
*Crisis of Authority: Crisis of Islam?*¹

FRANCIS ROBINSON

Abstract

This essay examines the growing crisis of authority in the Muslim world of the past two hundred years. It is a crisis set in motion by the challenges of Western domination, intensified by those of globalisation, and exacerbated by Muslim attempts to resist them. It is a crisis which has pervaded all aspects of Muslim life, but one which has been felt particularly in the religious arena. Focussing initially on how authoritative religious knowledge was established and sustained down to c. 1800, the essay goes on to examine how this system broke down. It demonstrates the fragmentation of authority as new methods of interpretation emerge, as lay interpreters come forward to challenge the 'ulama, and as the individual human conscience comes to be given an increasingly important role. Consideration is also given to the growth of primary and higher education, the emergence of new electronic media, and the transnational movements of Muslims. The outcome has been the growth of a 'spectacularly wild growth of interpretation'. It remains an open question as to whether this development is a cause for despair or a source of hope.

Over the past two hundred years there has been a growing crisis of authority in the Muslim world. This crisis was set in motion by the European conquest of this world between 1800 and 1920, a process, which was part of that first great moment of globalisation powered by industrial capitalism. In the second half of the twentieth century it was intensified by the next great movement of globalisation, powered by finance, communications and increasingly large movements of people. Throughout this period the crisis has been exacerbated by the measures taken by Muslims to resist the challenges of western domination. It is a crisis which has been felt through all aspects of Muslim societies: their modes of wielding power, their sense of justice, their culture, their values, their literature, their forms of art, in some cases their especial forms of medicine, but in all cases, in the area of religious authority.²

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²For a brief but excellent survey of issues and scholarship relating to religious authority and authorities see Gudrun Kramer and Sabine Schmidtke, 'Introduction: Religious authority and religious authorities in Muslim societies. A critical overview', in Gudrun Kramer and Sabine Schmidtke eds., *Speaking for Islam: Religious Authorities in Muslim Societies* (Leiden, 2006), pp. 1–14.

No area could be more important. From the outset Islamic civilisation was fashioned primarily by God's revelation to humankind through the Prophet Muhammad, the Quran. The business of interpreting God's will as law, from place to place, and from day to day, has been a central activity in moulding both Muslim lives and Muslim societies. But, the past two hundred years have seen great changes, indeed massive transformations, in this process. The authority of much scholarship from the past, has been rejected; the authority of the traditional interpreters, the *'ulama*, has been marginalised. New claimants to authority have come forward with none of the finely-honed skills of traditional scholarship, indeed, for growing numbers of Muslims Islam has become a matter of individual conscience, individuals have come to interpret the faith for themselves. No one knows any longer, as the saying goes, 'who speaks for Islam'. There is in fact, a crisis of authority. This article explores this crisis. It does so in the belief that some understanding of the crisis will give us insight not only into some of the problems of the contemporary Muslim world but also into some of the strands of hope it offers for the future.

To understand this crisis of authority we need to first know how authority was established and sustained in the Islamic world. The process begins, of course, with the emergence of Muhammad as a charismatic prophet in early seventh-century Arabia, and with his successful assertion of his authority against the traditional Arab order. He succeeded in doing so because he came to be widely recognised as the messenger of an omnipotent God, indeed, as that God's last messenger to humankind, who succeeded through His revelation in fashioning the first Muslim community. The Quran is quite explicit about how Muhammad's role as messenger translates "the omnipotence of Allah [God]", as Hamid Dabashi has shown, "into the comprehensive authority of Muhammad":

Say [O Muhammad] O mankind! Lo! I am the messenger of Allah to you all – [the messenger of] Him unto whom belongs the sovereignty of the heavens and the earth. There is no God save Him. He quickeneth and he giveth death. So believe in Allah and His Messenger, the Prophet, who can neither read nor write, who believeth in Allah and His word, and follow him that haply ye may be led aright. (VII.158)³

After Muhammad's death the succession to his authority was bitterly contested amongst those whom Marshall Hodgson termed the 'piety-minded', followers of Ali, the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law, Kharijīs, who broke with Ali because he appeared to be willing to compromise with the first Umayyad caliph, indeed, numerous groups usually divided over the means by which authoritative understandings of revelation were to be achieved.⁴ Eventually, as what Hodgson termed 'the Jamia-Sunni consensus' emerged under the Abbasid caliphate, Muhammad's authority, if you will permit a Weberian expression, came to be 'routinised' for the majority Sunni community in several forms. His political authority came to be

³Hamid Dabashi, *Authority in Islam: From the Rise of Muhammad to the Establishment of the Umayyads* (Piscataway, NJ, 1989), p. 2.

⁴Marshall G.S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization*, Vol. I (Chicago, 1974), pp. 187–279.

institutionalised in the office of the caliphate, an office which was finally abolished by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in 1924; his judicial authority in the office of the *qadis* or judges; his military authority in that of the *amirs*, or military commanders; his spiritual authority in the roles of the sufi saints, the Islamic mystics; and finally, and most important from our point of view, his religious authority in the roles of the *‘ulama* or learned men.⁵ The term *‘ulama* is the plural of *‘alim*, meaning learned man, which is derived from the Arabic root *‘ilm* meaning knowledge. It was the task of the *‘ulama* to transmit the essence of knowledge, the Quran, God’s revelation to humankind, and the Hadith, the reported sayings and doings of his Messenger, from generation to generation. Alongside this they had to transmit the skills which would enable future *‘ulama* to understand this essence of knowledge, such as Arabic grammar and syntax, and the skills, such as jurisprudence and rhetoric, to make this knowledge socially useful in the form of law.

Of course, these ‘routinised’ splinters of Muhammad’s charismatic authority did not through time retain completely independent spheres of authority: the caliphs and sultans, the rulers, were always trying to subordinate the authority of the *‘ulama* to their purposes; sufis, in many different circumstances from Indonesia to West Africa might also be military leaders; moreover, as Islamic history developed, it became commonplace for *‘ulama* also to be sufis, indeed, it came to be understood, as was so wonderfully recorded by the eleventh-century scholar al-Ghazali in his autobiography, *The Deliverance from Error*, that there was little point to formal learning unless it was imbued with spiritual meaning.⁶ This said, in spite of these often overlapping spheres of ‘routinised’ authority, the *‘ulama*, the transmitters of the central messages of Islam, were at the heart of the process of shaping Muslim societies, then sustaining them, and then, as necessary, reshaping them.

