INTRODUCTION: RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY AND RELIGIOUS AUTHORITIES IN MUSLIM SOCIETIES.
A CRITICAL OVERVIEW

Who speaks for Islam? Who explains to Muslims whether human rights are a legitimate concept “in Islam,” whether there is such a thing as “Islamic values” and what they consist of, and whether violence can ever be justified from a religious point of view? Who do Muslims turn to when they look for guidance? To what extent do individual scholars and preachers exert religious authority, and how can it be assessed? What is the role of the Cairo-based Azhar mosque and university, the Shi‘i seminaries in Najaf and Qum or the great Islamic colleges in South Asia for Muslims in their respective countries and beyond, including the Muslim diaspora in the west? The upsurge of Islamism has lent new urgency to these questions, but they have deeper roots and a much longer history, and they certainly should not be considered in the light of present concerns only.

Religious authority is an elusive concept and notoriously difficult to define. Following Max Weber, authority describes the ability (or “chance” as Weber put it) to have one’s rules and rulings followed, or obeyed, without recourse to coercive power. It is indeed the very absence of coercion that for Weber distinguishes authority (Autorität) from power (Macht).1 In the present context, however, authority and power are not always easy to distinguish. Religious authority can assume a number of forms and functions: the ability (chance, power, or right) to define correct belief and practice, or orthodoxy and orthopraxy, respectively; to shape and influence the views and conduct of others accordingly; to identify, marginalize, punish or exclude deviance, heresy and apostasy and their agents and advocates. In the monotheistic religions founded on revealed scripture, religious authority further involves the ability (chance, power, or right) to compose and define the canon of “authoritative” texts and the legitimate

1 Weber deals with the issue in various contexts, from religion to politics to market relations, and his relevant definitions and comments are dispersed over his massive work, notably Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft (Studienausgabe, rev. ed., Tübingen 1972). Interestingly, the concept of authority does not figure prominently in Stefan Breuer’s Max Webers Herrschaftssoziologie, Frankfurt am Main/New York 1991.
methods of interpretation. Even so brief a sketch illustrates how easily the distinction between authority and power can become blurred. For Weber, authority is intimately linked to the notion of legitimacy. By the same token, it is tied to the concept of trust. Religious authority can be ascribed to individuals, groups of people, or institutions. While it rests on certain qualities and/or qualifications, inherited or acquired, it is the willingness of others to credit any given person, group or institution with religious authority that ultimately renders it effective. Like any kind of authority, religious authority does not denote a fixed attribute, but is premised on recognition and acquiescence. Put differently, it is relational and contingent. In his seminal work, Weber did refer to the relational character of religious authority. Yet he may not have given it the weight it receives in present scholarship which unlike Weber, tends to be uncomfortable with definitions, preferring to emphasize narratives, interactions, and contingency. To focus on the relational aspect and to evaluate the ways religious authority is projected, perceived and put into practice in any given context, adds considerably to the complexity of the issue, and of the research agenda.

Religious authority in Muslim societies is not a new topic. From an early date it has attracted scholars interested in the complex interplay of religion, law, politics and society. As a result, we now have a fair number of sophisticated case studies and some comparative works, mostly collective volumes, dealing with the issue.2 Not surprisingly, the relevance of (religious) authority to Islamic law, shari'a as well as fiqh, and vice versa has been discussed at some length.3

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3 See, e.g., Khaled Abou El Fadl, The Authoritative and the Authoritarian in Islamic Discourses. A contemporary case study, Austin 1997, and idem, Speaking in God’s Name. Islamic Law, Authority, and Women, London 2001; Baber Johansen, Contingency in a
The most significant addition to a growing field are studies dealing with religious authority and authorities in Muslim diaspora communities in the West. Here the French contributions or, to be more precise, contributions in French, are especially notable. Still, much remains to be explored and better understood.

