[CIS 2.2 (2006) 171–180] *Comparative Islamic Studies* (print) ISSN 1740-7125
doi: 10.558/CISv2i2.171 *Comparative Islamic Studies* (online) ISSN 1743-1638

"In the Book We have Left out Nothing": The Ethical Problem of the Existence of Verse 4:34 in the Qur'an*

LAURY SILVERS

Skidmore College

Medieval Muslim mystic and thinker Ibn al-'Arabi (d. 1240) claims all meanings drawn from within the semantic boundaries of the language of the Qur'an are intended by God. If so, how do Muslims concerned about violence against women reconcile their faith with verses such as 4:34 which can be read as a prescription to beat women to control their rebelliousness? This paper will explore the problem posed by the existence of verse 4:34 in the Qur'an through the lens of Ibn al-'Arabi's ontology and ethics and the traditionally received example of the Prophet Muhammad. God's self-disclosure through the macrocosm, logocosm, and microcosm demands the full expression of his beautiful and terrible attributes as well as the human responsibility to cultivate the proper balance between the two. I argue that Muhammad's example demonstrates that cultivating that balance requires resisting divine prescriptions that are ultimately not worthy of us as children of Adam.

Kecia Ali writes in her book *Sexual Ethics and Islam* that studies on the history and forms of gender injustice in Islam have yet to adequately address concomitant theological challenges concerning the nature of the divine justice and will.[1] In response to this need, I would like to explore the problem posed by the *mere existence* of v. 4:34, otherwise known as "the beating verse," in the Qur'an. This article is intended to be a primary theological and ethical response to the problem, rather than a secular academic analysis of historical approaches to the verse. My approach is grounded in the thought of Ibn al-'Arabi (d. 1240), arguably the most influential, systematically comprehensive, and prolific mystic and thinker of medieval Islam. Ibn al-'Arabi's ontology, ethics, and hermeneutics of the Qur'an provide a useful frame and a possible resolution to the problem.[2] In keeping with Ibn al-'Arabi's own perspective, I will discuss the matter within the traditional boundaries of Islamic scholarship: namely, on the premise that the Qur'an is the word of God in the Arabic language, and that the Prophet is the perfect embodiment of the Qur'an's guidance.

Any person with a fair grasp of the Arabic language could read v. 4:34 to mean that men are commanded or at least permitted to hit their wives if necessary to control them. Translators of the Qur'an typically interpret "*idribhunna*" as "beat them." Thomas Cleary nicely brings out a paternalistic overtone in the

verse by translating "*idribhunna*" as, "spank them." Traditional Muslim scholars have argued that the verse means everything from an obligation or permission to beat to non-violent marital separation. It is widely reported that Muhammad was disturbed by the command/permission when the verse was revealed to him, limited it to non-violent tapping, and did not act on it himself. *Because the Prophet rejected violence against women, we would be justified in accepting the reading of non-violent separation as that which was intended by God and be done with it*. But to do so would not tell us why the verse exists at all. If God did not intend men to beat their wives, then why use a word with a primary meaning of "beat them"?

Ibn al-'Arabi claims that whatever meaning one can take from the Qur'an within the semantic boundaries of the accepted recitations must be intended by God. From this perspective, no amount of interpretive finesse would be able cover over a reading of God's prescription in v. 4:34 as obliging husbands to hit their wives if necessary to control them. Following Ibn al-'Arabi's hermeneutic, I suggest that the verse comprehends all possible meanings including "beat them." As such, the verse prompts the problem of conscience we find illustrated in the Prophet's conflicted response. For Ibn al-'Arabi —and this is an important point—God may intend all meanings, but it does not follow that He *approves* of all meanings. In this light, I argue that the purpose of the existence of the verse would be to remind human beings of the extraordinary burden of freedom. Specifically, human responsibility is only meaningful if we choose from comprehensive possibilities: ranging, in this case, from gladly accepting the right to beat one's wife to properly refusing to interpret this verse as a permission, let alone a command of God.