At this point we should note the area of the Muslim community where *‘ulama* had enhanced authority derived from Muhammad’s charisma, that is the Shia, the party of Ali, who contested the leadership of the Muslim community with the first three elected caliphs. The followers of Ali came to argue that *‘irfan*, the divine light with which God had graced Muhammad, flowed down through Ali and his bloodline, who became Imams or leaders of the Shia Muslim community. Thus, Muhammad’s charismatic (and comprehensive) authority persisted in the Shii Imams, the Shii leadership until, as the Twelver Shias maintain, the Twelfth Imam disappeared, or occultated (became hidden), in 874 AD. This created the possibility of continuing charisma in Shii history, as the leaders of the Safavid sufi order, who created Iran’s Safavid empire in the sixteenth century claimed to be reincarnations of the hidden Imam, and as the Shii *‘ulama* later claimed to be representatives of the hidden Imam. The greater authority to which the Shii *‘ulama* can lay claim has led to greater flexibility in their jurisprudential tradition as compared with the Sunnis. Moreover, it is this greater potential for authority which has bolstered, not wholly but certainly in part, the authority of Mulla Hassan Nasr Allah’s leadership of the Shii Hizb Allah movement in the Lebanon, that of Grand Ayat Allah Ali Sistani in Iraq, and of course that of Ayat Allah Khomeini in Iran. The continuing force of the idea of a charismatic Imamate was demonstrated, as in the

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 71–93.

⁶ Al-Ghazali, *al-Munqidh min ad-Dalal*, W. Montgomery Watt trans., *The Faith and Practice of Al-Ghazali* (Oxford, 1994).

years of the Iranian revolution from 1978 to 1979 Khomeini came to be called no longer Ayat Allah Khomeini but Imam Khomeini.

We now turn to consider the way in which authority, and by implication authoritative interpretation, was sustained amongst the *‘ulama*, Shii and Sunni, down to the nineteenth century. At the heart of authority in learning was the system for transmitting the Quran, the very essence of knowledge. For Muslims the Quran is the word of God – His very word. It is the divine presence, the mediator of divine will and grace. Quran itself means recitation, al-Quran, the recitation or the reading out aloud. It is through being read out aloud that the Quran is realised and received as divine. Pious Muslims strive to learn most of it by heart; its words are for ever on their lips.

Authoritative transmission of the Quran was always oral. This was how the Prophet transmitted the messages he had received from God to his followers. And when a few years after His death they came to be written down, it was only as an aid to memory and oral transmission. Telling evidence for the authority of the orally transmitted Quran comes from the 1920s when the Egyptian standard edition was produced, not from a study of the variant manuscript versions but from a study of the fourteen different traditions of recitation.⁷

Receiving the Quran orally, learning it by heart, and then reciting it out aloud, has traditionally been the first task of young Muslim boys and girls. The usual method of learning was that each day the teacher would recite some verses, write them on the pupil's slate, and then the pupil would spend the rest of the day learning them. Those able to recite them successfully the next day, in addition to those they already knew, would be entitled to wash their slates, hear more verses, and have them written down for them. Those who succeeded in remembering and reciting the whole Quran were celebrated with joy and received much respect.

The methods of learning and transmitting the Quran laid their impress on the transmission of all other knowledge. "The Quran", declared the great fourteenth-century Muslim historian, Ibn Khaldun, in a discussion on the art of teaching, "has become the basis of instruction, the foundation of all habits that may be acquired later on".⁸ So, when a book was published in the early Islamic centuries, its writing down was merely an aid to oral publication. The author would dictate his first draft, either from memory or from his own writing; the copyist would then read it back to him. Publication would then take place through the copyist reading the text to the author in public, often in a mosque. During this process the author might make additions and emendations, and several readings might be required before it was given his authorisation. This was known as the *ijaza*, which means 'to make lawful'. Thus, the author gave permission for the work 'to be transmitted from him'. Further copies had real authority only when they had been read back and approved.⁹

⁷William A. Graham, *Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion* (Cambridge, 1987), pp. 96–97.

⁸Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, trans. Franz Rosenthal, ed. by N.J. Dawood (Princeton, 1967), p. 421.

⁹J. Pedersen, *The Arabic Book*, trans. G. French, ed., R. Hillenbrand (Princeton, 1984), pp. 20–36.

A similar process took place when a member of the *‘ulama* transmitted some of the great Islamic texts to his students. The teacher would dictate the text to his pupils, who might write it down, and frequently commit it to memory. Subsequently, depending on its nature, there might be an explanation of the text. The completion of the study of the book would involve a reading back of the text with an explanation. If this was done to the teacher's satisfaction, the student would be given an *ijaza*, an authority to teach the text. On that *ijaza* would be the names of all those who had transmitted the text going back to the original author. The student knew that he was in his generation the trustee of part of the great tradition of authoritative Islamic learning handed down from the past.

You may wonder why in a society where beautiful writing, calligraphy, was deemed to be the highest of the arts, and where in great cities like medieval Baghdad or Cairo paper was widely available, authoritative knowledge had to be orally transmitted. The fact is that Muslims were fundamentally sceptical of the written word. "Language", declares Ibn Khaldun, "is merely the interpretation of ideas that are in the mind . . . Words and expressions are media and veils between the ideas. . . . The student of ideas must extract them from the words that express them But", Ibn Khaldun goes on, "when a student has to rely on the study of books and written material and must understand scientific problems from the forms of written letters in books, he is confronted with another veil . . . that separates handwriting and the form of letters found in writing from the spoken words found in the imagination".¹⁰ To understand the words properly, the student must read them out aloud. So, as the Quran gained full realisation only by being recited out aloud, so too did the academic book give of its full meaning by being read aloud. Muslims got at the truth in speech.

