Textual Aspects of Religious Authority in Premodern Islam

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In *People of the Book: Canon, Meaning, and Authority*, Moshe Halbertal described Judaism as a “text-centered community” (Halbertal 1997). What he meant is that Judaism, as a community, is defined by the texts, principally the Torah and the Talmud, which it placed at the centre of its religious experience. In his analysis, it was not an idea about God which distinguished a Jew. As Halbertal pointed out, historically Jews have had radically different, even contradictory conceptions of the deity. Nor was Judaism defined by ritual, not even a ritual as central to Jewish identity as circumcision. It was rather the text, or certain texts, and the way in which those texts were employed both in religious discourse and in social life, which gave to the Jewish tradition its coherence. And not just Jewish identity, but Jewish divisions. Attitudes towards the foundational texts lie at the heart of the major sectarian divisions within the Jewish world. For example, it is a textual dispute which in the Middle Ages marked the difference between Rabbanites and Karaites: the Rabbanites accepting the authority of the Talmud in addition to the Bible; the Karaites rejecting the authority of anything but the canonical scriptures.

Change a key term or text, and these remarks also describe the situation in Islam. For the Torah and Talmud, substitute the Qurʾan and the hadith—the word of God and the words of his Prophet. The texts may be different, but Islam, too, is a “text-centered community.”

Of course, behind the simple focus on texts lies a more complex reality, not least because the text or texts in question are not easily defined. In the case of Judaism, the Torah alone is not the text: it is the Torah plus the Mishnah and the Talmud plus the entire universe of commentaries on the sacred texts which define the tradition. Islam constitutes a “text-centered community” in precisely analogous terms. It is not the Qurʾan and hadith alone which define the community, but a complex array of commentaries on those texts—especially those commentaries which came to define Islamic law.

As an observation about Islam, all this is, perhaps, self-evident. But it has very important consequences for Islamic history. For example, there is the question of the identity—almost, we might say, the very existence of
Islam – during the first Islamic century. The radical ideas articulated by Michael Cook and Patricia Crone in *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World* and by John Wansbrough in his various studies of the Qur’an have not been accepted in their entirety by many historians of early Islam (Cook and Crone 1977; Wansbrough 1978, 1987). Nonetheless, it is fair to say that they have highlighted the fragility of the traditional narrative of Islamic origins, so much so that it is now difficult to speak with great confidence of a fully-formed and precisely delineated “Islam,” even perhaps of a definitive Qur’anic text, before the later years of the seventh century.1

If this is so, then it may be necessary to rewrite the history of Islam in its formative decades as the history of a “text-centered community.” This would mean that the proper framework for an understanding of early Islamic history would not be one centred on the *individuals* or the *families* or the *dynasties* who exercised political power – that is, on those around whom we are accustomed to construct the story. The history of early Islam should be conceptualised not so much as that of the “rightly-guided caliphs,” or of the Umayyads or Abbasids. Rather, the history of early Islam should be construed as the story of the *formation of a textual authority*.

One advantage of casting early Islamic history as the “formation of a textual authority” is the reminder that the process was precisely that – a *process*. Virtually all of those things to which we might point in order to define “Islam” developed only gradually. This may be true of the Qur’an itself, although that question is better left to specialists in the history of Muslim scripture. It is, however, certainly true of the ‘ulama’, the religious scholars who defined the Islamic textual tradition and in whom a mature Islam vested its religious authority. The ‘ulama’ were not there at the origins of the new religion, nor do they correspond neatly to any pre-Islamic social or religious group. This is an important point, which historians of early Islam have recently begun to explore. At what point can the ‘ulama’ be said to have come into existence? At what point did they come to exercise religious authority? These questions are reminiscent of that involving chicken and eggs. Which came first: the chicken or the egg? Which came first: Islam? Its fundamental texts? The religious scholars who defined what the religion was, and what it was not? It may well be that, as with chickens and eggs, a precise and definitive answer is impossible. Perhaps it would be better to say, simply, that all of these things constitute aspects of a *textual authority* which developed over the course of the first century or so of the Islamic period.

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1 See Donner (2010).
The topic of this essay, “textual aspects of religious authority,” is thus central to the Islamic experience. There are many places in the history of Islam, and in particular of its understanding of religious authority, in which the text and the idea of the text have had important consequences. What I would like to do here is to identify three aspects of this preoccupation with the text and its complex relation to religious authority. My goal is to explore certain broad themes of recent scholarly literature about texts and religious authority in the Islamic tradition, as a way of highlighting possible areas of future research.