The present volume is not so much concerned with religious authority, but with religious authorities, men and women claiming, projecting and exerting religious authority within a given context. A number of assumptions merit to be critically examined here: that religious authority ultimately derives from the foundational texts of the Qurʾān and the sunna of the Prophet; that persons matter more than institutions as sources and mediators of religious knowledge and authority; that religious and legal scholars have greater authority than caliphs, sultans and other rulers, pre-modern as well as modern; and that scholars and Sufis are situated at opposite ends of a scale of religious experts or virtuosi, to use an expression dear to Weber. There is little argument concerning the crucial importance of the Qurʾān to Islam and the Islamic tradition. Indeed, Islam may be considered the scriptural religion par excellence. As is well known, the Qurʾān itself classifies other religions according to whether they, too, are monotheistic in their doctrine and based on revealed scripture, distinguishing the “people of the book,” ahl al-kitāb, from the pagan “polytheists,” mushrikūn, who in addition to their polytheist beliefs and practices lack a revealed scripture. According to Muslim belief, the Qurʾān is divine speech revealed to Muḥammad, in the Arabic language, over a period of some twenty years, and “collected” into a book by a group of knowledgeable Muslims just over one decade after Muḥammad’s death in 632 C.E. One cannot insist too much on the fact that for Muslim believers, the Qurʾān is not just divinely inspired: it is God’s very word. For that reason, the text is regarded as eternal and inviolable as far as its wording is concerned. However,
like any text, sacred or other, the Qur‘ān requires active minds to explore its meaning(s) and implement its directives under changing circumstances. While it may be too bold for most Muslims to say that by itself, the Qur‘ānic text is mute, most will accept that for it to become relevant to their lives, it requires interpretation, highlighting the issue of religious authority. The field of Qur‘ānic exegesis (tafsīr) is, of course, vast and varied, and still largely understudied, especially with regard to the social “embeddedness” of individual exegetes and exegetic traditions, and the hermeneutic approaches advocated by them.

The status of the sunna, the collection of reports (sg. ḥadīth) on the sayings, deeds and practices of Muḥammad (and select members of the early Muslim community), as a source of religious authority is less clearly defined and more controversial. It is true that at least among Sunni Muslims, the sunna is generally regarded as the second most important source of Islamic normativity (Baber Johansen) alongside the Qur‘ān, complementing the divine word with the exemplary practice of the Prophet and certain members of the early community. Some even hold that in case of conflict, sound ḥadīth can abrogate specific Qur‘ānic injunctions. Religious guidance, then, is not only laid down in a text of inviolable status. Muslims can look to living examples of proper thought and conduct, providing role models for Muslim men and women of all times and places. In contrast to the Qur‘ān, the sunna does not consist of one book containing divine speech but rather of a number of collections compiled by Muslim scholars of the eighth and ninth centuries C.E. Like Qur‘ānic exegesis, ḥadīth scholarship is highly elaborate, especially with regard to the normativity of specific categories of reports. It is even more difficult to assess the weight and impact of other elements of what is usually called the authoritative tradition of Islam, and to analyse the processes of canon building involved. The legal tradition has probably been studied most extensively, including notably the formation of the Sunni and Shi‘i schools of law (sg. madhhab, pl. madhāhib) and their respective textual canons. Interestingly, the

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few studies exploring not just the formation of the schools of law but their actual functioning deal mostly with the Ḥanbalī one. As yet, we seem to dispose of very few studies dealing with theological schools as schools and networks, and not so much as groups of distinguished individuals and their respective writings.

To deal with the Qurʾān and sunna not just as a source of moral guidance but as normative textual proof regulating human activity in all spheres of life requires expert knowledge, a knowledge premised on a minimum level of literacy and the requisite training, underlining yet again the need to define the scope and basis of religious authority. As is well known, there is no church in Islam, and no ordained clergy. What did emerge at an early date is a class of religious semi-professionals and professionals (sg. ʿālim, pl. ʿulamāʾ, derived from Arabic ʿilm, knowledge relevant to religion), religious experts closely resembling Jewish rabbis rather than the ordained clergy of the Christian churches, who claimed the right, on the basis of their acquired religious knowledge, to interpret the foundational texts of


the Qur’ān and sunna and to compose authoritative texts themselves. For obvious reasons, the ‘ulamā’ have received considerable attention, and we are now much better informed about the rise of various types of religious and legal scholars, their background, training, and fields of activity, their self-views, and to an extent, their place and image in their respective community or society.10 In their vast majority, the ‘ulamā’ are men and always have been. The study of women in Islamic scholarship narrowly defined is slowly developing.11 The institutes of higher learning (sg. madrasa) which from the eleventh century C.E. onwards spread and developed in all parts of the Muslim world, have met with special interest.12 We also have a growing number of studies on individual institutions of higher Islamic learning in the pre-modern and modern periods, first and foremost al-Azhar in Cairo and several large Islamic schools and colleges in South Asia.13


INTRODUCTION

But there are still major fields to be explored: to what extent did knowledge (‘ilm) equal authority in religious matters? Who had access to the Qur‘an and sunna and the authoritative canon within a given social context, and what were the relevant criteria here (age, gender, status group, language skills)? Who had, or claimed, the right to interpret the Qur‘an and sunna? Who was entitled to compose additional authoritative texts in his (or her?) own right and to establish the relevant authoritative canon? What was the scope given to reason in interpreting scripture? What was and is the significance of what Roy Mottahedeh called the silsila mindedness and Jonathan Berkey the isnād mentality of Muslim scholars, saints and ordinary believers: the marked tendency to refer to the normative and authoritative traditions in order to justify their own thoughts, no matter how thin the connection and how far-fetched the analogy?\(^\text{14}\) As an authenticating device, or legitimizing strategy, this is a familiar practice. What remains to be studied more systematically are the conventions and formulae employed in specific contexts (see Schmidtke in this volume). But there are also authors who did not resort to this device and fields where it was not commonly used: under which circumstances, then, were earlier texts either used and cited, or used (if not fully plagiarized) without being cited?\(^\text{15}\) What is the relative weight of the oral and the written in the acquisition and transmission