Thus, person-to-person transmission was at the heart of authoritative transmission of knowledge. The best way of getting at the truth was to listen to the author himself. So Muslim scholars constantly travelled throughout the Islamic world so that they could receive authoritative transmission of knowledge. And, when a scholar could not get knowledge from the author in person, he strove to get it from a scholar whose *isnad*, or chain of transmission from the original author, was thought to be the most reliable. The preference for the oral over the written text may be explained by the central concern for the transmission of the author's meaning – for the transmission of the most authoritative understanding of the text. Person-to-person transmission through time was the most reliable way of making up for the absence of the original author in the text. It enabled the students to read the white lines on the page, as the *‘ulama* used to say, as well as the black lines.¹¹

Symptomatic of the anxieties of the *‘ulama* about person-to-person transmission and authority was the criticism which the formidable fifteenth-century scholar of Cairo, Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti, attracted because he did not sit at the feet of other scholars enough, taking his knowledge directly from books.¹² Symptomatic again was the custom of taking very young boys to listen to the transmission of Hadith from very old men, so that the line of

¹⁰Ibn Khaldun, *Muqaddimah*, p. 431–433.

¹¹Pedersen, *Arabic Book*, p. 35; Timothy Mitchell, *Colonizing Egypt* (Cambridge, 1988), pp. 150–154; Michael Chamberlain, *Knowledge and Social Practice in Medieval Damascus 1190–1350* (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 137–138; Sayyed Hossein Nasr 'Oral Transmission and the book in Islamic Education: The Spoken and the Written Word', *Journal of Islamic Studies*, 3, 1, January 1992, pp. 1–14.

¹²E. M. Sertain, *Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti*, Vol. 1 (Cambridge, 1975), p. 74.

transmission would be shorter, the chance of error be less, and their authority as transmitters thereby greater.¹³ A powerful demonstration, moreover, of the anxiety over person-to-person transmission and authority was the notable literary/historical genre developed by the *‘ulama* in the classical Islamic era, and continued virtually down to the present, of collective biographies, the *tabaqat* or *tazkirah*. These might deal with the scholars of a particular discipline, place, family or time. They recorded, after family details, who a man’s teachers were, what he learned, and who his pupils were. His own contributions to knowledge would be listed along with anecdotal evidence bearing on his reliability as a scholar and transmitter of knowledge. These collective biographies were ways in which *‘ulama* set out their contributions to sustaining Islamic civilisation and bolstered their authority.¹⁴ Nothing, however, was more symptomatic of the relationship between person-to-person transmission of knowledge and authority than the way in which the *‘ulama* for centuries rejected print. From the sixteenth century print was known about through much of the Muslim world but, apart from a brief dalliance in Istanbul in the 1730s, it was ignored. Print undermined directly, and explicitly, the authority of person-to-person transmission. It also promised to undermine the monopoly over the interpretation of religious knowledge which belonged to the *‘ulama*.¹⁵

So let us consider the location of religious authority as it was to be found in Muslim societies in general around 1800, nearly 1,200 years after the beginning of the Islamic era. Religious authority, and the capacity to produce authoritative interpretation, derived from the Quran and the life of the Prophet, lay with the *‘ulama*. They were the recipients of the traditions of Islamic scholarship which had built up through time. They were proud of the many *ijazas* they possessed, permitting them to transmit the great scholarly works of the past. They relied on the authority of these and other works as they strove to make revelation in the form of law relevant to the problems of their time. Throughout they strove to prevent others muscling in on their monopoly, whether they were sufis or sultans.

Of course, the general authority of the *‘ulama* was subject to specific social, political and personal conditions. It helped, if they could claim to be Sayyids, and therefore descendants of the Prophet. It helped, too, if they came from a well-known family of scholars; learning could be regarded as being in the blood. If they did not, it helped to have studied with the best scholars of the day. Moreover, *‘ulama* needed to behave like men who corporeally embodied the word of God and the capacity to interpret it. They should not behave like the young Mawlana Abd al-Ali of the great Farangi Mahall family of Lucknow, who later in the eighteenth century was to become the foremost scholar of his day. Soon after his father’s death he attended the most important sufi ceremony in Lucknow over which his father would normally have presided. He wandered through the crowd in dandyish fashion carrying a quail cage. Someone gave him a shove and asked him where he thought he was going. “Don’t you know me”, Abd al-Ali said, “I am Mulla Nizam al-Din’s son”. “By God”, the man replied, “if you are the son of Ustad al-Hind, you would be presiding over the

¹³Chamberlain, *Knowledge and Social Practice*, p. 139.

¹⁴Sir Hamilton Gibb, ‘Islamic Biographical Literature’ in B. Lewis and P. M. Holt eds., *Historians of the Middle East* (London, 1962), pp. 54–58 and Wadad al-Qadi, ‘Biographical Dictionaries as the Scholars’ alternative history of the Muslim Community’, in G. Endress, ed., *Organizing Knowledge: Encyclopaedic Activities in the Pre-Eighteenth Century Islamic World* (London, 2006), pp. 23–75.

¹⁵Francis Robinson, ‘Islam and the Impact of Print in South Asia’ in Francis Robinson, *Islam and Muslim History in South Asia* (Delhi, 2000), pp. 66–104.

assembly and not carrying around quail cages".¹⁶ And, of course, *'ulama* needed to have a reputation for avoiding those with power. "The worst of scholars is he who visits princes", went an oft-quoted Hadith, "and the best of princes is he who visits scholars". Nothing should stand between the authority of God and the authority of the scholar.

Over the past two hundred years this system for the authoritative transmission of Islamic knowledge, and for its authoritative interpretation, has broken down. Lay folk have come forward to challenge the authority of the *'ulama* as interpreters, indeed, increasingly each individual Muslim has come to arrogate to his or herself the responsibility for interpretation. Lay folk and some *'ulama* have come to challenge the authority of past Islamic scholarship. Scholarly authority has become fragmented; old hierarchies have been flattened; the old interpretative disciplines have been sidelined. All kinds of new interpreters of the faith have come forward; all kinds of new interpretations have been promulgated. As I declared at the beginning of this lecture, no one now knows who speaks for Islam with authority. Let us see how this has come to pass.