I. The Interpretive Frame

Muslim scholarly interpretations of the word *idribhunna* have ranged from non-violent marital separation to detailing the conditions under which women can be properly beaten. My purpose is simply to remind the reader that the verse *can be read* as a permission or as a command to hit and *has been read* in this way by jurists, Qur'an commentators, and lay people in spite of the Prophet's own attitude. The verse is typically read to mean that men are in charge of women because God favors men over women in some respects and obliges men to support women financially. Because men are in charge of women, men are required to control those whom they fear will be rebellious wards by first speaking harshly to them, then isolating them if necessary, and finally beating them. A woman's rebellion [*nushuz*] has been defined by scholars and lay people as ranging from "being disagreeable" to committing adultery.[3]

> Men are in charge of women, according to what God has favored some over others and according to what they spend from their wealth. Righteous

> women are obedient, guarding the unseen according to what God has guarded. Those [women] whose rebelliousness you fear, admonish them, and abandon them in bed, and beat them. If they obey you, do not pursue a strategy against them. Indeed, God is Exalted, Great. (Q 4:34)

From the perspective of Ibn al-'Arabi's hermeneutic, one must acknowledge that God intended every meaning that can be drawn from within the semantic boundaries of the Qur'an. Divine knowledge is absolutely comprehensive. There can be no possible reading that was not ultimately intended by God. Michel Chodkiewicz explains Ibn al-'Arabi's position in *An Ocean without Shore*:

> Given the extremely rich polysemy of Arabic vocabulary, rigorous fidelity to the letter of Revelation does not exclude but, on the contrary, it implies a multiplicity of interpretations...none of these meanings is to be rejected, regardless of how surprising or even how scandalous it might appear, for God in uttering this verse had to be aware of the diversity of possible interpretations for each word or group of words. To deny the validity of this rule is to deny divine knowledge.[4]

Consistent with Ibn al-'Arabi's thought, I would argue that God knew and intended the verse to be interpreted and applied in every possible way, including its most abusive forms.[5] If we affirm divine knowledge, then we must admit that God intended this word-choice knowing it would be used to permit abusive behavior well beyond Muhammad's attempt to restrict hitting to what I will argue is a still unacceptable light tapping. A common apologetic approach to this problem argues that God only intended the meanings produced by properly trained scholars of law. To my mind, this approach is at best a theodicean cheat and at worst useless. Legal authorities *have* interpreted this verse to permit what I consider to be abuse. Even if they had not, we still cannot take refuge in authoritative legal restrictions even in specifically legal matters. Legal scholars are not the only interpreters of the divine will that is articulated in the Qur'an. Qur'an commentators also discuss possible legal interpretations, even if they do not have a jurist's authority to render rulings themselves. Imams pass along these readings. Lay people, inspired by these sources and by popular preachers, make legal assumptions and interpretations on their own all the time. Moreover, we all know that it does not always matter what scholars say. People will do as they like. *God knows this*. To my mind, any theologically grounded ethical analysis of this verse must address God's comprehensive intent.

While Ibn al-'Arabi's hermeneutic accepts the possibility of multiple interpretations of a single articulation of God's will, this does not mean that all possible interpretations of the divine will are considered ethically equal. In reference to our subject here, the mere fact that God made it possible for us to argue for beating women does not mean that we *should* argue for it. Legally,

nothing necessitates reading the verse this way.[6] I would simply like to make the point that we have examples from the whole of the Islamic intellectual tradition demonstrating that scholars debate points and refine terms, obligations, and exceptions in an effort to find what they understand to be the most felicitous meaning of the divine will in the Qur'an. It is a commonplace to point out that a good legal scholar can interpret his way out of nearly any bind. Traditionally speaking, then, there is nothing scandalous, to take Amina Wadud's well-publicized statement, in saying "no" to a reading of Qur'an; or less dramatically stated by Khaled Abou El Fadl to take a "a conscientious pause."[7]

