In 1330, the historian Hamdullah Mustawfi Qazvini recorded a story, in his Tarikh-i guzida, about a strange event that had occurred a decade and a half earlier “in the city of Yangi, one of the towns of Turkistan.” The town he had in mind, in the south of modern Kazakhstan, was indeed known by that name during the Mongol era, but through most of the Islamic era it was known as Taraz. Hamdullah’s account of the event that occurred in this town, around 1316, was related, he writes, by a certain Mawlana Jamal al-Din the Turk, who is said to have avowed its wide confirmation among the local people.

In that year an army of infidels had come to make war upon them, and they sent the men of Turkistan to fight and give battle against them. From the town of Yangi, a man named Qara-bahadur went out with that group to fight the infidels, and was martyred there. After a time, from a corner of the home of Qara-bahadur, where his wife and children were, they heard a voice, saying:

“I am Qara-bahadur. On [such-and-such a day] the infidels martyred me. Things are fine with me now there [in the next world]. I have come to this city along with 70,000 spirits in order to welcome an old woman who is going to pass away after three days. Because they [the 70,000 spirits] were coming for this good purpose, I came as well; otherwise I would not have come. Since my mind was attached to you, I have come to see what you are doing. You should tell the people of this town that a great calamity, a dire affliction, is on the way and will come to this town; you should do good works and give charitable offerings in order to ward off that affliction.”

When Qara-bahadur’s family heard this voice, they quickly destroyed the corner of the house from which the voice was coming: no one was there. The voice arose again from a different corner of the house, saying, “I am Qara-bahadur; it is my spirit that is speaking with you,” and it repeated the details of the story, and stressed that they should tell the people of the town to make offerings. This voice was not like a bodily voice; rather, it was like a voice coming out of a jar. The people of the house said in response to him that “The people of the town will not believe these words [coming] from us.” He replied, “Tell the people of the town to assemble in the square and set up a post in the ground, so that I may address them from that post.” They did so. The people of the town heard the story from the post; it said, “You should make offerings to allay the affliction, and you should say, ‘O God, Your knowledge suffices against what is said, and Your magnanimity suffices against the questioning.’” For three days the people heard the voice from various places in the city, but after the old woman passed away, no one ever heard the voice again. This is among the wondrous events.

Hamdullah’s story offers a vignette of the manifestation and exercise of religious authority, of decidedly unconventional cast, from the frontiers of the medieval Muslim world, and helps us frame a broader set of questions regarding the nature of religious authority in the Muslim world. It portrays, after all, a medieval Muslim community called upon to undertake religious acts — and not merely private and individual acts of piety (as in the charitable offerings asked of them), but public and collective acts entailing the recitation of a seemingly expiatory litany — on the authority of a voice heard addressing them from a post erected in the ground. The voice’s authority is not explicitly addressed in the narrative, but we can easily suggest several reasons for it to have been taken seriously: its mode of manifestation was miraculous; it was understood to be the voice of a martyr; it demonstrated its veracity to the martyr’s family by correctly specifying the date of his death; it demonstrated its veracity more publicly by delivering on a promise (i.e. by “moving” from the house to the post); and it called upon the people of the city to perform laudable acts of piety. To these more or less normative demonstrations of authority, all of which can be situated within the framework of well-attested patterns of Muslim religiosities, may be added other elements that seem to conform less well with those patterns, but nevertheless added, we may presume, to the experiential intensity of the voice’s manifestation, and thus, indirectly,
to the authority accorded it. It had, we are told, a distinctive aural character that set it apart from ordinary voices, and this sensory distinction, we may surmise, thus enhanced the affective response of those who heard it; the specific "form" in which the voice came to be embodied (the post), as well as its vocal "trajectory," as the voice of a loved one speaking from a corner of his family's home, then from a post erected in the town square, and finally from other sites in the town (to which, we may conjecture, the post was moved), may have evoked patterns of funerary rites rooted in local pre-Islamic ancestral religious practices, though undoubtedly long Islamized; and, although this "proof" is not explicitly highlighted in the account, the predicted duration of the voice's appearance seems to have been linked with its "prediction" of the death of an unidentified old woman.

The latter point is particularly significant, in connection with the affective impact of the story, despite (or because of) the lack of explicit comment in the account: the "public" experience of the voice - it spoke for three days, from the post, exhorting the people to acts of piety, and then was never heard again - is implicitly accounted for by the presence of the voice and the throng of spirits (who, we may note, are not explicitly identified as the souls of others martyred by the infidels along with Qara-bahadur), and their presence, for three days, is explicitly linked with the impending death of an old woman. This link, furthermore, is strangely emphasized, when Qara-bahadur is made to affirm, first, that he was now quite comfortable in the other world and, second, that he would not have come, and hence would not have been speaking, had it not been for the occasion of the old woman's death. This affirmation renders his entire warning, and exhortation, to the townspeople utterly incidental, secondary to the more central purpose of receiving the soul of a seemingly insignificant woman (and, indeed, the collective arrival of the spirits in order to receive the old woman's soul may itself echo those local funerary traditions rather than "authoritative" Muslim duties).

In other words, the soul of the martyr Qara-bahadur, who gave his life defending his Muslim community against an infidel attack, was now happily at home in the next, more real, world, and would not have bothered to address his living family or his living community, or to warn them of impending travails, or to instruct them about how to ward off those travails, or how to live piously in general, had it not been for the spiritual "mission" of welcoming the old woman into the next world. That mission is identified, further, as that of the 70,000 spirits whom Qara-bahadur accompanied; only through happenstance, then, did he come, and also, while there, tell his family and community of the afflictions that threatened them, warning them that their only possible defense (as might be gathered from his recent fate) was to do what they ought to have been doing anyway. In effect, the authority of the voice speaking from the post rested on a curious combination of the private and the public, of individual and communal experience and obligation: the martyr first loses his life while participating in the collective duty of defensive jihad, and then attends to the personal and communal service of warning not only his family but the entire town; yet it is not his service to the community that is referred to as a "public good," for that label is attached to the task of the 70,000 spirits in receiving the soul of a single old woman. The martyr's concern for the fate of the townspeople is thus not only individual but incidental as well (he attends to it while his companions - here the 70,000 spirits are involved - attend to their collective duty of attending to the old woman).

This is, to be sure, an isolated story, and we have been dwelling on an aspect of it that is not expressly developed in the only version of it to come down to us; but it serves nicely to remind us that many of our expectations regarding how religious authority would be expressed and interpreted in Muslim societies remain too narrow, too abstract, and too inattention to historical reality. In particular, it suggests that Muslim communities have engaged with issues of religious authority in ways far more complex and flexible than those, today and in the past, who insist on a rigid construction of the roots and branches of proper Islamic religiosity would countenance.

