the country. She probably drove about two hours before we parked in a big open field and began walking across the bumpy ground to join a rapidly-swelling crowd. I had no idea what was going on but my mother kept telling me that soon we were going to see the Blessed Virgin.

Our third child was born in Rome. My husband Dennis and I were spending a research year there with our two older children and awaiting the blessed event. About a month after the baby's birth, we took off for a short holiday in Sicily. Driving down the Italian coast we stopped at famous sites along the way, including the cathedral in Reggio Calabria. I remember that walking from hot sunshine into the cool, dimly-lit interior felt soothing and refreshing. With our infant daughter in my arms, I began to explore the cathedral's beauty. Before long, a local priest in traditional black cassock and cincture approached to greet the baby. He was about to stroke her forehead when he asked if she had been baptized. I said, "No, that will happen in a few weeks when family can be with us." His face went dark and exclaiming "She's full of the devil; she's full of the devil," he backed away.

Two years ago on just about this date, I was walking down one of the vast corridors of the Vatican toward a papal audience. Pope Benedict XVI had convened a group of Catholic and Muslim scholars for what was billed as the first Catholic-Muslim Forum. The audience was a formal and somewhat solemn occasion with the polite exchange of greetings and speeches.

Three stories, three quite different Catholicisms, all of which continue to co-exist. There's the Catholicism of my American childhood where May processions and family rosaries were as powerfully formative as the liturgy and sacraments. Although the farmhouse shrine in Necedah, Wisconsin no longer attracts the tens of thousands that it did when my mother took me there, people still show up

⁵ For a very recent rebuttal of such contemporary efforts see "Believers Beware: Injustice Cannot Defeat Injustice," <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3lofpsHOosE>

and pray at the site where Mary Ann Van Hoof claimed that the Virgin Mary appeared to her just outside her kitchen door. The Calabrian priest and the Roman pontiff live only a few hundred miles from each other but their Catholicisms are quite, quite different.

This collection of Catholicisms, which could be endlessly multiplied, raises important challenges to the study upon which we are embarked, the study of the intersections of Catholicism and modernity. Which Catholicisms—or Islams—will be welcome as representative of the traditions that subsume such diversity? What will count as normative, as worthy of serious consideration? From all the time that I've spent at academic conferences and interfaith gatherings, I can attest to the subtle exclusions of scholarly endeavor. 'Rapture-ready' Christians and strict Salafi Muslims are absent from such events.

Robert Orsi, a prize-winning historian of twentieth-century American Catholicism, insightfully studies this complexity. In his many books, articles and lectures Orsi has probed the rich reality of Catholicism lived below the level of papal pronouncements or ecclesiastically-organized activities. His is the world of novenas to St. Jude, holy cards and relics, Marian apparitions and devotions to the Sacred Heart. Family characters figure prominently in Orsi's incisive analysis of the disjunctures that define modernity, disjunctures between the natural and the supernatural, the literal and the metaphorical, the officially sanctioned and the heterodox. Here is Orsi on his grandmother:

Imagine one of my Italian Catholic grandmothers going to see a statue of the Virgin Mary in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. She climbs the museum's steep steps rising up from Fifth Avenue and pushes through the crowds and into the rooms of medieval art, where there are many lovely statues of the Blessed Mother, whom my grandmother knows and loves. My grandmother wants to touch the statues. She wants to lean across the velvet ropes to kiss their sculpted robes or to whisper her secrets and needs.⁶

But where does Bob Orsi's grandmother fit in the project that we are launching today? Will the Catholic charismatic movement have a place? What will be the position of Pentecostalism and evangelical affiliations? How about an interdenominational fellowship organization like Women's Aglow that functions as 'church' for thousands of Catholic women,⁷ women who practice a post-feminist theology of sacrifice and submission to male authority. 'Practice' is the scholarly category to which I am pointing.