The first of these themes concerns the persistent orality of texts – that is, the stubborn preference for the oral transmission of texts – the Qurʾan of course, but also most other religious texts. It is a commonplace in scholarly literature that, in the Islamic tradition, books do not really exist until they are actually pronounced, that is, spoken out loud. Books might be written down; they might be copied; they might be bound and arranged on shelves in libraries. But books were routinely and preferably read out loud, and their essence was found in their spoken rather than written form. One can find examples of this preference for oral transmission in virtually all premodern Muslim societies. It was certainly present in the world of religious education in medieval Cairo.² There, books were routinely read out loud, either from memory or from a written text, and the act of reading was sometimes described as a “buzzing” sound. There were practical advantages to “speaking” books rather than reading them silently. For one thing, it meant that more people had access to them, since many could listen where only one at a time might read a written text. But the preference for oral rather than written transmission goes well beyond practical concerns and reflects deeply-rooted cultural priorities.

Of course, the oral nature of the Islamic conception of the text is most evident in the case of the Qurʾan. One of the classic statements of the importance of the oral transmission of texts is found in the important book by William Graham, *Beyond the Written Word* (1987). In that work Graham was concerned principally with the Qurʾan, the Muslim holy scripture, in which the oral nature of the Islamic conception of the text is most evident. As he points out, the very name of the Qurʾan – from an Arabic verb meaning “to recite” – suggests the oral nature of the text. The Qurʾan, says Graham, is a “wholly oral” text – although it might be preferable to call the Qurʾan “originally oral” rather than “wholly oral,” since eventually the writing down of the revelations created a more complex text, in which oral and written

elements both played a role. Moreover, the Qurʾan refers to itself as a “written book” (kitāb maktūb) and attributes its glory to a “preserved tablet” (lawḥ mahfūz). Such expressions may suggest that the Qurʾan’s understanding of its own origins presumes the priority of a written celestial text.

But despite these ambiguities and complexities, the oral nature of the Qurʾan as experienced is surely clear. The very name of the text (qurʾān or “recitation”), its euphonic language and the frequent presence within it of the imperative qul (Speak!) indicate unequivocally the oral character of the Prophet Muhammad’s encounter with the Word of God (even if we are agnostic on the highly-charged question of whether or not Muhammad was illiterate). Graham sought to distinguish the Muslim experience of scripture from the Jewish and Christian. Jews and Christians, he argued, have tended to stress the written nature of scripture, recognising in the written book “a physical symbol of divine as opposed to human knowledge” (Graham 1987, 51). This was especially true after the Protestant Reformation and the rise of printing, although the roots of the privileging of the written word are older, and lie in ancient Near Eastern ideas. By contrast, he said, “[i]n Muslim piety, the written word of its scripture has always been secondary to a strong tradition of oral transmission and aural presence of scripture” (Graham 1987, 79).

There are in fact two questions, two distinct aspects of the orality of the Qurʾan, and it is helpful to separate them. The first is a religious question – the type of question which might concern theologians, on the one hand, and on the other historians of religion influenced by the approach of scholars such as Mircea Eliade. This question concerns the sacred power of the written Qurʾanic text. Where does the power of the written Qurʾan come from? One possible answer: from the power of the sacred oral word, from the word pronounced by God. This is certainly plausible, from the point of view of the theologian or the historian of religion. The theologian proceeds with certain assumptions about the character of God which render judgements about the power of God’s speech credible. The historian of religion is interested in the subjective experience of religion, and in patterns in the religious experiences of people living in different times and places. But on all of this, the social historian has little to say, since he is uncomfortable making judgements about abstract ideas (such as God) or subjective experiences which are not anchored in a social reality.

There is, however, a second question, and one which from the standpoint of the social and cultural historian is far more important. The oral character of the word of God was not Graham’s principal subject. He wished to discuss the oral character of reading “beyond the written word” – that is, not the
Qurʾan itself, but the reading of the holy scripture during the centuries that followed its revelation, the encounter between the holy book and the Muslim believer, and the Islamic conception of the book and of religious literature more generally. And here we abandon the domain of the theologian and enter that of the social historian.

To be sure, at least in the premodern period, most Muslims have in most cases experienced the Qurʾan as an oral text. They encountered the Qurʾan recited, rather than the Qurʾan in written form. Take one example. One of the principal features of the madrasas and mosques of medieval Cairo were professional Qurʾan readers employed to recite the holy scripture, at all hours of the day and night, from the windows of the structures – all for the benefit of those passing by in the street. It is a delightful scene to imagine: as a Muslim passed through the streets of the noisy and crowded city, he heard the Qurʾan recited from open windows high above the street. Anyone who has visited modern Cairo is familiar with the public recitation of the Qurʾan that one occasionally hears in the streets of the city, particularly during holidays or on solemn occasions. But if the endowment deeds which established the religious and educational institutions of the medieval city are to be believed, this must have been a permanent and ongoing experience, a defining feature of urban life (Berkey 1992, 63-64).