* * *

Many religious systems tend toward reductionism, toward a claim, or effort, to know and manipulate the many by means of the few; they offer, that is, an assurance that the many things or forces of the phenomenal world may be understood and controlled by finding the few, or the one, most important or powerful or pervasive thing and understanding or controlling it. This reductionist tendency gives us, for example, the Ten Commandments from the myriad rules of the Torah, and then gives us the further reduction of the Ten to the one "Golden Rule" that subsumes all others; it gives us "master spirits" who control all particular iterations of an animal species; it gives us
the Four Noble Truths, the Upanishadic distillation and interiorization of the Vedas, and, perhaps, the Dao that cannot be named. In the context of Islam, it gives us in theological terms the absolute unity and transcendence of Allah; and it gives us in ritual terms the Five Pillars of Islam, the essence of which is further reduced, in some formulations, to the first of them, the Attestation of Faith (the shahada, consisting of phrases that further bear witness to religious reductionism, as they identify, in effect, God and His Prophet). In the context of the second of the Pillars, the daily prayers, moreover, their number is explained as the result of a process of successive reduction, achieved by the Prophet through tough bargaining with the angel Gabriel—the medium, in effect, of the revelation itself—on behalf of the weak and impious human community that would rely upon the very last messenger of God.

If religious systems themselves regularly offer, or seek, the equivalent of a “unified field theory” through which their adherents may observe and experiment on the world, and appeal to the trope of limiting the essential responsive operations incumbent upon humankind, it is perhaps not surprising that scholarship on religion has often reflected this reductionist approach, seeking to limit the complexity of historical religious traditions to the essential positions or fundamental sources, knowing which we may know the tradition, or at least recognize it, in any particular time and place. While there is nothing inherently wrong with this approach, which may be unavoidable in pedagogical terms, its limitations should be clear, and problems inevitably arise if we take what is pedagogically useful to be historically, or, worse, essentially, definitive; what is particularly ironic is that religious traditions themselves have proven more willing, and eager, historically, to discard the constraints of their reductionist tendencies—the better to paint the entire world with signs of their visions of the sacred—than scholarship on religion has been to subdue its own reductionist tendencies.

The problem of authority, or of establishing and/or arguing the authoritativeness of a particular transmission of knowledge, inevitably lends itself to reductionist approaches in scholarship, and moreover to a focus on textual, scriptural essentialism; yet it is a key issue both for the internal dynamics of Muslim societies, and for scholarship on the history of Muslim societies, and broadening our understanding of the sources and methods underlying religious authority is thus key to a historically grounded understanding of the complexities of the Muslim world. Notions of what is authoritative have shaped scholarly trends, and scholarly preconceptions have, in turn, directed attention toward particular aspects of Muslim tradition while ignoring or “backgrounding” others. A constant in both contexts has been a focus on scripture and sacred texts, which at first glance seems to work well with Islam, given the primacy of the Qur’an; the assumption of, and search for, scriptural authority also fit well with older approaches in scholarship on religion, which defined religions in terms of their “sacred books,” and it fit well with more general Western understandings of religion, in a lineage extending back from Enlightenment scholarship to Protestant rhetoric critical of practices without scriptural foundations. It also fit well with “modernist” Muslim approaches to Islam, intent on aligning the faith with discrete formulations based on textual foundations, and, ultimately, with the technological and scientific achievements of the West that provided the impetus for specific modernist Muslim currents.

The link between scholarship on the Muslim world, and the internal dynamics of Muslim debates over the foundations of religious authority, is of special importance, for in the final analysis authority is fundamentally about the relationship between the present and the past, between what authority is intended to serve or justify or explain or prescribe today, and the sources of authority that were made known in an earlier time; even if a source of authority beyond time is posited, it is relevant to all but the most ardent fundamentalist, or mystic, how past generations related to or evoked that authority. What is missing in much discussion of the Islamic world today is precisely an awareness of that vital relationship between the present and the past as in itself a mode of discourse about authority; scholarship on Islamic history tends to be compartmentalized and separate from scholarship on contemporary issues, with the result that the most anomalous contemporary currents in arguments about religious authority in the Muslim world are adopted as the norm, not only today, but in the past as well. This is not just a matter of needing better “background” information, from the past for the present, but of the need to engage with the diversity of Muslim experience in the past as itself an ongoing contributor to the present. On the whole, historical scholarship does better in terms of appreciating the religious diversity of pre-modern and contemporary Muslim societies; it is precisely with discussions focused on contemporary affairs—for which nuance and complexity are arguably most urgent, for compelling practical reasons—that we
find the most persistent tendencies to paint with a broad brush, to
essentialize (essentialism, after all, is the helpmate of brevity), and to
reduce diversity to monolithic “civilizational” frameworks.

As a result of these tendencies, the assumption that religious
authority in Islam rests primarily or exclusively upon written scriptural
sources is widespread, and is reinforced nowadays through the
preponderance of voices insisting that “true Islam” excludes nearly
everything without direct scriptural sanction (with “scripture” limited
to the Qur’an itself and a quite restrictively defined body of Prophetic
hadith); even those who reject the most extreme, “fundamentalist”
approaches to scriptural authority in effect legitimize the centrality
of the written word by offering no other basis for or interpretation
of religious authority, but by offering different interpretations of par-
ticular scriptural passages, or by offering a different set of principles
for the process of scriptural interpretation.

We need not go to the extreme of denying the pivotal role of the
Qur’an, as the revealed word of God, or of Prophetic tradition to argue
that this assumption is fundamentally misleading. We may begin,
rather, with a reminder of the initially oral character of the revela-
tion itself, and of the continued primacy of the direct apprehension
of the Qur’an in the form of oral recitation (rather than in the form of
written words), and then recall the persistence of the oral venue for
the transmission of Hadith (whether in the original chains of trans-
mision or in much later contexts of instruction and memorization);
we may point out, further, the fundamentally oral character of the
central soteriological act in Islam, that is, the profession of faith; and
we may also take note of the obvious importance of oral communi-
cation and modes of solemnification for the expression of religious
knowledge and duties in non-literate contexts, outside the framework
of the learned elites of Muslim societies. We might also point out the
circularity of textual bases of authority, in which the written texts, and
the knowers of written texts, legitimize each other.

But we must also eventually come to terms with a more funda-
mental distinction that is of relevance for understanding the foundations
of religious authority in the Islamic world—not merely written versus
oral, but verbal versus non-verbal, or discursive versus non-discursive.
We must come to terms, that is, with aspects of religious life and
authority that are accessible to (though not exclusive to) the inarticu-
late (whether they are inarticulate by nature or status or choice): how
can we understand, and discuss, the transmission, communication,
or valorization of religious “meaning” in non-verbal terms? In short,
how are religious meaning, and religious authority, conveyed without
words, in non-discursive venues?²

In large measure, addressing this question entails recognizing that
words and discursive formulations far from exhaust religious expres-
sion, and hence modes of religious authority; we must acknowledge,
specifically, that Islam, and signs of religious authority, have been
“written” in non-verbal venues as often as in the scriptural contexts
so often privileged today by both Muslims and outsiders. Naturally,
Islam is written on the bodies, and the bodily movements, of Muslims;
it is written on the “handiwork” of Muslims (whether what we regard
as art or mundane artifacts, whether structures or clothing or amulets
or hygienic utensils, produced in furtherance of religious duties or
sensibilities); it is written in landscapes shaped by Muslim obligations
and aspirations (through modes of agriculture, travel, or commerce);
it is written in institutions, whether the madrasa or the shrine; and,
according to some, it is inscribed in venues of human consciousness
that are both “above” and “below” the discursive capacities in which
not only written language, but verbal expression in general, reside.³

All these non-verbal venues can be talked about, and have been;
but fundamental to them is the assumption that religious authority,
and religious “power” (in the form of baraka or divine grace), inhere
in them without need for verbal expression, simply through their sta-
tus as, ultimately, God’s creation. And it should not be lost on us that it
is above all these non-verbal modes or signs of religious authority that
are scorned today by proponents of the tyranny of the written word.

