Scripture and Society in Modern Muslim Asia — A Symposium

Introduction

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Since the late nineteenth century, Muslim movements for religious and social reform have underscored the value of making scripture accessible to a broad public. Scholars and activists alike have urged ordinary Muslim men and women to study and follow the Qur’ān and the hadlth (the reports of the Prophet Muhammad’s words and deeds), and to do so they have rendered these scriptural writings and commentaries on them into the vernaculars of Asia, Africa, and Europe. They have also framed a wide range of appeals—to study the sciences, to modernize society, to stage a revolution—in the language and format of scriptural commentary. Vernacular writings (and, more recently, audio and videocassettes) based on scripture provide the foundations of popular religious education (Shahrani 1991), figure prominently in political movements (Fischer 1980; Kepel 1985), and serve as guides for living for Muslims traveling outside their homelands (Kepel 1987). The modern period has seen an explosion in the range of languages, genres, and contexts in which Muslims have authoritatively deployed scripture.

The four articles collected for this issue explore the range of vernacular, scripture-based writings in twentieth-century South and Southeast Asia. The genres range from Afghan political tracts to religious verse in Sumatra to didactic works composed in Urdu and Indonesian. They share the assumption that the ultimate authority for a wide range of personal and public conduct lies in scripture. They also share a density of translation and commentary that is accentuated by the linguistic and cultural distance between the Arabic originals and the vernacular texts (often mediated by several layers of intervening commentary). The genres differ in their textual properties and social histories—how writers or speakers claim authority, to what ends, and with what social repercussions. Moreover, the history of a specific genre is imbricated with developments in other domains: schooling and knowledge, the technology of print and voice reproduction, ideas about modernity and subjectivity, and political movements. In each of the following four articles, the author underscores the ways knowledge and authority are given specific textual form. We offer this

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series of contextualized analyses of text construction as a basis for comparing the social histories of Muslim discourse across regions of South and Southeast Asia.

We see these works as part of a common effort by a recent generation of historians, anthropologists, and textual scholars to understand how texts are produced, read, and reread in particular places and times. Their efforts have begun to close the gap between the decontextualized reading of normative texts on the one hand, and an ethnographic approach that paid little attention to the social life of texts on the other. The newer discourse-centered approach involves scholars of all Asian traditions, and ranges from analyses of colonial rhetoric (Dirks 1992; Stoler 1992) to studies of contemporary ritual performances (Appadurai, Korom, and Mills 1991; George 1991). It has been particularly important in analyzing modern Islamic processes of cultural reproduction. In studying Islamic law, scholars have examined how scriptural traditions have been interpreted and conveyed in various court settings (Messick 1986; Rosen 1988); in studying village life, they have analyzed how sermons and lessons delivered at Friday worship have been carefully directed at critical social issues (Antoun 1989; Gaffney 1987); in studying theological writings, they have looked at the processes of translation, interpretation, and transformation of texts across societal boundaries (Eickelman 1989; Fischer and Abedi 1990; Gladney 1991).

In the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the audiences for these tracts, poems, sermons, judgments, and commentaries have formed what we may call, adapting a phrase from Habermas (1989), a religious public sphere: a group of ideal hearers or readers assumed to have certain identifications and interests as Muslims. But these Muslim publics were also involved in new waves of nationalist energies, anticolonial actions, literary revivals, and educational movements. New genres of writing and speaking often sought to draw from several of these endeavors, and resulting melanges of anticolonial, modernizing, and reformist ideas lent an exhilarating and often unifying air to public debates, newspaper columns, and books or tracts.

In Muslim South and Southeast Asia, public events and a sense of public opinion took on new importance during this period. Public debates over religious issues become widespread in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In Bengal, these babas, public disputes over controversial religious issues, were an entirely new practice (Ahmed 1988:132–33). Elsewhere in northern India, debates took on a sharper character than before, both because of a heightened sense of public competition for resources and legitimacy within and across religious communities, and because of the related rise in doctrinal self-consciousness (Metcalf 1982:215–34). Colonial policy created a context in which actors were encouraged to become spokespersons for communities identified as “Muslim,” “Hindu,” etc. Along with debates went other community-level actions: door-to-door canvassing, neighborhood placards, and sympathetic newspaper coverage (Freitag 1988). In British Malaya from the 1880s on, Muslims organized literary and debating clubs, some of which published their own journals and magazines (Roff 1967:162–64).