In the study of religion, our scholarly practices have privileged texts, doctrines and ecclesiastical structures. For Christianity, we have foregrounded formal theology and the histories of the established churches. In the last several decades the ascent of social history and cultural anthropology has focused

⁶ Robert Orsi, "When 2+2+5," *The American Scholar* (Spring 2007), <http://www.theamericanscholar.org/when-2-2-5/> See also, Robert A. Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

⁷R. Marie Griffith, *God's Daughters: Evangelical Women and the Power of Submission*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997); idem, "Submissive Wives, Wounded Daughters, and Female Soldiers: Prayer and Christian Womanhood in Women's Aglow Fellowship," in David D. Hall, ed., *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1997), pp. 160 – 195.

attention on ‘popular’ religion or, as it is increasingly called, ‘lived’ religion.⁸ But this expanded focus creates continuing tension within the scholarly community. It’s easy to talk about each tradition’s internal plurality but quite difficult to accept or enact that plurality in specific situations. During my years of leadership involvement with the American Academy of Religion, I saw this disquiet play itself out in dramas of dismissal or denigration.

With the recognition that most ordinary Catholics (or Muslims, for that matter) don’t operate only or primarily in the realms of doctrine and ecclesiology, the scholarly study of religion is reaching into the lives of real people with all the ensuing fluidity, messiness, particularity and ambivalence that entails. Ethnography unearths the extra-ecclesial, the unregulated, the places of resistance and subversion. It also becomes a rescue effort, the reclamation of forms of belief and practice that are too easily ignored or disparaged.

An important part of this multiplicity is not just geography, whether a shrine in Wisconsin, a cathedral in Calabria, or the papal apartments in Rome. An important part is demography. It is worth repeating that the Catholicism represented in this room may be politically dominant—for the moment—but it is a demographic minority. In the last century the world’s population has shifted massively from the developed North to the developing global South. Statistics from this month’s *Foreign Affairs* document the shift: “The North accounted for 32 percent of the world’s population in 1900, 25 percent in 1970, and about 18 percent in 2000. By 2050, it will likely account for just 10 percent.”⁹ The interactions of Islam, Christianity and secularism operate very differently in the global South than in the post-Enlightenment cultures of western Europe and North America. The fault lines of religious demography also function asymmetrically in the minority-Christian lands of the Middle East and the Orthodox-majority regions of eastern Europe and Russia.

Secularism and sexism

I’ll preface these remarks with a deliberately provocative assertion: Most educated women in this country and elsewhere would argue that secularism has been much kinder to women than religions. Women’s advancement in secular societies has far outdistanced that of religiously-dominated cultures.

At the entrance to my Bryn Mawr office hangs a portrait of Susan B. Anthony, founder of the National Women’s Suffrage Association. The first quarter century of the College’s history coincided with the final push toward passage of the Nineteenth Amendment. Although born a Quaker, Anthony increasingly distanced herself from formal religious affiliation. A similar pattern can be seen in the life of my predecessor, Martha Carey Thomas, the second president of Bryn Mawr College and an extraordinary

⁸ Recent interest in the seven-volume illustrated encyclopedia of religions produced by Jean Frederic Bernard and the engraver Bernard Picart, *Cérémonies et coutumes religieuses de tous les peuples due monde* (1723-43) draws our attention to this eighteenth-century effort to map religious complexity and heterogeneity. See Lynn Hunt, Margaret Jacob and Wijnand Mijnhardt, eds., *Bernard Picart and the First Global Vision of Religion* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2010) and idem, *The Book that Changed Europe: Picart & Berhard’s “Religious Ceremonies of the World”* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2010).

⁹ Scott M. Thomas, “A Globalized God: Religion’s Growing Influence in International Politics,” *Foreign Affairs* 89 (2010), p. 93. (The developed North is chiefly North America, western Europe and the former Soviet republics.)

figure in the history of American higher education. Bryn Mawr, which celebrates its 125th anniversary this year, was founded by Quakers and daily chapel gatherings were a feature of College life for decades. But President Thomas' primary—indeed sole—focus was academic excellence. She wanted to create an elite institution for women, whose undergraduate and PhD programs were on par with the best universities in the world. She chafed at the constraints of Quaker paternalism and found scant support for her academic ambitions in the more modest aspirations of her male Quaker sponsors.

