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Introduction

Making Islamic Authority Matter

Frédéric Volpi and Bryan S. Turner

THE TITLE of this piece is not a normative statement about ‘why’ a specific type of religious authority that is deemed Islamic ought to matter in contemporary societies. Rather, it is intended as a descriptive statement: a reflection on the fact that Muslim social and political actors around the world today are working hard to establish how, where, when and why claims to authority expressed in an Islamic idiom do matter for the re-organization of a global (Muslim) community in the 21st century. Thus, to talk about ‘making Islamic authority matter’ is to consider the social practices and processes that underpin or embody these claims to authority in a given political or social order. In the following discussion, we address the issue of general trends and trajectories, leaving the task of describing in detail the rationale for specific transformations to the individual contributors to this collection.

A well-rehearsed strategy for investigating the patterns of Islamic authority is to ask how much is changing and what remains the same in the structures of religious authority that organize the behaviour of individual Muslims and Muslim communities over time (Burke and Lapidus, 1988; Voll, 1982). Although this question always was a central concern for scholars of Islam and for the social sciences more broadly, in the aftermath of 9/11 it became a crucial issue for policy makers and political actors. In this context, much public and media attention (as well as scholarly research) focused on those instances of political Islam that have a very sharp ‘direct action’ edge. This shift led some commentators to argue that the political dynamics inside the Muslim world that led to the events of 9/11 were also producing new models of religiously framed social authority in the global Muslim community. Yet seasoned observers of the Middle East and the Muslim world have stressed that such events were more a symptom of an underlying transformation of religious authority across the

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Muslim world than a reliable indicator of change (Halliday, 2002; Roy, 2004).

Considering this issue from the perspective of the 'structure–agency' debate in sociology, one could invoke two fairly distinct explanatory narratives to account for such transformations of Islamic authority in the contemporary world. The agency moment of the narrative would emphasize the fact that many of the structures of authority that dominate our lives today are being contested. It may well be that individuals like George W. Bush and Osama Bin Laden – or, more benignly, Ayatollah Sistani and Tariq Ramadan – will have, or already have had, such an impact on these (Muslim) communities that they have conjured up a new framework for (Islamic) authority out of thin air. There can be times and places – the end of the Cold War or the beginning of the 'War on Terror', for example – when individual agents can be very successful in initiating a dramatic reorganization of social order. War and terrorism become the kind of locomotives of history, to employ a metaphor from Marx, that revolutions, their not-too-distant relatives, once constituted in modern societies.

The structural moment of the narrative, by contrast, would insist that the underlying processes, against which these peculiar religious claims to authority have to be understood, cannot be reduced to the behaviour of a few individuals in particular sites of power around the world. Instead, these processes represent large conceptual transformations that are slowly modifying the ideological outlook of Muslims and Muslim communities, as well as other religious identities, in response to a whole gamut of social, political, military, technological, economic and cultural changes that may be subsumed with varying degrees of helpfulness under the term 'globalization'. Furthermore, these general structural circumstances of Muslim transformation are deeply rooted in the history of the Muslim world and are not simply contemporary conditions of action.

Although the idea of globalization is itself conceptually and historically problematic, its use, especially with respect to contemporary religious phenomena, is inescapable. Suffice it to say that we reject the view, often associated with sociologists such as Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens, that globalization is a relatively modern development relating to the growth of global communication systems in the 1970s. The very expression 'world religions', when applied to both Christianity and Islam, indicates that these religions have been, since their inception, in an important sense globalizing forms of religious consciousness. Both Christianity and Islam had a clear notion of 'the world' for which their revelation was a major challenge. It is true that the pace of religious globalization has intensified – in particular we would argue after the Mujahidin's confrontation with secular Soviet forces in Afghanistan and after the collapse of the USSR. The consequence of the Afghan war was to disperse a peculiar brand of transnational militant Islam through the Muslim world and beyond.

The slow but seemingly ineluctable radicalization of Muslim youth in Iraq, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia and elsewhere is one manifestation

of this globalization of political Islam. But these specific developments should not obscure an equally important phenomenon: the powerful revival of Islamic identity and membership that has been characteristic of Islam quite independently of the politico–military consequences of the Afghan war, the Gulf War or 9/11. The pace of Islamic globalization matched the global growth of Islamic institutions of education and training – from the many Quranic training institutions in Asia, where the memorization of the text of the Qur'an has such a lasting impact on the mental and cultural dispositions that are creating an Islamic habitus, to the new higher education Islamic institutes in Europe that cater for a generally wealthier and more sophisticated cohort of Muslim students. One crucial aspect of this transformation is the formation of identities and allegiances that underpin the social resilience of the communal expression of these representations. In a modern Western political lexicon that somewhat superficially accounts for religiously based identities, this process amounts to redefining – or refining – the meaning and boundaries of 'citizenship' in a globalizing world order.¹

In this context, it may be instructive briefly to look back at the conceptual landscape that prevailed at the turn of the previous century to bring to the foreground the most striking metamorphoses of the problem and to gain some critical distance. How far we have moved away from the accounts of society, politics and religion proposed by Max Weber and Émile Durkheim is the contemporary intellectual issue underpinning core debates in the sociology of religion (Casanova, 1994). To look back to Weber and Durkheim should not be construed as a last ditch effort to salvage their categories of analysis and to rebuild an overarching scheme that would replace the classical grand theories that these authors proposed in their own time – even though the status of grand theory was obtained by default. Rather, such a reflection is meant to help in identifying with greater clarity those social synergies that appear to retain strong causal relevance over time, and those that appear to become mostly ineffective.

