

## Determining Islamic authority in North America (I)

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(On March 8, I was invited to a conference on “Islam in America, 2003,” organized by the Muslim students organization at Harvard Divinity School. This essay is an edited version of that talk, and it is in two parts.)

Some of the ideas I will be sharing with you today come out of my work on the Qur’an in which I attempt to show that what we read the Qur’an to be saying depends largely on who reads it, how, and in what particular social and historical contexts; in other words, that there is a relationship between religious knowledge and authority (“*Believing Women*” in *Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur’an*, University of Texas Press, 2002). Other ideas crystallized as a result of having participated in a public debate on “Religious Authorities in Middle Eastern Islam” in Berlin recently during which we discussed some of the issues that I expect also will arise at our panel.

As a way to contextualize my comments about Islamic authority in North America, I want to begin by speaking about religious authority and knowledge in general and I want to distinguish between the Qur’an’s teachings and how Muslims define religious authority and knowledge because there are fundamental discrepancies between them. I realize that Islam isn’t reducible to the Qur’an, but we need to differentiate between what Fazlur Rahman used to call “normative and historical” Islam, and, while texts other than the Qur’an are normative among Muslims, I can’t imagine a more authoritative or compelling exposition of a religion than by its own scripture.

Two of the Qur’an’s teachings in particular seem relevant here, especially if we consider what they do *not* say about religious knowledge and authority.

First, the Qur’an does not say that the ability to acquire knowledge is a function of any sort of authority stemming from being a male, literate, an Arabic speaker, an *alim* (scholar), or a member of an interpretive community. Rather, the Qur’an teaches that all human beings have the potential to acquire knowledge, including religious knowledge, by reflecting on its *ayat* (“signs” of God). It also tells us that we do not need mediation and intercession in our relationship with God, which is why Islam does not ordain a clergy or sanction an institution comparable to the church.

Not only does the Qur’an not locate knowledge and authority in a specific person or community or institution, but—and this is the second point—it also does not teach that any community or person or institution is free from interpretive (or other) errors. Rather, the Qur’an teaches that even the bloodlines of prophets were not free of wrong-doing. Here one may recall God’s promise to Abraham,

“I will make thee  
An Imam to the Nations.’  
[Abraham] pleaded: ‘And also

(Imams) from my offspring!  
[God] answered: 'But My Promise  
Is not within the reach  
Of evil-doers'" (2:124; Abdullah Yusuf Ali, 1988: 52).

And, again, "even though God 'blessed [Abraham] and Isaac . . .of their progeny Are (some) that do right, And (some) that obviously Do wrong, to their own souls'" (37: 113; Yusuf Ali, 1206). (We safely can take "progeny" here in both a literal and a metaphorical sense).

In sum, the Qur'an does not teach that religious knowledge is the patrimony of a specific person or community, or that belonging to a community or a family ensures infallibility, or that a moral praxis founded in a true comprehension of God is a function of authority.

That being so, we cannot take the Qur'an's distinction between those who have been given real knowledge and those who have not and its charge to obey those in authority among us, as constituting scriptural sanction for setting up communities of male experts who monopolize religious knowledge and claim inerrant authority. And yet, regrettably, that is precisely what Muslims do today, and I am speaking now only of Sunni Muslims.

The principal marker of religious authority and knowledge among Muslims is gender. The religious knowledge we accept as authoritative has been produced only by men, and a handful at that. Women's contributions either have been forgotten or rendered merely symbolic so that we are content to note, for instance, that Ayesha narrated more *ahadith* than did any man, but not to use her example to open up the processes of knowledge creation to women today, specially in Muslim societies.

Where women are free to undertake scholarship (as for example, in the West), their work is marginalized in their own communities by being depicted as gender specific and feminist. Thus, in contrast to men's work that is represented as universal knowledge, women's work comes with the proviso that it is a woman's reading or a feminist reading because of the mistaken view that women cannot critique male authority from within an Islamic framework. And, of course, for most Muslims to label a woman a feminist is to impugn her identity and her arguments.

Male *ulema*, on the other hand, present their own work not only as universal, but also as sacred and infallible by claiming "that the authority of the practice defined by later generations [of scholars is equivalent to] the authority of revelation" (Brannon Wheeler, *Applying the Canon in Islam*, Albany: SUNY, 1996: 88). This claim, however, confuses the Qur'an with its (male-authored) exegesis and undermines the Qur'an's sanctity while simultaneously imparting to human knowledge the authority of Divine discourse.

The view that religious knowledge is inerrant also stems from the belief that Muslims have been safeguarded from interpretive errors (of course, this still begs the question of why only some modes of authority and knowledge are considered inerrant). It is because most Muslims hold this to be true that they oppose attempts to rethink certain provisions of the

Shariah, the authenticity of some ahadith, or the legitimacy of misogynistic readings of the Qur'an. But, unless we do all three, we cannot bring our understanding of Islam closer to the Qur'an's teachings.

Lastly, we need to keep in mind that historically the hegemony of certain communities and their interpretations of Islam was enabled from a very early period not by popular will and consensus, but by the political power of the state as a way to secure its own interests. This is borne out by several excellent studies including by Leila Ahmed.