Who Gets the Past? The Changing Face of Islamic Authority and Religious Knowledge

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Historians and sociologists often take at face value the ideological claim in Islam of the fixed nature of religious knowledge. Consequently, they give less attention to how such a system of knowledge is affected by changing modes of transmission, who takes part in the increasingly widespread debates over what is valued knowledge, and how these debates have shifted over time.

Competing Claims to Authoritative Religious Knowledge

The problem of defining what knowledge is valued and how it relates to faith and authority is increasingly a subject of intense debate in Muslim societies. Innovation—even when denied outright—can emerge from surprising quarters. In March 2009, for example, conservative religious scholars in Saudi Arabia argued in the local Arabic press that the secluding and covering of women was an innovation (Arabic, *bid'a*) that was not practiced in the time of the Prophet Muhammad and therefore could not be considered "Islamic." A Kuwaiti scholar (Alatiqi, 2009), entrusted as a government official with enforcing gender separation at private universities in his country, offered in his private capacity a powerful public version of the same argument. Trained not in the religious sciences but rather as a civil engineer, Alatiqi based his argument on a consideration of the recognized sources of "authentic" Islamic tradition—including the Qur'an, the sayings (*hadith*) of the Prophet Muhammad, and accounts of the Prophet's life.

Alatiqi, like members of the Kuwaiti parliament who enacted university gender separation regulations in the first place, bases his argument on claims about what happened in the past, particularly in the time of the Prophet Muhammad (d. 632).

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The fact that one can separate official duties from private opinions in Kuwaiti and Saudi public space also indicates the new settings in which beliefs and practices can be argued in public.

To use a term made popular by Oxford philosopher W. B. Gallie (1968), "innovation" in the Islamic tradition is an "essentially contested concept." Innovation concerns not only the content and context of ideas and practices, but also who takes part in the discussion about them and who is influenced by those discussions. In the Islamic tradition, the easiest way to claim legitimacy for innovation is to deny that it has taken place (see, e.g., Kamarava, 2011). Like concepts of "good governance," "duty," and "social justice," innovation in Islamic thought and practice is impossible to define once and for all. People can justify why they hold one interpretation over others, and authorities can attempt to block public debate, but the "proper" meaning of an essentially contested concept cannot by definition be settled once and for all.

The clarification of such claims to fixed religious knowledge involves considering how differing parties have used the concept throughout its history. The uncontested experts once were the *'ulama*, or men of learning, the generally recognized authorities of prior generations. Yet, as the Sorbonne-educated Sudanese lawyer and politician al-Turabi (1983, p. 245) has argued, all knowledge is "divine and religious," so that all those who possess knowledge (*'ilm*) are the equals of those who possess specialist religious knowledge.

This view is still strongly contested. For example, Sa'id Ramadan al-Buti (d. 2013), a Syrian religious scholar and television preacher, argued that just as one goes to an architect for a building and a medical doctor for illness, one goes to a properly trained specialist for religious questions (personal communication, Damascus, August 12, 1999). The addition of women to these debates further shapes the field of what is no longer taken for granted.

Struggles for control of the mantle of religious and political authority in Muslim-majority societies are often phrased in opaque interpretations, blurring lines between tradition and modernity and concealing the vigor of the underlying debates. This opacity is quickly becoming transparent through new media, which enable key religious leaders to be regularly seen on satellite television and in streaming video. Disciples and coworkers regularly post catechism-like documents and Web links, answers to religious questions, and simplifications of complex arguments in multiple languages to expand the reach of their *shaykh* (see, e.g., http://naseemalsham.com).

In the prescient words of Castells (1996, p. 373), the new media have increasingly become a "real virtuality"—not just a channel through which the appearance of reality is communicated, but experience itself. Since at least the mid-twentieth century, the increased availability of mass education, especially mass higher education, the greater ease of travel, and new communication technologies have reshaped struggles over religious and political authority in South and Southeast Asia, the Middle East, Turkey, and North Africa even as the protagonists in these struggles claim to sustain old ideas and practices.

In any challenge to political and religious authority, incumbents decidedly have the advantage. Nonetheless, in the hotly contested Iranian elections of June 12, 2009, and in the "Arab Spring" demonstrations from 2011 onward, opposition

effectively mobilized and reacted to government actions via mobile telephones, the Internet, Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, and text messages, as well as older forms of communication. State authorities try to block subversive communications, but the ensuing cat-and-mouse games between those authorities and their opposition have become increasingly fragmented and multidimensional.