But drawing too sharp a contrast between Muslim and Christian (and especially Protestant) attitudes and practices may obscure a complexity in the actual Islamic experience of the text. Medieval Muslims heard Qurʾanic verses being recited in the streets, but they also saw them written on the walls of buildings. It is important to remember the ubiquity of Qurʾanic inscriptions in the physical fabric of medieval Muslim cities. This is one of those places where the social historian must take his/her cue from historians of art. In addition, there is the question of the usage of the text of the Qurʾan. Graham mentions in passing various magical practices and acts of “bibliomancy” or “book magic” – that is, foretelling the future by randomly opening the pages of a book. (Something similar occurs in a famous passage at the end of Book 8 of St Augustine’s Confessions.) But from the point of view of the actual experience of the faith, such practices may have been more important than we might assume. The invocation of the magical power of the Qurʾan often depended heavily on actual written texts, on amulets inscribed with Qurʾanic verses and the like. As a written text of spiritual power, the Qurʾan, in fact, had to compete with other scriptures, even among Muslims. Consider, for example, an observation by Ibn al-Hajj, a rather excitable and pessimistic jurist living in Cairo in the fourteenth century. Ibn al-Hajj complained that it was the habit of the inhabitants of
the city to visit schoolteachers and ask them to inscribe Qur’anic texts as charms and amulets. This custom annoyed him, but he was positively livid about Muslims who went further and asked that those charms be written in Hebrew characters. The power of these “judaizing” amulets resided in their strange character, a character manifested in writing (Ibn al-Hajj 1929, 2: 323).

This is not to deny the importance of the oral recitation and transmission of texts for medieval Muslims. It is simply to insist on the complexity of the phenomenon. Medieval Muslim societies were full of books – the large number surviving in the libraries of Europe and the Middle East attest to that. The scribal profession was one of the most widespread open to an individual with a degree of education. A comparative example may be useful. Brinkley Messick recognised the importance of the oral nature of reading in his investigation of juristic culture in nineteenth-century Yemen. But he also acknowledged a fundamental ambiguity: that the intellectual milieu was inundated with actual, physical books. As he put it, “the coexistence of recitational forms and their written versions was taken for granted.” “Indeed, the complex interplay between written and spoken word was characteristic,” he said, “of a distinctively Islamic mode of literacy” (Messick 1993, 28-29).

Clearly, the power and the status of the written book was a subject of controversy in medieval Islam. There are many hadiths in which Muhammad or his companions condemned the writing down of the Prophet’s words. They did so for many reasons – for example, that copying down Muhammad’s words might distract believers from the supreme text (that is, the Qur’an), or that doing so might diminish memory and encourage forgetfulness. But these objections seem somewhat artificial and formulaic. In any case, there were at the same time plenty of contradictory hadiths, approving the writing down of Muhammad’s utterances.

In the end, the scholarly tradition managed to surmount the objections and insisted upon the compatibility of religious knowledge and writing, so that we cannot understand the social role of books without an appreciation of the power of the written text and the logic of writing. Indeed, the famous historian and jurist al-Khatib al-Baghdadi argued for the necessity, indeed the superiority of writing as a means of transmitting and preserving religious knowledge. “For practical reasons,” “people rely on books and on writing for the safe transmission of religious knowledge. Hearts tire at the commitment of names and texts to memory” (al-Khatib al-Baghdadi 1974).

This was a phenomenon replicated at different levels of culture. So, for example, as Jeanette Wakin demonstrated some time ago, despite the suspicion of documents embedded in the juristic thought, they nonetheless
played a critical role in legal life. It is true that a document which described, for example, a contract of sale did not represent the contract itself – the contract was found rather in the personal relation between the seller and buyer. But from a practical point of view, the documents nonetheless definitively decided the sense and the consequences of the contract (Wakin 1972).

The second major historiographic theme emerging from the Muslim preoccupation with texts is linked to the question of orality. This is the question of what I shall call the *informality* of medieval Muslim society, by which I mean the informal and personal relations which determined the contours and also the hierarchies of social, intellectual, and even political life. This too is a textual question – at least if we use the term “textual” with a certain flexibility. This is because the archetypal mode of the “informal” relationship is that of a shaykh and his disciple, the master and student who sit, whatever the milieu, and read books – out loud, perhaps from memory, perhaps from an actual, physical text. In this model, the important thing is not the text itself, nor the environment, nor any institutional structures. The important thing is the personal relation between the shaykh and student, the master and disciple.

Like the preference for oral transmission, the emphasis on personal relations in structures of intellectual authority is deeply rooted in the Islamic experience. It was, for example, central to the study of hadiths, as in the famous dictum that “knowing hadiths means knowing the men.” In other words, it was necessary for a scholar to know not only the text of a tradition, but also the identities and characters of the individual transmitters who relayed the hadiths, whose names were included in the “chains of authority” (*isnāds*) which were attached to each tradition, and in particular to know the connections between them: how they met, when, where, at what age, and under what conditions. The personal connections and relationships on which the transmission of hadith rested were replicated in various ways across the intellectual spectrum. As Messick nicely put it, “this preference for personal, informal transmission meant that texts were ‘literally embodied’” (Messick 1993, 15).

