

Determining Islamic authority in North America (II)

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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; the first part was published on March 11, 2003.)

The structure of religious authority among Muslims has given rise to a class of *ulema* that is more powerful and ubiquitous than a clergy and is able to reproduce itself endlessly, in the manner of a complex network. Yet, there is no place for such networks in a religion that continually emphasizes the direct relationship that believers have to God.

It is against this background that I will now speak about Islamic authority in North America. I was interested to read the description of our panel which states: “In the North American context, the Muslim community is both ethnically and religiously diverse, comprised of immigrant, convert and African-American communities. As a result a locus of Islamic authority has been difficult to establish.”

The implication seems to be that this is harmful but, if what I’ve just said carries any weight, why do we see this as a problem?

I believe one reason may be 9/11. While the event itself forced Muslims to realize how much is at stake in who interprets Islam and how, its aftermath is obliging us to close ranks in the face of assaults on Muslims by the state as well as by people clamoring for the “real Islam to stand up.” While such calls are disingenuous and meant to put us on the defensive, I think there is a very real feeling that the absence of a discernible locus of authority among us is perhaps to our disadvantage.

However, alongside these immediate and negative reasons that are compelling us to come together, there is a more abiding and affirmative desire for community that has infused our consciousness throughout history. For Muslims, community and faith, or “*ummah* and *din* are mutually defining and they give distinctive characteristics to the Islamic view of communal existence.” In a *Tawhidi* worldview, the community “is a moral entity...[whose] purpose is to achieve moral balance within and between a network of relationships.” How these relationships are realized in practice and “translated into a particular pattern of living is the function of a *din*” (Merryl Wyn Davies, *Knowing One Another: Shaping an Islamic Anthropology*, London: Mansell Publishing, 1988: 129; 130).

But if this means that we can only practice our religion to its fullest within the framework of a moral community, it does not mean that the community itself must have a single locus of authority within it, specially if authority is structured along the lines I have described. Nor does this mean that the community itself cannot be internally diverse. Indeed, in a *Tawhidi* worldview, unity always encompasses multiplicity; i.e., unity is internally differentiated.

This unique conceptualization of unity and difference is in fact essential to the Qur'anic notion of mutual recognition, and here I'd like to quote from the Qur'an itself:

O [*insan*]/! We created
You from a single (pair)
Of a male and a female,
And made you into
Nations and tribes, that
Ye may know each other ...
Verily
The most honoured of you
In the sight of God
Is ... the most
Righteous of you (49:13; Abdullah Yusuf Ali, 1988: 1407).

In effect, then, differences function to establish the unity of the human race and unity in this context means a shared, not an identical or uniform, moral praxis. Moreover, God is the ultimate Judge of the quality of a person's moral praxis, not human beings. And nor can we force moral praxis on one another inasmuch as Islam forbids compulsion in religion.

Multiplicity, then, is not in itself symbolic of disunity and nor it is immoral. Nor are multiple readings of Islam necessarily harmful. To the contrary, they illustrate the pluralistic and democratic potential inherent in our religion. Of course, to be able to actualize this potential, we need to reexamine the many glaring contradictions in which we are caught.

I have suggested what some of these are with respect to religious authority. So far as religious knowledge is concerned, one of the worst is paying lip-service to the idea that Divine speech is inexhaustible and egalitarian in its meanings while adhering rigidly to one, often misogynistic, reading of the Qur'an. (That most Muslims accept such readings as not only legitimate, but also authoritative, has to do with the relationship between authority, knowledge, gender, and methodology about which I spoke earlier.)

The Qur'an, however, recognizes its own polysemy, or, the fact that it has multiple meanings and that we can read it in more than one way, which is why it instructs us to seek its "best meanings" (39:18). The idea of "best" presupposes multiplicity and, since one can only make deliberative choices in an open and tolerant environment, a guarantee of democratic rights that extend to equality for women as well. (This should tell us, of course, that hermeneutic and existential questions are always *connected*.)

I want to conclude with some observations about communal unity and authority. I could be wrong, but the anxiety about the difficulty of establishing a locus of authority strikes me as an anxiety about the perceived and actual lack of unity among American Muslims at a political and historical conjuncture at which we are under siege. The systematic backlash against us by the state after 9/11 and the ease with which it has been able to isolate, target, profile, and victimize Muslims has shown us the disastrous consequences of not having an effective and united presence in national life and politics.

But while it is imperative for us to develop such a presence, I don't believe this requires us to have one locus of authority. The desire to centralize authority often leads to an implacable quest for uniformity and thus to stamping out differences in the name of communal solidarities. However, such practices cannot ensure communal harmony and they embody the worst elements in the practice of any religion, not just of Islam.

Our history wasn't always exemplary, but it can teach us some good lessons. One is that the Muslim empire thrived for as long as it did because it was multiracial, multicultural, and multinational and characterized at its zenith by pluralism, tolerance, and creativity. These constitute an enduring strength of Muslims. For us to continue to thrive, we must honor the voices of both women and men in our multiple communities, open up Islam to ever better readings, and find unity not in uniformity or authority, but in the knowledge that even if our journeys are diverse, the ends towards which we are striving are the same.