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Is There a Church in Islam?

MARK SEDGWICK

At first sight, the term Church seems not universal, but rather specifically Christian. 'Church' is, however, simply the English translation of the Greek word *ekklesia*, a word which initially meant 'an assembly of the select', but which was then also used to translate the Hebrew *qahal*, meaning 'the congregation of the faithful'. Both the Greek and the Hebrew terms are pre-Christian, and the two senses of Church that derive from them denote two universal categories: the community, and the institutional authority

within it.¹ It is in institutional terms that Islam most differs from Christianity. An institution may be formal or informal, and while the overarching institutions of Christianity are formal, those of Islam are informal.

Islam has evolved formal institutions only for the performance of specific functions. The madrasa (religious college) and the *shari'a* court, to take two examples, are thus institutions within the religion of Islam, but not institutions of the religion. Sunni Islam lacks any overarching, formal, corporate institution that might be identified as a Church. Instead, there is the body of ulama—a word current in non-specialist English, though often misused. The ulama are not in any sense priests, but rather scholars, akin to the New Testament's 'doctors of the law.'

Although Sunni ulama have no rigid hierarchical organization, we know that—as seen in other contexts—a class may still act effectively without being organized into a rigid hierarchy. In fact, a Marxist would see class as more important than the institution or institutions of that class, and even non-Marxists concede that such an approach has merits. For a class to act effectively and to be an actual class—rather than a potential or virtual one—it must be conscious of its existence as such, and must be in agreement on its common interests. The extent to which the ulama have been in agreement on common interests has varied from time to time and place to place, but the ulama have almost always been aware of their existence as a class. And the ulama class certainly constitutes the only possible 'assembly of the select' of Islam. There are other important groups, notably Sufi sheikhs, and there are formal institutions, but, again, all these other groups and

institutions are within Islam, not of Islam. Two hundred years ago the ulama held most of the religious authority in Islam, confirming the possible identification of the ulama as the Church of Islam. The situation today, however, is very different.

Religious authority

Authority in any religious system may be analyzed according to its many varieties. There is material authority (over physical assets), doctrinal authority, spiritual (or charismatic) authority, ritual authority, and moral authority. The groups that produce knowledge have, de facto, doctrinal authority. For Islam, the three most important varieties of authority are material, doctrinal, and spiritual. Moral authority can be assumed to flow from other varieties of authority. Ritual authority is of lit-

Each religion constitutes a distinct system. Failure to recognize this once led many observers of Islam into error, and scholars have therefore tended to move towards purely Islamic categories. Universal categories, however, are needed in order for scholars to transcend boundaries between scholarly disciplines and to communicate effectively with the wider public. This is also true with respect to issues such as 'church' and 'mosque' in current debates on authority within Islam, and more precisely, on institutional authority.

tle importance in Islam, contrary to Christianity. The Christian Churches have considerable ritual authority, since in most cases many of the important forms of Christian worship are impossible to perform without the presence of a priest or minister. In contrast, there are almost no ritual actions in Islam that cannot be carried out by any sane adult Muslim.

Material authority in Islam might fall into two categories of assets. On the one hand, there are places of worship,

places of learning and instruction madrasas, and places of pilgrimage. On the other hand, there is *waqf* (endowed property), dedicated to the maintenance of the first category of asset. The key to material authority in Islam is control of *waqf*. This control also grants a measure of authority in other spheres. *Waqf* deeds for madrasas, for example, often stipulated what should be taught and how—an indirect exercise of doctrinal authority. *Waqf* deeds for mosques normally contained stipulations concerning the appointment of preachers and imams, also an indirect exercise of doctrinal authority, and in a sense an exercise of ritual authority. In theory, an imam has authority only over the pace of the particular prayer that he has been chosen to lead, and this theoretical point is observed still today, when prayers are performed at a workplace or in a private house. In more general practice, however, once a single individual has been designated as the imam for a particular mosque, other varieties of authority begin to attach to him, though these are hard to define and have never been recognized by doctrine. Since donors who were rarely ulama originally determined the contents of *waqf* deeds, at a *waqf*'s establishment material authority lay with the wealthy. However, once the donor was dead, responsibility for interpreting and implementing the original deeds passed to the ulama, since the overseers (trustees) of *waqf* were almost always of this rank. Small mosques—typically in villages—for which there was often no *waqf*, were generally controlled by the individuals who built the mosque, sometimes Sufi sheikhs, and then by the local community or Sufi *tariqa* (brotherhood or order). Most material authority, though, lay with the ulama, and no other body or group rivalled this authority.

Doctrinal authority also lay mostly with the ulama. It can be safely assumed that Islamic knowledge was produced only by the ulama, because there were few, if any, alternative producers of knowledge of any sort. Major Sufi sheikhs were often also ulama and those who were not, rarely produced written work. There were certain areas of intellectual life that lay outside the ulama's realm, but these were few and far between. Charisma, however, was the accepted specialty of the Sufi orders. Most Sufi sheikhs had at least hereditary charisma, and great sheikhs were almost universally accepted as *awliya* (saints). Spiritual authority, therefore, was not exclusively the dominion of the ulama. But though the Sufi sheikhs had more spiritual authority than the ulama, they never challenged the ulama's material authority, and generally accepted the authority of the ulama in doctrinal matters. If any group in Islam could have rivalled the ulama, it was the Sufis, but—with rare exceptions—Sufism was integrated into a system over which the ulama presided, not one which was in opposition to them. Despite the complication presented by Sufism then, the location of religious authority two hundred years ago indicates that there was a Church in Islam, and that that Church was the body of ulama. Today, this is no longer the case.

