

Determining Islamic Authority in North America

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I would like to thank Palwasha Kakar and the Muslim students organization, Shura, for inviting me to participate in this panel on Islamic authority in North America.

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 (1). 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.

The Qur'an and religious authority

I believe it is important 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) (2)

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) (3). (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.

Religious authority among 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 re-presented 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.” (4) 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 your own Leila Ahmed.

In sum, 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. (5)

Religious authority in North America

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 (6), 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.” (7)

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). (8)

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.)

Some conclusions

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.

1. Asma Barlas, *Believing Women" in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an* (University of Texas Press, 2002).
2. Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Quran: Text, Translation and Commentary* (New York: Tahrike Tarsile Quran, 1988: 52).
3. Yusuf Ali, 1206.
4. Brannon M. Wheeler, *Applying the Canon in Islam: The Authorization and Maintenance of Interpretive Reasoning in Hanafi Scholarship* (Albany: SUNY, 1996: 88).
5. I owe this insight to Ulises Ali Mejias.
6. Asma Barlas, "Will the 'Real' Islam Please Stand Up?" Talk delivered at Yale, February 21, 2002.
7. Merryl Wyn Davies, *Knowing One Another: Shaping an Islamic Anthropology* (London: Mansell Publishing Ltd., 1988: 129; 130).
8. Yusuf Ali, 1407.