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

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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. 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.

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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