In general terms, authority is central in religious systems in so far
as it is crucial to religious meaning: whether discursive or not, reli-
gious meaning is made meaningful by its authoritative character. Yet
authority is hierarchical, in that there are ultimate sources, and sub-
sidiary sources of authority; the former tell one, in principle, where
to look or whom to ask, while the latter speak to interpretation and
extrapolation. It is the second type that is inevitably controversial,
within a tradition, since the ultimate sources are unassailable (except
from outside a tradition), while the subsidiary sources stand between
those unassailable sources and the communal or individual actors
who, presumably, require authoritative sanction for what should
be thought or done. Authority cannot be understood wholly on the
basis of its sources, however; recognizing and transmitting authority
depends also upon methods. Establishing authority is essentially a
process of reference; it is the set of footnotes, in effect, to religious life, and while we can imagine some minimalist frameworks in which a religious life would be referenced by only one footnote ("See: God"), a referential apparatus of that sort would be neither informative nor interesting, certainly for the historian, but probably for those who live religious lives as well.

In more specific terms, the foundations of religious authority in Islam — in particular, aspects of authority linked with the interpretation of the sacred law, the shari'a — are well-worn ground, both within the tradition itself and in scholarship upon it. It is common to outline a sort of flow-chart of authority, from the Qur'an through the Prophet's hadiths and sunna, and on to further interpretive principles; it is largely the latter "sources" or principles of religious authority (to which we will return) that have prompted the most debate historically, but it should go without saying that the Qur'an, and the mass of information created about what the Prophet said and did, are themselves fodder for interpretive battles. It is important to stress that the Qur'an, as the revelation of God's word, and the Prophet Muhammad, as its conveyer to humanity and as the exemplifier, for the Muslim community, of its message and demands, are of course the ultimate authorities in Islam; but here as well the pedagogical minimum may conceal, in its choices, much of importance.

If the authority of the Qur'an is incontrovertible, and if indeed acceptance of its authority is arguably the definitive marker of being a Muslim, understandings of the nature of the Qur'an are more diverse than is immediately obvious, and herein lies potential for exploration, beyond textual criticism, that has not been extensively undertaken. In the case of the Qur'an, it is explained as the sacred book, in a sacred language, regarded as the embodiment of divine speech; it is thus assimilated to other "sacred books," and even if care is taken to note its oral recitation or calligraphic rendering, its importance and its authority are usually understood to lie in its contents, its "message," its positive statements, its concrete injunctions. Even brief reflection, however, reminds us of the remarkable range of the Qur'anic text, in terms of multiple modalities of discourse and varieties of language (mythic, narrative, ethical, aesthetic, etc.). If we think of the Qur'an and its authority merely in terms of its directive, or even exhortative, language, we miss much of its substance and content and rhetorical power; indeed, considering the frequency of passages cast in the form of questions — questions with an expected answer ("Am I not your Lord?" and so forth), to be sure, but rhetorically interrogative nonetheless — we may find the Qur'an to be much more of an "interactive" text than commonly thought, with its authority resting in part on the affirmative engagement of believers. This, of course, is not how its authority is framed in Muslim discourse; the Qur'an is God's speech, pure and simple, and the notion that the hearer's, or reader's, response could add to it or detract from it is patently blasphemous. The point is, however, that even in its positive, discursive content, the Qur'an conveys religious authority in both direct and indirect ways that belie the simple literalism of textual interpretation.

Yet we must also move beyond the content and "message" of the Qur'an in order to understand fully its authority; in this regard we are even less accustomed to considering those non-discursive aspects of the Qur'an alluded to above. That is: we seldom consider the Qur'an as talisman, charged with sacramity in its physical presence or vocal recitation; we are still less accustomed to thinking of the Qur'an as an aural experience beyond the positive meaning of its words and phrases, or the Qur'an as a visual experience beyond the import of its letters and signs, or the Qur'an as a thing to be touched or even "tasted" (as when the ink with which a Qur'anic passage was recorded was dissolved and drunk for its curative effects); and we are even less accustomed to appreciating the Qur'an from the standpoint of its pauses, its silences, its blank places, or, by the same token, its prolonged sounds, its tones, its ligatures, its enigmatic letter combinations, and so on. All these modes of experiencing the Qur'an are known to Muslim tradition; their neglect by scholars and students is matched by their neglect among the vocal modernists who insist on the Qur'an as text, on text as words, and on words as univalent signifiers. More to the point, even if other modes of apprehending the Qur'an are acknowledged, they are usually not counted among the ways in which authority is conveyed; the authority of the Qur'an is typically reduced to its explicit content, its words and their meaning. But to understand its authority with such a constraint is to miss much of the way the Qur'an "works" as a source — the source — of religious authority.

As a source of authority, the Qur'an is subject to an ongoing tension between understandings of its historical context and assumptions of its timelessness and essentiality; the Qur'an is at once the historically contextualized final revelation and a revelatory prototype outside history. In the first regard, the Qur'an is apprehended in terms of explicit
readings of its text, and the contextualization of each āya according to the time of its revelation. In the second regard, the Qur’an that is available to believers is understood as a particular externalization of a heavenly “prototype,” complete with the reductionist assertion that the entire Qur’an was revealed synthetically at a single time, on the “Night of Power;” the latter assertion conditions, and hence reduces, the multiple Prophetic expressions of particular āyas to a single Prophetic reception of the entire, essential, but timeless Qur’an.

In the case of the Prophet Muhammad, he is both a conveyer of the revelation and, through his special status as the exemplar of a life lived in perfect submission to God’s will, a source of authority in his own right. As in the case of the Qur’an, his person is subject to similar tensions between his historical context and claims of the extra-historical and essential character of his prophethood. In historical terms, he is lauded as the most perfect Messenger and the external details of his life and his conduct are central to the construction of Muslim juridical, ethical, and behavioral norms. On the other hand, he is celebrated as the metahistorical embodiment of prophethood, inhabiting a spiritual world that regularly intersects with this world but transcends it; notions of this spiritual being, and of the “Muhammadan light” and its creation even prior to Adam, ensure that the essential reality of the Prophet may be accessible outside the historical context in which he served as the model for human conduct.

It is also relevant to the authority of the Prophet that, notions of his extra-historical reality notwithstanding, a doctrinal “bright line” was normally maintained between divinity and human nature, with the Prophet identified as exclusively human, however exalted, without any kind of participation in or partnership with God; this line is key to understanding Muhammad’s religious role, utterly different from divine prerogatives. Yet the boundary between the Prophet and the ordinary human is more problematical: on the one hand, he is a pre-eminently imitable figure precisely because of his humanity, and because of his engagement with the full range of human life, including its limitations; on the other hand, his prophethood is endowed with extraordinary cosmic and historical significance in terms of the messenger’s role in the community (not to mention those mystical elaborations of the Prophet’s essential reality or of his primacy in creation), and the specific “historical” claim that Muhammad was the final Prophet obviously entails stark discouragement, or stronger, against claiming the status or quality of prophethood.

