

# CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY

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**Abstract:** This article aims to elaborate on the debate surrounding continuity and change in Islamic religious authority. The discussion begins by establishing a framework for understanding the analytical definition of authority before delving into the dimensions that experience continuity and change. Arendt defines authority as a relationship, signifying a connection to a specific discursive tradition, knowledge, and history. Additionally, it involves a relationship with others who may recognize, accept, or contest this connection. Building upon Arendt's definition, the article deconstructs the nature of this relationship, emphasizing three constitutive elements: the notion of a past, the connection to the foundational past, and the ability to convey and enhance that model. This includes the augmentation of the foundational past and the ability to elicit obedience without resorting to coercion. What sets authority apart is its unique capacity to foster obedience through a relationship, free from coercion. To identify the constituents of authority, the article explores the question of continuity and change in a more productive manner by focusing on each of its three constitutive elements.

**Keywords:** Religious authority; continuity and change; foundational past; connection; obedience.

## Introduction

To think about the question of continuity and change in Islamic Religious Authority, we need to begin with a working analytic definition of authority. Authority is a hierarchical relationship that is defined in contradistinction to coercion by force and persuasion through arguments. The term authority, as

the philosopher Hannah Arendt explains, comes from the Latin *auctoritas*, which is derived from the verb *augere*, meaning ‘to augment.’ What is being augmented is a foundation built by others in the past and deemed to be sacred. Those endowed with authority were people who are recognized to have connections to that foundational past (through descent or chain of transmission), and the capacity to transform and augment that past into examples for the present and effect obedience without resorting to coercion.<sup>1</sup> Authority “rests neither on common reason nor on the power of the one who commands,” but on the recognition of the hierarchy deemed by all parties involved to be right and legitimate.<sup>2</sup>

Arendt’s definition is useful to think with for the present purpose precisely because it defines authority as a relationship. That is, authority is a relationship with a particular discursive tradition, knowledge, and history, and also a relationship with others who come to recognize, accept, or contest that very relationship. Arendt’s definition of authority allows us to deconstruct the nature of this relationship by highlighting its three constitutive elements.

The first constitutive element that make up authority is the notion of a past. Not just a past but a past deemed foundational by a group of people. A foundational past is a past that constitutes the beginning of a community or a group of people; a past that the community traces its origin and derived its identity as a corporate group. For the Romans, for example, the foundational past was the founding of the city of Rome. For Muslims, it was the time of the Prophet Muḥammad and his companions, the time of revelation, or what we can term as *the Prophetic past*. This is the only past that all Muslims, no matter their theological and cultural varieties recognize as truly foundational.

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<sup>1</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Penguin, [1968] 2006), 122. Arendt’s discussion of authority is based on her account of Roman political tradition. Talal Asad has suggested how Arendt’s “historical sketch of tradition is relevant to the Middle East because it begins with the Greco-Roman experience that is part of the classical heritage of both the northern and the southern lands of the Mediterranean...” See Talal Asad, “Thinking about Tradition, Religion, and Politics in Egypt Today,” *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 42, No. 1 (2015), 181.

<sup>2</sup> Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 93.

The second constitutive element of authority is connection to that foundational past. The fact that the foundation is temporal means that it no longer exists objectively. Thus, for that past to remain important for the people who recognize its foundational status, connection to it needs to be maintained and made present. The question then is what connects people to their foundational past? The Romans, for example, deemed those families who can trace their lineages to the foundation of Rome as authoritative. Only members of those families could sit in the senate. The assumption here is of course that being descended from the people who founded the polity allowed them to learn, by means of lineal transmission, the history, teachings, and wisdom of the ancestors or founders. Connection to the foundational past, in this sense, is important precisely because it is the temporal connection that enables transmission between the past and the present. But transmission is never as simple as mere conveyance. What is transmitted from the past needs to be transformed into examples or models for action in the present. Transmission requires curation and elaboration, contextualization of that past information for the present need, for present concerns and challenges; for present questions and *problem-space* that is always changing.<sup>3</sup> It is in this sense that we can see how the term authority comes from the verb *augere*, that is to augment. What is being augmented is the foundations built by others in the past. Connection with the past allows for the augmentation of the past into examples or models for the present. This very act is what allows the foundational past to remain alive and relevant to the people who recognize its foundational status.