II. Comprehensive Possibilities

For Ibn al-'Arabi, such comprehensive and ethically polarizing readings of the Qur'an are demanded by the comprehensive nature of the divine self-manifestation in the Book, the world, and in ourselves. Ibn al-'Arabi typically discusses divine self-manifestation through creation in terms of the Ninety-Nine Most Beautiful Names of God; such as, Beautiful, Majestic, Lover, Avenger, Compeller, Terrible in Punishment, Forgiving, Independent, Merciful, Slayer, Life-Giver, all-Knowing, all-Powerful, and the Guide. These names are manifest as signs [*ayat*] indicating who and what we are and how we should respond to our situation. In Ibn al-'Arabi's work the ontological perspective necessarily encompasses the ethical and epistemological perspectives. "Signs" are literally the verses [*ayat*] of the Qur'an as well as all outward and inward phenomena, all pointing towards God. The Qur'an says, "We will show them Our signs on the Horizons and in their own souls until it is clear to them that He is the Real" (41:53). To give a simple example that will prove useful below, we see the signs of God's "guidance" in the verses of the Qur'an telling children to honor their parents. We see the signs of God "nourishing" in the world's abundant food sources. We see the signs of God's "independence" in the souls of children who have just discovered they can refuse to their vegetables.

Although the names are traditionally numbered ninety-nine, we find them infinitely manifest through the subtle interplay of their qualities that subsist and then pass in every moment in every atom of creation. Everything other than God is in a state of continual change. While each unique sign of creation can be traced back to one name of God, its competing and complementary relationships with other names must also be taken into account.[8] To return to the example, the manifestation of children's growing independence at any one moment will be the result of the unique relationship of innumerable qualities in themselves and their environment, never to be repeated. The differences may seem slight—and the habitual nature of the renewal of creation gives the appearance of consistency—but everything other than God on every level is unique.

III. Human Responsibility

I argue that God's comprehensive self-manifestation results in fathomless creaturely diversity and is the necessary condition for any meaningful sense of human responsibility. The Qur'an calls human responsibility "the Trust." Human beings are entrusted with the whole range of God's names concentrated within us as human character traits. The Qur'an describes how God offered the Trust to all of creation, but only human beings agreed to carry it (Q 33:72). The burden of this Trust is that we have god-like abilities to create and to destroy. We can choose to be higher than the angels in our character, as sturdy or as stubborn as a rock, or lower than the most base aggressively selfish creature. The human failing is forgetfulness [*nisyan*] or heedlessness [*ghafla*] of the fact that these attributes are only a Trust loaned to us by God. Our failing is in part due to the independence entrusted to us by God. We necessarily experience these god-like abilities as our own. We forget that these characteristics are potential within us. Becoming human requires the proper actualization of these qualities in every moment appropriate to its time and place. As one can acknowledge with the children who refuse their vegetables, developing an independent identity is necessary for healthy psychological growth. But such growth should ultimately lead back toward locating one's independence through God and the myriad relationships in the world that produced it. These distinct groupings of qualities confer rights on us but also obligations to God and to the world. We may have the ability and right to decide not to eat our vegetables, but we also have obligations to God, our bodies, and our loved ones. Inasmuch as we deny those rights and obligations in their proper scope, we use these qualities to our own selfish ends.

Human responsibility demands comprehensive possibilities and considerations, so much so that we must also admit that obeying the prohibitions, permissions, prescriptions laid out in the Qur'an does not guarantee that an act will be ethical. While this sounds scandalous to say, traditional Muslim jurists and theologians have made distinctions between purely legal choices and ethical choices.[9] Simply put, God may prescribe or permit any number of things out of necessity, but prefer something else. As an example of necessity in the context of this verse, Wadud has argued that God permitted or prescribed beating in 4:34 only after a series of conditions are met as a way of restricting already rampant abusive behavior.[10] In agreement with and as an extension of her point, I argue that comprehensive possibilities are necessary to prompt the ethical crises that make us human. I believe Ibn al-'Arabi is addressing this interpretive crisis when he states that there are some commands of God one should not obey. Ibn al-'Arabi addresses this point while discussing "the Two Commands."[11] The first command is the command to "Be!" All creatures of the Creator submit to this *ontological* command. There is no disobeying God in