The situation in medieval Cairo provides a clear example of an intellectual world defined by these informal and personal relationships between scholars and students. Most medieval Muslim cities saw the proliferation of madrasas and other institutions, created to encourage and support the transmission of the Islamic religious sciences. But these institutions had little, if any, effect on the actual transmission of religious knowledge. Religious education never came to rely on a system of institutional degrees or other formal mechanisms. Rather, the system rested on the close
personal relationships established between teachers and students. What was transmitted between master and student was not simply knowledge, but rather “an authority over texts and over a body of learning that was intensely personal, and that could be transmitted only through some form of direct personal contact” (Berkey 1992, 23-24). The force of that personal authority is evident in the case of the fifteenth-century scholar al-Suyuti. Al-Suyuti wrote a book on the science of the variant Qurʾan readings. Nonetheless, he refused to teach it, because he had never studied the subject properly under the personal supervision of a recognised master (al-Suyuti 1975, 204).

This theme has been fundamental to all studies of the transmission of religious knowledge over the last several decades. There is a particularly stark expression of it in a fascinating paper by the eminent Iranian philosopher Seyyed Hossein Nasr – a scholarly study exploring “oral transmission and the book in Islamic education,” but also serving as an exemplum of the survival of traditional modes of Islamic intellectual discourse in the modern world. In this essay, Professor Nasr outlined his own experience studying with the grand masters of Persian philosophy and theosophy. These teachers, he said, would mention at the beginning of their instruction that the good student must learn not only to read correctly the black lines of the text in Arabic or Persian, but that he must also read what he would call “the white parts” of the page or what in English would be called “reading between the lines.” But this reading of the “unwritten” text had to be carried out not according to the student’s individual whim and fancy, but in accordance with the oral transmission stored in the memory of the master and going back through generations of teachers to the original author of the text. One hears in his words a not-too-distant echo of the teaching of the rabbis of late antiquity, who held that they possessed a second Torah, a purely oral Torah distinct from the written text which was transmitted exclusively through the close personal contacts between teacher and student (Nasr 1992).

The theme of informality may be rooted in the transmission of religious knowledge, but it has shaped our understanding of social life in medieval Muslim societies more broadly. “Informality” – that is, the reliance on networks of personal relationships rather than formal or institutional arrangements – is visible in virtually all types of social relations, and not simply in educational ones. We see it in the relationships between Sufi masters and their disciples. We see it in the commercial relationships described by S.D. Goitein, Avrom Udovitch, and others (Udovitch 1977). We see something similar, too, in the intimate relationships between amirs and their mamluks in the military regimes which dominated the Middle East in the medieval
period. It would not be too much to say that this model has become one of the defining tropes of modern studies of medieval Islamic society.

There are many reasons why this idea – the idea that authority was located in personal relationships rather than institutional forms – has been popular among social historians of the premodern Islamic world. One is that it tends to draw our attention to people, to persons, to individuals rather than to institutions and more formal structures. This is fortuitous, because we have plentiful information about those individuals – and especially about the ‘ulama’, the religious scholars – from medieval biographical dictionaries. By contrast, institutions, both those of the state and of the religious establishment, have left a less prominent imprint in the historical record. The emphasis on informality and personal relationships, in other words, is confirmed by the very nature of the surviving evidence. Another reason why this model has been so influential is that it serves to distinguish these societies from those of medieval Europe, where institutions such as the Church and the more formalised relationships of feudal vassalage were dominant.3

An especially sophisticated and compelling application of the model of informality is found in Michael Chamberlain’s important book on Knowledge and Social Practice in Medieval Damascus. If Graham’s book Beyond the Written Word was a kind of summum of the idea of the orality of texts, we might say that Chamberlain’s is an epitome of the importance of informality and the personal relationships which held medieval Muslim societies together. The author did not like the term “informality” and sought to avoid it, but in fact he discussed in detail and with conviction the character of the personal ties that bound master to disciple, and showed how they were characteristic of the understanding and the experience of authority at all levels of medieval Muslim society, those of both the scholars and the military rulers. For Chamberlain, this model served to distinguish the societies of the medieval Middle East from others. In Europe, he pointed out, power and authority rested in the more formal and precisely delineated ties of feudal obligations. In China, they were found in imperial institutions and offices. But in medieval Islam, they resided in the fluid structure of the “household,” or bayt, the grand family dynasties which dominated both intellectual and political life. And here, again, the model takes us back to the book, to the text. The authority of shaykhs operating under this system rested on books, but these books did not exist as fixed and permanent objects. For Chamberlain, this was not merely the distinction between

3 For a study which made informality a central theme of its analysis, see Berkey (1998).
a written book and oral reading. On the contrary, it was the book itself which lacked a determinative and fixed form. One did not “read” a book, he said; rather, one “created” it new each time it was read, “fortuitously” (as he cogently expressed it), in a public “performance” (Chamberlain 1994).

The model of informality has proved as important to our understanding of medieval Islam as has that of the oral transmission of texts, and with as good a reason. But as with the earlier question, it is important not to let its analytical force oversimplify the picture. The model of informality can obscure as well as clarify.