Although we might be specifically critical of Weber's Orientalism in his sociology of Islam, his general framework for the analysis of religion remains, in some respects, congenial to our approach and our topic. It was after all Weber who, in his famous analysis of power, authority and influence, set the conceptual agenda for most if not all social science analysis of legitimate authority in the 20th century. Weber's contrast in religion between the religion of the masses (that is geared to bringing wealth and delivering health) and the religion of the virtuosi (that is geared to generating and conserving meaning) lies at the heart of much contemporary discussion of whether religion (of the elite) can withstand the encroachment of the religion of the masses in a consumer society. The recent furore over, for example, Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* or Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*, can be taken as evidence of the threat to official orthodoxies from popular expressions of religion in Hollywood and in pulp fiction. Such manifestations of religion in popular culture well illustrate the threat of mass consumption in elite formulations of orthodox belief. It could be held that

popular or folk representations of religion have always been problematic, but these contemporary forms have an immediate, mass and global impact, and the popular interpretation of these forms cannot be controlled or supervised by powerful institutions such as the state or Church.

These new developments also present interesting intellectual challenges to Weber's charisma-tradition-rational model of authority, and in this sense sociology may have entered into a post-Weberian mode of analysis. In relation to the institutionalization of legitimate violence in the politics of the nation-state, the rise of 'global jihadism' (for want of a better term) at the turn of this century may signal that we are increasingly moving into a post-Weberian political order.² In this perspective, the monopoly of violence that is considered legitimate may no longer be conceived as being increasingly located in the institutions of those autonomous nation-states that claim it. This point is evidently not an empirical statement about the oft-announced (and generally greatly exaggerated) death of the nation-state, but simply an analytical remark about the likelihood of this ideal type of institutional order increasingly becoming more relevant for social analysis.³ This post-Weberian evolution of legitimate violence is therefore not incompatible with the recent efforts by states and international institutions to reformulate international law (particularly in relation to *jus in bello*) in order better to deal with the kind of armed transnational movements exemplified by al-Qaeda (Ould Mohamedou, 2005).

Similarly, we may also be entering a post-Durkheimian society, where institutionalized religious hierarchies are no longer the driving force behind increasingly individuated forms of religiosity. We are not talking here about a classical case of the privatization of religion and an increased separation between the public and the private. What has become increasingly clear today is that there is no necessary convergence between the individualization and the privatization of religion (Casanova, 1994; Roy, 2004). On the contrary, the 'personalization' of religiosity can be and often is highly public. It may be 'my religiosity' but I want to show and enact my faith to the rest of the world, to all those individuals who define (or could potentially define) their religiosity in a similar fashion.

Charles Taylor proposes an interesting account of this post-Durkheimian order in relation to the transformation of the forms of religious experience and practice in Western Christianity. He points out that, unlike in the recent past, when religious experiences were mediated by collectivities in the form of institutionalized churches or national-based communities of beliefs ('denominations'), in the post-Durkheimian model religiosity is becoming personalized in the extreme (Taylor, 2002). Orthodoxy is increasingly becoming epistemologically irrelevant and the collective structures of authorities that ultimately found their justification in these constructions of religious knowledge are becoming redundant.⁴ This form of extreme individual subjectivity is perhaps most clearly expressed through personal blogs, where ordinary housewives and their ordinary husbands can record their daily activities, such as cleaning out the fridge, having affairs

and going to church, and share these intimate and mundane activities with the world. The paradoxical consequence is that this very subjectivity, which is also an important feature of modern spirituality, is itself the principal consequence of Western modernization.

Perhaps the conservative epoch of Roman Catholicism under the guidance of the late Pope might be an exception to the rule in a context where orthodoxy was stoutly defended by a reinvigorated Curia. However, informed diagnosis of the condition of the Catholic Church after the death of Pope John Paul II suggests that he failed to address, let alone heal, the deep rift between liberals and conservatives in the Church, especially over sexual mores. The current crisis of Catholicism is precisely a crisis of who has authority to speak. Similarly, the renewed prominence of the Shi'a clergy in post Saddam Hussein Iraq underlines the tension between the structural power of institutionalized religious hierarchies and the legitimization of their authority structure in a reinvented democratic order. The claims by Osama Bin Laden to speak for Islam and to issue *fatwas* against the West constitute a revolutionary break with tradition in which only established religious scholars in accord with traditional criteria and with proper communal consensus could issue a binding legal judgment. A deeper irony is that even Saddam Hussein – that arch spokesman of Ba'athist secularism – now appeared on TV as a traditional Muslim leader calling on the faithful to oppose the American infidels. The fact that some official institutions still remain highly visible and active is principally the result of the haphazard progression of the post-Durkheimian transformation across the world. Clearly today there are places and contexts where the functional rationale of these institutionalized religions can convince the believers to stick with them for now, for practical/instrumental reasons. Elsewhere, as in the case of the quest for 'Islamic identity' of Muslims in the West, the bulk of religious life and activities, and indeed the increase in religiosity, are being organized more and more in a quasi-solipsistic fashion at the individual level.