The first source of this change was the western conquest of the Muslim world. For nearly 1,200 years Islam walked hand in hand with power. The Muslims who had burst out of seventh-century Arabia to conquer within a century much of the known world, had gone on to create a world system. This was based on the long-distance trade by land across Asia and Africa, and by sea across the Indian Ocean to the China Sea. It shared the great books of Islamic civilisation, alongside Arabic as a language of learning, and Islamic law. In a few decades in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this world system was overwhelmed by Europe. The symbolic beginning was Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798, followed in 1799 by the snuffing out of Mysore, the last significant Muslim opponent of British power in India. Between 1800 and 1920, the British, the French, the Russians, the Dutch, the Italians and the Germans annexed, or asserted influence over, almost the entire Muslim world. In 1920 the only areas largely free of European influence were Afghanistan, North Yemen, and Central Arabia. Iran enjoyed a much-qualified freedom; Atatürk was fighting for Turkish freedom and respect in Anatolia.

Let us consider the impact on the Indian subcontinent, home to nearly one third of the world's Muslims. British rule transformed its economy, making it, as far as possible, a producer of commodities and receiver of finished goods. India was also fashioned into a great military base, whose huge resources of men and material would support the military operations of the British Empire in Asia, Africa and Europe. British policy came to display utter contempt for Indian learning, which of course included the sources of Muslim civilisation. "A single shelf of a good European library", declared Macaulay in his notorious minute on education of February 1835, "[is] worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia".¹⁷ It was not surprising that the grants made by Muslim rulers to support the scholarship and teaching of

¹⁶Mawlana Mawlwi Muhammad 'Inayat Allah, *Tadhkira-yi 'Ulama-i Farangi Mahall* (Lucknow, 1928), pp. 137–138.

¹⁷Minute recorded in the General Department by Thomas Babington Macaulay, law member of the governor-general's council, dated 2 February 1835 in Lynn Zastoupal and Martin Moir, *The Great Indian Education Debate: Documents Relating to the Orientalist-Anglicist Controversy, 1781–1843* (London, 1999), p. 165.

the *‘ulama* were abolished. Now, new forms of knowledge had to be mastered for success in the world of western dominance. Able Muslims from India went less to the great Muslim *madrasas* of Arabia and Egypt and more to London, Paris, Oxford and Cambridge. Power had seeped away from the old Muslim heartlands in northern India, from the former centres of Muslim civilisation like Delhi and Lucknow, to the new European cities of the coast – Calcutta, Madras, Bombay. When the old centres of Muslim power were caught up in revolt, as they were in the Mutiny Uprising of 1857, the British slaughtered many, laid them waste, and reshaped them to their purpose.

One outcome was a pervading sorrow at the passing of Muslim greatness. Two decades after the destruction of Delhi, the poet, Altaf Husayn Hali, wrote his *Musaddas*, or elegy entitled, the *Flow and Ebb of Islam*. This was a great set-piece on the rise and decline of Islam and its causes. Savour its elegiac note:

When autumn has set in over the garden
 Why speak of the springtime of flowers?
 When shadows of adversity hang over the present,
 Why harp on the pomp and glory of the past?
 Yes, these are things to forget; but how can you with
 The dawn forget the scene of the night before?
 The assembly has just dispersed;
 The smoke is still rising from the burnt candle;
 The footprints on the sands of India still say
 A graceful caravan has passed this way.¹⁸

Over the next forty years the poem had many imitators. The mood, of course, was felt widely throughout the Muslim world. Recently it has been well-expressed in the concept of *huzun*, which pervades the chapters of Orhan Pamuk’s autobiographical work, *Istanbul*.¹⁹ To experience this in the European context we need to go to Giuseppe di Lampedusa’s paean on the decline of Sicilian aristocratic life, *The Leopard*.²⁰

There was also anger at the destructiveness of Europe. “Against Europe I protest”, wrote Muhammad Iqbal, the finest Indo-Muslim poet of the twentieth century:

And the attraction of the West.
 Woe for Europe and her charm,
 Swift to capture and disarm!
 Europe’s hordes with flame and fire
 Desolate the world entire.²¹

This anger and protest can be seen growing from the late-nineteenth century in the lively arena created by the newspaper press. From the Russo-Turkish war of the late 1870s and the British invasion of Egypt in the early 1880s through to the Italian occupation of Cyrenaica and the European conquest of Ottoman territories in the Balkans just before World War One

¹⁸This excerpt was translated by Gail Minault in G. Minault ‘Urdu Political Poetry during the Khilafat Movement’, *Modern Asian Studies*, 8, 4, 1974, pp. 459–471.

¹⁹Orhan Pamuk, *Istanbul: Memories of a City* (London, 2005), pp. 79–96, 137–154.

²⁰Giuseppe di Lampedusa, *The Leopard* (London, 1991).

²¹A.J. Arberry trans, *Persian Psalms (Zabur-i Ajam) . . . from the Persian of the late Sir Muhammad Iqbal* (Karachi, 1968), p. 76.

Muslims expressed anguish and protest. At the same time, from 1912, they could see emerging a mighty symbol of their new position in the world at large, as the British imperial capital of New Delhi grew huge as a theatre for imperial display against the much smaller Old Delhi, which the Mughal emperor, Shah Jahan, had built for the same purpose. All came to a head as Britain and her allies dismembered the Ottoman Empire during and after World War One. This led to the Khilafat movement of the Indian Muslims, which was the greatest protest against British rule before the Quit India movement of 1942. I have often wondered from where the energy and psychic resources for this extraordinary movement came. Certainly they came from the economic disruption caused by World War One. Certainly, too, from the impact of hundreds and thousands of returning soldiers. The political fluidity caused by the introduction of the Montagu-Chelmsford form of democracy also played its part. But, I have absolutely no doubt that a key driving force was a psychological response to the loss of power and authority of Muslim civilisation, and one most deeply felt in India where the impact of the West had been greatest. This verse by the satirist, but most sensitive poet, Akbar Ilaahabadi, says it all:

The minstrel, and the music, and the melody have all changed.
 Our very sleep has changed; the tale we used to hear is no longer told.
 Spring comes with new adornments; the nightingales in the garden sing a different song.
 Nature's every effect has undergone revolution.
 Another kind of rain falls from the sky; another kind of grain grows in the field.²²