Public Islam and the Common Good

The notion of "public Islam" refers to the highly diverse invocations of Islam as ideas and practices that religious scholars, self-ascribed religious authorities, secular intellectuals, members of Sufi orders, mothers, students, workers, engineers, and many others make in public life. These debates make a difference in configuring the politics and social life of large parts of the globe. They make a difference not only as a template for ideas and practices but also as a way of envisioning alternative political realities and, increasingly, in acting on both global and local stages, thus reconfiguring established boundaries of civil and social life.

Advancing levels of education, greater ease of travel, and the rise of new communications media throughout the Muslim-majority world have contributed to the emergence of a public sphere in which large numbers of people, and not just an educated, political, and economic elite, want a say in political and religious issues. The result has been to challenge authoritarianism, fragment religious and political authority, and increasingly open discussion of issues related to the "common good" (*al-maslaha al-'amma*), an essentially contested concept that is at the core of public life in Muslim-majority countries. The trend toward this greater openness and inclusion has, however, been uneven and often contradictory.

Not all of these trends are unique to the modern world. Cook's (2000) majestic study of "commanding right and forbidding wrong" in Islamic thought from the early Islamic centuries to the present depicts how issues of the common good and community responsibilities have engaged both Muslim jurists and a wider Muslim public well before the last two centuries. As in the present, some fundamentalists seek solace in literal attempts to imitate the life of the Prophet Muhammad. Others emphasize the necessity of interpreting the Qur'an as if it were revealed in the present and in interpreting the life and sayings of the Prophet metaphorically and not literally, engaging critical reason. This approach underlies that of the Andalusian jurist Abu Ishaq al-Shatibi (d. 1388; Masud, 1995) as much as it does the writings of the Syrian engineer Shahrur (2009), whose published work since 1990 in Arabic has gained an increasingly significant audience in the Arab world and, in translation, elsewhere.

Many of the emerging new voices and the leaders of movements within the proliferating public space of the contemporary Muslim world—a social location which is simultaneously physical and virtual—claim authoritatively to interpret basic religious texts and ideas, and work in local or transnational contexts. These new interpreters of how religion shapes, or should shape, societies and politics, like their counterparts in Poland's Solidarity movement and the liberation theology

movements in Latin America in the 1980s, often lack the technical textual sophistication of the religious scholars of earlier eras who previously led such discussions. Such new leaders and spokespeople have nonetheless succeeded in capturing the imagination of large numbers of people. These trends often intensify the ties that bind Muslim communities in the Muslim-majority world with Muslims in Europe, North America, and elsewhere in the world.

The issues and themes in Muslim politics increasingly transcend the specifics of region or place. Thus the contemporary “publicization” of Islam is more commonly rooted in communicative practice than in formal ideology (Adelkhah, 2002). It has created new social spaces, a trend significantly accelerated since the mid-twentieth century, and facilitated modern and distinctively open senses of political and religious identity.

Such practices involve both emotional and intellectual engagement among participants in overlapping circles of communication, solidarity, and the building of bonds of identity and trust. Some of these circles are based on local communities. Others are geographically diffuse yet targeted to receptive audiences. One example is the use of e-mail among the Indonesian university students who coordinated the nationwide campus protests that contributed to the downfall of President Suharto in 1998, a use of technology that seems archaic in light of the use of newer media in Iran, Jordan, Pakistan, and Morocco since then. These modern practices and new communication technologies create new and effective bases for effective mobilization that are not dependent on geographical propinquity. At the same time, they can threaten tolerance and civil society by facilitating publicity and calls to action by extremist groups (Hefner, 2003).

Social practices that are based on ideas of the common good and that contribute to shaping public Islam include collective rituals, such as popular festivals and religious and secular commemorations. They also encompass disciplining and performance practices as diverse as Sufi rituals, regional pilgrimages, the informal economy, the routines of modern schooling, and the use of the press and modern communications technologies.

Public Islam and Modernity

Mid-twentieth century theories of modernity and modernization assumed that religious movements, identities, and practices had become increasingly marginal and that only religious intellectuals and leaders who attached themselves to the nation-state would continue to play a significant role in public life. Assertions about the eclipse of religion in the public life of North America and Europe were exaggerated. Casanova (1994) was one of the first to remind us of several major developments in the 1970s that challenged the idea of the eclipse of religion in public life: the Iranian revolution, the rise of the Solidarity movement in Poland, the role of liberation theology in political movements throughout Latin America, and the return of Christian fundamentalism as a force in American politics.