It is no surprise, however, that Muslim tradition developed various ways of flirting with this boundary, and of maintaining the possibility of contact, either with the Prophet himself or with the prophetic vocation. Some of these ways of maintaining access to Prophetic authority – or to a reasonable facsimile thereof – were domesticated, as in the notion of the mujaddid, merely a renewer of religion and the community. Some were apocalyptic, as in the role of the future mahdi. Some were mystical, as in the role of waliyya (sainthood), and the long debates over the relationship between sainthood and prophethood. Some in effect endowed the Muslim community with prophetic qualities, as in the idea of Ibn al-‘Arabi regarding the retention of prophethood in the Islamic community through the faithful transmission of the Qur’an and the Prophet’s hadiths. And others crossed the line, whether the deviations, recounted by early heresiographers (some of them straw men, perhaps, but some no doubt real), that imputed divine status (as “incarnations”) to ‘Ali and his descendants or to others, or the claims of revelatory experience that placed the claimants beyond the pale (in doctrinal terms, at least, though their historical roots in the Muslim community must be acknowledged), whether self-avowedly (as with the Baha’is) or not (as with the Ahmadis).

Yet even outside such claims (whether extraordinary or domesticated), and without invoking notions of the Prophet’s extra-historical existence, the very historicity and concrete humanity of the Prophet already mark a retreat, of sorts, from rigorous scripturalism. On the one hand, to be sure, the Prophet is himself made a fount of scripture-like statements; but at the same time, the Prophet’s authority is implicitly independent of what he said, insofar as it is rooted in what he was. The Prophet’s authority rests on his selection by God, on his status as the final messenger and bearer of the Qur’an, and on his exemplification of the life of the Muslim (to the point of sinlessness); all these undergird the assumption that his entire being was and is infused with spiritual “grace,” or baraka, and the desire to gain or remain in contact with the Prophet’s baraka – or merely the fact of sustained contact with it – is taken as so natural and inevitable that it becomes itself infused with authority.

Perhaps the most obvious mode of contact with the Prophet that becomes a source of authority in and of itself is natural descent from him; it is thus somewhat surprising that such descent does not count for more, in terms of actual authority, than it does. Certainly for Shi’i Muslims, some descendants of the Prophet became, in principle,
supreme arbiters of the content and tone of religious life; for the Shi'a, a host of religious matters, including the interpretation, and in practical if not theoretical terms the substance, of the law, remains open through the inherited lineage of the Prophet. For Sunnis, the obligation to honor and respect Muhammad's descendants does not automatically accord them religious authority, as such; this is true at least juridically, and even in popular venues, where descendants of the Prophet have taken on a wider range of prerogatives that in practical terms amount to special religious authority, it is arguable that other markers of sacrality are more central to their social, political, or religious prerogatives.

Other means of maintaining contact with the Prophet — and with the baraka inherent in his being, and with the authority inherent in his baraka — include his grave as well as relics and objects handled or worn by him. In the case of relics and objects, they confer a kind of authority on their possessor, through the assumption that they would not be allowed to fall into impious or otherwise improper hands (or merely through the assumption that their survival alone attests to the appropriate sort of reverence and piety on the part of previous possessors); the same holds true of another kind of link with the Prophet that combines a physical connection with a chain of transmission, namely the transmission of a handshake from the Prophet (such lineages of transmission were highly prized and recorded in various accounts). The Prophet may also lend his authority through dreams and visions; stories of receiving, in a vision of the Prophet, some tangible legacy that crosses the visionary boundary into crude physicality reminds us of the inevitable blurring of the distinction between the Prophet's historical life and his living reality. That blurring is also evident in the much more widespread assumption, linking popular and learned environments, of the Prophet's soteriological role, as intercessor for his community on the Day of Judgment.

We may return, finally, to what may be regarded as simply another means of maintaining contact with the Prophet: his sayings (hadeeth) and his conduct (sunna). It may appear, at first glance, that hadiths offer a mode of contact with the Prophet's authority that is more amenable to explicit determination and fixation in verbal form; examining hadiths thus seems to offer a concrete and authoritative means of determining the Prophet's views and eliminating doubts and uncertainty. It must be stressed, however, that in all likelihood the appeal of transmitting hadiths did not rest in their susceptibility to being fixed and their usefulness, thereby, for limiting possibilities, but precisely

the contrary. The historical growth of Hadith scholarship in itself attests not simply to a positive aspiration to determine what the Prophet said, but to a negative concern about a kind of dilution of Prophetic authority through the indiscriminate creation and circulation of hadiths; at the same time, it is quite clear that outside the framework of Hadith scholarship, other Muslim constituencies saw in the acceptance of a wider corpus of hadiths than the Prophet could have uttered in his lifetime not a dilution, but an expansion, of the Prophet's authority, befitting his historical and universal significance.

It is also worth considering the implications of a fundamental difference between the hadiths and the sunna of the Prophet, again in terms of their authority: the verbal character of speech versus the physicality of action. Reports of what the Prophet said and reports of what he did are both reports, and are thus once removed (at the very least) from the Prophet himself, but in the case of actions, the possibility of another medium of transmission comes into play. That is, his speech is reported in the medium of speech, and must always be explicit; his actions, too, may be explicitly described in speech, but his actions may also simply be imitated, without explicit comment. The physical example of the Prophet's conduct may thus be transmitted, in theory, from imitating body to imitating body, without becoming the subject of explicit speech (at least for several generations). Many aspects of external ritual performance, and the specifics of adab, are modeled on (in principle) specific actions of the Prophet, some of which are explicitly described, but some of which are not; Muslims performing them do so in the conviction that they are repeating actions archetypally performed by the Prophet, and the imitation of the Prophet in this regard is seldom based upon a consciousness of an explicit verbal (oral or written) description of his exemplifying action. Muslims may thus be shown how to perform certain actions, without reference to an explicit description of the Prophetic prototype; but the conviction that a direct lineage of wordlessly "showing how" goes back to the Prophetic prototype is central to the authority of the demonstration.

In the development of Muslim juridical thought, matters of both ritual acts of worship ('ibadat) and acts of interpersonal relations (mu'amalat) were initially developed organically on the basis of the example of those who knew the Prophet's example directly; the time at which verbal descriptions intervened is difficult to pinpoint, even when apparently reliable chains of transmission are offered, but it seems
clear that an emphasis upon explicit hadiths as the foundation for conduct was secondary, in historical terms, to the organic, "living traditions" that developed in various local contexts, and were intimately connected with the generations of the companions and the followers. Those generations served not only as transmitters of the Prophet's sayings, but as preservers of a sort of "muscle memory" of the Prophet's actions; and in the consciousness of later Muslims, even if less often in developed juridical theory, imitation of the Prophet's conduct is indeed precisely that, and is not dependent on verbal descriptions.