The third constitutive element of authority is the ability to impart that very model, that augmentation of the foundational past, and effects obedience without resorting to coercion. In fact, the Romans define *auctoritas* in contradistinction to *potestas* or

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<sup>3</sup> Problem-space, as David Scott defines it, is:

an ensemble of questions and answers around which a horizon of identifiable stakes (conceptual as well as ideological-political stakes) hangs. That is to say, what defines this discursive context are not only the particular problems that get posed as problems as such... but the particular questions that seem worth asking and the kinds of answers that seem worth having.

See David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 4.

power. So, what is really special about authority is precisely that it is a relationship that engenders obedience without coercion. For the Romans, resorting to coercion signals the failure of authority. One is not authoritative when one requires coercion to effect obedience. One may be powerful but one is certainly not authoritative. This is why Arendt argues that the construal of authority as a form of power is one of the major misconceptions of modern Western philosophy.<sup>4</sup>

Positing authority as a relationship allows us to destabilize and disaggregate it, and think about the various ways in which that hierarchical relationship has been created, maintained, expanded, and modified. It opens up the possibility for thinking about authority as an assemblage, involving not only the actors deemed to be authoritative and those who recognize that authority, but also other actors and semiotic forms that mediate, maintain, stabilize, or transform that relationship. Now that we have identified what constitute authority, we can start exploring the question of continuity and change in a more productive way by focusing on each of its three constitutive elements.

### **The Foundational Past**

The first constitutive element that make up authority is the notion of the foundational past. Here we seem to encounter continuity instead of change. That is, the foundational past seems

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<sup>4</sup> Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 92. One prominent example is Machiavelli, who criticized the French king Louis XII's policy of helping Pope Alexander VI to occupy Romagna as a move that alienated him from his allies and strengthened the church "by adding to it so much temporal power, in addition to the spiritual power from which it derives so much authority." See Nicollò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, translated and edited by Peter Bondanella (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 14 (emphasis added). Another example is John Stuart Mill, who described tyrannical forms of government as deriving "their authority from inheritance or conquest, who at all events, did not hold it at the pleasure of the governed." John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, ed. Edward Alexander (Peterborough, ON: Broadview, 1999), 43 (emphasis added). Yet another notable example is Michel Foucault, whose capacious conceptualization of power situates all forms of asymmetrical relations—including those that can be described as authoritative or authoritarian—within its fold, thereby emptying the notion of authority of any analytic purchase. See, for example, his discussion of the pastorate as a particular technique of power. Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (1982), 782-84.

to be unchanging. The Prophetic past remains the foundational past for Muslims everywhere throughout history. Nevertheless, that past looks different depending on the immediate context from which we are looking. History, as the famous historian E.H. Carr once wrote, is after all “a continuous process of interaction between the historian and his facts, an unending dialogue between the present and the past.”<sup>5</sup> Concurrently, as an ideological and narrative product, time itself is constantly being made and remade, generating multiple constructions of time that add layers of complexity and diversity in how Muslims comprehend the Prophetic past from a particular present and think about their relationship to it.<sup>6</sup> The present on which these labors occur serves as the ground that modulates the past in the attempt to find *not* what is authentically Islamic, but rather what is essential to Islam for that very present and future. The concern with essence, as Talal Asad reminds us, is not necessarily to be equated with a concern with authenticity, and what is essential in a religion, in turn, is not neutrally determinable because it is subject to agonistic and antagonistic arguments.<sup>7</sup> The reconstructions and representations of the Prophetic past by different actors may thus look dissimilar from one another.

Consider the following examples. Compare the works that represent the Prophet written in different context for a different audience. If we read ‘Abd Allāh b. al-Mubārak’s *Kitāb al-Jihād* or any *maghāzī* works for that matter, we would form a picture of the

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<sup>5</sup> E.H. Carr, *What is History? Second Edition*, ed. R.W. Davies (London: Penguin, 1990), 30.

<sup>6</sup> Shahzad Bashir, “On Islamic Time: Rethinking Chronology in the Historiography of Muslim Societies,” *History and Theory*, Vol. 53, No. 4 (2014), 521. Ismail Fajrie Alatas, “Dreaming Saints: Exploratory Authority and Islamic Praxes of History in Central Java,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (2020), 80-83. For an interesting example of how dynamic Muslim conception of the past, see, among others, Teren Sevea, *Miracles and Material Life: Rice, Ore, Traps and Guns in Islamic Malaya* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Rian Thum, *The Sacred Routes of Uyghur History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014); Shahid Amin, *Conquest and Community: The Afterlife of Warrior Saint Ghażī Miyan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

<sup>7</sup> Talal Asad, *Secular Translations: Nation-State, Modern Self, and Calculative Reason* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 95. See also Carl W. Ernst, “Situating Sufism and Yoga,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (2005), 20.