In the Muslim-majority world, however, the role of religion in society and community life never receded, though it did change and develop in ways often underemphasized by Western observers and by Muslims themselves (Zaman, 2002). Only since the mid-1990s has the idea of an "Islamic public sphere"—*Islamische Öffentlichkeit* in German—come to the fore. Schulze (1995/2000), responding to the work of Jürgen Habermas, discerned this phenomenon as forming the infrastructure of communication and discourse of a new intellectual class that had emerged from the classic era of Islamic reform in the late nineteenth century through the structural transformations of the 1960s and 1970s.

A trope in the Muslim-majority world is to claim that these ideas of the common good are a return to an immutable heritage of religious or normative traditions fixed by Muhammad in seventh-century Arabia. They are not. They are defined by ethical notions and social values contested and redefined through interaction, practice, and transmission over generations.

In a parallel way, sectarianism in Christian Europe provided the habitus and congregational form for developing ideas of the public. It is possible to see in the Sufi tradition and other Muslim religious practices a similar contribution to learning how to participate in the public sphere. Like the Christian sects, the more orthodox forms of Sufism and other styles of public piety have contributed to shaping reasoning selves and to reconfiguring the relationship between legitimate authority and independent pursuit of truth. Public reasoning has a long tradition in Islamic jurisprudence. However, both Sunni and Shia awareness of this tradition is deflected by claims that anything new actually originated in the valued past of the time of the Prophet Muhammad.

As Casanova (1994) argues, various sectarian movements in Europe played a major role in developing the idea of the modular self, empowered with a moral conscience and confronting the authority both of established religion and of the state. According to this European trajectory, only when the freedom of individual conscience is recognized and tolerated can a public sphere develop. Nonetheless, religious ideas and practices can similarly foster the emergence of a public sphere.

Ideas of the public are historically situated and have strong links with culturally shared senses of self and community. They are located at the strategic intersection of practice and discourse. A recent book in France, *Penser le Coran* (or "Thinking the Qur'an"; Hussein, 2009), persuasively indicates how Qur'anic revelation is situationally linked to the understanding of revelation in seventh-century Arabia. In the context of the contemporary state, techniques of authority, persuasion, and control are also historically situated. Modern techniques often promote a secular outlook of citizenship and social membership, but these ideas exist alongside religious traditions and the emergence of new socioreligious discourses and leaderships that intersect with and challenge nation-state projects. In Morocco, for example, there is resurgent interest among the middle classes in collective Qur'anic chanting and the recitation of Sufi poetry, often composed by "pious ones" (*salihun*, or saints) known equally for their piety and their religious knowledge. The popularity of such piety pervades all social classes, and rural as well as urban milieus. Visitors to the royal compound in Rabat quickly note that only two ministries are situated within it—the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Pious Endowments and Religious Affairs.

Religious and Secular Identities

How does this continued pervasiveness of religious ideas and practice match views of the public sphere that are premised on the existence of religiously neutral or "secular" access to public debate? Some ideas of the "secular" divest participants in public exchanges of their religious and cultural identities, or at least marginalize these identities. However, the creation of a public culture promoting exchange and discussion can also build on traditions of religious faith and practice. Such traditions can also encourage the gradual emergence of ever more abstract patterns of membership and citizenship that rest on obligations and rights which increasingly fit a legal vocabulary and a contractual view of society.

Such developments including the discontinuities between tradition and modernity created by the emergence of a "culture of publicness," have been the focus of interest of political philosophers, social scientists, and historians alike. It suffices here to mention such diverse authors as Giambattista Vico, Adam Smith, Immanuel Kant, Alexis de Tocqueville, Ferdinand Tönnies, and John Dewey. These thinkers have concentrated on developments in Europe and North America, developments that are specifically Western but regarded as exemplary of universal trends. As John Agnew argues in this volume, the unexamined assumption that European and North American views are universal is all too common.

In spite of the growing recognition that religion plays an important role in public life and can contribute to the common good, it remains necessary to challenge the common assumption that secularism and secularly oriented practical rationality constitute the exclusive normative base for "modern" public life (Eickelman, 2000; Salvatore, 1997, 2001). Religious thought and practice in the Muslim world can inspire rational-practical orientations as much as do secular approaches to social action.

For both the nineteenth century and the contemporary era, it is possible to identify the norms of exchange and discourse that are the product of these interactions and clashes, and also the emergence of explicit and implicit Muslim forms of civility and publicness. Identifying these norms requires an effort to discern the social history, or genealogy, of the emergence of a sense and structure of public communication and participation in societies shaped by Muslim cultural, religious, and political traditions.