Muslims regard themselves, that is, as modeling their behavior on the Prophet's behavior, not upon words about the Prophet's behavior. This is in part why the sunna represents a much more powerful, pervasive, and definitive concept (and, perhaps, one more flexible as well) than the hadith, even with the enormous potential for invention and innovation in connection with words ascribed to the Prophet. Repeating actions performed by the Prophet, as the Prophet performed them, is not merely a required or preferred way of fulfilling a duty; it provides, rather, a means of contact with the body of the Prophet, and it involves mirroring his substance, as well as his spirit, in one's own substance. Insofar as the Prophet's body is a source of baraka, imitation of the Prophet's bodily movements conveys divine grace in its sheer physicality; and while this may be talked about (and is), it need not be. The sunna (and the individual and collective aspiration to follow it) is thus more than a means of observing a religious obligation; its authority lies as much in the Prophet's bodily example as in his words, or the words of others about him.

The issue of hadiths, and of reports about the Prophet's sunna, brings us back to the issue of transmission; while the historicity of particular reports is questionable (both within and outside the tradition), the historical consciousness that pervades discussion about the reports is undeniable, and significant. That historical consciousness manifests itself not only in modes of investigating the plausibility of chains of transmission, but in considerations of the moral character and piety of particular transmitters as well; yet it does not necessarily follow that the historical verification (or verifiability) of such reports should be decisive in terms of authority. Those who adopt a restrictive attitude toward hadith, for instance, and who limit those acknowledged as authoritative to those verified to their satisfaction, make the dubious historical assumption that principles of transmission were in place and in operation at the earliest stages of the Muslim community, and make the dubious religious assumption that they, today, can better judge the authority of a particular hadith than those intervening generations of transmitters, scholars, and ordinary Muslims who preserved a wider range of reports, including those clearly solid, and those less solid, in their earliest links. The rhetoric of "sound" and "unsound" hadiths, that is, has always been more important to scholars and jurists than to ordinary Muslims who made do with the cumulative authority of communal tradition.

In the end, the Prophet's authority is not so easily reducible to the hadiths pronounced "sound" by Hadith scholars (whether today or in the ninth century C.E.), or even to the broader mass of utterances ascribed to him; beyond those extra-historical dimensions of the Prophet's person, beyond the mechanisms for keeping his person accessible in the here and now, and beyond the specific claims of Sufi transmissions from the Prophet, there is the simple fact that the Prophet was the Prophet before he preached publicly, and still, after his public career began, when he was not speaking publicly, or not speaking at all. While a claim to fill in those silences, in effect, obviously holds great potential for abuse, the claim to limit the Prophet's "output" to explicit utterances that came to be associated with the names of a few transmitters seems equally injurious to a proper appreciation of and respect for the Prophet's mission; while the issue is rarely framed in such terms, the practical effect of filling in the Prophet's silences—the vast body of sayings ascribed to him—is in itself a sign of respect for and veneration of the Prophet, and of commitment to his authority.

* * *

In some venues, in the past and today, the Qur'an and a limited body of Prophetic hadiths comprise the sum total of the reliable, authoritative sources regarding God's will; in those venues, moreover, it is not the wider range of understandings and modes of experiencing or making contact with the Qur'an and the Prophet that are invoked, but the much narrower "scriptural" recordings typically privileged in both modernist Muslim discourse and modern scholarship. Modernity, indeed, has increasingly "scripturalized" the bases of religious authority in the Muslim world, increasing the emphasis upon texts and documents and the written word, contrary to traditional patterns. Some contemporary trends bespeak, indeed, a winnowing of recognized modes of authority and of legitimate modes of religious expression.
Given the incompatibility of the Qur’an, and the virtual perfection, albeit human, of the Prophet, the insistence that these sources of authority can be enhanced only through interpretation (and not augmented in actual substance) is perhaps understandable; in the active and discursive context of the shari’a, language is inevitably circumscribed, requiring any “adjustment” of the sacred law to be framed as an interpretation based on the Qur’an and the Prophet’s life. If we return to our flow-chart of authority, after the powerhouses of the Qur’an and the Prophet, we come to two interpretative principles that are treated to some extent as actual sources of, or methods of achieving, authoritative knowledge of the sacred law: first consensus (ijma’), in theory the consensus of the Muslim community at large, in practice that of the learned; and second, the principle of analogical reasoning, whether in and of itself or as exercised by an individual interpreter (ijtihad).

It is not surprising that the latter two principles have been, and remain, the focus of enormous controversy and contention. On the one hand, consensus embodies the authority of communal experience, and the centrality of the umma in Muslim thought — as the arena both for religious action and for soteriology, through the conviction that the umma is a salvific community (frqa najiya) — ensured consensus a pivotal place in religious interpretation; ihtihad, similarly, embodies the religiously laudable element of individual striving and personal effort. On the other hand, the force of consensus was heavily restricted by some juridical schools, and, in so far as it came to be regarded by some as “cover” for rendering extra-Islamic practices licit, it has remained a target of Muslim reformers intent upon purifying Islam and Muslims; ihtihad, meanwhile, was nearly always suspect as a cover for individual opinion, pure and simple (hence its allowance only as a last resort, and the well-known claims of the closing of the “gate of ihtihad”), until it was revived and championed, by reformers, as a last resort against the supposed stagnation of a Muslim world that had come to be permeated by too much consensus. Indeed, modernist/reformist defenders of ihtihad typically omit consensus altogether from the foundations of the shari’a, going straight from the Qur’an and Prophetic hadiths, in the “flow-chart” of authority, to ihtihad (and doing so on the authority of a specific hadith).

In the rhetoric of the reformists — which has been uncritically adopted in much scholarship and public discourse about modernization and reform in the Muslim world — what takes the place of consensus, in effect, is taqlid, a term used always pejoratively by the reformists, to refer to the blind following or parroting of received tradition, and to an avoidance of direct engagement with the real sources of the law. The term taqlid had an entirely respectable, non-pejorative meaning in traditional jurisprudence, referring to a loyal and respectful deference to authoritative scholars of the past, or more specifically to a mode of juridical engagement within a single juridical school; taqlid meant adherence to the principles and conclusions of one’s predecessors in a particular school. From the reformist perspective, the juridical schools had become hidebound servants of the status quo, and their reasoning was as stagnat as their training; taqlid connotes, in the reformist critique, not only blind adherence to precedent, but a neglect of the “real” authoritative sources (the Qur’an and hadiths) in favor of engaging only with the tradition’s literary products, above all the commentaries and summaries that were typically specific to one school and were in any case several steps removed from the fundamental sources. The authority conferred by long education and training is likewise devalued in reformist rhetoric; in effect, the transmissional certificates and lineages prized historically as attestations to juridical authority become simply badges of bondage to taqlid.

Yet, while reformist rhetoric highlights the potential for stagnation and inflexibility in taqlid, the real intent of the reformist program is to bypass the juridical schools altogether, and to bridge back even further, to the age of the “predecessors” (salaf) who preceded the emergence of the juridical schools. The assumption that the “predecessors” were unanimous in their views, and that an end-run around the contentious juridical schools will restore harmony and unity in the Muslim world, is historically unsustainable, but the construction of an idealized golden age is not unusual; what is ironic in this particular construction is the unspoken appeal to ijma’, to the “consensus” of the salaf.