In relation to Christianity, Taylor suggests that the origin of this individualized religiosity can be traced directly to the socio-political environment that has been created in wealthy Western democracies in the 20th century. It was produced by a combination of consumerism and affluence on the one hand – which reduced the need for, and relevance of, traditional forms of religious solidarity and interaction – and it is the result, on the other hand, of the human (individual) rights culture that has developed in these political communities (Taylor, 2002). In particular, the growth of this human rights culture has reorganized all systems of authority and justification in terms of the rights of the individual, and the related need to maximize them in a context where they can only conflict with other individuals' rights. This culture of individual rights has yet to issue a charter of individual duties that an individual might owe to the community. In recent decades, a similar transformation can be seen impacting the Muslim community in the way it defines both religious authority and its relations

with other systems of authority. Saïd Amid Arjomand pointed out that the emergence of a universalistic human rights culture has led proponents of a universalistic religion like Islam to try to merge the two forms of universalism to advocate or defend their position in terms of Islamic human rights or other similar combinations of concepts (Arjomand, 2004). When these notions become embedded in institutional orders – be it in the form of constitutions or legal systems – this phenomenon can lead to either the Islamicization of liberal constitutionalism or of the liberal institutionalization of Islamic interpretation (or both at once as the case of the new Iraqi constitution illustrates).

The issue of authority in a globalized world order and multicultural societies becomes especially problematic with respect to the interpretation of law. One important characteristic of Islam as a religious system has been the centrality of a working or practical consensus over legal norms. Whereas there was no shared term for ‘law’ in the Indo-European languages, there has been a common notion of ‘order’ underpinning the law-like orderliness of the natural world, the relations between God and men, and social relations within communities. This paradigm, in which law is equivalent to social order, was common to the Abrahamic religions and in these cultures there was no distinction between secular laws, rituals and the sacred. In this interpretation, both law and religion refer to custom, to the individual’s place in the world and to order. In sociological language, the social norms of a community are merely manifestations of a greater *Nomos* that shields people from disorder or chaos.

With the development of the secular state in the West, law came to be conceived as the command of the state and hence laws were institutionally separate from both religion and morality. The decline of the Holy Roman Empire, the separation of Church and state, the decline of the authority of ecclesiastical courts and the emergence of law issued by a secular state were important stages in the separation of law from morality in the Western tradition. The positivist tradition went further in seeking to convert jurisprudence into a science and to remove any (subjective) evaluation of law. Moral rules and legal rules can only be distinguished by the procedures by which they come into existence, and the scope of positive law has to be determined by an appropriate official, such as a judge. In the sociology of the law, this command theory was developed by Weber in his definition of the state as that institution which has a monopoly of force in a given territory. This positivist tradition was hostile to the legacy of natural law in which just laws expressed a (religious) notion of the good society. In the natural law tradition, procedural correctness was never a guarantee of the existence of a just law. In the West ‘legality’ and ‘legitimacy’ came to have separate and distinctive meanings and significance.

Before the rise of the modern state and the development of secular legal systems, it was not possible to make such clear distinctions between law, religion and morality. In the Abrahamic religions, for example, religious laws determining the relationship between people and God, and people and

community were produced by revelation and their authority depended on charismatic powers. The ultimate authority of the law was divine. In Judaism, the texts dealing with law and ritual were known as the *halakhah*, the root of which means a way or path. In this sense it describes the customary ways of the people. More specifically, it describes religious customs. Moses was the central prophetic figure behind halakhic laws, because it was through Moses that God revealed the law. Islam shares with Judaism this centrality of law to ritual and religious practice. The Prophet was the divinely appointed lawgiver of the community and subsequently the caliphs were deputies responsible for the good order of the Household of Faith. The Prophet created a polity at Medina that was held together by a constitution that spelt out the legal obligations of newly converted tribes to Islam and, on his death, when some tribes attempted to terminate their contract, the Apostasy War broke out. The *Shari'a* or Holy Law is governed by *Fiqh* or understanding, and in Sunni Islam there emerged four major schools of law (Hanafis, Hanbalis, Malikis and Shafi'is). Shi'ite Islam had its own systems. The term *Shari'a* means literally the way to the watering place, namely the source or fountain of life and good order. Islam has no church or priesthood, and in this sense its legal structure is the core of its religious consciousness and the expression of its social solidarity.

Because Islamic legal systems were often dislodged or reorganized by Western positive law during colonization in the 19th and 20th centuries, in the postcolonial period there has been a significant revival of Islamic legal thinking in order to modernize legal practice and to make the impact of Islamic law more widespread in the community. This modernization of law often results in legal pluralism, as in Malaysia for example, where *Shari'a* competes with English common law, tribal codes and human rights legislation (Peletz, 2002). In the Malay case, we might say that Islamic legal practice has been modernized by lawyers who implicitly shared Weber's critique of the 'irrationalities' of traditional Islamic legal practice. And so *Shari'a* has been made more central by lawyers who were as often as not trained in English legal practice, who wear pin-striped suits rather than customary garb, and whose mental attitudes and professional *habitus* are distinctively Western. This development is not to say, however, that *Shari'a* has achieved a dominant or monopolistic position. Rather, it is modernized and shares the legal stage with international law, human rights conventions, global corporate law and an English common law tradition. In this context, how is the authority of religious law discovered and how is it implemented?