The present period differs from earlier ones in the speed, intensity, and large numbers of people involved in shaping the contours of tradition, but the publics of an earlier era were equally engaged in doing so. The reshaping of religious identity and forms of communication and publicness in the nineteenth-century Ottoman Empire is especially salient in this respect. Consider, for example, Istanbul, a city inhabited by a religiously, ethnically, and linguistically diverse population that outnumbered the Muslims for a good part of the Ottoman era. The most commonly held assumption is that the confessional communities of the empire lived separately, with minimal interaction, and developed social bonds and allegiances exclusively within their own communities.

This assumption fails to appreciate the mobile and relational aspect of community relations in Ottoman Istanbul, and it says little about the people's sense of identity

and of collective allegiance. Re-examining the ongoing transformations of the Ottoman Empire from the nineteenth century to the present facilitates a better grasp of the possibilities for change in the contemporary Muslim-majority world (see, e.g., Çinar, 2001; Frierson, 2004; Meeker, 2002).

The collective historical experience of coexistence among Muslims and non-Muslims in the Ottoman Empire can be analyzed on the basis of their common interests as members of a vibrant society. In India, the relation between Hindus and Muslims is crucial to the development of ideas of secularism and religiosity in relation to the public sphere (Ahmad, 2009). In such an historical and interreligious perspective, forms of public Islam in the twentieth century appear as contingent crystallizations of much more complex historical processes that were present in earlier periods. For example, imperial encounters have been of great importance in the historical development of public debate in the metropole as well as the colony—a circumstance that the U.S. occupation of Iraq in 2003 and increased involvement in Afghanistan from the Soviet invasion of 1979 onward bring once again to light.

Notwithstanding their diversity of historical experience, most Muslims share inherited conceptions of the common good, and these ideas from the past shape contemporary understandings of publicness in Muslim societies (see Eickelman & Salvatore, 2004, pp. 15–20). For example, Islamic religious scholars, the *'ulama*, claim that God reveals ideas of the common good to humankind. Yet these scholars also regard themselves alone as capable of discerning these ideas through their expertise in the science of scriptural hermeneutics. However, their agreement about the common good and how to understand the past still lead to vigorous debate. Moreover, Muslims increasingly are disinclined to allow conventionally trained religious scholars the final word in interpreting such vital questions as "What is Islam?" "How is it important to my life?" and "How do I interpret the past?" Participants in these debates may assert universal scope, but all such claims are locally situated, such as Tarek Fatah's vigorous attacks on adherents of the ideal of an Islamic state both in the present and since the death of the Prophet Muhammad in AD 632 (Fatah, 2008).

As the writings of Fatah—a self-described left-wing student leader and later a journalist in Pakistan who is now a Canadian—and many others make clear, interpreting the Islamic past as a means to legitimate the present is too important a task to be left to conventional Islamic scholars or to received wisdom. The authority of conventional religious scholars remains strong in the modern world but is increasingly challenged by alternative religious authorities who often lack formal training in the traditional religious sciences. Even the constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran is based on two conflicting principles, the absolute sovereignty of God (Principles 2 and 56) and the people's right to determine their own destiny (Principle 3:8) (Islamic Republic of Iran, 1980), thus opening the door to wide debate over issues of government and society. Within Sunni Islam, it is also becoming increasingly common for lay personalities to lead the Friday prayers at mosques. Thus, like the state, the *'ulama* rarely maintain a monopoly over the implicit understandings and formal ethical pronouncements guiding the Muslim community. Morocco's Minister of Pious Endowments and Religious Affairs since 2002 was

trained as an historian, not as a religious scholar, and his writings include novels, not religious treatises.

The increasing accessibility of new media, including satellite television and the Internet, and new uses of older media such as video- and audiocassettes and CDs contribute to the fragmentation of the traditional structures of religious authority. It also facilitates innovative ideas on religious authority and representing Islam in public in unexpected ways (Gonzalez-Quijano, 2003; Gonzalez-Quijano & Guaaybess, 2009; Hefner, 2003). There are numerous combinations of fragmented and sustained old and new forms of religious authority and influence in the public sphere, making debates about what constitutes "good" or authentic Islam much more contentious than has been the case in the past.