It is hard not to think that, when one civilisation is overcome by another, that what the former contains and represents might not lose authority. It is hard not to think, too, that in this context there might not be concern for the authority of the Quran and the Prophet. Indeed, ever since, Muslims have been deeply sensitive to failures to show respect to these founding sources of their civilisation. Thus, when Mawlana Abd al-Bari, the head of Lucknow's Farangi Mahall family of *'ulama*, discovered at the foundation ceremony of a new college for *'ulama*, the Nadwat al-Ulama, in 1907 that the Qari reading the Quran was placed at a level lower than the Lieutenant-Governor, he had the Qari stand on a table so that the word of God would come down from on high to the representative of British power.²³ This was nearly a century before the Rushdie crisis or the Cartoon crisis. There was an overwhelming feeling that Muslims had failed, and particularly that their *'ulama* had failed. Indeed, there was the feeling that, if things had come to this pass, they had not been good enough Muslims.

This loss of power, which was so very deeply felt, precipitated a crisis of authority. But this crisis was much exacerbated by the responses of the *'ulama*, and of other Muslims, as they sought answers to the questions set by western power. I shall examine this crisis once more primarily in the context of the Indian subcontinent.

First, numbers of *'ulama* began to shred part of the old basis of authority by rejecting much past scholarship. Not all did this. The *'ulama* of Lucknow's Farangi Mahall family and those

²²Ralph Russell and Khurshidul Islam, 'The Satirical Verse of Akbar Ilaahabadi (1860–1921)', *Modern Asian Studies*, 8, 1, 1974, p. 9.

²³Mawlana Mawlvi Muhammad 'Inayat Allah, *Risala-i hadrat al-afaq ba wafat majmua al-akhlaq* (Lucknow, 1348/1929–30), p. 35.

in the traditions of Bareilly's Ahmad Rada Khan continued to draw on the full panoply of classical scholarship. But others in the tradition of Shah Wali Allah, the eighteenth-century reformer of Delhi, revised their relationship to past scholarship in ways which varied from the moderate to the extreme. Thus the *'ulama* of Deoband, founded in 1867, which has grown to become the second most important traditional Muslim university in the world, continued to follow much classical scholarship in the revealed sciences, but rejected large quantities of the rational sciences, the great achievements of Greek and Persian civilisation which had flourished in the Islamic tradition. They also rejected all aspects of sufi practices which suggested that there might be intercession for man with God. Then, a group of *'ulama* called the Ahl-i Hadith, like the Salafis of the Middle East, rejected almost all classical scholarship, engaging afresh with the Quran and the Hadith. They rejected all sufism. A further group, called the Ahl-i Quran, went just to the Quran. At the same time in the nineteenth century, a lay Muslim who was also influenced by the tradition of Shah Wali Allah, Sayyid Ahmad Khan, developed the trajectory of Islamic modernism. Like the Ahl-i Hadith, he rejected classical Islamic scholarship, going straight to the Quran and Hadith. But, much influenced by Christian Biblical criticism, he made the achievements of western science, the benchmark of authority for interpretation. His dictum was that the "word of God and the work of God must be in harmony". If they were not, it was because Muslims had not exerted themselves enough to discover that harmony. Yet another new source of authority was experimented with in the Punjab, where Muslims found themselves competing with Christian missionaries and Hindu and Sikh revivalism. Here, one Ghulam Ahmad of Qadian declared himself a minor prophet with a messianic mission to revive Islam. He used the messianic traditions of Islam to boost his authority: as some might know, because his actions tended to undermine the finality of Muhammad's prophethood, Ghulam Ahmad and his followers are reviled throughout the Muslim world. Just these few brushstrokes are enough to suggest how by the mid-twentieth century groups of Indian Muslims had become increasingly selective about from where they derived authority. Indeed, authority had begun to fragment.²⁴

Then, secondly, the *'ulama* attacked the heart of their authority, the oral, person-to-person transmission of knowledge. From the beginnings of reform in the nineteenth century they began both to use print and to translate the Quran, the Hadith and the texts of classical scholarship from Arabic in the vernacular languages. Thus, they themselves began to destroy the 'closed shop' which gave them the monopoly over transmission and interpretation of knowledge.²⁵

You may well ask, why should the *'ulama* so damage their position? It was a matter of survival. With the removal of government support after the British conquest, they found themselves needing to build a constituency in Indo-Muslim society at large, and to do so both in competition with missionaries from other faiths and with the secular western system of education supported by the government. Print and translation, alongside a considerable expansion of their madrasa system of education, was their means of doing so. The *'ulama* were right at the heart of the Urdu printing revolution of nineteenth-century northern

²⁴For this diverse interpretative response see Francis Robinson 'Ulama of South Asia from 1800 to the mid-Twentieth Century', in Francis Robinson, *Islam, South Asia and the West* (Delhi, 2007), pp. 59–98.

²⁵*Idem.*

India, from the very first reforming pamphlets of the 1820s and 1830s through to the late-nineteenth century, when religious publications dominated the print trade, and Deoband, the centre of reform, was growing into the town of printing and bookshops it has now become.²⁶ *ʿUlama* tried to limit the damage to their authority caused by this uncontrolled transmission of knowledge by insisting that no one should read a work of scholarship without their supervision. But it was a lost cause. Men and women could not resist the opportunity to engage with the sources of their faith themselves. “Increasingly from now on”, as I have argued elsewhere, “any Ahmad, Mahmud or Muhammad could claim to speak for Islam. No longer was a sheaf of impeccable *ijzas* the buttress of authority. . . . The force of 1,200 years of oral transmission, of person to person transmission, came increasingly to be ignored”.²⁷

Thirdly, the reforming *ʿulama* began to develop what some have called a ‘Protestant’ or willed Islam. Some of you, I am sure, can see the various elements coming together. There was the attack on all ideas of intercession for men at saints’ shrines, indeed amongst some reformers an attack on all forms of sufism: at the same time individual consciences were primed with an increased awareness of the horrors of the Day of Judgement. There was a new emphasis on personal engagement with texts in languages people could understand, in particular the Quran. Then, there was the role of print in making texts widely available, which combined with a growth in literacy encouraged both by the *ʿulama* and by British rule.