In our view, legal pluralism must lead to new questions, and possibly new answers, about the status of religio-legal norms. The debate about authority in Islam is underpinned by the realization that the debate over the opening the gate of interpretation (*ijtihad*) in modern Islam has produced, not a restoration of tradition, but a modernization of Islamic legal thinking and practice. In short, the attempt to impose or implement *Shari'a* in postcolonial and multicultural contexts has brought about a wholesale debate about the relevance and nature of Islamic legal custom in new contexts. As

the contributions in this collection show, modern communications technology has greatly facilitated this global legal discussion. Because of the weak institutionalization of religious hierarchies in most Islamic settings, the legal debate over authority becomes localized, devolved and fissiparous. It is difficult to impose any transnational authority over this debate, where local mullahs pass legal judgments on websites for an audience that has no clear cultural or spatial boundary. The fundamentalist or maximal view that *Shari'a* has to have some sort of monopoly or definite authority becomes very problematic in a context of legal pluralism, and especially in diasporic communities where innovation is an inevitable outcome of migration and cultural adaptation.

The most conspicuous embodiment of this tension between the 'old' and the 'new' modes of social organization today is the debate over multiculturalism in Western democracies. At one level, the renewed prominence of religiously phrased authority is tied to the thoroughgoing application and implementation of the liberal principles forming the telos of these polities. It is part and parcel of the current discourse about justice and fairness, in which religious communities are seen to have the same claim over rights as other socio-cultural groups. From a policy perspective, one need not invoke essentialist arguments about the genuineness of the authority emanating from the Islamic tradition in order to construct a narrative that highlights the contemporary social relevance of this type of communal affiliation, the relevance of these customs to the well-being of the community as a community and the well-being of individuals as members of that community. The deliberative rationale of this debate is part of the contemporary liberal attempt to identify all legitimate rights claims and the means to address them in terms of procedural justice.

A policy perspective nonetheless has to cope with obvious political problems. For American sociologists on the right of the political continuum, such as Nathan Glazer, the multicultural project of the United States has failed (partly because it provides no real solution to the social and political problems of the black community). Sceptics of past programmes to accommodate cultural difference see multiculturalism as a threat to the coherence, indeed to the authority, of the American republic. Similarly, it could be argued that multicultural strategies in the United Kingdom have failed the youth of the country, especially young men, who find themselves economically and culturally marginalized even when they are able to claim to be black British. In practice, these issues are context-dependent and generally subservient to the dominant political discourse in each national setting. Thus Trevor Philips, the Head of the Commission for Racial Equality in the United Kingdom, could wholeheartedly declare about the integration of varied communities in national life that 'we are just better at it than anyone I can think of' and 'we can thank our lucky stars that we are not American, French or Dutch today', despite pointing out a few minutes earlier that it was not a legal offence in the United Kingdom to discriminate against someone on the basis of his or her faith (Phillips, 2004). Scepticism about

the wisdom of multicultural recognition of difference and a return to strategies of integration have become common orientations of governments in Australia, the Netherlands, Denmark, the United States and the United Kingdom.

The policy debate over multiculturalism is informed by a theoretical framework grounded in the political and socio-legal norms and practices of the Western liberal tradition. There is an ongoing debate about how far this tradition frames the options available to contemporary societies. Is there a need necessarily to embrace a series of substantive values or positions on the contents of liberalism or multiculturalism, or it is enough to have some minimalist commitment to agreed procedures in order to get some acceptable level of social harmony? Even a minimalist pragmatic approach recently advocated by Richard Rorty contains some clear reservations on the utilization of religious identity markers (Vattimo et al., 2005). Conversely, Seyla Benhabib (2002) is quite explicitly building on liberal democratic theory to map out the possible avenues and boundaries for a contemporary model for multiculturalism. In any case, such forms of liberal multiculturalism are open to challenge on the grounds that they are too 'shallow' and fail to consider alternative ways of organizing and prioritizing the different public and private goods under consideration. Unsurprisingly, there have been other attempts at rethinking the relationship between Muslim and non-Muslim communities in liberal-democratic settings from an Islamic perspective, with Tariq Ramadan being probably the most noticed voice in this debate in recent years. Ramadan is particularly careful not to turn the opportunities for political participation available to the Muslim community into a lower form of socio-political engagement in a liberal multicultural framework. In effect, in *Western Muslims* he makes the tense proposition that 'one gets involved in politics not in the name of "my people" but before God and in conscience, in the name of inalienable principles. As a result, the community of faith is essentially opposed to any form of communitarianism' (Ramadan, 2003: 147).