of religious knowledge? The well-known saying that knowledge can only properly be attained at the hands of scholars, not of books, reflects a social ideal (presumably cherished by the scholars themselves). Yet we know of large libraries, private as well as public, and of encyclopaedic works written as early as the ninth century C.E.: who read them and what were the social uses of religious knowledge as it were privately acquired?

To move to a slightly different domain: how does knowledge relate to personal conduct (Lebensführung) to refer once again to Weber) or to charisma, either ascriptive or acquired? In the existing literature, the Hanbali school of law has served as the prime example to study the complex relationship of knowledge, conduct and charisma. Several contributions to the present volume (including Afsaruddin, Böttcher, Dennerlein, Dressler, Krämer and Schmidtke) address these issues. At the same time, processes of institutionalization of religious knowledge and religious authority merit closer attention: they include the social functions of the schools of law and theology, the establishment of colleges of higher Islamic learning, and the efforts on the part of governments and rulers to organize religious scholars in court or state-centred hierarchies (see notably Amirpur, Dennerlein, Dressler and Walker in this volume). The Safavid and Ottoman cases are the best known examples here. Again it has to be emphasized that while rulers succeeded in creating a hierarchy of religious professionals, from among those willing to work within the state admin-

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18 See above, n. 8.

stratification, they did not create a church. Storytellers and folk preachers (pl. qaṣāṣ) created their own religious knowledge, at times openly challenging the authority of the scholars and the rulers. Long neglected and underestimated, pre-modern storytellers have now become the object of serious study. They did not create a church. Given the salience of Muslim preachers of varying background in the modern age and the modern uses of means of mass communication, much remains to be done here (see also Krämer in this volume).

Much of what has been said so far is relevant to religious scholars, but not necessarily to Muslim mystics (Sufis), for access to God, or truth, can be sought and possibly gained not just by way of textual knowledge, but of a spiritual experience that may ultimately culminate in illumination. Muslim saints and Sufis have held a strong attraction for students of Islam that is reflected in a vast body of literature. While the boundaries between the scholar and the Sufi have been reconsidered, the precise forms and functions of religious authority in the Sufi milieu are still far from exhausted (see Böttcher and Dennerlein in this volume). Initially elitist and confined to small circles, Sufism gradually acquired a broader social base. By the eleventh century C.E., it had reached all classes of society. Some mystics were themselves trained scholars, some were in close contact with the ‘ulamāʾ and the political powers that be, others shunned

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these associations as contrary to their spiritual quest. From the twelfth and thirteenth centuries C.E. onwards, Sufis created their own institutions (Sufi brotherhoods or orders, ṭuruq) with specific sites, rites and practices, including specific types of master-disciple-relationships. Some enjoyed court patronage, others avoided it, or rejected it altogether. Within the Sufi milieu, both ṭuruq-affiliated and independent, religious authority was understood and practiced in ways that as a rule differed markedly from those of the ulamā‘. It would be an interesting topic for further research to investigate more thoroughly the degree of social inclusiveness and exclusiveness associated with textual and spiritual authority: if one presupposes literacy (in the Arabic language!), the other is commonly thought to be premised on charisma (another of Weber’s difficult concepts), either inherited or acquired.

It is perhaps the rulers and official policies that call for more critical attention than they have hitherto received: that caliphs claimed religious authority from an early date is well documented, and reflected at all sorts of levels from coins to court poetry, and from inscriptions to actual policies. It has been convincingly argued that within the Sunni milieu, the issue of religious authority was far from settled by the outcome of the miḥna (trial, sometimes translated as inquisition) in which the Abbasid caliph al-Mamūn (r. 813–833 C.E.) and two of his successors tried to impose the doctrine of the created Qur‘ān within their realm, torturing and killing a number of ulamā‘ who refused to accept the doctrine on the basis of caliphal authority.