One paradox of modern Muslim publics is that despite the discursive expansion in many Muslim-majority states and communities, which includes respect and tolerance for non-Muslim "others," the public good is increasingly defined within the parameters of Islam. Some states, such as republican Turkey, vigorously sought to domesticate and neutralize Islamic institutions and ideas in the first half of the twentieth century, yet mutual accommodation and tacit bargaining among proponents of the different alternatives define the main approaches to current Turkish politics. The guardians of secularism and those who participate in Turkey's public sphere and civic life learn mutual accommodation through public debate and practice (White, 2002). As Adelkhah (2004) suggests for Iran, the most powerful achievement of the women's movement is not formal and recognized organizations, all monitored and repressed by the state, but women's activities in the informal economy and in shaping religious practices. As in the French Revolution, Adelkhah argues that such "informal" activities can be at least as powerful a vehicle for changing gender roles and ideas of Islam as explicit ideological statements and formal organizations. In all cases, Islamic ideas of the common good shift in content and elaboration over time and, despite explicit denials, may often converge with Western understandings of such major issues as democracy and tolerance for religious diversity (Hefner, 2000; Sulaiman, 1998). Thus the role of Islam in shaping understandings of the common good is unlikely to recede in importance in the years to come.

Muslims participate in crafting the idea of the common good in a variety of ways, and they also contribute to shaping the definitions of wider and more inclusive publics in societies where they are not a majority, as in Europe (Kepel, 1994/1997; Khosrokhavar, 1997; Schiffauer, 2001); or, as in Syria and Turkey, where they are confronted with a profoundly secular elite; or, as in Iran, with an increasingly unpopular, although powerful, clerical elite (Adelkhah, 2004). In India, Muslims live in a secular state strongly buffeted by religious extremism (van der Veer, 1994). Such historically situated and contemporary discourses speak against efforts to find a single, overarching idea of the common good shared by all Muslim societies, even if some ideologues—both those claiming to represent Islam and those attacking it—make such essentializing claims. It is often the case that such discussions or conflicts about what "good" or "true" Islam entails disrupt implicit conceptions of the public sphere, as in many communities throughout the Muslim world. These

debates and the contexts in which they occur throw into relief competing claims to speak in public, revealing threads of consensus and points of divergence or rupture.

Authorities and Audiences

The participation of religious authorities in public religious debate cannot be understood without an analysis of the audiences to which their discourses are directed and the elements that connect the followers of religious leaders to their persona. New media, including sermons on tape, popular journals, and local radio broadcasts, may combine with more conventional media (including gossip, published fatwas, and religious interpretations) to broaden spheres of participation and make them more complex. The degree to which the participation or influence of these new audiences alters conceptions and implementation of the common good, however, is a question that must always be asked rather than assumed (Eickelman & Salvatore, 2004, pp. 15–20). New authorities or speakers emerge in the space between the state and more traditional religious authorities, and thus come to represent alternative sites of power.

Religious authorities can be an essential part of the construction of public religious discourse. For example, the participation of Sufis in public religious debate combines modern forms of conceptualizing and presenting religious arguments with membership in a hierarchical and intensely personalized religious framework. Public articulation of the common good does not require the equality of all participants in order to raise a claim to truth and justice. The relationship between religious authority—whether claimed by traditional religious scholars or by “new” religious intellectuals (Roy, 1992/1994)—and the public sphere is profoundly ambiguous and more complex than conventional Habermasian theories would have us believe. Even in places where there is a state-sponsored Islamic ideology, as in Pakistan and Iran, individuals, groups, and communities often appropriate this ideology—or strive to disregard it—in order to reinforce their position in public religious debate by claiming Islamic credentials rooted in the historical past for defining the common good, or by furthering particular interests in the guise of shared ones, a strategy prevalent in public spheres everywhere.

Well before September 2001, the growing number of Muslims in Europe and North America began to foreground questions about national identity, citizenship, and multiple loyalties, as Muslims in France and Germany did before them. Events since then have further illuminated the vulnerability of, and misconceptions about, Muslims living in Europe and North America. This situation has at times led to efforts to organize for more effective participation in the political life of the societies in question; at other times it has led to waves of self-estrangement, exposing the fragility of multicultural discourse. Even in such a predicament, however, a positive outcome of double estrangement within the home and the receiving societies is to encourage engagement with transnational Muslim causes, especially where Muslims are the victims of human rights abuses.

In short, there is no singular public Islam, but rather a multiplicity of overlapping forms of practice, discourse, and invocations based on readings of the past. The competing claims represent the varied historical and political trajectories of Muslim communities and their links and influences with societies elsewhere. Debates about the common good encompass both words and actions. In spite of competing claims to represent the past authentically, these representations are profoundly shaped by new practices, new forms of publication and communication, and new ways of thinking about religious and political authority.

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