

PROPHECY AND POWER
MUHAMMAD AND THE QUR'AN IN THE
LIGHT OF COMPARISON

Marilyn Robinson Waldman

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Postscript

SUFFERING BY COMPARISON

Lindsay Jones

It is inevitable that while Marilyn Waldman is fondly remembered by many as a historian of Islam with special interests in comparison, others have felt her influence primarily as a comparativist with special interests in Islam. Bruce Lawrence's comments in the Preface remind us of the former possibility, and my comments accentuate the latter; that is, the sense in which my former Ohio State colleague's work is consequential and relevant to scholars of religion, indeed all scholars, who only tangentially share her deeply informed concerns with Islamic traditions.

As we are reminded in that Preface, there is an artificiality to this rendition of *Prophecy and Power: Muhammad and the Qur'an in the Light of Comparison* insofar as it fixes an unfinished conversation that the author was having with her colleagues, her students, and most of all with herself right up until the final months of her life. The latest versions of this book, still very rough-hewn, were heavily revised and reorganized in the context of the final course that Marilyn taught at Ohio State, a seminar entitled "Comparison as a Social Act;" to be sure, reading the present book transports me back to the countless discussions about the topic that we had both in and outside of that class. That Bruce Lawrence, along with a wide and shifting array of colleagues and graduate students, managed to fashion the messily exuberant manuscript that she left us into a smooth narrative is a wonderful accomplishment; that skillful editorial endurance ought to be heartily congratulated. Nonetheless, we can be certain that, had her untimely death in 1996 not intervened, there would have been many more and large revisions. She was relentlessly critical of her own work, and by no means ready to announce this project complete.

Though a large share of the materials for that final seminar were drawn from Islam, and focused especially on ways that Muslims have

defined themselves and their tradition via comparisons to Judaism and Christianity, her interests spilled over into the more generic processes of comparison both as a scholarly method and, even more compelling for her, as a social practice. Herself a great champion of comparison, she alerted students to the plentiful hostility that has been heaped on comparative scholarship. They were apprised, for instance, that, for many scholars, comparison is akin to an infectious disease, made especially dangerous by its enduring and wide contagion. Unwilling to extricate their assessments of "the comparative method" from the work of James G. Frazer, William Robertson Smith and E.B. Tylor, many continue to caricature comparison as a kind of home-wrecking procedure: it yanks elements away from their systems of cultural or familial relations and slams them into the confines of some evaluative, probably evolutionary scheme. In this view, comparison, particularly of a cross-cultural sort that so fascinated Marilyn, either willfully or inadvertently wrenches historical phenomena out of their cultural contexts, and thus flattens and disrespects the uniqueness of individual cases. According to critics of that ilk, we must, as a matter of academic responsibility, and to the greatest extent possible, abjure comparison.

For others among Marilyn's inventory of detractors, the abuses of comparison, as a sibling to typology and morphology, are primarily of a (dis)organizational sort insofar as superficial similarities are allowed to provide the basis for catalogue and pigeonhole efforts: at best expedient, they are more often insidious and distorting. Interesting and telling idiosyncrasies thus become reduced to mere instances of broader, reified categories. For other critics, comparison amounts to an ahistorical or even anti-historical mode of judgment by analogy, an insidious form of misleading that perverts discrete and unique phenomena by seeing and assessing them in terms of something other than themselves. For still others, Marilyn mused, the transgressions of comparison are related primarily to generalization and totalizing abstraction. By this reasoning, what is comparison but a method for building, seemingly afloat in the air between concrete cases, forgettable idealizations and fictive universals that correspond to nothing other than the scholar's prejudiced imagination? Comparison must be condemned, we are told, as a decidedly "uncritical" affair insofar as it always undermines empirical rigor and usually perpetuates some form of social oppression and injustice. Finally, in her catalogue of criticisms leveled at comparison and comparativists, Marilyn reminded students that for an even larger constituency—including many practitioners of "comparative religion"—comparison is so integral to all our processes of thinking and decid-

that it does not merit, nor should it receive, special comment. Explicit discussions of comparative methods like those on which her final seminar was trained are, from that perspective, both redundant and otiose, empty alike of substantive content or analytical rewards.

None of these criticisms is entirely unwarranted, and, of course, none escaped Marilyn's critical view. Specters of totalization and essentialism, evolutionism and diffusionism, decontextualization and reification, do accompany many versions of comparison. And they do pose, as she constantly cautioned us, significant threats to our critical health. She was, in many respects, a historians' historian, uncompromisingly appreciative of the uniqueness of particular persons and events, and thus incessantly skeptical of any version of generalization. Yet, notwithstanding widespread disdain for what is so often imagined as the "disease of comparison"—disdain linked in many cases with attachment to the hopeful, if elusive, expectation of prejudiceless description of isolated, individual cases—Marilyn persuaded us that no immunization is foolproof.