Susan B. Anthony's and Martha Carey Thomas' religious withdrawal was replicated in the second wave of feminism which began to sweep North America and western Europe in the late sixties. Stimulated by both the civil rights and the anti-war movements in this country, this second wave spawned a scholarship of recovery and resistance. In both its theoretical and activist aspects, resurgent feminism challenged established ecclesiastical structures and time-honored textual interpretations. Like their turn-of-the-century predecessors, the women most deeply invested in advancing gender equity found stronger support in secular humanism than in institutional religion. Despite such historical antecedents as the Women's Bible of the mid-nineteenth century or the women's liberation theology produced by twentieth-century Jews and Christians, contemporary campaigns for gender justice rarely invoke religious rationales.

The parallel history of Muslim feminism both replicates and realigns this pattern. As efforts for women's liberation emerged in Muslim-majority countries, particularly in the Middle East and North Africa in the first half of the twentieth-century, they were shaped by the forces of anti-colonial struggle, nationalist mobilization and technological modernization. Like their Western counterparts, these initiatives were action-oriented secular social movements that presumed the protections of emerging nation-states where individual rights and religious freedom were politically guaranteed. They were focused predominantly on the public not the private sphere and were informed by a broader modernist discourse that sought more egalitarianism in education, employment and political participation.

As several recent studies make clear, this first wave of 'secular' feminism in Muslim societies has been superseded, or at least supplemented, by the late twentieth-century emergence of Islamic feminism.¹⁰ Islamic feminism represents a far more radical challenge because it promotes women's rights through reinterpretation of the Qur'an and the *hadith*. The rising tide of women's education has benefited Muslim women across the globe. Many have now taken advanced degrees in the principal fields of Islamic religious studies and are scholars of the primary texts. They are building, along with sympathetic male colleagues, an alternative exegetical discourse, arguing that the prevailing patriarchal model of family and society does not reflect core Qur'anic assertions of human equality and gender justice.

I sketch this brief history of feminism because there is no place where the 'contending' between Catholicism and modernity, between Islam and modernity, has been more fraught than on issues involving women. Perhaps the strongest accusation that secular society lodges against both Catholicism and Islam is the charge that they devalue and debase women. As adherents of these faiths, we may

¹⁰ Margot Badran, *Feminism in Islam: Secular and Religious Convergences* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009); Isobel Coleman, *Paradise Beneath Her Feet: How Women are Transforming the Middle East* (New York: Random House, 2010).

argue that such judgments are deeply flawed and grossly unfair but I suspect that all of us have found ourselves in conversations where we were asked to defend our tradition's treatment of women.

In an essay entitled, "What Might an Anthropology of Secularism Look Like?" Talal Asad cites a characterization with which many advocates for gender justice would agree, referring to secularism as "a rational principle that calls for the suppression—or at any rate, the restraint—of religious passion so that a dangerous source of intolerance and delusion can be controlled, and political unity, peace, and progress secured."¹¹

The secular discourse about women's rights has shifted markedly in the last decade. No longer is gender equity discussed chiefly as a matter of moral mandates. It's become an important foreign policy and national security concern, as well as a key factor in global economic development. In other words, the argument has expanded from ethics to economics. The UN's Millennium Development Goals set women's empowerment at the center of the fight against global poverty. The argument for educating girls has been development dogma for two decades but suddenly it's gaining a much wider audience. What's happening?

A paper prepared by a senior economist at Goldman Sachs offers an initial answer. It focuses on the world's emerging markets¹² and comes to this conclusion: "Narrowing the gender gap in employment—which is one potential consequence of expanded female education—could push income per capita as much as 14% higher than our baseline projections by 2020, and as much as 20% higher by 2030."¹³ Quite simply, women's education and economic empowerment will be crucial to corporate success in the fast-expanding world of emerging markets.

Last month, I participated in a conference at Harvard entitled "Closing the Gender Gap". The conference wasn't held at the Divinity School or even the Faculty of Arts and Sciences. It was jointly hosted by the Kennedy School of Government and the Harvard Business School. At its most effective, the economic argument intensifies the ethical, as in the recent books by the journalists Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn and the philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah.¹⁴

Will the efforts for the education, political empowerment and economic advancement of half the world's population be driven largely by the religiously nonaligned? Will women's rights advocates continue to derive more support from secular humanism than from Catholicism and Islam? I do not discount or diminish the work being done by dedicated individuals and organizations in each of these

¹¹ Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam and Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 22.