If consensus is ignored or rejected by the Salafists, and taqlid is reinterpreted from a thoroughly hostile perspective, ihtihad too has been recast; from their disregard for the traditional juridical schools, from their attacks on the educational foundations of juridical training, and from their anti-taqlid rhetoric, it is clear that the ihtihad championed by the Salafists is not their fathers’ ihtihad, but something quite new. Traditional concerns about potential abuses under the guise of ihtihad, entailing the elevation of pure opinion and innovation to authoritative status, are essentially ignored by the Salafists. The new ihtihad
also increasingly stakes a claim on universality—a claim at present enhanced even further by global communications—in opposition to the local particularism represented by the traditional juridical schools and the principles of taqālīd and consensus (which in practical terms occurred on a relatively local scale). In addition, the contemporary proponents of expanded īṭiḥād betray their essentially modern outlook by insisting on the rationality and “scientific” character both of the sources of authority underlying īṭiḥād, and the process of īṭiḥād itself (hence the appeal to those with modern scientific, technical, and engineering educations). As a result, indeed, the new īṭiḥād has been invested with a kind of absolute value in its own right; classical notions of īṭiḥād were averse to claims of certainty, with emphasis placed upon process and the exertion of informed effort, based on all available sources, to discover a particular applicable rule of law, but the new īṭiḥād has invested the opinions of a few of its leading proponents with real-life impact (in uniformity of dress, for instance) far beyond that ever achieved through taqālīd. Ironically, then, the reformists’ focus on individual effort has in fact subordinated individual interpretation, no longer to the diffuse traditions of particular schools, but to the interpretive programs and pronouncements of a few leading spokesmen of the Salafist agenda.

In any event, both historically and today, these two subsidiary sources, or principles, of religious authority—consensus and īṭiḥād—are intimately related. Classical theory holds that the combined īṭiḥād of the whole umma is what leads, in effect, to consensus, but consensus may be thought of as a check on unlimited īṭiḥād, and īṭiḥād as a remedy to a surfeit of consensus. Muslim juridical discussion entertained the possibility of other, subsidiary sources of the shari‘a, such as the law of earlier prophets, the opinions of the companions of the Prophet, or the simple “preference” of certain jurists; still other principles of interpretation or decision, such as the consideration of public welfare or the general good, were discussed as well, but these tended to be subsumed within the broader categories of consensus and īṭiḥād. While not necessarily or traditionally opposed in principle or application, these two notions help delineate important, and contending, trends in Muslim attitudes toward religious authority that are particularly significant today.

One further distinction between the principles underlying consensus and those underlying īṭiḥād is that the latter must be, by definition, explicit, while consensus may be, in some cases, inferred from non-explicit, and non-verbal, circumstances. In terms of both its process and its result, īṭiḥād reflects conscious effort and an explicitly articulated conclusion. By contrast, juridical discussion regarding consensus has left open the possibility, at least, that it may be tacit; that is, it may be possible to infer the consensus of the umma in some circumstances even if it is not expressly articulated or consciously formulated. The Hanafis, for instance, allowed the fact of communal behavior to be construed as validation of a particular practice even without explicit communal pronouncement. That is, consensus could be invoked with regard to a particular practice if the community simply performs it; the community does not have to state explicitly and communally that it is legitimate.

Such flexibility in juridical interpretation regarding the substance of actual life should remind us again of the potential authority of silence; if, as noted, the Prophet’s silences served as venues for projections of authoritative transmission, we find a starker parallel in the juridical context, in the frequent conclusion that simply to perform some action classed (by some) as sinful is less harmful than to declare explicitly that that action is not sinful. Not unexpectedly, Muslims have differed, historically, over the authority of silence; but here as well, in the juridical context, the notion of tacit consensus parallels the wordless bodily transmission of Prophetic conduct, noted above.

There is, finally, yet another aspect, more significant, I believe, regarding the controversy over consensus and īṭiḥād: the former is historically cumulative, while the latter is, by definition, historically discrete. Through consensus, tradition builds upon tradition, with a guaranteed continuity both socially and intellectually; indeed, consensus ensures a bond between the social locus of religious action and the intellectual foundations of religious action. To be sure, its very cumulative character—and its continuity—make it cumbersome and slow to respond to external circumstances, and no doubt limits the range of responses; it is precisely the cumulative character of consensus that has been targeted by the modernist and reformist critics who condemn taqālīd. īṭiḥād, by contrast, may bypass decades or centuries of communal consensus and laboriously worked-out opinion; this is at once the source of its flexibility, the root of its appeal to those who seek change but are constrained by the injunctions against harmful innovation, and the root of its potential to sanction minority views and even extremism.
The latter potential is further strengthened by the Salafist suspicion of traditional juridical training and by the “populist” appeal to each believer’s ability to engage the scriptural sources of authority directly; if traditional measures of authority are no longer regarded as sufficient to interpret the shari’a, or even to “authorize” or certify the training of those who will exercise ijtihad, and if traditional educational achievement is discounted as well, what will serve as a new signifier of authority to interpret the law? Here the modernist/reformist repertoire is again disturbingly weak, compared with the range of signifiers for traditional jurisprudence, with its cumulative historical foundations; Salafist movements may be building up a framework of educational certification (becoming in effect a separate juridical school, in which a neo-taglid may not be far behind), but in the meantime, piety, charisma, political activism, and martyrdom seem to be the chief markers of authoritative interpretation.

Perhaps the clearest indication, indeed, of the contested territory represented by consensus and ijtihad may be found in the way their respective proponents in effect trade places, with regard to those two other sources of authority, the Qur’an and the Prophet, when it comes to history; it is with regard to history, and that relationship between the authoritative past and the present, as noted above, that these two categories of sources or foundations of religious authority—the primary sources, the Qur’an and the Prophet, on the one hand, and the subsidiary foundations, consensus and ijtihad, on the other—differ most starkly, and inversely. In the case of the Qur’an and the Prophet, it is the modernists, the rigorists, the fundamentalists, who appeal to discrete historicity, grounding (and limiting) their understanding to the literal text, and to the single historical span in which the Prophet revealed and exemplified the Qur’anic message; it is then the mystics and traditionalists who find solace in the expanded possibilities afforded by the respective prototypes of the holy book and prophethood. In the case of consensus and ijtihad, conversely, history—and here the cumulative history of the community—is essentially rejected by the rigorists, while traditionalists cling to it.

In their hostility to the traditional incorporation of practices and beliefs deemed, by their critics, to be of non-Islamic origin (above all the veneration of saints and shrines); in their appeal to the “original,” foundational, scriptural sources of revelation and its interpretation, and their challenge to and critique of accumulated tradition; in their insistence that even untrained believers could and should read the scriptural sources of authority and interpret them directly; in their attacks on existing institutionalized structures of power and authority, both political and religious; and even in their links to new forms of economic activity, the Salafi movements have close historical parallels with the Protestant critiques of Catholic tradition and institutions. They warrant the label “fundamentalist” (in the sense entailed by that term’s original Protestant Christian context), and as with other fundamentalisms, their engagement with “modernity” entails a rejection of tradition, a willingness thereby to cast history aside, and a reductionist approach to religious authority. It is not merely the cumulative wisdom of the community that is thus jettisoned in the name of modernity; the very authority of communal experience in itself is discarded as well.