The possibility for addressing a widely dispersed religious public—or, indeed, for creating such a public—was enhanced by the increased use of print media and what Serif Mardin, in his study of modern religious change in Turkey, called the “world communications revolution” (1989:38). Muslim reformers made use of new resources of printing and mass literacy to send their messages of personal reform to a wide public, including the rural public. In South and Southeast Asia they wrote in the print vernaculars of Urdu, Bengali, Malay, and Indonesian, rather than in the traditional literary and religious languages of Persian, Javanese, and Arabic.

These new vernaculars reached a gradually expanding public. When Indian Muslims began to write religious works in Urdu in the late nineteenth century, for
example, their audience was initially a Muslim elite, but a broader elite than had ever known Persian or Arabic, the older languages of religious knowledge. Yet as knowledge of Urdu expanded (and especially as it became the language for newspaper journalism in the region), it developed into the medium of a shared Muslim tradition in which elite and masses throughout northern India could see themselves (Freitag 1988:145; Metcalf 1982:206–10). Written messages, rather than the persons of charismatic leaders, became the immediate bearers of authority (cf. Mardin 1989; Eickelman 1985).

Indeed, these vernaculars in a sense embodied the messages of religious reform. In late nineteenth-century Bengal, for example, reformers created a new genre of pūbi tract literature written in a new language, Musalmani Bangla, that incorporated Arabic and Persian terms. They did so to signal their intent to communicate with a broad public, but also to signal a refusal to compromise with non-Islamic beliefs (Ahmed 1988). The very use of Musalmani Bangla (or Urdu or Indonesian) signaled the speaker or writer’s stance outside of purely local contexts and yet inside larger frameworks of religious or social unity. These languages intervened in contexts already structured by internal differentiations along lines of class or culture—lines often marked by language, as in the opposition of elite Persian and lower-class Bengali (Ahmed 1988) or high and low Javanese (Anderson 1990). Similar language shifts were taking place in the Middle East: religious discussions or writings in colloquial Arabic (rather than its classical form) in Morocco, or in Turkish (rather than Arabic) in Turkey, were felt as innovations and as threats to the established religious and political orders (Eickelman 1985:97; Mardin 1989).

Newspapers and books appeared that were written in these regional vernaculars and designed for wide distribution. In the archipelagic region formed by the Dutch East Indies and British Malaya, reformers disseminated their ideas through newspapers written either in Arabic-script Malay (called “Jawi”), or in Latin-script Indonesian, the print medium of a new Indonesian literature. These newspapers became the medium of choice for debates about religious issues. One popular Indonesian periodical featured a column in which a reformist scholar, Ahmad Hassan, answered questions from readers on religious topics. These widely read columns were written in plain Indonesian, with Indonesian translations of all quotations from Qurʾān or hadith. They were reprinted in book form, and subsequent editions of this work continue to be sold throughout Indonesia and used as manuals for Muslim reformists (Federspiel 1970). The readers of such tracts could, and do, imagine themselves part of worldwide debates over religious issues.

The new networks of information were just as international as they were vernacular-sensitive. Networks of publishers, booksellers, and authors stretched between Cairo and Delhi, Mecca and Surabaya, and negotiated the difficulties of typesetting in languages new to print by calling on diasporas of migrants, pilgrims, and traders. Thus, the first work ever printed in Gayo, a highland Sumatran language, was written in Arabic script, printed in Cairo in 1938, and subvened by booksellers in Sumatra and East Java. These print linkages reflected the multisocietal character of the reform movements themselves (Bowen 1993). In the archipelago, for example, the largest reform movement, Muhammadiyah, began in Java but had its greatest impact by way of West Sumatran educational reformers, who carried its institutions (schools, orphanages, hospitals) throughout the Indies. Muslims of Arab and Indian descent living in Singapore formed the nucleus for the initial Malay-language Islamic publishing ventures in the first two decades of the twentieth century (Roff 1967: 32–90).
We may consider the books, tracts, and poetry of modern Muslim reformers as forms of scriptural commentary or *tafsīr*. All are part of ongoing processes by which Muslims relate critical issues of religion, society, and politics to the textual underpinnings of the faith. In their intertextual relation to the Qurʾān and hadith, these works range from translations, to partial exegeses, to didactic works in which scriptural passages supply the proof for the arguments.