The model of informality may be especially problematic on the political side. Chamberlain addressed a textual problem which has vexed historians of medieval Islam for years: namely, the almost total absence of documents and archives from before the Ottoman epoch. The contrast really is quite stark. With the Ottomans, we suddenly have archives of enormous proportions, preserving the institutional history of a powerful state. Before that, there is virtually nothing. Chamberlain resolves this problem with an elegant and creative solution, one that relies on the model of informality. There is no point, he argues, in complaining about the lack of documentation. Rather, we should simply accept it as a consequence of the character of power and political authority, that is, of the state, and in fact of the book itself in medieval Muslim societies. None of these things took a fixed and definitive shape, neither books nor the state. They were all created and re-created “fortuitously” in time, as manifestations of the authority of an amir or of a shaykh, an authority which was founded on personal relationships, informal and constantly shifting. Chamberlain contrasts the situation in medieval China, as well as that in the Ottoman Empire. Both of those had extensive and institutionalised bureaucracies, and both have consequently left a prodigious documentary legacy. By contrast, the “formal state agencies” in the medieval Middle East were “rudimentary” (Chamberlain 1994, 17).

To this there is, perhaps, an obvious objection. The “formal state agencies” of the Mamluks, for example, or of the Ayyubids were not “rudimentary” in comparison to those of, say the Angevin or Anglo-Norman kings. But we have lots of documents prepared by the scribes of those medieval European states. The sophistication of the institutional apparatus of the Mamluk state is clear from the enormous encyclopaedia prepared by Ahmad ibn ʿAli al-Qalqashandi. Al-Qalqashandi, who was himself a scribe in a government office, envisioned his work as a sort of handbook that would provide scribes and bureaucrats with the information they needed to carry out their practical tasks – drawing up official correspondence, drafting
treaties, or putting into effect the decrees of the rulers – all those documents reflecting a formalised political authority which now appear to be missing. Al-Qalqashandi clearly did not compose his work as a useless distraction; he composed it because the many scribes and bureaucrats who staffed the chanceries of the Mamluks had constant recourse to it.

The scribal tradition was not the only place where authority was actually experienced in more formal terms. At all levels, social and political relations, while defined by personal and informal relationships, were registered in formal, written documents. In the field of religious knowledge, we might take note of the care with which teachers and students inscribed their names in *ijāzas* – those certificates which testified that an individual had studied some text, or mastered some field of study, under the direction of a particular teacher. The absence of formal archives from the pre-Ottoman period is a puzzle. Perhaps they were carted off by the Ottomans when they conquered Egypt and Syria; perhaps they have simply not survived the vicissitudes of time. The explanation for their absence, however, cannot be attributed solely to the informal character of the medieval Muslim state.

A more interesting question, from the standpoint of religious authority, is that of education itself. Why did an individual participate in the transmission of religious knowledge? There were many reasons, and one of the major accomplishments of Chamberlain’s book is that he illustrates in detail the broad social value of religious knowledge, of *ʿilm*. As Chamberlain put it, the transmission of knowledge created “social capital” on which all of the participants – masters and disciples both – could draw in their relations with each other and with the social and religious elites. In other words, participating actively in the transmission of knowledge, both as one who transmitted knowledge – that is, a teacher – and as one to whom it was transmitted – a student – had a significance *above and beyond* its intellectual and professional value.

This is certainly true, but surely the transmission of religious knowledge also had a practical and professional value of which participants were aware. Chamberlain observed that “in all the literature for high medieval Damascus there is not a single citation ... that any young person ... [was] enrolled in a madrasa to acquire certified mastery of law” (Chamberlain 1994, 87). The suggestion seems to be that the intellectual activity which went on in a madrasa – transmitting religious texts, reading them, reciting them, memorising them, commenting on them – was simply a means to build the relationships with other scholars which defined an academic career. In other words, they did not perceive a formal connection between the intellectual activity of transmitting religious texts and the religious
careers which the scholars might later pursue – as professors, as qadis, as preachers, whatever.

Here, perhaps, we should tread with caution. It is likely that the medieval ‘ulama’ understood the connection between what they studied/how they studied/with whom they studied and their later careers within the religious and academic establishment. They understood, in other words, both the informal and the formal value of what they studied. Only slightly later, the Ottomans understood the connection perfectly well. For them, enrolling in a madrasa was a conscious step one took in a carefully structured career path: a student enrolled in a madrasa precisely in order to acquire a certified “mastery of law,” which would enable him to advance through the ranks of the academic and judicial establishment. It is true that medieval madrasas, whether in Damascus or Cairo or anywhere else, never embraced a set curriculum or the formal degrees of the later Ottoman system. But the Ottoman system did not emerge out of nowhere, and most likely reflected simply the formalising of a professional system which was already in place. (Indeed, one of the most promising avenues for future research lies in exploring the continuity between Ottoman and pre-Ottoman Middle Eastern societies, and the roots of Ottoman practice in that of the Saljuqs, Ayyubids, Mamluks, and others.)