In the contemporary context, whichever position Muslim intellectuals may choose to adopt vis-a-vis multiculturalism, they are always open to an internal critique saying that they are 'tainted' by non-Islamic ideas and practices and no longer able to speak with a genuine 'Islamic' authority.⁵ The internal debate over 'proper' Islamic practices is currently dominated by a non-reflexive notion of a return to the 'fundamentals' of Islam that limits the possibilities for a conceptual reorganization of *doxa*. Even innovative thinkers in Western settings are careful not to challenge directly a literal reading of the scripture (for example on stoning) from a theological position, but argue instead for reform from the standpoint of political expediency. From a political perspective, however, the fact that liberal political orders recognize that some of their citizens organize their lives in accordance with the demands of religion, and therefore recognize to some extent the relevance of some religious structures of authority for the exercise of their secular administrative-legal system, potentially exacerbates the dilemmas of Islamic authority. The dilemma faced by liberal policy makers is that, by

institutionalizing their relationship with representatives of the Muslim communities, they may undermine the claim of the latter to be genuine bearers of the Islamic tradition. Political engagement means bringing into the public sphere those religious disagreements that might have been only scholarly debates in the first instance. It also forces individual Muslims to choose, as Muslims, a strategy of engagement (or non-engagement) with those very liberal orders that wish to recognize the relevance of Islamic authority for the political and socio-legal organization of the national community.

The recent examples of the debate over the creation of a French Council on the Muslim Faith (Conseil Français du Culte Musulman [CFCM]) shows how the tentative engagements of the French government with its domestic Muslim constituency created strong tensions over who should be speaking for these communities and on what basis.⁶ This issue of authority in the public sphere and in relation to the state has always been a crucial component of the practice of Islam, but it takes on a particular significance in the Western context as Western Muslims are relatively disconnected from pre-existing structures of power, religious and political. There they have greater opportunities to explore what the foundations of this Islamic authority ought to be, or might be in relation to a virtual learning community and its networks of validation. In its turn, this process cannot but have a long-term impact on those Western governments (and societies) that merely propose a 'light' version of multiculturalism – thereby trying to create a niche for diverse expressions of cultural particularity that would not have any far-reaching consequences for the constitution of the society as a whole. In the French case, the CFCM, which was set up with the help of the Interior Ministry, has increasingly used the institutional tropes at its disposition to challenge the more secularized/liberal policies of the government in the name of a more Islamic rationale for policy reform.

The tension identified earlier by Taylor in Christianity is replicated in the Islamic context. The attempt by scholars and ordinary faithful to free themselves from unwieldy juridical-historical traditions and from a particularistic national/communal ethos in order to reconstruct a better, purer and more cohesive structure of interpretation leads to ever more individuated forms of religious authority (often mediated by the global media). Unavoidably, without institutional structures to define and implement these interpretations as authoritative, what is being created is an ever more complex tangle of conflicting 'rights' and 'duties'. Even an organization like the European Council for Fatwa, which endeavours to put forth the foundations for a common set of rules and practices across Muslim communities in Europe, relies ultimately on nothing more than the willingness of individual Muslims to recognize their judgments as legally binding.⁷ All of these debates over who now speaks on behalf of Islam are exacerbated by the deepening rift between Shi'ite and Sunni Islam. This rift is not simply a problem in the representation of Islam in the West, but throughout the Muslim world. The very attempt to settle upon an orthodox or fundamentalist interpretation of Sunni Islam necessarily brings into issue the legitimacy

of Shi'ism, Ismaili traditions, the acceptability of the Ahmadiyah movement in Indonesia or the legacy of Sufism. As deviancy theory in sociology has demonstrated, the vigorous defence of core norms must necessarily amplify deviance and so the orthodox members of any religion tend to see themselves as surrounded by a sea of apostasy.

This is the double bind that Muslims increasingly face with the development of a more sustained and generally more open discourse throughout the *Umma*. As Peter Mandaville suggested, new forms of communication and the greater accessibility of Islamic texts allow Muslims to take their development as Muslims into their own hands, to become less reliant on established sources of authority, and to become more aware of their own diversity as a community and therefore produce a more supple and subtle Islamic 'doctrine' (Mandaville, 2001). Yet, such opportunities come at a price. The emergence of new practices of transnational Islam and new concepts of Muslim identity currently thriving in the new media/online community are, temporarily, free from constraints and often without obvious direct implications for the author. But discourse, particularly discourses about religion and its inescapable authority over human life, do not occur in a vacuum; ultimately, these discourses have to be re-embodied and authority displayed in the public space (most vividly through violence). The competitive claim to legitimacy and authority between an infinite number of voices has an inflationary impact on the claims to superiority. To demonstrate my orthodoxy against your claims, I must increase the stakes, and the most promising route to such a claim is to demonstrate that my interpretation of the Law is more comprehensive, more demanding, more exacting and more all-embracing. The spiral of claims inflates the criteria by which orthodoxy may be finally judged. If this argument is valid, then, over time, everything in the everyday world – what I eat, with whom I have friendships or how I dress – becomes a basis for defining orthodoxy.

Today, the many opportunities that Muslims have for reconsidering carefully and with a greater intellectual freedom some of the tenets of their religious practices coincide with a profusion of arbitrary authority structures that seek forcefully to impose their views as authoritative. The global 'noise' generated by the media (new and old) ensures that the subtler interpretations of the Islamic (or liberal) tradition can only painstakingly be put into practice, as they require, above all, the active participation of enlightened agents. In effect, much of the contemporary 'noise' about Islam involves interpretations based on a fairly simple model of epistemic rationality. This trend of thought that is ubiquitous in the Islamic debate is the drive towards scripturalism or, more precisely, neo-scripturalism.