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23 In addition to the titles cited above, n. 22, see Alexandre Popovic and Gilles Veinstein (eds.), Les voies d’Allah. Les ordres mystiques dans le monde musulman des origines à nos jours, Paris 1996.
25 Muhammad Qasim Zaman, Religion and Politics under the Early ‘Abbasids. The
The role of Sunni caliphs and Muslim rulers more generally in setting the boundaries of legitimate expressions of the faith remains to be studied. Not only did they enjoy wide-ranging powers in organizing the judicial sphere within their realm, allowing them to privilege specific schools of law (and theology), to patronize individual scholars, and to marginalize others or exclude them altogether. Beginning with the collection of the Qurʾān which entailed a significant amount of editorial work, the caliphs also intervened in dogmatic issues, formulating creeds and attempting to enforce them, both before and after the miḥna which allegedly confirmed the sole and exclusive authority of the ‘ulamāʾ in their capacity as “heirs to the prophets” (warathat al-anbiyāʾ), or the “people that bind and unbind” (ahl al-ʿaqd wa-l-hall). The caliphs were thus intimately concerned with defining and defending correct belief and practice (orthodoxy and orthopraxy), and by the same token, preventing heresy and apostasy, and not necessarily as mere executioners only, lending their sword to the men of the pen. The same applied to princes from the Buyid amīrs to the Saljuk sultans and the Moghul emperors with no immediate claim to religious authority but wide-ranging powers which were by no means limited to the “secular” domain. In this context, the Sunni sultans of Morocco provide a special and highly interesting case. With regard to the rulers, religious authority based on claims to voluntary obedience blends into religious power involving the (legitimate)


use of coercive force. What has perhaps been studied least are the instances of rulers imposing a particular interpretation of Islam as the “state religion” in their territories. Iran under the (very unorthodox) Shah Ismāʿīl (r. 1501–1524) is the best-known case in point.28 But what does the term “state religion” mean in an Islamic context, pre-modern as well as modern? Paul Walker’s contribution to this volume sheds fresh light on the Fatimid experience. For the modern period, the Islamic Republic of Iran with its idiosyncratic adaptation of one strand of the Shi‘i tradition provides the most obvious example (see Amirpur in this volume).29

The nature, scope and locus of religious authority, then, is far from clear with regard to the pre-modern period. It is even less so in the modern period. More and more groups and individuals are claiming the right to speak on Islam and in the name of Islam. The expansion of mass education, the mass media and new communication technologies have greatly contributed to this state of affairs. Broader access to information and relevant knowledge serves as the basis of wider claims to religious authority. We should perhaps think not so much in terms of a fragmentation of the “religious field” (champ religieux), a field that has never been unified under one single authority, but rather of a proliferation of religious knowledge, actors and normative statements of uncertain status (see Krämer in this volume). The ‘ulamā’ and their characteristic media of expression have by no means disappeared (see Zaman in this volume). But next to them, and often in competition with them, other actors, forums and forms of expression have emerged, some of them well known but subtly transformed (legal opinions, fatāwā, issued by non-specialists are the prime example here), others of a new type altogether (Islamic intel-


29 For a brief introduction into what has become a major field of study, see Sabrina Mervin, “Les autorités religieuses dans le chiisme duodécimain contempo-
lectuals, Islamicists and even social scientists). The general fascination with the internet and its impact on what has been called the public sphere, is of some importance in this context. If scholars trained in the classical tradition are increasingly using new channels of expression ("media muftis"), intellectuals and political activists are laying claim not merely to religious knowledge, but to religious authority based on this knowledge. Now it is not just imams and caliphs that intervene, or interfere, in the religious sphere, but secular authorities such as parliaments and High Constitutional Courts staffed with secular lawyers. In states such as Egypt, where "the principles" of the shari'at serve as the main source of legislation, they decide on the constitutionality of draft laws, or pass judgements in cases involving apostasy charges. Are they, then, to be considered religious authorities, too? At the same time, social scientists researching Muslim communities in the west have emphasized the processes of individualization of religious education and experience. They have also been criticized for underrating countervailing tendencies. In all instances, the element of trust in constituting and maintaining religious authority remains to be more fully explored.


While aware of the wider issues, the editors and authors of the present volume could not possibly cover them all. The volume has a strong focus on Middle Eastern Muslim majority societies in the period from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries; one paper (Annabelle Böttcher) deals with a Sufi network of Middle Eastern origin operating in the United States of America and Western Europe. In their majority, the authors do not approach their subject with an explicit theoretical agenda. Rather, they offer case studies elucidating important aspects of the wider issue in a way that we hope will deepen our understanding of the relevant phenomenon, and help to further refine the concepts used to analyse the larger issue. Individually and collectively, they highlight the scope and variety of religious authority and religious authorities in Muslim societies past and present: contingency is not just fashionable term.

The majority of the papers were presented at an international symposium “Religious Authorities in Middle Eastern Islam,” organized by the Interdisziplinäre Zentrum “Bausteine zu einer Gesellschaftsgeschichte des Vorderen Orients,” and held in Berlin from 5 to 8 December 2002. Not all speakers were able to contribute to the present volume. Camilla Adang, Asma Afsaruddin and Paul Walker were invited to contribute later.

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Gudrun Krämer and Sabine Schmidtke