So far, then, we have identified two major issues, that of orality and informality, which have stood at the centre of recent scholarly discussions about this “text-centered community” – the communities of medieval Islam. A third major theme of recent scholarship – that of the specifically textual nature of religious authority – is perhaps even more important, and constitutes the most promising field for future research. To begin, I would return to the book of Moshe Halbertal, and in particular to certain comments he made about the canonisation of the Jewish scriptures.

“Canonisation” here indicates the establishment of definitive limits to the texts which are identified as those of God, which are holy books. This process of canonisation, Halbertal said, changed the character and the locus of religious authority in Judaism. In the first place, the process of canonisation shifted the locus of religious authority from God to human beings. That is because canonisation also implied the closing of the book of prophecy – that is, it brought to an end the era in which God could speak directly through his prophets. In other words, the source of religious authority was no longer to be found directly in the voice of God, but rather in the voices of those who talked about God. Religious authority was found less in the scriptural texts themselves than in the ever-expanding universe of commentaries on those texts. In theory, God could no longer speak directly; rather, it was scholars, jurists, and rabbis, who now spoke in his place. To be sure,
God did not suffer his reduction in rank quietly, and there remained many voices which defied the authority of the rabbis. Even in the Talmud, one can detect efforts by God to find his voice, in the form of dreams, auguries, etc. But those voices were always pushed to the margins by the hegemony of the commentators. Consequently, if the texts which commented upon the holy scriptures assumed the responsibility of religious authority, they were also transformed into a field of battle. It is there, in the interpretation of the text, that we find the struggles which would determine the identity of the Jewish tradition itself. And for this reason, the critical question was that of access to the text.

Once again, these remarks pertain to Islam as well. The development of a canonised scripture was not a simple affair. It is possible that the Qur’an itself did not exist in a fixed form before the final years of the seventh century. And it was not until the late ninth century that definitive compilations of hadiths began to be written down, in collections such as those of al-Bukhari and Muslim. More important, however, was the process by which these collections came to have a canonical status. This development, recently studied by Jonathan Brown, was a product of the tenth and eleventh centuries, and marks a turning point in the history of Islam (Brown 2007). In the centuries which followed – in the epoch which Marshall Hodgson referred to as the “Islamic Middle Period” – the problem of religious authority presented itself to Muslims in new and socially complex ways. Now that the canon had been established, what was critical was determining who would be recognised as authoritative commentators – who, that is, could shape the community’s understanding of its canonical texts.

Consequently, one common feature of this Middle Period was an effort to limit the social base of religious authority – to limit access to the textual foundations of authority. The men of religion, the ‘ulama’, tried to define their own “text-centered community” in such a way as to exclude the vast majority of Muslims from participating in the exercise of religious authority. It is a truism that Islam is not a church, that religious authority is more diffuse and – to borrow a term – “informal.” But to say that religious authority is “informal” is not to say that it does not exist. In fact, the need to set limits to this authority – to determine who, that is, could speak for the tradition – was greater for Muslims precisely because religious authority was so loose and flexible.

The history of the ‘ulama’ in the Islamic Middle Period is best viewed as the history of a crisis of authority – a crisis of that textual authority on which the power of the ‘ulama’ was founded. The need to limit access to texts and to the community of acceptable and legitimate commentators may have
become more acute in the Middle Period as a result of broader developments in Islamic society. It is easy to forget how unnerving it must have been to live in the medieval Middle East. From a Muslim perspective, things must have seemed to be falling apart. It was not simply the threat posed by new and terrifying enemies, the Crusaders, for example, or even worse, the Mongols. Even your friends might be dangerous. A Muslim inhabitant of Egypt or Syria might well have felt grateful to the Turkish regimes which dominated the Middle East in the Middle Period for having saved Islam – as, indeed, Ibn Khaldun urged them to do. But his gratitude might have been tempered by feelings of repugnance and fear at those same Turkish overlords, with their monopoly on state-sanctioned violence and the un-Islamic habits in which they reportedly indulged.

The religious scene itself must have seemed unstable and disconcerting. So, for example, it was probably around the outset of the Middle Period that Islam became a majoritarian religion in most of the Middle East. This condition surely created pressures to define more precisely the contours of religious authority, for many reasons, not least because of the large numbers of non-Muslims who now embraced Islam, but who sometimes brought with them the customs and beliefs of their former faiths. There were pressures from the ideological struggle between Sunnism and Shiʿism which, in many ways, grew more acute during the Middle Period. Another factor was the growth and popularity of the fraternities of Sufis. Sufism presented many challenges, not least because of its tendency to borrow liberally from the religious experience and insights of non-Muslims. But even leaving its syncretism aside, the Sufi tradition posed challenges to a religious tradition which defined authority in textual terms and through personal and informal networks. So, for example, in Andalusia, Sufis were embroiled in a controversy over the question: was it possible to arrive at mystical knowledge only through books, or was it necessary also to have a shaykh to guide you? (Mahdi 1975)