Prophet as warlike man. This of course makes sense because those works were mostly written for warriors who were safeguarding the borders of the Caliphate.<sup>8</sup> These are works that were composed to instill warriors and soldiers with fighting spirits. So, it is not surprising that Ibn al-Mubārak's treatise inspired and was copiously quoted by later writers of Jihad treatises, whether Zayn al-Dīn al-Malibārī as he faced the Portuguese or Dāwūd al-Fatānī as he faced the Thais.<sup>9</sup>

Now compare Ibn al-Mubārak's portrayal of the Prophetic past to that of the younger al-Junayd of Baghdad, many of whose discourses came down to us from his disciples. Here, among the so-called Sufis of Baghdad we see a very different evocation of the Prophet and of the Prophetic past. The Prophet is portrayed as a mystic, a spiritual wayfarer, a seeker. His wars are downplayed while his *mi'rāj* is inflated to become the prototypical spiritual ascent for subsequent seekers.<sup>10</sup> Now compare again to the Prophet and the Prophetic past evoked in the study circles of Aa Gym or Ari Ginandjar. Here, as Jim Hoesterey and Daromir Rudnyckyj tell us, we have "Muhammad as CEO," a Prophet of prosperity or of Neo-liberal morality and sensibility attractive to the urban-based Muslim Middle class.<sup>11</sup> What these examples tell

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<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Feryal Salem, *The Emergence of Early Sufi Piety and Sunni Scholasticism: 'Abdallāh b. al-Mubārak and the Formation of Sunni Identity in the Second Islamic Century* (Leiden: Brill, 2016); Michael Bonner, *Jihad in Islamic History: Doctrines and Practice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); Fred M. Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins: The Beginnings of Islamic Historical Writing* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1998); Rizwi Faizer (ed.), *The Life of Muḥammad: Al-Wāqidi's Kitāb al-Maghāzī* (London: Routledge, 2011).

<sup>9</sup> See Engseng Ho, "Custom and Conversion in Malabar: Zayn al-Din al-Malibari's Gift of the Mujahidin: Some Accounts of the Portuguese," in *Islam In South Asia in Practice*, ed. Barbara D. Metcalf. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009); Francis R. Bradley, *Forging Islamic Power and Place: The Legacy of Shaykh Da'ūd bin 'Abd Allāh al-Fatānī in Mecca and Southeast Asia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2016).

<sup>10</sup> Ali Hassan Abdel-Kader, *The Life, Personality, and Writings of Al-Junayd: A Study of a Ninth Century Mystic with an Edition and Translation of his Writings* (London: Luzac & Company, 1976); Erik S. Ohlander, "Al-Junayd al-Baghdādī: Chief of the Sect," in *Routledge Handbook on Sufism*, ed. Lloyd Ridgeon (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021).

<sup>11</sup> James Hoesterey, *Rebranding Islam: Piety, Prosperity, and a Self-Help Guru* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016); Daromir Rudnyckyj, *Spiritual*

us is that while Muslims recognize one foundational past, that past always looks different depending on who is representing that past, what audience he/she has in mind, and for what purpose. So here we have both continuity and change. The past deemed foundational remains the same but the actual content of that past—or what is publicly accentuated from that past—dynamically changes in relation to the changing audience and problem-space. In this sense we can perhaps think of Muslims as co-creators of the Prophetic past.

### Connections and Connectors

The second element of religious authority is what we have identified as connection to the foundational past. So, what or who connects the present and the past? If they are humans, who are they? Are they scholars, teachers, proselytizers, saints, sultans, or presidents? What kind of claims do they make? What infrastructure do they employ? Texts, YouTube, Twitter, Zoom? What kind of connection to the Prophetic past do they claim to have and how do they make it evident to others? Connection to the Prophetic past can be established through various means, from bloodline (*nasab*) and Sufi spiritual genealogies (*silsilah*) that link an actor to the Prophet, to the mastery of textual sources that contain reports (ḥadīths) of the Prophet's sayings and actions.<sup>12</sup> Others claim connections to the Prophet through visions and dreams, both of which are believed by some Muslims to facilitate interactions between contemporary actors and the spirit of the Prophet.<sup>13</sup> In the modern era, there are even Muslims who think

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*Economies: Islam, Globalization, and the Afterlife of Development* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010).