What the *ʿulama* were doing was, in the absence of any Islamic political power, developing and informing the individual human conscience as the force which would fashion a Muslim society. Muslims in the reforming tradition knew that they must act on earth in the light of God’s guidance if they were to be saved. Many Muslims thus became those activists for the faith that we see all over the world today.²⁸

One consequence of these changes was the emergence of interpreters of Islam from outside the ranks of the *ʿulama*. We have noted the emergence of Sayyid Ahmad Khan, whose Islamic modernism did much to fashion the people and the institutions which were to create the state of Pakistan. We should also note Mawlana Mawdudi, who was educated for the most part outside the world of the *ʿulama*, and who came to create both a vision of Islam as a system, an ideology, and the institution, the Jamaat-i Islami (or Islamic Society) which was to carry it forward. Mawdudi’s totalitarian understanding of Islam, which it is said was influenced by his reading of western social science, was particularly popular with the growing Muslim bourgeoisie. He and his followers were to play the major role in pressing for the Islamisation of Pakistan down to the introduction of such a programme by General Zia in the late 1970s. He was the ideal type of the Islamist thinker. The emergence of lay interpreters of this kind was a feature of the Muslim world in the twentieth century. And frequently they drew inspiration from the West, as for instance Sayyid Qutb of Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood did from the French fascist thinker, Alexis Carrel, and Ali Shariati of Iran did from Frantz Fanon, Jean Paul Sartre and Louis Massignon.

²⁶Barbara D. Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860–1900* (Princeton, NJ., 1982), pp. 198–215; Ulrike Stark, *An Empire of Books: the Naval Kishore Press and the Diffusion of the Printed Word in Colonial India* (Delhi, 2007).

²⁷Robinson, ‘Impact of Print’ pp. 80–81.

²⁸Francis Robinson ‘Other-Worldly and This-Worldly Islam and the Islamic Revival’ in Francis Robinson, *Islam, South Asia and the West* (Delhi, 2007), pp. 171–188.

A second consequence was the emergence of Muslims who felt personally responsible for making God's revelation live on earth. They felt empowered by this sense of personal responsibility; they also felt empowered by the capacity to engage with the central message of Islam themselves. They were the modern Muslims, as envisaged by Muhammad Iqbal, the leading Indo-Muslim poet-philosopher of the twentieth century, who realised themselves in the creative work of shaping and reshaping the world. As the Ottoman Caliphate died, Iqbal, drawing on the Quranic reference to Adam as God's Caliph, or successor, on earth, came increasingly to emphasise the dynamic role of man, by referring to man as God's Caliph, or successor on earth. This was an idea taken up by reformers, *'ulama* and lay alike, across the Muslim world. It is one full of potential, and not least for the fashioning of a new system of authority.²⁹

What does this mean for religious authority in the Muslim world by the middle of the twentieth century? The authority of the *'ulama* has fragmented as they have come to pick and choose from the authority of the past. Moreover, the authority of the *'ulama* has come to be less central to the working of Muslim societies as new lay interpreters have risen from outside the traditional systems for transmitting knowledge. This said, we should note that the introduction of print did not totally undermine the authority of the *'ulama*; they were able to use print to bolster their authority while others came forward to rival them.³⁰ Nevertheless, we can see a new type of Muslim beginning to emerge, who might note what the *'ulama* say, who might note what the Islamists say, but increasingly he, and those like him, will engage with the texts themselves. They will form their own conclusions and pursue what their conscience dictates. Thus, the individual human conscience, that most uncomfortable bedfellow for all forms of authority, began to work its way more fully in the life of Muslim societies.

Let us now address the fate of religious authority in the second half of the twentieth century. There are several developments we need to note, which lead to further fragmentation of authority and what has been described as a "spectacularly wild growth of interpretation".³¹

The first is that in many Muslim societies religious authority continues to be exercised in the context of western domination. Muslim states may have received their independence between the late 1940s, when Pakistan and Indonesia did, and the early 1990s, when the states of Central Asia and the Caucasus did, but through this period many were entangled first in the Cold War, and then increasingly with global capitalism, as it sought commodities and markets, alongside great-power assertiveness. Ordinary Muslims knew that the elites of their societies were often deeply engaged with the political and economic interests of outside forces. Many of you will recall the notable instances of western bullying, and I include Russia as part of the West in this context: the overthrow of Mussadegh in Iran in 1953 by Britain and

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 179–182.

³⁰ Robinson, 'Impact of Print', pp. 80–81. Other professions were also able to rebuild their authority through print, not least medical *hakims* for whom authority was essential, see G.N.A. Attewell, *Refiguring Unani Tibb: Plural Healing in Colonial India* (Hyderabad AP, 2007).

³¹ Fazlur Rahman, 'Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies: Review Essay' in Richard C. Martin, ed., *Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies* (Oxford, 2001), p. 195.

the US; the British invasion of Egypt in 1956; the Russian invasion of Afghanistan in 1979; the Russians in Chechnya in the 1990s; and the US and Britain in Iraq since 2003. Rulers who were subservient to the West risked losing authority. Listen to Ayat Allah Khomeini's scorn in June 1963 after the Shah's Israeli-trained security forces had attacked a *madrasa*:

Shah. . . I don't want you to become like your father [who was forced to abdicate by the British and Americans]. Listen to my advice, listen to the ulama of Islam. They desire the welfare of the nation. . . Don't listen to Israel . . . You miserable wretch, forty-five years of your life have passed; isn't it time for you to think and reflect a little. . .³²

Listen to Osama bin Laden's cheeky upbraiding of bin Baz, the Chief Mufti of Saudi Arabia, and its leading scholar, after he failed to criticise neither the establishment of US bases in Saudi Arabia after the first Gulf War nor the Oslo Accords of 1993 between Israel and³³ Palestine. Bin Laden, a man of no scholarly credentials declared:

Honorable Shaikh you have reached a good age, and you have achieved much in the service of Islam, so fear God and distance yourself from these tyrants and oppressors who have declared war on God and His Messenger and stand with the righteous men . . . the most prominent characteristic of these righteous scholars was the way they dissociated themselves from sultans.