To the contrary, she countered these deep and wide suspicions about the so-termed comparative method by forcing others to recognize the ubiquity of comparison. In her view, while the prospect of studying specific historical phenomena strictly "on their own terms"—that is, ostensibly *non-comparatively*—might be well-intentioned, such efforts are certain to be frustrated, and for the very reason that anti-comparativists most fear: the ubiquity of the comparison virus. As she made eminently clear, even the most rigorous empirical descriptions, a goal to which she herself always aspired, always already presuppose comparative studies. She argued with equal measures of toughness and humor that strategic pleas to absolute singularity either for one's self or one's objects of study, claims that phenomena are "beyond compare" or "utterly different," are never, in the end, sustainable. Comparison, in some fashion, is unavoidable; it is a virus that can be contained but not eliminated.

Indeed—and this is the insight from which she drew her course title—Marilyn made the case that comparison is *not* simply a method of study; nor is it one academic option among many. Instead, she insisted that comparison is no less than *a fact of life*. Not just a virus it can also be, and should become, a cure for worse viruses. All interpretation, all organizations of knowledge, all understanding must, of necessity, pass through what others have termed "the travail of comparison." Accordingly, having realized early on that all scholarship, all teaching, perhaps all of life's endeavors, are to some significant extent comparative, she urged that, rather than aspiring to avoid comparison, it ought

to be embraced—though, as she undertook all things, in a highly self-conscious and critical fashion. Though not an easy cure, comparison if undertaken with rigor, can, she argued, heal a host of problems, scholarly and otherwise.

In order to heighten sensitivities regarding the crucial and ubiquitous role that comparison plays in nearly all aspects of life, Marilyn encouraged her students to reflect upon, and to take seriously, what she termed “lexical usages” in relation to comparison, that is, idiomatic, colloquial, and seemingly off-handed phrases in which scholars and non-scholars invoked the language and strategy of comparison. She appraised and scrutinized, for instance, the familiar but glib phrases “comparing apples and oranges,” “to compare and contrast,” “comparatively speaking,” “beyond comparison,” “unfair comparison,” “same difference,” and so forth. And then, she provided her own favorite. She commented, as I recall, that of all the colloquial phrases she could summon to mind, the one that was best suited to *her* attitudes toward comparison, and that best exemplified her understanding of the unique value of comparison for scholarship and teaching, was “comparing notes.” That metaphor superseded all others because it implied an activity that served to open and promote discussion rather than foreclosing debate, to widen rather than narrow the range of alternatives, and to share and exchange insights rather than to hoard them. To mix two of her favorite metaphors, the academic activity to which she aspired required her to position herself as a “hostess” who brought together people, both live scholars and historical figures, to “compare notes.”

Capitalizing on her own pedagogical ploy, I organize the remainder of this postscript by keying on some of those colloquial phrases as clues with which to summarize four of Marilyn’s recurrent points about the happily inescapable ubiquity of comparison.

First, under that infamous rubric of complaints about the insidiousness of “comparing apples and oranges,” Marilyn focused a spotlight on the widespread, actually prevalent, tendency to imagine that some phenomena are “naturally” amenable to comparison, while other comparative juxtapositions are simply impossible, infelicitous or somehow “unfair.” In response to that charge, Marilyn impelled us to realize that *all* comparisons are artificial and contrived insofar as they require the construction of a special, heuristic context in which to reflect, with special interests and perspectives, on a juxtaposition of one’s own making. As she wrote in a brief e-mail message and then elaborated in her manuscript, when comparing, “it is important to pay attention to contexts—the context from which the things compared are drawn, and

context in which the act of comparison is undertaken.” Consequently, she contended that no phenomena, however seemingly unparallel and irrelevant to one another, are intrinsically “incomparable” or “beyond compare.” No—or perhaps, depending on your perspective, *all*—such juxtapositions are, in that sense, “unfair comparisons” insofar as they entail the relocation of discrete phenomena into some comparative arena, some heuristic comparative context, of the comparer’s own making. By her critical assessment, neither so-termed “obvious similarities” nor “obvious differences” are ever so obvious, self-evident or “natural” as they might first appear.