<sup>12</sup> See Jamil M. Abun-Nasr, *Muslim Communities of Grace: The Sufi Brotherhoods in Islamic Religious Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); Vincent J. Cornell, *Realm of the Saint: Power and Authority in Moroccan Sufism* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998); Nile Green, *Bombay Islam: The Religious Economy of the West Indian Ocean, 1840–1915* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Nile Green, *Sufism: A Global History* (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012); Catherine Mayeur-Jaouen and Alexandre Papas (eds.), *Family Portraits with Saints: Hagiography, Sanctity, and Family in the Muslim World* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz, 2014).

<sup>13</sup> Naveeda Khan, *Muslim Becoming: Aspiration and Skepticism in Pakistan* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012); Amira Mittermaier, *Dreams that Matter: Egyptian Landscapes of the Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press,

that the *sunnah* is transmittable only through its entextualized forms in the ḥadīth collections, thereby excusing them from the necessity of finding a living connector.

Again, here we have variation and changes. In early Islam, as Arabs conquered Byzantine and Sassanian lands and establish their own urban settlements, it was those Arab conquerors and their descendants who were recognized as authoritative precisely because those families were recognized by Muslim converts as connected to the Prophetic past.<sup>14</sup> They were the living links in a way, whether they were the descendants of the Prophet through the house of ‘Alī or the descendants of other companions of the Prophet. In this early period, *nasab* or bloodline was the very framework of connection to the foundational past. Or for Mālik b. Anas, it was more specifically the people of Medina who are deemed authoritative due to their proximity to the Prophet.<sup>15</sup> As more non-Arab became Muslims, however, this gradually changed. Now instead of *nasab* or spatial proximity to the Prophet, one can form connection to the Prophetic past through *isnād* or chain of ḥadīth and knowledge transmission. Ḥadīth transmitters and those connected to them, many if not most of whom were non-Arab, rose as authoritative figures precisely because they are able to demonstrate their tangible connection to the prophetic past.<sup>16</sup>

Along with *nasab* and *isnād* there also emerged the notion of the *silsilah* among the more mystical-oriented Muslims, the idea of which is that the *silsilah* is a chain of transmission of spiritual

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2011); Elizabeth Sirriyeh, *Dreams & Visions in the World of Islam: A History of Muslim Dreaming and Foreknowing* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2015); Anand V. Taneja, *Jinnealogy: Time, Islam, and Ecological Thought in the Medieval Ruins of Delhi* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018).

<sup>14</sup> Ahmed El Shamsy, *The Canonization of Islamic Law: A Social and Intellectual History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

<sup>15</sup> Umar F. Abd-Allah Wymann-Landgraf, *Malik and Medina: Islamic Legal Reasoning in the Formative Period* (Leiden: Brill, 2013).

<sup>16</sup> See Jonathan A. C. Brown, *The Canonization of al-Bukhārī and Muslim: The Formation and Function of the Sunnī Ḥadīth Canon* (Leiden: Brill, 2007); Jonathan A. C. Brown, *Misquoting Muḥammad: The Challenge and Choices of Interpreting the Prophet’s Legacy* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2014); Garrett A. Davidson, *Carrying on the Tradition: A Social and Intellectual History of Ḥadīth Transmission across a Thousand Years* (Leiden: Brill, 2020).



teachings and litanies.<sup>17</sup> So possessing one of these three frameworks of temporal connection was and has remained an important prerequisite for garnering recognition as authoritative. Sometimes these three frameworks compete with one another. Other times they coalesce and converge to form saintly and scholarly dynasties as can be seen in the great Sharifian houses like the Ghummarīs and the Kattanīs of the Maghreb, the Bā ‘Alawīs of the Ḥaḍramawt and the Indian Ocean World, the Mizjājī and the Ahādila of Zabīd, the Sanūsīs of Libya, the Mirghānīs of Sudan, the Jubayrīs of Bukhara, the Bakris and Wafā’īs of Egypt and so on.<sup>18</sup>

