‘73 PROOFS OF DILETTANTISM’: THE CONSTRUCTION OF NORM AND DEVIANCE IN THE RESPONSES TO MOHAMAD SHAHROUR’S BOOK *AL-KITAB WA’L-QUR’AN: QIRÂ’A MU’ÂSIRA*

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Introduction

The emergence of new Muslim intellectuals\(^1\) in the public sphere in Muslim countries has undoubtedly challenged the authority of traditional Islamic institutions. The unconventionality of their engagement with traditional religious literature has not only undermined the well-established canons of textual interpretation but also created—as Dale Eickelman puts it—an “increasingly open contest over the use of the symbolic language of Islam”. More radically, it has led to a “collapse of earlier, hierarchical notions of religious authority based on claims to the mastery of fixed bodies of religious texts”.\(^2\) Recent research by Islamicists has understandably focused on exploring the character of that challenge, resulting in a number of detailed studies on the works of different new Muslim intellectuals.\(^3\) However, there is a signifi-


\(^{3}\) See J. Cooper, R. Nettler, M. Mahmoud (eds), *Islam and Modernity: Muslim*
cant lack of studies that explore the impact of those ‘unorthodox’ writings on conventional scholarship whose authority is at stake. How have traditional ‘ulmā’ and fuqahā’ responded to the challenge? What are their strategies to cope with new ideas of textual analysis and new ways of interpretations? Have other, traditionally inclined lay Muslims, well educated and knowledgeable in the disciplines of Islamic sciences, acknowledged the validity of new, innovative approaches to the sacred texts or have they passionately defended the classical, medieval heritage? Paradoxically, if there is a serious contest going on today between different rival carriers of tradition, struggling for control over the usage of Islamic symbols in the public discourse, we know now more about the challenges in this contest, but know almost nothing about its defenders.

This article attempts to fill the gap. It focuses on the analysis of the so-called *radd*-literature, which emerged as a negative response (Arabic: al-radd) to the publication of *al-Kitāb wa’l-qur’ān: qirā’a mu’āṣira* (1990) by the Syrian engineer Mohamad Shahrour. In Syria, the book caused a similar public outcry as the works by Nasr Hâmid Abû Zayd and Salman Rushdie did in Egypt and India/Pakistan, notably at around the same time of publication. In its intensity and emotionality this certainly evokes memories of parallel past incidents in Egypt, Sudan and Lebanon, such as the scandals after the publications of *Naqd al-fikr al-dīnī* by Sādiq al-‘Azm (Beirut 1969); of *al-Risāla al-thāniya min al-islām* by Mahmūd

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