By neo-scripturalism we mean not a return to the prominence of some traditional methods of accessing the religious text, such as rote learning of the Qur'an and the recognition of the scholarly authority of those people able to achieve it. Clearly this process is still relevant in many parts of the Muslim world and community, but, in sharp contrast with previous periods, such a direct way of accessing the scripture can be challenged. Thus, in the

Westernized setting of a London mosque, the imam of a well-established Muslim community of North African origin could criticize the imam of a neighbouring mosque on the ground that 'he only knows the Qur'an by heart' and that 'he can only speak Arabic'.⁸ This example does not illustrate that one type of authority (traditional learning) is simply being replaced by another (scientific learning), but rather shows that scholarship based on direct access to the sacred text in its original language is not necessarily a trump card for making credible claims to religious authority.

To interpret from original sources is to produce what we may identify as an original 'work of art' – it is a hermeneutic experience that requires not only a theoretical knowledge of the text but also a practical knowledge of its mode of application in different circumstances. For ordinary believers to follow this judgement requires not only that they recognize the theological expertise of the interpreter but also that they trust his or her ability to interpret the text in these circumstances. This trust is a commodity that is more readily available and usable in close-knit communities than in newly (re)created Muslim networks. In communities well attuned to the modern mass media and the new information technologies, in contrast to tight-knit groups, each act of interpretation is immediately (though not necessarily directly) challenged by a wide array of readily available alternatives, many of which may also be direct original interpretations from the sacred text. What we obtain is not a straightforward privatization of knowledge and authority but rather a multiplication of authorities on the sacred text in what remains a two-tiered global communal order. Borrowing from the terminology of Beck and Giddens, we would call this not reflexive modernity but reflexive traditionalism. It does not necessarily emulate the culture of rote learning, but attempts to defend a tradition that is discursively constructed.

Today, as much as at the turn of the previous century when the notion was popularized among scholarly Islamic circles by the reformist Muslim intellectuals Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Muhammed Abduh, what can provide a reliable indication of the authority of these interpretations is simply the use of 'reason' (Abduh, 1966; Enayat, 1982). Now, as then, the basic principle is that the Qur'an contains a set of rational prescriptions that can be understood by the rational mind of the believers once they have been clearly explained by the proper religious authorities. And this explanation of the text, once found, is to be kept precious. Hence, the main task of the scholarly elite is gradually to construct a cohesive body of rational interpretations of the scriptures that would reflect the original message of the sacred text for the community. In this way, regardless of their mastery of the actual text, the faithful could rely on an increasingly coherent body of authoritative interpretations that scholars had built in order to devise their personalized blueprint for religious, social, political and cultural activities – more effectively than they would if they had to ask any particular Islamic scholar. This accumulation of 'definite' statements on the scriptures in the modern period (mostly cut off from the pre-existing body of theological and judicial

interpretations) underpins the spread and consolidation of contemporary forms of scriptural Islam – be they called Islamism, Wahhabism and so forth. And it constitutes perhaps the more pernicious form of closure of the Islamic ‘archive’, as defined by Mohammed Arkoun (2002).

The strength of those multiple yet similar neo-scripturalist readings of the sacred text that have become truly global in the last couple of decades resides precisely in their identification of a relatively stable set of basic principles and understandings that can be easily communicated to a mass audience. These readings form a set of mutually supportive strategies to describe and understand the religious, social, political and cultural world and Islam rationally (in an instrumental sense). This is the kind of discourse on Islam that can easily be found and implemented in London, Paris, Baghdad, Riyadh or Jakarta. It encapsulates the kind of questions and answers that one can easily identify even in the most superficial discussion about Islam, and is ubiquitous, as any web search may demonstrate. For the proponents of alternative, non-scripturalist ways of reading the sacred text, the main difficulty (and their main scholarly strength) resides in the originality of their discourse. This originality, uniqueness even, ensures that their message can easily get lost among the background noise that constitutes the bulk of the information that is available in the mass media. This background noise, as much as traditional factors such as charisma or institutionalization, becomes a determining element in the construction of contemporary forms of Islamic authority. Too much information produces too little knowledge.

At this point we may perhaps take stock of the distance that separates us from the early 20th century, and from the Weberian and Durkheimian models that set the tone of the debate then. Today, there clearly remains authority in the religious world, but this authority is to an ever-increasing extent purposefully mediated by the individual, who becomes as much the final assessor of religiosity as his/her practice of individuated religion allows. In the Muslim context, it also means that once this new freedom of interpretation exists – and by this we mean epistemological freedom in general, not simply *ijtihad* – then a return to the structured form of religious authority that existed throughout most of our recent history is unlikely. What we obtain is an increased form of intersubjectivity, intermixed with a functional type of anarchism in so far as religiosity has a de-institutionalized and de-nationalized political edge to it. Although this development is true for all religions, it has a special impact on Islam, within which there is no institutional authority such as a Church and within which competition between scholar-jurists is the norm. Furthermore, as Islamic communities experience global pressures of migration, especially in Bangladesh, Pakistan and Indonesia, the problem of acculturation in majority host communities raises acute and often new questions concerning proper practice. Being a ‘good Muslim’ requires a lot of interpretive activities in largely uncharted waters. Can a ‘good Muslim’ have a Jewish friend? Can a ‘good Muslim’ tolerate a neighbour who keeps a dog in their high-rise flat?