this sense. The second command is the *prescriptive* command which can be disobeyed. This command is directed only at those who have the ontological ability to disobey God (human beings and jinn). Ibn al-'Arabi says these prescriptive commands are not commands per se. If they were, how could we disobey them? No one can disobey a command of God. Rather, he says that they are statements in the imperative mood.[12] It is possible to disobey an imperative or a prescriptive command. To recall my point above, God's comprehensive self-manifestation results in fathomless creaturely diversity and is the necessary condition for any meaningful sense of human responsibility. Consider, then, that if there were one unequivocal prescriptive command, we would not be fully human. Consonant with this line of thinking, Ibn al-'Arabi adds that there are also prescriptive commands that God does not want us to obey. He writes, "The commander may command something [through the imperative mood] that He does not desire to be obeyed."[13]

IV. The Prophet's Example

Hence I would argue that the Prophet's conflicted response to the revelation of 4:34 demonstrates the perfection of his humanity. Again, it is reported that he was uncomfortable even reciting the verse and sought to restrict its application. The Prophet is considered the perfect guide to assuming the character traits of God in their proper balance and scope. In other words, he is the perfect exemplar of the struggle to be fully and ethically human. While there is broad consensus that Muhammad never hit his wives, there is an exceptional example that may shed light on his struggle of conscience when the verse was first revealed. It is reported in Muslim that Muhammad slapped Aisha in the chest after catching her spying on him as he went to visit another of his wives.[14] Given what we know from available sources, it is likely that the Prophet slapped Aisha prior to the revelation of 4:34.[15] If we accept this report, then we could argue that the Prophet was capable of hitting one of his wives out of anger and frustration. When 4:34 was revealed, some claim he was so disturbed, he did not want to recite it.[16] We might argue that he knew from his own experience it is never acceptable to hit a woman even to control her behavior.

Although Muhammad was compelled by God to recite the verse, and he never denied the divine prescription therein, he never carried it out despite the possibility of the conditions being met. The legal literature has defined *nushuz* to mean everything from adultery to being in a bad mood when one was formerly cheerful.[17] Muslim scholars who insist on reading *nushuz* in the broadest possible way imply by logical necessity that the Prophet's wives met the conditions of "rebelliousness." Certainly some of his wives were moody after being formerly cheerful and even guilty of conspiring against him.[18] The Prophet's companions and father-in-laws Umar and Abu Bakr are reported to

have considered it necessary to beat their daughters because of their behavior towards the Prophet.[19] If scholars insist on reading *nushuz* so broadly, then they must be prepared to speak in such ill-mannered terms about the behaviour of Prophet's wives. Ethically, it would be more sound to define *nushuz* more narrowly so as to exclude the Prophet's wives' behavior and likewise the behavior of the generations of Muslim women who have followed them. In either case, we can argue that the Prophet refused to read the verses as a command, a permission, or that he at least disapproved of the practice overall. Muhammad is reported to have said about beating when he recited the verse, "God wanted one thing, I wanted something else."[20]

Muhammad demonstrated in this case that the burden of carrying the Trust requires us to struggle with our conscience even to the point of refusing to interpret a divine permission or prescription as such. If we accept that Muhammad is the most comprehensive and perfect example of God's guidance to us in carrying the Trust, then how could he err in struggling with his conscience over the meaning of this verse? Traditional Islamic scholarship turns to the Prophet for clarification after considering the Qur'an's internal evidence. Aisha said of Muhammad's character, "His character is the Qur'an."[21] Muhammad's example shows us in this circumstance that we must struggle with our conscience even in response to God; he also demonstrated the *limited* circumstances under which one can and should say "no" to the Qur'an. Refusing a prescription or permission of God is no small matter. As the Prophet showed us, it should properly arise out of a sincere struggle of conscience rooted in our very humanity. In accordance with traditional legal methods, and as Ibn al-'Arabi would say our ontological condition, *we may not deny the existence of the prescription or any aspect of God's intent*, but we may limit its practice to the point of complete prohibition in law and in our own ethical confrontation with the comprehensive possibilities of the Book, the world, and ourselves.