A second, closely related and even larger cluster of Marilyn Waldman’s insights about comparison arises in relation to her rejoinders to similarly common and equally pejorative objections about “idle comparison” or “insignificant comparison.” Comparison, she reminded us, is too often imagined as a strictly academic procedure, an optional option with few consequences beyond pedagogy or illustration. In response to that charge, her scholarly protocol, both in the classroom and in writing—with the current book providing her most sustained exposition on this point—demonstrates over and over again that there are few if any fully disinterested, “idle comparisons.” Invariably, comparison is, as she entitled her seminar, “a social act,” a matter of some social and material consequence. That is to say, Marilyn persuaded us that comparison, as an always-contrived procedure, must become a pragmatic, evaluative, interested social act, undertaken with express purposes (either successfully or unsuccessfully) of changing opinions, reconfiguring socio-economic alliances, and redistributing religious and/or political power. Focusing on the social ramifications of comparison, Marilyn’s work, whether in this book or that seminar, suggests that, on the one hand, someone, some institution, or some idea always “suffers by comparison.” On the other hand, though, the converse is nearly always also true: virtually all comparisons are, from some perspective or slant, “fruitful comparisons” insofar as they accrue an advantage or privilege to the parties who undertake them.

In other words, where there has been boundless debate about the relative merits of *scholars* undertaking comparisons, Waldman shifted the gaze to a largely neglected version of “comparative religion” that scrutinizes the ways that historical communities and religious actors have themselves undertaken comparisons, especially as a means of winning ascendancy over their competitors. Thus, instead of the familiar scholarly exercise of reflecting on similarities and differences among, for instance, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad, she brought to our attention the

now-unmistakable—but previously unnoticed—sense in which Moses, Jesus and especially Muhammad were themselves “comparativists.” This point is as brilliant as it is rare, as welcome as it has been, up to now, ignored. Marilyn made us see the sense in which, and the extent to which, historical religious figures as well as academic students of religion have relied deliberately and aggressively on strategies of comparison in order to make their cases, to plead their singularity, and thus to win some social advantage. She helped us to appreciate, for example, how Jewish claims to uniqueness depend upon, and are sustained by, the rhetoric of comparison; how religious leaders in Africa and elsewhere deploy comparison to legitimate their platforms of reform; and how the recasting of biblical materials in the Quran, say in the story of Joseph, supports in a comparative fashion Muslims’ claims to continuity with, yet *divergence from*—and thus *superiority over*—other Abrahamic peoples. For Marilyn, it is the strategic role of comparison “in the street” as it were—comparison, most notably, in the calculated maneuvering between Muslims, Jews and Christians, or between Muslims and other Muslims—that is most interesting and revealing.

Moreover, once those floodgates were opened, recognitions of “comparison as a social act” multiplied at an alarming rate. This line of inquiry worked for Waldman and her students like one of those computer-generated designs that camouflages some image so that, first, you do not even notice it; but then, once discerned, you cannot *not* see the formerly obscured image. Recognitions of comparison became, as she herself repeatedly noted, a kind of compulsion, even an obsession, and her enthusiasm for the matter was contagious. Yet she not only identified the virus of comparison; she helped to spread it. Under her influence, we were slapped with realizations concerning the “strategic comparisons” that were at work in automobile and furniture advertisements, in the promotion and assessment of political candidates, in sports and sports commentaries, in comedians’ monologues, in grocery shopping and grading papers, in walking through a building, or in picking a television program to watch. Everywhere suddenly we were confronted with, to borrow again her seminar title, exercises in “comparison as a social act.” She proved eloquently and emphatically, and often with her characteristically wry and self-deprecating humor, that comparison is hardly the sole preserve of academics.

In any event, that brings me to a third sort of observation about Marilyn Waldman’s comparative preoccupations. By keying in on colloquial references to “felicitous comparison,” “productive comparison,” and “fruitful comparison” she forced us to recognize the sense in which t

supposed “fruits” of comparison are far richer and more abundant than is commonly appreciated. Comparison is, or could be, in her view, far more than a means of organizing or cataloguing knowledge. The estimable and underestimated value of comparison is due to the fact that it is, in her words, “an important way of producing new knowledge.” That is to say, where comparison is usually embraced by academics, either directly or implicitly, as a procedure for the “discovery” of apparently pre-existent meanings, meanings that are somehow already “out there” awaiting our acts of retrieval, Marilyn compels us to appreciate that “comparison involves the construction of *new* meanings.” Comparison becomes productive, constructive and transformative in ways, and to an extent, that far too few scholars and pedagogues have been willing or able to realize. Comparison may be orchestrated by academics, religious leaders, architects, ritual choreographers, politicians, journalists or comedians, but invariably it becomes, Marilyn teaches us, among the most effective means for challenging and rearranging the status quo rather than simply replicating it. In short, comparison is not simply reiterative and descriptive of standing insights; it is a means of creatively (and, of course, strategically) generating new insights.