Now, actors who can demonstrate links to the Prophetic past are recognized by others as *connectors* to that foundational past. As connectors they are able to transmit that past to their contemporaries. Transmission, as I mentioned earlier, involves curation, translation, elaboration, modification, and transformation of that which is being transmitted. What is being transmitted has to be calibrated to suit the changing proclivities of the audience. It is in this sense that in transmitting the Prophetic past, connectors also *augment* that past. These connectors, whether scholars, sufis, or preachers, evaluate and adjust inherited teachings. They introduce new practices that suit local contexts, thereby transforming the foundational past into individualized, customized, and culturally-specific models of action—or to use an Islamic term: *sunnah*. The figure of the Sufi master, for example, or the *kyais* in Indonesia, are recognized as embodiments of prophetic teachings, as living

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<sup>17</sup> Ismail Fajrie Alatas, “Šūfī Lineages and Families,” in *Handbook of Sufi Studies Volume I: Sufi Institutions*, ed. Alexandre Papas (Leiden: Brill, 2021).

<sup>18</sup> Sahar Bazzaz, *Forgotten Saints: History, Power, and Politics in the Making of Modern Morocco* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010); Engseng Ho, *The Graves of Tarim: Genealogy and Mobility across the Indian Ocean* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); Stefan Reichmuth, *The World of Murtaḍā Al-Zabīdī (1732–91): Life, Networks and Writings* (Oxford: Gibb Memorial Trust, 2009); E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *The Sanusi of Cyrenaica* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1949); Ali Salih Karrar, *The Sufi Brotherhoods in the Sudan* (London: Hurst, 1992); Mayeur-Jaouen and Papas (eds.), *Family Portraits with Saints*; Rachidah Chih, *Sufism in Ottoman Egypt: Circulation, Renewal and Authority in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2019); Richard J.A. McGregor, *Sanctity and Mysticism in Medieval Egypt: The Wafa Sufi Order and the Legacy of Ibn ‘Arabi* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012).

links to the foundational past. Embodied in living bodies, what is posited as prophetic teachings is always in motion, bundled with and augmented by other particularities that make up the individual, thereby creating a surplus. This is what I have referred to elsewhere as the notion of the *living Sunnah*.<sup>19</sup>

A fascinating example of how transmission involves augmentation can be learned from the work of Ronit Ricci on a once popular text known as the *Kitab Seribu Mas'alah* or the *One Thousand Questions*. This book, which has been translated into Persian, Tamil, Malay, Javanese, Turkish, Urdu, Sundanese, Buginese, and Latin from the original Arabic since the beginning of the tenth century, tells the story of the Prophet's encounter with a Jewish rabbi, 'Abdallāh b. Salām. Ibn Salām posed questions to the Prophet, who responded to each and every one of them—spanning the topics of history, mysticism, belief, and ritual—to the satisfaction of the rabbi. In her analysis, Ricci shows how the Prophet's words in the text “were clearly later, and so less authentic, than the very early accounts.”<sup>20</sup> In fact, different translations of the text contain different questions posed by Ibn Salām and answers to those questions given by the Prophet.

As Ricci describes it, “Muḥammad as a teacher and prophet was redefined through the *One Thousand Questions*, in time and place to suit different cultural contexts.”<sup>21</sup> While the text has been seen as problematic since the nineteenth century, due to the absence of *isnād* that can attest to the authenticity of the Prophet's words, the *One Thousand Questions* was for a long time an important source from which Muslims across time and space could learn the normative teachings of their religion, or the *sunnah*, in ways that were essential to their cultural surrounds and suitable to the changing problem-space. Unlike Ricci, however, I do not think that the question of authenticity is really useful to think about texts like *Kitab Seribu Mas'alah*. What is essentially Islamic seems to be more crucial than what is authentically Islamic. The concern with essence is not necessarily to be equated with a concern with

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<sup>19</sup> Ismail Fajrie Alatas, *What is Religious Authority? Cultivating Islamic Communities in Indonesia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021), 150-160.

<sup>20</sup> Ronit Ricci, *Islam Translated: Literature, Conversion, and the Arabic Cosmopolis of South and Southeast Asia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 240.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

authenticity, and what is essential in a religion, in turn, is not neutrally determinable because it is subject to agonistic and antagonistic debates.