Ironically, the most destabilising factor of all may have been the proliferation of madrasas and other educational institutions during the Middle Period. The madrasa was a new feature of medieval Islamic life. From their origins in Khurasan in the eleventh century, they spread throughout the Middle East as rival regimes dominated by mostly Turkish soldiers sought to establish their Islamic bona fides. Their ubiquity in the cities and towns of the Islamic world created the conditions in which many Muslims, professional students but also individuals from quite disparate walks of life, were able to participate in the transmission of religious knowledge. In many respects this was a remarkable and praiseworthy development – after all,
more and more Muslims could participate actively in the transmission of religious knowledge and texts. But from the standpoint of those who guarded the religious tradition, it also posed a danger. By increasing opportunities for many Muslims, even those who were not full-time students, to participate in the transmission of religious texts, it blurred the lines between ‘ulama’ and others and thereby threatened the integrity of their religious authority.

All of these factors, and others as well, helped to create a crisis of textual authority within the Muslim community. This crisis manifested itself in multiple ways. One of the more important was that involving *ijtihād* in the domain of jurisprudence. For years, the received notion was that the so-called “gates of independent reasoning” closed sometime around the tenth or eleventh century. From that point on, Islamic jurists were limited to the “imitation” (*taqlīd*) of the opinions of those who had gone before. Many recent scholars, most notably Wael Hallaq, have demonstrated that this notion is untenable, that on the contrary, *ijtihād* or “independent juristic reasoning” remained both possible and, for juristic theory, necessary, right down through the end of the Middle Period.

But we can acknowledge this and still recognise that medieval Muslims sought to limit the range of individuals who were capable of exercising independent jurisprudential authority. Sherman Jackson, for example, in his important book on constitutional jurisprudence under the Mamluks, demonstrated that, despite the persistence of *ijtihād*, the actual practice of the law was dominated by what he called a “regime of *taqlīd*.” “Jurists,” he said, “were more and more restricted in their rulings by the general consensus of the schools of law” (Jackson 1996). Other studies have affirmed the general trend, for example, by demonstrating the increasingly important role of *mukhtaṣars*, what modern students might call “hornbooks,” in medieval legal education. A *mukhtaṣar* was a treatise which provided an abridged résumé of the rules of the four orthodox schools of law. The historian Ibn Khaldun objected to their use, seeing in them a “corrupting influence upon the process of instruction” (Ibn Khaldun 1967, 3: 290-291). But such texts proliferated nonetheless, and spoke to a perceived need within the juristic community: namely, to attain what has been called “univocality” within each school of law. That is to say, they reflected an effort to restrict the range of individuals who exercised the textual authority rooted in the Qur’an and the other foundations of Islamic jurisprudence (Fadel 1996).

In a recent book, Kevin Jaques traced some of the practical consequences of this drive for univocality. His subject was the of the Mamluk-period scholar Ibn Qadi Shuhba, a biographical survey of jurists of the Shafi’i
school from the ninth century through to the fifteenth century. *Tabaqat* works provided a map of authority within a given field of knowledge. By tracing the connections between one scholar and another, and between one generation of scholars and those that went before – in other words, by describing the web of informal and personal relationships we discussed earlier – a writer such as Ibn Qadi Shuhba could identify “the chains by which authoritative knowledge is transmitted from generation to generation and in doing so present readers with overviews of trends in the development of different scholarly traditions and schools of thought” (Jacques 2006, 11-12).

Ibn Qadi Shuhba’s text was one of many such *tabaqat* works produced during the Mamluk period. Jaques sees them as a “manifestation of the crisis of religious authority” of the age (Jacques 2006, 17). That crisis was a product of all that political and cultural turmoil which characterised the Middle Period, and also of the intrusion of what Ibn Qadi Shuhba considered “corruptions” into the body of Shafiʿi law. Through a careful analysis of the names of Shafiʿi scholars mentioned in the work, and also of the various legal texts referred to and approved of by the author, Jaques shows how Ibn Qadi Shuhba’s purpose was to limit the number of those Shafiʿi scholars and texts who were recognised as authoritative transmitters of accepted legal rulings within the Shafiʿi school. In effect, Ibn Qadi Shuhba provided Shafiʿi jurists of his day with a convenient but restrictive map of the intellectual range of their school of law. By limiting the number of earlier scholars recognised as authoritative, Ibn Qadi Shuhba tried to promote consistency – or, to put it differently, univocality – in the legal rulings handed down by his contemporaries.