The texts discussed by Mark Woodward and Barbara Metcalf are in large part translations and summaries of hadith, with commentaries that link these scriptural passages to current concerns. Woodward examines a twentieth-century Indonesian translation-commentary on the *Riyadh as-Salihin*, itself a collection of hadith compiled by the thirteenth-century Syrian scholar Imam Nawawi. Woodward shows how the Indonesian commentator interprets Nawawi’s work in a conservative, quietist direction, focusing on internal states and attitudes. The commentary depicts the relation of the society to the state through familialistic and hierarchical imagery, thereby sustaining a broader sociopolitical hierarchy.

Barbara Metcalf examines a collection of texts that serve as guides to everyday living for the men and women in the Tablighi Jama’at, a movement that is quietistic in its social profile and in its stress on the reform of personal conduct and attitudes. Whereas Woodward stresses the fit between the Indonesian text and the political attitude of the conservative Javanese religious organization Nahdlatul Ulama, Metcalf focuses on the capacity of the Tablighi texts to provide models for everyday behavior that transcend the particulars of time and place.

By contrast, David Edwards stresses the tight interdependencies between pamphlets and politics in the development of the Hizb-i Islami party in Afghanistan. Edwards shows how the physical form, style of writing, language, and representations of authority jointly construct a particular social role for the text as object, indicating the kind of reading and sharing expected of the text as well as its function in promoting particular political ends.

The Gayo religious poetry that I analyze shares with the Tablighi literature an emphasis on reforming personal conduct. Yet, unlike the quietistic Tablighi authors, the Gayo poets intended their work to shake up the religious and social complacencies of those who heard or read it. Like Edwards, I examine changes in intent, form, and content of the genre.

Most of these texts, along with many other central works in modern reformism, stress the importance of reshaping personal conduct. Part of this call is religious in the strict sense: individual men and women are told that they must be responsible for their own religious and ritual behavior, that it is not enough for others to pray for them, that they cannot be sent merit after death. But these genres cast their critical nets widely, evaluating actions from table manners to prayer styles for their fit with God’s prescriptions. In so doing, they construct a semi-autonomous sphere of social and cultural reproduction that merges the religious and social.

The personal roots of much of this rhetoric (even that which eventually became explicitly political) must be understood in terms of the conditions of its production. The modern-era efforts to reshape the consciousness of Asian Muslims were initially shaped in colonial contexts, where only certain kinds of ideas were permitted public expression. A focus on reforming personal practice allowed Islamic leaders to create a discourse of change, and even of opposition, without incurring censure. In some instances the colonial context also promoted certain kinds of self-reflection in print. Barbara Metcalf has argued elsewhere (1990) that the literature written to educate and uplift ordinary South Asian Muslims was stimulated by the colonial assumption that there existed distinct religious communities, each with an obligation to shape
its members’ lives. What had been a relatively restricted discourse among scholars became a broadly aimed set of didactic works, most notably the *Bihisti zevar* [Jewelry of Paradise], written at the turn of this century in Urdu and addressed to women readers.

These works not only focus attention on the individual Muslim, they also remind the religious reading and hearing public that ultimate authority lies elsewhere, in the word of God. The practices of religious life convey another message of difference and distance as well: that the Islamic community and the authoritative interpreters of its texts transcend the local bounds of culture and nation. In reciting Arabic prayers, studying and translating across several languages, making pilgrimages and listening to pilgrimage accounts, the Muslim is frequently reminded of the cultural heterogeneity of the community.

Our hope for these four articles is to highlight the potential for Asia-wide comparisons afforded by the studies of intertextual processes, specifically the histories of Muslims reading across different genres and situations, when they construct fields of socioreligious discourse. These comparisons, in turn, invite further investigations of the nature of text-making and text-remaking in other Asian religious traditions—for example, of the extent to which Theravada or Hindu religious practitioners see themselves in comparable dialectics between localistic and universalistic norms. But at least we hope that these articles can suggest the social importance and the variation in Islamic text-interpretive practices.

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