Now in the modern period, we began to see some people or group who think that one can know the Prophetic teachings without necessarily forming tangible connection to that past. What is needed, in their view is simply the mastery of the Arabic language and access to textual records like ḥadīth to access Prophetic teachings. The assumption here is of course that documentary evidence is a transparent transcript of historical reality, instead of seeing them merely as technologies used to represent an already vanished past and as such already involves some form of contextual augmentation. This new form of connecting to the Prophetic past generates new forms of pedagogy, educational institution, Islamic texts, and figures of authority. More recently, people would use the internet and search engine, or even Ai to excavate Prophetic teachings. Such novel practices of forming connection to the Prophetic past share the same basic assumption: that documentary reports are transparent transcript of historical reality and, as such, any other form of tangible and embodied connection to the Prophetic past is not needed. Here, the question of authenticity gradually become more important than the question of essence. As a result, augmentation that for long has been the driving logic of authority become seen by some Muslims as a problem. All forms of augmentation can be deemed as innovations, and innovations can be considered as reprehensible.

### **Obedience without Coercion**

Now let me move to the last constitutive element of authority, that of the ability to impart that model of action or *sunnah*—derived from the foundational past—and effect obedience without resorting to coercion. This suggests that the formation of authority demands ongoing labor of producing and reproducing interpersonal relationship that links these transmitters/connectors to their co-religionists. Such acts of cultivating relationship and communities require the constant effort of building trust. It also requires different kinds of infrastructure that connects the transmitters/connectors to other Muslims and help solidify their

relationship. The infrastructure used to transmit prophetic teachings, build trust, and engender community is so varied and constantly changes, from texts, relics, and prayer halls to YouTube, twitter, and zoom. There are ongoing changes in the varieties of infrastructure used and the kinds of community realized through that infrastructure; from Sufi orders and madrasas to modern Islamic voluntary associations and WhatsApp group. These are all social frameworks and channels that enact the relationship of authority. They need to be sustained and maintained but also modified and transformed to suit changing socio-historical reality. For this reason, each of these diverse figurations of Islamic social formation can develop into another. For example, a Sufi order can develop into an empire, like the case of the Safavid in Anatolia and Persia; or into a sultanate like the case of the Sanusi in Libya; or into a modern political party like the Mahdiyya in Sudan. A network of madrasas can form a modern voluntary association like the case of the Nahdlatul Ulama in Indonesia, and so on and so forth.

Recent scholars of Sufism have rightly observed how the success or failure of a Sufi master in assembling a durable community depends largely on his creativity and leadership. A Sufi master may inherit followers from his deceased master. To preserve and maintain them, however, demands creativity and resourcefulness.<sup>22</sup> As Alexander Knysh points out, the language of routinization of charisma that previous generations of scholars of Sufism adopted from Max Weber fails to capture the ways in which a Sufi master does not simply “inherit his authority and prestige to enjoy for the rest of his life.”<sup>23</sup> Failures to maintain an inherited community are as common as successes, although they are usually not recorded.<sup>24</sup> Through the master’s acumen, a Sufi

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<sup>22</sup> Martin van Bruinessen and Julia Day Howell (eds.), *Sufism and the “Modern” in Islam* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007); Rüdiger Seesemann, *The Divine Flood: Ibrahim Niasse and the Roots of a Twentieth-Century Sufi Revival* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Itzhak Weismann, *Taste of Modernity: Sufism, Salafīyya, and Arabism in Late Ottoman Damascus* (Leiden: Brill, 2001).

<sup>23</sup> Alexander D. Knysh, *Sufism: A New History of Islamic Mysticism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 163.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 163. For cases of failures see Jonathan G. Katz, *Dreams, Sufism, and Sainthood: The Visionary Career of Muḥammad al-Zawāwī* (Leiden: Brill, 1996); Hoesterey, *Rebranding Islam*.

order has the capacity for innovation. Understanding this point enables us to consider distinctions among different Sufi orders, or among different masters of the same order, not only in terms of varying *silsilah*, but also in terms of variation in the substance of the ordering mechanism deployed to maintain the community. Even a single order with a shared genealogy may turn out to consist of masters who institute diverging practices. In some cases, such differences have led to schism, the birth of a new order, or the development of a suborder.<sup>25</sup> For the most part, however, disciples do not see such innovations as problematic because of their recognition of the master's legitimacy and connection to the Prophet. A stable hierarchical relationship thus allows the master to introduce new measures that can help disciples maintain that very relationship.