V. Having a Good Opinion

Consonant with Ibn al-'Arabi's thought and the command in the famous *hadith qudsi* to have a good opinion of the divine intent, I argue that all the possible meanings of the verse indicate that the purpose of its existence is to inspire the crisis of conscience that would lead us to prohibit beating. Frankly, if the Prophet of God struggled over the matter, we should have the humility to assume that we cannot do better. His example shows us that there is no possible way to properly hit a woman. I would argue that he knew this from hitting Aisha, and he knew we should not hit at all. A significant number of traditional scholars and lay Muslims have followed the Prophet's example and successfully argued that the verse does not prescribe beating at all, but rather prescribes marital separation. They too said "no" to what seems like a plainly

straightforward reading of the Qur'an. Because of the comprehensive nature of the Trust, we bear the burden of full responsibility for our choices. We should consider the weight of this burden carefully. Muhammad is reported to have said about the Last Day, "If you knew what I knew you would laugh less and cry more." I read this to mean that we would be terrified if we knew the extraordinary extent of our responsibility in being human.

Notes

* This paper is dedicated to Ahmet Karamustafa. Many thanks to those who critiqued this piece in its earlier stages: William C. Chittick, Mohammad Fadel, Aisha Geisinger, and Ahmed Kamal Sultan Salem. Special thanks to philosopher and old friend, Gregory Recco, for long conversations on ethics that challenged and refined my perspective on this verse.

1. Kecia Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam* (Oxford: One World, 2006), 54–55.
2. This paper does not claim to be a secondary analysis of Ibn al-'Arabi's thought; rather it takes Ibn al-'Arabi's hermeneutics, ontology, and ethics as a resource for thought. Although I think my conclusions are consistent with Ibn al-'Arabi's thought, as well as his traditionalism, claiming one's own position to be consistent with Ibn al-'Arabi's is always problematic given the richness of his works in meaning and in their sheer number. Contemporary interpreters of Ibn al-'Arabi continue to debate his perspective on gender. With respect to the subject of this paper, Sachiko Murata has argued that Ibn al-'Arabi understood men to possess ontological *qiwama* [charge] over women correlative to God's ontological *qiwama* [charge] over creation. Murata's discussion of the matter suggests that, for Ibn al-'Arabi, male ontological *qiwama* necessarily confers social and legal *qiwama*, thus establishing the legal condition for wife beating if necessary (Sachiko Murata, *The Tao of Islam: A Sourcebook on Gender Relationships on Islamic Thought* [Albany: SUNY Press, 1992], 178). Sa'diyya Shaikh, by contrast, argues that Ibn al-'Arabi subverts the ontological gender binaries he first establishes, hence neither men nor women would be ontologically superior or inferior to one another (Sa'diyya Shaikh, "In Search of al-Insan: Sufism, Islamic Law, and Gender," in *Islamic Feminism and the Law*, ed. Qudisa Mirza [London: Cavendish, forthcoming] and her forthcoming book, *Spiritual Cartographies of Desire*).
3. For an overview of the history of interpretation of v. 4:34, see Amina Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2006), Chapter 6; and Ali, *Sexual Ethics*, 117–26.
4. Michel Chodkiewicz, *An Ocean without Shore: Ibn Arabi, the Book, and the Law* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993), 30.
5. William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-'Arabi and the Hermeneutics of Imagination* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), 242–44.
6. Bernard G. Weiss, *The Spirit of Islamic Law* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998), 103–6.