In many, though not all, Muslim societies *'ulama* are paid functionaries of the state. Thus their authority suffers.

A second agent transforming the nature of authority has been the growth of mass education. Mass primary education only began in Egypt in the 1950s and in the Arabian peninsula in the 1970s. Now literacy in Egypt is 71%, in Bahrain 85% and in Qatar 87%. We might note, too, that the rate in the country with the largest Muslim population, Indonesia, is 83%, but nearly 100% amongst those of school-going age.³⁴ And we might also note that Iran plans to have 40% of the age cohort in higher education by 2010, a target just 10% below that of the UK.³⁵ The context in which authority operates is very different from fifty years ago.

Not surprisingly the growth of mass literacy has stimulated the mass development of print media. In the religious arena the typical product is the small format printed booklet, what would have been called a chapbook in early modern England. Some will be written by *'ulama*, but many by lay folk. They might give basic guidance as to how to live a good Muslim life, or present biographical models of such a life, that of the Prophet or a great figure from the Islamic past.³⁶ Alternatively, popular culture might be bent to didactic purpose, as in Bangladesh where a Mills and Boon tradition of romantic novels has been turned into

³²Speech delivered by Khomeini at the Fayziya Madrasa in Qum on 3 June 1963 in Hamid Algar, trans. and ed., *Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini* (Berkeley, 1981), p. 179.

³³Bruce Lawrence, *Messages to the World: The Statements of Osama Bin Laden* (London, 2005), p. 12.

³⁴For the general argument, see Dale F. Eickelmann and Jon W. Anderson, 'Redefining Muslim Publics' in Dale F. Eickelmann and Jon W. Anderson eds., *New Media in the Muslim World: The Emerging Public Sphere* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 2003), pp. 1–18.

³⁵Personal communication from Dr Hasan Kaleghi, Iranian Minister for Higher Education, 21 January 2005.

³⁶For examples of these booklets see Francis Robinson ed., *Cambridge Illustrated History of Islam* (Cambridge, 1996), p. 247.

a vehicle for religious teaching.³⁷ The great Turkish reformer, Said Bediuzzaman Nursi, would send out his disciples with sacks of such booklets saying, “they are my *gazis* [warriors for the faith]”.³⁸ Go to any major mosque or shrine, or small town bookshop, throughout the Muslim world and you will find stalls full of such booklets.

The emergence of this new audience and the vibrancy of the market in religious print matter has been accompanied by the emergence of more and more interpreters – new authorities – from outside the world of the *‘ulama*: the schoolteacher, Rashid Ghanoushi of Tunisia, the lawyer, Hasan al-Turabi of the Sudan, the engineers, Mehdi Bazargan of Iran and Mahamed Shahrour of Syria. As these men, and others like them, spoke the language of those educated in secular systems, they continued the marginalisation of the *‘ulama*. Then, particularly among women, the phenomenon of reading groups has sprung up to discuss the Quran and other texts.³⁹ Increasingly individuals, driven by conscience and by the requirements of much of the reforming movement that believers should engage directly with the sources of the faith, have insisted on their individual right to interpret. And in doing so they have brought to the process the repertoire of skills they have learned outside the Islamic tradition.⁴⁰

The third agent transforming the nature of authority has been the growth of new media, by which I mean in particular, cassettes, audio and video (and now of course CDs), television, terrestrial and satellite, and the internet. All play their part in the democratisation of knowledge. They work, of course, for the *‘ulama* as well as lay interpreters. It is well known how audio cassettes helped to project Ayat Allah Khomeini’s authority in Iran in the years before the revolution of 1979. In the same way, the layman, Osama bin Laden, has used video cassettes, allied to satellite television, to project his message across the Muslim world, and beyond. The al-Jazeera Arabic satellite television channel of Qatar has given a huge boost to the authority and reach of the traditionally-educated Islamic scholar, Shaikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi. On his show he answers religious questions just as a traditional scholar might.⁴¹ On the other hand, Saudi terrestrial television has made a huge success of the layman and popular preacher, Amr Khaled, who does not wear the traditional beard and turban, but is clean-shaven, dressed in a suit and adopts a style mixing those of Billy Graham and Oprah Winfrey.⁴² The internet, however, is the great democratising force, which I sense must in time push authority further from the reach of the *‘ulama*. So far, its main impact has been amongst Muslims in the West. In the rest of the Muslim world, internet penetration has been achieved for between 20% and 40% of the population only in Malaysia, Turkey, the Lebanon,

³⁷Maimuna Haq, ‘From Piety to Romance: Islam-Oriented texts in Bangladesh’ in Eickelmann and Anderson, *New Media*, pp. 129–157.

³⁸Serif Mardin, *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey: The Case of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi* (Albany NY, 1984), p. 4.

³⁹See, for instance, M. Hakan Yavuz, ‘Nur Study Circles (*Dershanés*) and the Formation of New Religious Consciousness in Turkey’, in Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi ed. and intro., *Islam at the Cross roads: On the Life and Thought of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi* (Albany, NY, 2003), pp. 297–316, and Maimuna Haq, ‘Reading the Quran in Bangladesh: The Politics of ‘Belief’ Among Islamist Women’, *Modern Asian Studies*, 42, 2–3, March/May, 2008, pp. 457–488.

⁴⁰Suha Taji-Farouki ed., *Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qur’an* (Oxford, 2004), pp. 18–19.

⁴¹Jakob Skovgaard Petersen ‘The Global Mufti’ in Birgit Schaebler and Leif Stenberg, *Globalization and the Muslim World* (Syracuse NY, 2004), pp. 153–165. For the views of some *‘ulama*, and in particular Qaradawi, on how a new consensus might be formed out of fragmented religious authority see, Muhammad Qasim Zaman, ‘Consensus and religious authority in modern Islam’, in Kramer and Schmidtke, *Speaking for Islam*, pp. 153–180.

⁴²Peter Mandaville, *Global Political Islam* (Abingdon, 2007), pp. 329–330.

the UAE and Qatar.⁴³ Nevertheless, its spread, with its ready access to key sources, and its host of different opinions, more or less neutrally presented, means further fragmentation of authority and further opportunities for individuals to decide for themselves.