The authority of an Islamic religious leader therefore hinges on a hierarchical relationship that allows him to articulate Prophetic teachings for others. Such a relationship is premised on the recognition of the leader's connection to the Prophetic past. This entails that the formation of authority demands the labor of building and maintaining conceptual and material infrastructure that can facilitate transmission over time and space. This infrastructure connects a leader to the foundational past and helps solidify his connection to his followers, thereby affording him the ability to render that past as a model for action—or *sunnah*—to others. Involving more than a simple attempt at replicating the foundation or applying the *sunnah* to new domains, such articulatory labors entail acts of curation, description, exploration, and innovation that augment the foundation. Produced in and through such relationships, the *sunnah* becomes a living, socially embedded, and cumulative model that guides and is simultaneously guided by the world.

The foregoing discussion illustrates the capacity of the *sunnah* to accommodate and adapt to cultural particularities, individual needs, and the vicissitudes of everyday life. Far from being simply

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<sup>25</sup> Devin DeWeese, "Khojagani Origins and the Critique of Sufism: The Rhetoric of Communal Uniqueness in the Manaqib of Khoja 'Ali 'Azizan Ramitani," in Frederick de Jong and Berndt Radtke (eds.), *Islamic Mysticism Contested: Thirteen Centuries of Controversies and Polemics* (Leiden: Brill, 1999); Weismann, *Taste of Modernity*.

a set of common, consistent, and disembedded norms posited to be globally applicable, the *sunnah* may outwardly express itself equally well through differences and even opposites. To a certain extent, there is a resonance between the *sunnah* as embedded in social relationships and what Caroline Humphrey describes as “ethics of exemplars.” In her study of Mongolian morality, Humphrey argues that what distinguishes ethics of exemplars from a morality based on a code is that “there is no requirement that exemplars be consistent with one another or that they be coherent with regard to society in general.”<sup>26</sup> This form of ethics relates to “assumptions of individual difference” and “contributes to the crystallization of a variety of different ‘ways of life,’” thereby rendering moral discourse as “open-ended and unfinished.”<sup>27</sup> Similarly, the fact that the Prophetic past as the foundation upon which the *sunnah* rests is not objectively available means that the *sunnah* becomes available only through contextually specific retrospective attempts of connecting to, capturing, describing, embodying, and transform- ing that past into a practicable model for the present. These attempts generate a plethora of particular contents that do not simply exemplify the *sunnah*, but struggle with it and give specific shape and form to it. Through such articulations, the *sunnah* as a universal become “fully engaged in the process of its particular exemplification,” which, in a way, may “decide the fate of the universal notion itself.”<sup>28</sup>

## Conclusion

So let me conclude by reiterating the points I have tried to make and from there return to the initial question of continuity and change. Religious authority is a temporal relationship that connects Muslims to their foundational past, that is, the Prophetic past. This connection allows for the transmission but also reconfiguration and modulation of the past into a model of action or *sunnah* in ways that are doable and susceptible to the changing

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<sup>26</sup> Caroline Humphrey, “Exemplars and Rules: Aspects of the Discourse of Moralities in Mongolia,” in *The Ethnography of Moralities*, ed. Signe Howell (London: Routledge, 1997), 38.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 34.

<sup>28</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 1999), 102.

socio-historical reality. Authoritative figures are precisely those who have taken the role of, and become recognized as *connectors* between the prophetic past and their fellow Muslims to the extent that they can effectively articulate and help realize prophetic teachings as norms or *sunnah* of the community. One does not simply [re]produce the *sunnah* and the community because one has authority. Instead, one becomes authoritative because one is engaged in the labor of producing/reproducing the *sunnah* and the community, thereby garnering the recognition of those who subsequently make up the community.

In this sense, authority stands—sociologically speaking—as an outcome of labor; the labor of connecting or articulating the Prophetic past and contemporary Muslims. This labor engenders two constitutive elements of the religion: the *sunnah* and the *jama'ah*. This very dynamic, I would like to suggest, is the continuous and perhaps invariant dynamic in Islamic religious authority. But this very dynamic is precisely what keeps on producing changes and varieties. The content of the *sunnah* and the figuration of the *jama'ah* have taken on different forms and possibilities, even when they all share the prophetic past as the common reference point. The malleability of that past, the different infrastructure used, the changing problem-space, the ongoing work of augmentation, all of these result in diverse *sunnah* products, forms of community, and figurations of religious authority from the simplest to the most complex. In this sense, there is a continuous and invariant relationship that makes up religious authority, but that very relationship is situated in historically evolving, open configuration, thereby generating diversity of Islamic teachings, practices, and forms of authority.

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