¹² BRICs and N-11 (Next 11): Bangladesh, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Korea, Mexico, Nigeria, Pakistan, Philippines, Turkey and Vietnam

¹³ Sandra Lawson, "Global Economics Paper No: 164, Women Hold Up Half the Sky," <http://www2.goldmansachs.com/ideas/demographic-change/women-hold-up-half-of-the-sky.pdf>

¹⁴ Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn, *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide*, (New York: Vintage, 2010); Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The Honor Code: How Moral Revolutions Happen* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010).

traditions.¹⁵ Yet I cannot deny that women's bodies remain ideological battlegrounds in both, and in others, as well. More starkly, women's bodies remain real battlegrounds. The terrorism of the Taliban is carved on the face of the beautiful young Afghan woman who gazed at us last summer from the cover of *Time Magazine*. In Congo, a predominantly Christian country, the mass rape by militias terrorizes women of all ages.

A concluding word on 'contending'

My remarks to you this evening have clustered around the three initial foci of *Contending Modernities*, Islam, Catholicism and secularism. But let me also offer a comment about the word 'contending', a choice of terminology that I find particularly felicitous. Having recently emerged from the near-maniacal virulence of the midterm elections, I suspect that all of us are worried about the deep decline in civil discourse. Dogmatic assertion replaces reasoned argumentation. Pseudofacts surge through the internet and our soundbite culture erases all appetite for nuance, complexity and critical thinking. In the words of NYU's president, John Sexton, "We have created a coliseum culture that reduces discourse to gladiatorial combat."¹⁶

Yet a project like this can counter the trend. 'Contending' need not degenerate into unproductive contention. Both Catholicism and Islam honor the value of sustained study and constructive argumentation.¹⁷ A Qur'anic passage on which I have published urges believers to "debate with them in the better way" (Q 16:125) and commentators have drawn a developed etiquette of intellectual exchange from this verse. Genesis 18:20-32, which certainly ranks among my favorite Biblical passages, recounts Abraham's contending with God about the destruction of Sodom.

Too often interfaith initiatives tiptoe around certain topics for fear of sparking conflict. If participants enter these encounters with differing levels of preparation, if they feel forced to assume a representational posture, discourse will quickly devolve to the banal—and stay there. But that becomes a recipe for superficiality. *Contending Modernities* presents a corrective with its commitment to serious scholarly research, to sustained connection and collaboration and to productive contribution to the most important contemporary conversations.¹⁸

I'll conclude with a final story that draws together my three themes. I spent a summer in Cairo many years ago studying Arabic. One of my tutors was a devote Muslim who often guided our conversations to religious topics. After he'd come to know me, he pulled out his wallet one day and drew from it a

¹⁵ The worldwide contributions of Catholic health organizations are immense. They are, for example, a major factor in the sub-Saharan fight against HIV-AIDS.

¹⁶ John Sexton, "Dogmatism and Complexity: Civil Discourse and the Research University," <http://www.nyu.edu/about/sexton-dogmatism.html>

¹⁷ For the renewed interest in a comparative theology that takes the contemporary critique of religious studies seriously, see Reid B. Locklin and Hugh Nicholson, "The Return of Comparative Theology," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78 (2010): 477-514.

¹⁸ As an instructive example of such potential contributions, see R. Scott Appleby and John T. McGreevy, "Catholics, Muslims and the Mosque," *The New York Review of Books*, 30 September 2010

small card. It was what Catholics would call a holy card, a traditional depiction of the Virgin Mary.¹⁹ My teacher talked about the Qur'anic presentation of Mary and about his devotion to her as a woman whom God had honored and blessed. I was touched by the trust his personal revelation placed in me and the memory of that moment has remained for me a defining instance of interfaith encounter. It was prompted by a woman, a woman who may well serve as a guide star for the work upon which we embark this evening, Notre Dame.

¹⁹ Further to this see Willy Jansen, "Marian Images and Religious Identities in the Middle East," in Anna-Karina Hermkens, Willy Jansen and Catrien Notermans, eds., *Moved by Mary: The Power of Pilgrimage in the Modern World* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009), pp. 33-48.