Worryingly, this form of personalized religiosity with a public face, which mirrors the individual rights culture that created its conditions of existence, is not bound by it. This generates new possibilities and, unavoidably, new dangers for the reconstruction of the political and religious allegiances in globalizing Muslim communities.

Introduction to the Articles

In this collection of original writings, the contributors identify the emerging dilemmas and opportunities that face globalizing Muslim communities. In particular, they address the epistemological issues that underpin the new claims to religious knowledge, particularly in relation to the notion of democratic choice in contemporary political debates. The contributors also consider the dynamics of the new forms of Islamic knowledge that have been facilitated by the rise of mass media and new media technology. They investigate the processes of formal and informal institutionalization of new Islamic discourses and 'authorities' in communities that have been at the cutting edge of these globalizing trends.

Looking at the historicity of the answers proposed, one could outline three main tendencies in the formulation and implementation of models of Islamic authority. Crudely, these schemes could be called traditionalist, reformist and radical. The radical perspective, embodied in Mohammed Arkoun's writings, challenges the very foundations of the corpus of religious knowledge that has been accumulated since the emergence of Islam as a world religion. It puts into question not only the individuals and institutions currently posing as Islamic authorities, but also the very reasons and processes that make them authorities on Islam. Arkoun suggests that little is being offered by the attempts at reviving Islamic thought by going back to the early period of Islam, or by patching up the cracks in contemporary disarray of Islamic thinking by ad hoc borrowing of lumps of Western modernity. Instead, the task should be to look squarely at the problematic evolution of the Islamic tradition and to dare to question those assumptions that have always been taken for granted by the scholarly, religious or political powers-that-be for the sake of expediency. For Arkoun, it is only by tracing back to their source the mechanisms that historically constructed the Islamic tradition that is alive today, and by analysis of the choices that they illustrated, that one can critically re-examine the prospects of this tradition in the context of modernity.

The reformist perspective, illustrated by Azzam Tamimi's contribution, is undoubtedly the most difficult approach to pin down with precision, as it is always in danger of backsliding into either a traditionalist argument or a revolutionist proposal. The reformist case, which is most relevant in the current debate about democracy in the Muslim world, is a self-reflective argument emphasizing that some but not all of the reasons and institutions that justify traditional forms of Islamic authority ought to be revised. In contemporary settings, the main challenge is to identify the role that democracy can play in fostering the multiple Islamic revivals that have been

witnessed in most parts of the Muslim world over the last decades. Tamimi suggests that, increasingly, reformist Islamic thinkers can build on a body of thought that emphasizes the relationship between popular participation and Islamic principles of governance. Yet the efforts of these reformers notwithstanding, the ongoing relevance of autocratic governments and politics in most of the Muslim world ensures that a smooth path to reform is far from guaranteed.

The traditionalist perspective, outlined here by Robert Gleave's and Baudouin Dupret's contributions, is readily embodied in the everyday deliberations of, for example, the Shi'a clergy in relation to the institutionalization of a political leadership in Iraq, or Egyptian judges in relation to the normative-legal application of positive and religious jurisprudence. In both cases, however, the notion of 'Islamic tradition' is consistently revised through practice at every step of the way. Gleave indicates how the acceptance of various interpretations of the proper relationship between theological knowledge and political governance is spurred by intra-elite competition within the Shi'a religious leadership, with each camp instrumentally using specific aspects of the tradition to keep in tune with (as well as shape) the expectations of ordinary believers. Yet, in a rapidly changing political context, and in the face of the growing relevance of democratic discourse, the Shi'a clergy proved able to maintain a cohesive approach to the conceptual primacy of the religious over the political. In this way, Gleave suggests, they position their institutions as an inescapable link between popular aspirations and good governance. In the Egyptian context, Dupret highlights that, even in the rulings issued by Egyptian judges under the label of Islamic law, the 'Islamic' quality of the decrees is more often than not a vague notion of appropriateness attached to a conclusion reached via routine considerations of mundane social problems. There, the Islamic rationale that can be unearthed by the scholar *a posteriori* is hardly ever the crucial element in determining the everyday practice of the judicial establishment that is meant to embody it. The resilience of the 'Islamic tradition' is therefore more an unquestioned assumption than an all-pervasive mechanism of social ordering.