Fourth and finally we come back to Marilyn’s preferred activity and her own professional path. If comparison is among our paramount means not only for arranging and transacting old knowledge, but likewise for producing new knowledge, then comparison could and should play an especially prominent role in educational processes. Marilyn was, above all, the consummate educator. I count myself not only as one of her colleagues but also as one of her students. And while her teaching was deliberately and aggressively comparative in innumerable respects, one sort of play of similarity and difference is especially noteworthy, namely, that which operated in her penchant for what might be termed “qualified agreement.” Whether in seminars, in committee meetings or hallway conversations—that is to say, even in those occasions when she was perhaps an unwilling and overworked “hostess”—she entertained questions with patience and grace. On the one hand, irrespective of the *naïveté* of the queries, Marilyn virtually always found a way to agree, or at least always allowed her “guests” at these conversational encounters to think that she agreed. Always she combined patience, generosity, and creativity to find that *point of sameness* between what students had said and what they *ought* to have said. She had a rare facility for putting words in other peoples’ mouths—for rephrasing their formulations and then returning them in much better shape than she’d found them. In those conversations, students and colleagues—as also some of us lucky

enough to be both—were invariably flattered that she had discovered what had seemed to be an elusive point of agreement between the ideas and hers.

At the same time, however, Marilyn seemed always to disagree. Her was always a qualified agreement. Along with affirming, she always challenged. She nearly always found something at least a little wrong with what colleagues and students said, *some point of difference* and disagreement. With Marilyn, it was always, “Yes, but ...” First she would affirm and strengthen your argument; then she would point out some presupposition left unexamined, some precedent not cited, some historical exception to the generalization, or some potentially insidious ramification unnoticed.

Her generosity was, then, always laced with a disputation, a contention or a challenge, the intrusion of which in the end made her even more generous. Her very restlessness, impatience and chronic dissatisfaction with all ideas and formulations—her own included—kept her all on the move. Under her influence, “reification,” which presupposes some false sense of the fixity of concepts and conclusions, became the greatest transgression while “heuristic,” defined by Webster as “that which serves to guide, discover or reveal ... valuable for empirical research but unproven or incapable of proof,” became the loudest of battle cries and the highest of aspirations. To love and respect ideas—others and one’s own—required that one hold them softly and tentatively rather than clutching and defending them. Always the experimental, the contingent, the provisional and that playful, ludic tone prevailed. She held us—and even more herself—to an unreasonable, unrealizable standard so that finishing anything, or laying anything to rest, was nearly impossible.

In the end, therefore, there is an ironic suitability to the peculiar circumstances that give rise to this publication of *Prophecy and Power*. Marilyn left us too soon, and she left behind a ragged, still-working manuscript, replete with self-critical marginalia, arrows, slashes, queries, and multiple versions of whole sections and paragraphs. It was quintessentially a work in progress, under construction, far from finished, especially in her own eyes. I realized in our conversation about this project, which, even while competing with chemotherapy and the other challenges of cancer treatment, had become ever-present on her mind, that it was impossible for her to reread the manuscript without rewriting it. Even in the final months of her life, instead of fine-tuning sentences and tracking down page references, she was rearranging and restructuring the entire argument of the book. Not surprising

the book itself had a new and different title nearly every time we talked about it. One wonders, in fact, how and if she would ever have been willing to announce that the work was completed. While she, of course, admired a well-polished book, she was even more effusive in her praise for the sort of cobbled, cluttered, and contingent group e-mail exchange that allowed her to “compare notes.” Consequently, that this book finally makes its way to print only via the efforts of numerous students, colleagues, and friends—Bruce Lawrence and Robert Baum foremost among them—is indeed a fitting turn of events. Though we can be certain she would find reasons to dispute as well as to affirm the way that her unperfected drafts have been polished into a handsome volume, it has been just the sort of collaborative initiative that suggests we may, after all, have learned something from her and her example. Nonetheless, to recycle one of those lexical phrases a final time, engaging her posthumous manuscript has also reminded us that, where Marilyn Waldman is concerned—Marilyn Waldman as a teacher, writer, mentor, organizer, administrator, colleague, and hostess par excellence—we all “suffer by comparison.”