7. Wadud, *Gender Jihad*, 200; Khaled Abou El Fadl, *Speaking in God's Name: Islamic Law, Authority, and Women* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2005), 213.
8. See Chittick, *Sufi Path of Knowledge*, Chapters 4 and 6.
9. Ali, *Sexual Ethics*, 55; Weiss, *Spirit of Islamic Law*, 164–68.
10. AminaWadud, *Qur'an and Woman: Re-reading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 70–74.
11. Chittick, *Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 291ff.
12. On the traditional legal view of the imperative mood and "tentative" univocality in the Qur'an, see Weiss, *The Spirit of Islamic Law*, 99–109.
13. Chittick, *Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 293.
14. The text reports "*fa lahadani fi sadri lahdatan awja'tani*" indicating a slap or a forceful push with an open hand (*Sahih Muslim lil-imam Abi al-Husayn Muslim b. al-Hajjaj al-Qushayri al-Naysaburi* [Beirut: Dar Ihya' al-Turath al-'Arabi, 2000], Kitab al-Jana'iz, 413).
15. Aisha Geissinger, University of Toronto, personal correspondence, July 24, 2006.
16. Abu Ja'far Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari, *Tafsir al-Tabari: jami' al-bayan fi ta'wil al-qur'an*, vol. 1 (Beirut: Dar al-kutub al-'ilmiyya, 1999), 59–73.
17. Ahmed ibn Naqib al-Misri (d. 769/1368), *Reliance of the Traveler*, ed. and trans. Nuh Ha Mim Keller (Beltsville, Md.: Amana, 1994), 541, or Book M 10.12. The ethical consequences of such broad characterizations of *nushuz* are grave when we consider that Keller's translation of *The Reliance* has become a *de facto* rule-book for English-speaking Muslims.
18. See verses 33:28-29 and 66:01-5 in which God directly addresses the Prophet's wives criticizing their behavior towards him.
19. Muslim, *Kitab al-talaq*, 3506.
20. Tabari, *Jami' al-bayan*, 60.
21. Cf. Chittick, *Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 241.

References

Ali, Kecia. *Sexual Ethics and Islam*. Oxford: Oneworld, 2006.

Chittick, William C. *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-'Arabi and the Hermeneutics of Imagination*. Albany: SUNY Press, 1989.

Chodkiewicz, Michel. *An Ocean without Shore: Ibn Arabi, the Book, and the Law.* Albany: SUNY Press, 1993.

El Fadl, Khaled Abou. *Speaking in God's Name: Islamic Law, Authority, and Women.* Oxford: Oneworld, 2005.

Al-Misri, Ahmed ibn Naqib. *Reliance of the Traveler*, ed. and trans. Nuh Ha Mim Keller. Beltsville, Md.: Amana, 1994.

Murata, Sachiko. *The Tao of Islam: A Sourcebook on Gender Relationships on Islamic Thought*. Albany: SUNY Press, 1992.

Sahih Muslim lil-imam Abi al-Husayn Muslim b. al-Hajjaj al-Qushayri al-Naysaburi. Beirut: Dar Ihya' al-Turath al-'Arabi, 2000.

Shaikh, Sa'diyya. "In Search of al-Insan: Sufism, Islamic Law, and Gender." In *Islamic Feminism and the Law*. Edited by Qudisa Mirza. London: Cavendish, forthcoming.

Shaikh, Sa'diyya. *Spiritual Cartographies of Desire*. Forthcoming.

Al-Tabari, Abu Ja'far Muhammad ibn Jarir. *Tafsir al-Tabari: jami' al-bayan fi ta'wil al-qur'an*, vol. 1. Beirut: Dar al-kutub al-'ilmiyya, 1999.

Wadud, Amina. *Inside the Gender Jihad*. Oxford: Oneworld, 2006.

Wadud, Amina. *Qur'an and Woman: Re-reading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Weiss, Bernard G. *The Spirit of Islamic Law*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998.