The process of re-articulation of Islamic knowledge side by side with the formation of an increasingly pervasive global religious discourse mediated by the new mass media is detailed in Peter Mandaville's and Bryan Turner's writings. Both contributors investigate how far our modern predicament provides an opportunity for Muslims to redefine the hierarchies of knowledge and power between old and new Islamic centres; and how far it reinforces the drive towards an inchoate multiplicity of Islamic voices. This debate is principally structured around two key questions: first, what are Muslims constructing their new Islamic identity for, and, second, how are they most able to do it today? For Mandaville, an increasingly important part of being Muslim nowadays involves coming to terms with the plurality of answers that Islam is purported to give in various fields of knowledge. Crucially today, this individual and collective interpretive effort is under-

taken at a time when very peculiar geopolitical considerations create new conceptual boundaries and synergies that favour expediency over mature reflection. For Turner, the craving for the pure, idealized knowledge of an unspoiled Islamic community is heightened in the global Muslim community as the need for adaptation and integration of new lifestyles and information is felt more pressingly. More than geopolitics, it is the evolution of a globalized information society and the changing role that traditional modes of knowledge and authority play in it that spur this transformation.

Finally, the contributions of Armando Salvatore, of Pnina Werbner, of Tariq Modood and Fauzia Ahmad, and of Fuat Keyman illustrate the different levels of engagement, and the strategic reorganization of different Muslim communities vis-a-vis this globalizing Islamic debate. The authors illustrate, each in their own fashion, the contemporary tensions between an increased 'transnationalization' of local and national cultural traditions, and the entrenchment of a set of 'truly' global Islamic perspectives and reference points. Armando Salvatore considers the emergence of a Europe-wide debate on the forms of Islamic communal recognition that liberal democratic states increasingly take into consideration, as well as the implications of the secularist drive advocated by specific states (like France). Muslim thinkers and activists are trying to redefine the relationship between the state and citizens, and the public and the private, in a way that resonates with the aspirations of the Muslim communities in Europe, while coping with the different approaches favoured by member states. Salvatore points out that this construction of a Europe-wide dialogue occurs at the same time as European countries redefine their notions of the liberal state and of secularism. For Muslim intellectuals and activists the challenge is to break free from the colonial heritage and the formal and informal classifications inherited from that time, and to re-introduce the Muslim community in a more productive interaction with European states and society in order to obtain more consensual forms of political authority. Pnina Werbner analyses the interconnections between 'traditional' and 'modern' forms of Islamic social identification in political and cultural contexts framed by both national policies and transnational relations. She emphasizes the importance of the role of identity markers such as honour, shame and sexuality in shaping the debate on the role of religion in secular liberal institutional settings. As individuals and communities utilize instrumentally new and old norms about appropriate religious or political behaviour to challenge existing structures of authority, they (often unwittingly) unsettle what came to be accepted as norms of social cohesion for various groups and institutions, with both positive and negative consequences.

Tariq Modood and Fauzia Ahmad document the emergence of a discursive space combining liberal and Islamic referents in the settings of UK multiculturalism. They detail how moderate British-based Muslim intellectuals and activists try to come to a satisfactory synthesis on notions of inter-community relationships. Here, the main challenge is to engage with the

community in a way that does not merely echo the superficial forms of multiculturalism of the liberal elite or the reluctance of conservative Muslim leaders unwilling to engage with the Western intellectual tradition. The contemporary political situation provides clear opportunities for these new intellectuals, but it remains to be seen whether collectively they can constitute an effective reference point for defining and practising multiculturalism in the UK. Finally, Fuat Keyman observes the process of re-articulation of Islamic social-political norms and practices in the framework of a Turkish republic initially defined by an uncompromising secular ideology. He points out that the over-ambitious policies of the Turkish government, aimed at institutionalizing the everyday religious attitudes of the population, reified the tensions between Islam and secularism. They positioned these two notions as opposite models of identity formation and curtailed the possibilities of conceiving and developing other approaches to modernity. In present-day Turkey, however, the debate over the accession to the European Union may provide new opportunities for reconsidering their relationship in a more democratic institutional setting.

Notes

1. New opportunities and constraints make this process different from the kind of communal creations that were produced on the basis of nationalism. An Islamic-based 21st-century version of an imagined community would have to be conceived differently from that of, say, Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities* (1991).
2. 'Global Jihadism' can be described as 'a form of violence directed against a state, its citizens and its assets, perpetrated by citizens of the same or another state on behalf of Muslim communities from any state in the world and which are directly or indirectly oppressed by the state targeted by this violence' (Volpi, 2006: 6).
3. See the contributors to John Dunn's *Contemporary Crisis of the Nation State* (1995); and compare Jürgen Habermas' *The Postnational Constellation* (2001).
4. Admittedly, Durkheim had very little of substance to say about religion in a Muslim context. This, however, does not stop contemporary authors from finding inspiration in his works on both suicide and on religion to analyse contemporary trends in Islamic radicalism. See for example Strenski (2003).
5. This dilemma is clearly identified by the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB), especially in relation to its dealings with the UK officialdom on issues of domestic security and regarding foreign policy choices made after 9/11 and the war in Iraq. See the 2004 general report by the MCB General Secretary, Iqbal Sacranie, URL (consulted November 2006): <http://www.mcb.org.uk/downloads/agm2004.pdf>
6. For an insight into the mind of Nicolas Sarkozy, the French Interior Minister who initiated this process, see Sarkozy, *La République, les religions, l'espérance* (2004). See also John Bowen, 'Beyond Migration: Islam as a Transnational Public Space' (2004).
7. The pronouncements of the European Council for Fatwa and Research are available online, URL (consulted November 2006): <http://www.e-cfr.org/eng/>
8. In an interview with the author, London, 13 March 2005.

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