* * *

Among the prominent targets of Salafist/modernist movements, Sufism is arguably the most important in the Muslim world historically. Sufism, too, is far from a single phenomenon susceptible to essentialist definitions, but one characteristic shared among most communities to which the label “Sufi” applies is a distinctively expansive approach to religious authority. It is, indeed, in the context of the personal and public experience of Sufism that we find the most remarkable range of significations of authority, and the most dramatic extensions of the reach of religious authority into different social venues.

The expanded possibilities come not only through the interiorization, and more open understanding, of the “standard” sources, but from expanded attentiveness to the authority of personal experience as well. To say “personal,” however, is not to say “idiosyncratic,” rather, the Sufi discourse of religious authority comprises not only the social and devotional and ethical, but the contemplative and visionary as well, and Sufism is only atypically averse to the authority of communal experience that undergirds juridical authority. Indeed, Sufi experience is every bit as subject to routinization in the social environment—with the authority of its method and prescriptions vouched for by cumulative tradition and by the “test” of replicability—as the juridical paradigm. Despite the frequent depiction of Sufis as weak on book learning and perennially at odds with the learned upholders of juridical authority, such Sufis are more the exception than the rule, in
historical terms, and Sufis typically operate on the same foundations and methods of authority as the 'ulama (often they are the 'ulama and vice versa).

Both interiorization and the application of personal experience, then, are put to work in expanding and deepening those sources of authority. Sufi approaches to the Qur'an typically are open to non-literal readings and assumptions of hidden spiritual meanings that reveal themselves hierarchically according to individual spiritual attainment; the Prophet is understood as the exemplar of the Sufi path, both in his sayings and in his conduct, but also in his trans-historical reality, and in the possibility of personal experience thereof; consensus is echoed in the collective rehearsals of the wisdom of past masters, and in accounts of the important role accorded in some contexts to the entire Sufi congregation in the spiritual advancement of each individual; and some Sufis speak of particular shaykhs as entitled to exercise *ijtihad*, and as thus able to alter aspects of the path to suit the needs of the age or of the community.

While Sufi understandings of God and of the nature of the human relationship with the divine are typically highlighted in distinguishing Sufism from a "normative" Islam, it is arguably in connection with the authority of the Prophet that Sufism most thoroughly deepens and interiorizes -- or, from the perspective of its critics, departs from -- the confines of the ordinary ritual, ethical, and public framework of Muslim life. Other Muslim religious currents maintain access to the Prophet outside the juridical constructions of the Prophet's legacies, but the Sufi experience of the Prophet lays claim to multiple layers of religious meaning in the public aspects of his prophetic career, and to the proper "accessing" of a body of his sayings (*hadith qudsi*) that differ in kind from his juridically valorized pronouncements; it also claims, as both imitable and metaphorical truths, elements of the Prophet's life that are left largely blank in those juridical constructions (what he taught Abu Bakr in the cave, for instance, or what he experienced during the *mi'raj*).

In addition to the claim to contact with and access to the living reality of the Prophet, Sufism also claims contact with a rich spiritual world that is imagined in neatly classified and hierarchical terms in Sufi literature and, we may surmise, Sufi experience, but is understood more broadly, in the public sphere beyond the narrower circles of committed Sufi aspirants, as a source of immediate and undeniable religious authority. In this way, too, Sufism has mediated between the personal and the public, the individual and the communal, and has done so perhaps more effectively, in historical terms, than the narrower juridical enterprise. The religiously authoritative character of dreams and visionary experiences, for example, was not dependent upon Sufism, but Sufism filled the unseen world -- or, more properly, identified and categorized the experiences of the unseen world -- for a public much broader than the specific classical structures of Sufi life. It performed the same function, moreover, for much of the "seen" world, the ordinary world, which Sufism saw with a distinctive set of religious insights and symbolic structures, and these, too, it has lent to a broader public.

If, in connection with the Qur'an and the juridical context, we tend to link authority with texts (i.e. the texts of revelation and of injunctions and laws), the case of the Prophet reminds us of authority linked with persons, and here too Sufism readily invests authority along the Prophetic example. It is on the model of the Prophet that the Sufi saint becomes a new source of authority in his own right, in accord with the famous dictum that the master's role in his local community is equivalent to the Prophet's role in the universal community. The Prophetic paradigm extends further, indeed, as the modes of asserting and transmitting authority radiate into broader social venues. The Sufi master too, like the Prophet, becomes an important focus of natural descent, transmitting the authority encrypted in the person, in bodily form; and if "blood" is evoked in the transmission of authority in hereditary frameworks, other bodily fluids are envisioned as the medium of transmission in other contexts, as in the imagery of a master suckling the disciple at his breast, or spitting his saliva into the disciple's mouth, or of a disciple imbibing the sweat of a master or of multiple masters. Yet such imagery of initiation, of the transmission and marking of authority, regularly escapes the borders of "Sufism" as such, as the personally embodied (and Proportionally modeled) authority of the Sufi master is projected into whole communities that come to be regarded and defined as his descendants, for example, or into a lineage of craftsmen that honors him as a transmitter of their skills, or into the maker of amulets who links a prayer or sacred text with him, or, most pervasively, into his shrine.

Medieval Sufism displayed a wide range of principles whereby authority was asserted, ranging from the one that became paradigmatic, the *silsila* or "chain of transmission," to natural heredity, the possession of various insignia, direct inspiration by the Prophet or by Khidr,
the claimed ability to ensure quick attainment of spiritual goals, or the intercessory power of a group’s founder; yet another mode of claiming authority, on a communal basis, involved stressing a distinctive social profile, whether through the provision of “social services” or through claims of strict adherence to the shari’a in the midst of widespread neglect of the sacred law. Many of these modes of asserting authority were claimed in the context of communal rivalries and disputes that heightened the intensity of the rhetoric through which different visions of authority were asserted, ensuring that some modes or sources of authority would be stressed precisely as alternatives to those advanced by other groups. Assertions of authority inevitably had concrete social implications, and claims of a “founding” saint’s special status occasionally developed on a grander social scale, as in the case of Sufi masters who claimed, or had claimed for them, the status of the mahdi. It was in the same era, not surprisingly, that we find considerable overlap among the religious, social, and political claims of Sufi masters and rulers. Whether claims of authority thus led to contestations of social and political power or to flagrant challenges to social order and conventions, the variety of modes of asserting authority (and their social ramifications) evidenced in medieval Sufi communities reminds us that religious authority, more broadly, should be approached not in static terms, but as part of an ongoing rhetorical dialectic in which a certain formulation of authority inevitably evokes a counter-formulation, often precisely among those inclined to poke a stick in the eye of authority – or, in Bruce Lincoln’s terms, to “corrode” authority. From this perspective, perhaps the real “authority” at work is the creative intellectual and religious work of challenge and reformulation, adaptation and dynamic adjustment; and this potential is perhaps the most important thing that is lost in a scripturally rigorist environment.