These developments were tied to the polemical tradition condemning innovations, what are called in Arabic *bidʿa*. The problem of *bidʿa* was extremely complex. Some jurists condemned all innovations on principle. Others sought to distinguish between innovations that were acceptable and those which were not. But a general suspicion of that which was new and different was characteristic of much medieval Islamic discourse. The hostility of medieval jurists (such as al-Turtushi, Ibn al-Hajj, Ibn Baydakin, and others) was not new; the discourse was rooted in very old Islamic traditions. But the level of hostility seems to me more pressing, more urgent in the Islamic Middle Period. The frenetic character of juristic opposition to *bidʿa* was, I think, the result of the scholars’ perception that their tradition was threatened by the absence of a visible and distinct – that is, of an institutional – authority. One aspect of the discourse on innovations, and one that reflects the question of books and textual authority, was the polemic against popular
preachers and storytellers. As with innovations more generally, the opposition to these preachers and purveyors of religious narratives to the masses was deeply rooted in Islamic culture. But here, too, the concerns grew more acute during the later Middle Period. The Hanbali jurist Ibn al-Jawzi’s treatise *Kitab al-qussas wa al-mudhakkirin* is a famous example, but it is only one of many produced in this period. In fact, the polemic against preachers constituted a distinct sub-genre of medieval Islamic religious discourse. This is an important point. Preaching and the transmission of edifying religious tales were, of course, in and of themselves good things. Nonetheless, Islamic writers such as Ibn al-Jawzi were adamant in their efforts to de-legitimise a broad array of individuals, men and also some women, who spent their time preaching and telling religious tales to the common people.4

What was the problem with these preachers? There were many. In the first place, some were imposters, deceiving the common people with fraudulent claims and deceptive tricks – for example, placing mustard seeds in their eyes to make them cry, and so to make them appear like pious penitents, weeping for their sins. By the Middle Period, many of these preachers were Sufis, and their critics condemned their recitation of erotic poetry to people who could understand that verse properly – that is, as a kind of metaphor for spiritual as opposed to physical love. There was a further problem of a sexual nature. Many members of the audience of these popular preachers and storytellers were women, as were some of the preachers themselves. And to the pious mind of an Ibn al-Jawzi or Ibn Taymiyya, the mingling of the sexes constituted a danger to the proper Islamic order.

But these problems were really secondary and derivative. The greater threat, the *structural* danger, concerned textual authority – the very foundation of the authority of the ‘ulama’ and of the Islamic tradition itself. In the first place, the threat had a political dimension. Critics such as Ibn al-Jawzi were worried about the tremendous popularity of the preachers and storytellers among average Muslims. The situation, he said, was reminiscent of that of the Banu Isra’il: they, too, had had storytellers and preachers who corrupted their traditions, and as a result their nation had been destroyed. Muslims who relied on popular preachers, Ibn al-Jawzi concluded, would share the fate of the Israelites (1986, 37, 127; Eng. trans., 122-123, 211). This was, therefore, a danger not just to individuals, but to society and the state. Critics of the popular preachers frequently connected their activity to

4 See Berkey (2001).
fitna, or disruption of the proper Islamic order, that is to say, civil war. For this reason, they were wont to describe their struggle against the popular preachers as a form of jihad. “To combat the storytellers and to wage jihad against them is more important than doing so against the unbelievers in lands outside the abode of Islam,” said one, “since the evil of the storytellers is greater” (al-Idrisi, ca. fifteenth/sixteenth centuries).

But the greater threat was to religious authority. Much of what the preachers and storytellers recited to their gullible audiences took the form of hadiths, or at least of what they claimed were hadiths. And yet, in the view of scholars such as Ibn al-Jawzi, al-Suyuti, and others, many of these texts were false. Ibn Taymiyya went so far as to compile a collection of hadiths told by the storytellers, most of which, in his account, did not accurately record the Prophet’s words (Ibn Taymiyya 1972). And his collection only scratched the surface of the problem. Suyuti warned that there were more than 12,000 false hadiths on which the storytellers drew (al-Suyuti 1972, 167). And it was not just a problem of transmitting false hadiths. Even some of the legitimate traditions they recited might do damage by confusing the unsophisticated and the untrained in their audience. Those who listened to the popular preachers were neither intelligent nor intellectual. They were comprised, said Suyuti, of “the common people, and the rabble of the markets, and women” (al-Suyuti 1972, 5). The storytellers recited to them a hadith according to which God created Adam “in his own image.” How, Ibn al-Hajj asked, could an uneducated listener hear such a thing without misunderstanding it, and attributing human features to God? (Ibn al-Hajj 1929, 2: 147-153)

What Suyuti and other scholars perceived, I think, was a genuine problem. Muslims had defined religious authority in textual terms. Together they formed a “text-centered community” like that described by Moshe Halbertal. Having done so, however, they faced a very real conundrum in limiting access to the text. How could they defend the integrity of the textual tradition when they lacked formal institutions of authority? What the popular preachers and others exploited was the flexibility of the informal mechanism of religious authority in medieval Islam. In doing so, they gave heartburn to conservative scholars such as Ibn Taymiyya, Ibn al-Jawzi, and others. But from another perspective they also reaffirmed the broad and inclusive nature of the Islamic intellectual traditions – a lesson worth learning in the present day.
Bibliography