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Authority today

In the Sunni world, control of *waqf* is now generally in the hands of the state, this control having been assumed between 1826 and the 1960s as one of various measures aimed at producing strong, centralized states. With control of *waqf* came the control of the mosques and madrasas they supported. Turkey has a Ministry of Religious Affairs, but most Arab countries simply have ministries of *waqf* instead. State control of places of learning and instruction arose partly as a result of the state takeover of *waqf*, and partly as a result of the state's simultaneous foundation of new schools and colleges. Although not officially religious institutions, state schools include religion in their curricula and are thus institutions of religious significance, especially when it comes to teaching doctrine, discussed below. By the early twentieth century, the state's institutions of learning had everywhere become more important than those few still controlled by the ulama. Despite these facts, the Arab Sunni state's material authority is not absolute. Countless small *zawiyas* (prayer places) and private mosques still remain outside of state control. These mosques are in private hands, albeit not in the hands of the ulama. In the West, mosques are mostly private, controlled by local mosque associations. Some, remarkably, are controlled by states—and not by Western states, but by states in the Islamic world such as Turkey and Morocco. Very few mosques, however, are controlled by ulama.

The location of doctrinal authority two centuries ago was clear, since no group other than the ulama could have possibly held it. Today, however, there are as many milieus in the Islamic world in which knowledge is produced as there are in the West. And the basic divisions in these many milieus in the Islamic world are also little different from those in the West, relating less to the production of knowledge than to its marketing and distribution—that is, to preaching, teaching, and the media. The most influential media are, of course, the mass media—primarily television, but also radio and newspapers. The mosque sermon (*khutba*) should perhaps also be classed within the mass media, as it too reaches a mass audience. The *khutba* professionals today are ulama, as they have always been, though many *khutbas* in private mosques are delivered by laymen, as has probably also always been the case. But like the physical assets of Islam, the distribution of Islamic knowledge is generally firmly under state control. Many newspapers and nearly all radio and TV stations are owned by the state, and 'independent' newspapers are usually subject to some form of state censorship. Most mosques are also owned by the state, as are the schools. This material authority over distribution has an influence over production, but is not the same as having authority over production. Only in schools, where the state not only sets and polices the curriculum but also usually writes and prints the textbooks, is the state the actual producer of knowledge and therefore, the chief location of doctrinal authority. In other areas, the state shares doctrinal authority with others, usually only setting the outer limits to discourse. A recent study of textbooks used in Egyptian schools suggests an understanding of Islam broadly in line with that of the state. Many Egyptians, however, discard much of what they are taught at school. Dr. Gregory Starett concluded that 'the textbook provides the liturgy for ritual dramatization of the moral authority of the state.'² This may be one reason why it is ultimately rejected.

The mass media are now probably more important than schools as channels for the dissemination of religious knowledge. Senior ulama have some access to these media, but this access is affected by a variety of forces, including the state, the nature of the medium itself, and the context in which the ulama appear. Ulama sometimes appear in the media in their own right, but much more important are the occasions on which they appear in the context of a major 'story'. A national debate on a topic such as circumcision, divorce, or suicide bombing has a much higher profile than a Friday-noon mosque broadcast. And in these cases, the voice of the ulama is just one voice among many, just as the voice of Christian figures is one voice among many in a national debate in a Western country. To the extent that knowledge is being produced, it is produced as much or even more by the debate itself than by any individual participant, and the media professionals who manage the debate may ultimately be more important actors than the ulama who participate in it.

On the whole, the most important producers of religious knowledge in the Sunni Arab world today are the media, the state, and the ulama—probably in that order. The ulama are in no way dominant, and certainly have no monopoly.



PHOTO: ALBRECHT HOFHEINZ, 2002

Al-Azhar by night.

Just as doctrinal authority has passed out of the hands of the ulama, so charisma has passed out of the hands of the Sufis. For those who still follow Sufi sheikhs, charisma and spiritual authority are where they always were, but in general, the percentage of the Arab Muslim population that follows Sufi sheikhs is far smaller today than it once was. The reasons for the virtual disappearance of Sufism among educated urban Arab Muslims fall beyond the scope of this article, but its result is that the old association between Sufism and charisma is today broadly limited to rural areas. Consequently, charisma is less prominent in Arab society as a whole than it once was, and pilgrimage sites are correspondingly less important. Spiritual authority, though similarly less prominent now than it was once, still exists. But this charisma is now often attributed to figures who have doctrinal authority, especially to religious media personalities.³ There are, of course, exceptions to these general trends and patterns. The system in Saudi Arabia is quite different; but then again, Saudi Arabia is an exception to the Arab norm in many ways. An overview of the matter points to the fact that while there was a Church in Islam two centuries ago, that Church has now disintegrated. The same might be said on a similar basis of the Christian Churches in the West, thus indicating corresponding patterns between the two. This correspondence is not surprising given the fact that the Islamic world today is part of a global civilization.

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Notes

1. The applicability of Church to Islam in the sense of 'community' has been discussed elsewhere by the author: Mark Sedgwick, 'Establishments and Sects in the Islamic World', in *NRMs: The Future of New Religions in the 21st Century*, edited by Phillip Lucas and Thomas Robbins (New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 283–312.
2. Gregory Starrett, 'The Margins of Print: Children's Religious Literature in Egypt', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 2 (1996), p. 127.
3. See Rachida Chih and C. Mayeur-Jaouen, 'Le cheikh Sha'rāwī, le pouvoir et la télévision: l'homme qui a donné un visage au Coran', in *Saints et héros du Moyen-Orient contemporain*, edited by C. Mayeur-Jaouen (Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 2002), p. 189–209.