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It would be fundamentally misleading to suggest that the wide range of sources and signifiers of authority evoked in Sufism, or more broadly in pre-modern Islam, somehow dilutes the force, or the centrality, of the Qur’an and the Prophet; while our understanding of both these sources of authority, and the channels for “accessing” them, requires refinement and expansion, the assumption that authority in Islam rests ultimately on the speech of God as recorded in the Qur’an, as “delivered” by the Prophet, and as refracted in his life, is largely uncontested among Muslims. That assumption has also been central to debates, historically and at present, over the extent, and foundation, of permissible interpretation; yet there is far more recognition and acceptance, in the historical experience of the Muslim community, of other venues for the expression, transmission, and interpretation of religious authority than is often acknowledged, and in any case an abhorrence of symbols and signifiers of authority without obvious roots in the textual sources is an aberration in historical terms.

Toward the end of the eleventh century, the eminent scholar Abu Hamid al-Ghazali included the following comments in one of his many works, alluding to debates in his time over the sources and nature of religious authority, and its implications for faith and for what it meant to be a Muslim:

Among the most extreme and extravagant of men are a group of scholastic theologians who dismiss the Muslim common people as unbelievers and claim that whoever does not know scholastic theology in the form they recognize and does not know the prescriptions of the Holy Law according to the proofs which they have adduced is an unbeliever.

These people have constricted the vast mercy of God to His servants and made paradise the preserve … of a small clique of theologians. They have disregarded what is handed down by the sunna, for it is clear that in the time of the Prophet … and in the time of the companions of the Prophet … the Islam of whole groups of rude Arabs was recognized, though they were busy worshipping idols. They did not concern themselves with the science of analogical proof and would have understood nothing of it if they had.

Whoever claims that theology, abstract proofs, and systematic classification are the foundation of belief is an innovator.

Rather is belief a light which God bestows on the hearts of His creatures as the gift and bounty from Him, sometimes through an explainable conviction from within, sometimes because of a dream in sleep, sometimes by seeing the state of bliss of a pious man and the transmission of his light through association and conversation with him, sometimes through one’s own state of bliss.

Though al-Ghazali had his own specific targets in mind, and his own notions of the “Muslim common people” whose faith and practice he sought to defend, we may not be far from the mark in suggesting that the people of Taraz, who found solace and perhaps religious inspiration in the authority of Hamdullah’s post-ghost, were the sort of Muslims he was referring to. Similarly, we may reasonably apply his critiques,
of those who would dismiss the faith of such Muslims and constrict the channels for seeking religious authority, to the Salafism of our time; from the Salafist outlook, after all, the only lesson to be drawn from the post-ghost story would be the decadence, imperfect Islamization, or baseless superstition of the community described in it.

The times of al-Ghazali and of medieval Taraz are long past, of course, and it is difficult to judge what future generations will make of the increasing appeal of the Salafist agenda in the last century and its implications for the Muslim understanding of religious authority. Will they wonder at the impoverishment of religious discourse, as some Muslims rejected nearly fourteen centuries’ worth of cumulative experience and religious expression in favor of a “return” to a limited corpus of authoritative scripture, all (or largely) in the name of responding to “modernity” and the threat of the West? Will they lament the “democratization” of religious interpretation, as even the untrained and unthoughtful were invited to enter the fray of scriptural interpretation, and long for a return to standards and the authority endowed by rigorous education and engagement with tradition? Will they applaud the initial steps toward a purification of the faith and the restoration of proper adherence to genuine religious authority? Will the Salafist appeal be explained as an artifact of political tensions that will inevitably have shifted? Will it have coalesced as yet another sectarian current with local or regional prominence?

Whichever direction prevails, and however averse scholars may be to involvement in the debates themselves, we may be certain of the pedagogical usefulness, at least in tactical terms, of “descripturalizing” the roots of authority in Islam, as a counter to the subtle effects of modernist Muslim discourse upon scholarship (including even historical scholarship) on the Muslim world. Looking forward, the situation today is undoubtedly relevant to understanding the future of Muslim approaches to religious authority, which we cannot now know; yet looking backward, it also stands at the end of a long historical process, and inasmuch as it sometimes casts its shadows across Muslim history in ways that hinder a better understanding of the historical trajectories of the Muslim world, suspending the scripturalist vision, and revisiting a world marked by a richer array of possibilities for locating Muslim religious authority, may serve to clarify the scenery both behind us and in front of us.
CHAPTER 2: AUTHORITY, DEVIN DEWEES


2 See William Graham, Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 111–14. Though he focuses on orality, Graham notes the “difficult problem” of “religious meaning that may exist apart from rational, discursive meaning – and, indeed, apart from mystical or esoteric meaning as well.” He also notes the essential agreement between “orientalist rationalism” and Muslim “literalism” in ignoring or rejecting such meaning.

3 See Michael A. Sells, Mystical Languages of Unsaying (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

4 See the discussion in Yohannam Friedman, Prophecy Continuus: Aspects of Ahmadi Religious Thought and its Medieval Background (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).


7 For considerations of the impact of modernity on issues of authority more nuanced than the stock frameworks of “liberal” vs. “conservative” or “modern” vs. “traditional” still often employed, see Daniel W. Brown, Rethinking Tradition in Modern Islamic Thought (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), and Carl W. Ernst, Following Muhammad: Rethinking Islam in the Contemporary World (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

8 See Bruce Lincoln, Authority: Construction and Corrosion (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).


CHAPTER 3: BELIEF, R. KEVIN JAQUES

1 Most discussions of non-anthropological method in Islamic Studies have come out of Political Science and the Sociology of Religion. The focus of these studies has tended to be on “political Islam” or on class, social strata, and issues of class mobility. Discussions of method have largely focused on different applications of statistical methodologies to economic and polling data. For an overview, see Mansoor Moaddel, “The Study of Islamic Culture and Politics: An Overview and Assessment,” Annual Review of Sociology, 28 (2002), pp. 359–86. Many of these studies also emphasize the application of theory to Islamic phenomena but rarely say anything about how we are to collect information or even specific methods of interpretation. The best example of this kind of approach is Brian Tumer’s Weber and Islam: A Critical Study (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974).

2 The exception to this general rule is Marshall Hodgson’s masterful The Venture of Islam. The first ninety-nine pages of the first volume remain one of the most authoritative and explicit statements on method in the historical and textual study of Islam. For several generations of scholars of Islam, Hodgson’s work has been the staple of doctoral exams and generally required reading, although his dense and what many younger members of the field consider to be “dry” prose have begun to erode his impact; a fact that should be lamented and corrected. See his The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization, The Classical Age of Islam, vol. 1 (Chicago: The University Press, 1974). Also see Edmund Burke, “Islamic History as World History: Marshall Hodgson, The Venture of Islam,” International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, 10:2, May 1979, pp. 241–64.


5 The author would like to thank Devin Stewart and Christopher Melchert, two of Makdisi’s students, for their insights into Makdisi’s teaching and methodology.


Key Themes for the Study of Islam

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