Finally, transnational developments also undermine authority. In Western Europe, for instance, a feature of the Muslim experience has been that first generation immigrants have tended to replicate the world from which they have come by bringing over *‘ulama*, usually in the form of *imams*, from their countries of origin. More often than not these *imams* have little understanding of the environment to which they have come. They are unable to offer informed and authoritative advice to often highly educated second-and-third-generation Muslims. It is a problem of authority painfully set out in Ed Husain’s informative autobiography, *The Islamist*, which was published last year.⁴⁴ The second issue is that, along with the gulf which lies between the generations, all the fragmentations of authority which have taken place in the Muslim world, as it strove to respond to the West over the past two centuries, have also come to be reflected into the Muslim communities in the West. This is one of the reasons why in Britain and France, and doubtless elsewhere, there has been such difficulty in finding authoritative representatives with whom government could discuss religious issues.⁴⁵

In the middle of the twentieth century we noted that religious authority was being fragmented, that lay interpreters were emerging to challenge the *‘ulama*, and that individuals were coming to interpret texts for themselves. Over the past half century we have seen a massive increase in these processes aided by the growth of literacy, new communications technology, transnational movements of peoples, and the context of continuing western dominance. The outcome has been a further fragmentation of authority in which *‘ulama* have become just some amongst the many voices clamouring to be heard. In this world of democratic access to religious knowledge, and widespread capacity to use it, religious authority, in the helpful image of the French political scientist, Olivier Roy, has become a *‘bricolage*, a do-it-yourself-project. Increasingly every individual’s view comes to have the same value as everyone else’s. Arguably, the Muslim world has returned to the interpretative anarchy which marked its early years.⁴⁶

This development has helped to foster problems, but also to foster encouraging possibilities. One of the problems has been the lack of authoritative religious leadership to counter those who wish to serve their faith, and to do so at the extremes, with violence and terror. This was clearly the case for the young Moazzam Begg of Birmingham, whose naivety and good intentions saw him imprisoned in Guantanamo Bay.⁴⁷ It was also the case of Ed Husain, who only began to see the light when the activities of the London Muslim circles in which he moved embraced violence.⁴⁸ No traditional scholar, not one amongst the *‘ulama*, had the

⁴³Mandaville, *Islam*, p. 323.

⁴⁴Ed Husain, *The Islamist: Why I joined radical Islam in Britain, what I saw inside and why I left* (London, 2007); Mandaville, *Islam*, pp. 320–321; Olivier Roy, *Globalised Islam: The Search for a New Umma* (London, 2004), pp. 164–167.

⁴⁵Roy, *Globalised Islam*, pp. 201–220.

⁴⁶For an excellent discussion of individualisation and the decline of religious authority, particularly amongst Muslims in the western world, see *Ibid.*, pp. 148–184.

⁴⁷Moazzam Begg, *Enemy Combatant: A British Muslim’s Journey to Guantanamo and Back* (London, 2006).

⁴⁸Husain, *Islamist*, pp. 129–153.

respect of the civil engineer, Abu Hamza, the so-called Imam of the Finsbury Park Mosque, who radicalised numbers of young Muslims and now moulders at Her Majesty's pleasure in Belmarsh Prison: "the people who have been bestowed *ijaza* give us nothing but headache", he complained. "What's the point of all this 'Islamic knowledge' if it is not bringing anything positive to Muslim people and Islam?"⁴⁹ I have already told you of the contempt which that other civil engineer, Osama bin Laden, had for the Chief Mufti of Saudi Arabia. There is no doubt about the problems which come with the lessening of the traditional forms of authority and the empowering of individuals.

On the other hand, the weakening of traditional authority has also created possibilities, opened spaces in which new interpretations, which might in time have authority, can emerge. I think of the creative Islamic modernism of Fazlur Rahman of Pakistan and of Nurcholish Madjid of Indonesia. But, I think in particular of the brilliant Khaled Abou el-Fadl, educated traditionally in Kuwait and Egypt, also at Princeton and Yale, and currently a Professor of Law at UCLA. Working from within the Islamic intellectual and jurisprudential tradition, he has been able to produce powerful arguments for democracy, pluralism, and gender equality.⁵⁰ A second possibility takes off from the very last point. It is the growing movement by women scholars to unpick, indeed to shred, the traditional patriarchal interpretation of the Quran, demonstrating instead how the Quran affirms the complete equality of the sexes. At the head of this most important movement is the Afro-American Islamic scholar, Amina Wadud, who caused a stir in March 2005 when she led a mixed congregation in prayer. As the bourgeoisie expands in Muslim societies, as more women in many societies enter higher education than men, and as they also enter the world of work, I expect more and more women to argue against patriarchal interpretations of the faith.⁵¹

So, there is most certainly a crisis of authority. But does this mean there is a crisis of Islam? In one sense, yes, because that "spectacularly wild growth of interpretation" has allowed through some understandings that are against the spirit of the faith. But, in another sense I would argue that this crisis is the making of modern Islam, the making of modern Muslim societies. The destruction of old forms of authority is empowering hundreds of millions of Muslims as individual believers, as individual trustees/successors/caliphs of God. The human conscience is getting a lot of exercise. It flourishes best in expanding bourgeoisies. We may reflect that it was the often inconvenient workings of the human conscience, operating in these very social locations, which helped democracy develop in the West. We may also reflect that it is the Islamist parties, the parties of the rising bourgeoisie, which have driven forward the development of democracy in the advanced Muslim countries of Indonesia and Turkey. Out of religious change in the Muslim world there may just be prospects for social and political development.

FRANCIS ROBINSON

Royal Holloway, University of London

⁴⁹Speech of Abu Hamza, December 2000, cited in Roy, *Globalised Islam*, p. 166.

⁵⁰Khaled Abou El Fadl, Joshua Cohen and Deborah Chasman eds., *Islam and the Challenge of Democracy* (Princeton NJ, 2004); *The Place of Tolerance in Islam* (Boston, 2002); *Speaking in God's Name: Islamic Law, Authority and Women* (Oxford, 2001).

⁵¹Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Women: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* (New York, 1999); Asthma Barlas, *Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an* (Austin, 2002).