



Islamic Authority Figures in Changing Contexts

Call for Papers: Workshop, Saturday 13 September 2014
Oxford Department of International Development, University of Oxford

Islamic authority structures are often presented as inherently rigid and unchanging, even though both historical and contemporary evidence suggests otherwise. Like all vibrant religious traditions, the ability to adapt to changing contexts and to remain relevant to believers in light of the everyday issues they face has been critical to the persistence of orthodox Islamic authority.

This workshop aims to bring together PhD students or early career post-doctoral candidates interested in how Islamic authority structures respond to change; how they build legitimacy in new contexts; and in which contexts and to what extent they can deviate from established Islamic discourse without losing the popular legitimacy to speak as an authority on Islam.

The workshop will use the term 'Islamic authority figure' loosely: this could include the *ulama*, Islamic preachers, or leaders of Muslim political parties. It will focus on understanding two distinct but related processes: how Islamic authority figures respond to demands for change, in order to stay relevant; and how they justify controversial shifts in their own positions — which might have an element of political expediency — to their followers. Case studies could range from those looking at deliberations over social issues, to ones focused on how Islamic authority figures justify shifting political positions. For example, how are Islamic scholars in the West responding to demands by a small, but growing, number of Muslim women to be allowed to marry non-Muslim men in an Islamic wedding ceremony? Or how do Al-Azhar or the Al-Nour Party in Egypt justify siding with the current military regime which has brutally crushed another Islamic party?

We hope to address some of the following questions at the workshop:

- What tools of Islamic reasoning are employed by Islamic authority figures to justify a shift in position, or to build a consensus around a new discourse?
- In the case of shifting political positions, how is legitimacy for the new position developed in the eyes of the followers?
- When responding to demands from the followers for a more liberal interpretation, how is consensus built among Islamic scholars to allow these new concessions?
- What are the most popular platforms and spaces, whether real or virtual, where these discussions and interactions take place?
- How anxious are Islamic authority figures about losing their following if they shift positions?
- What factors do they take into account when deciding how far can they push their new position?

While the majority of the papers are expected to focus on contemporary cases, historical pieces looking at processes of accommodation and negotiation by Islamic authority structures are also welcome. Researchers looking at such processes through online interactions between Islamic scholars and the followers are equally welcome to present.



The workshop is being organised by the ERC-funded project on *Changing Structures of Islamic Authority and Consequences for Social Change: A Transnational Review*, which is directed by Professor [Masooda Bano](#), Associate Professor at the Oxford Department of International Development. The workshop will be led by [John Bowen](#), Dunbar-Van Cleve Professor at the Department of Anthropology at Washington University in St Louis. In his book *Can Islam be French?: Pluralism and Pragmatism in a Secularist State*, Professor Bowen has mapped such processes of negotiation between the different Islamic authority figures, their constituencies and the French state agencies to demonstrate the pragmatic outcomes they produce. By undertaking what Bowen refers to as an ‘anthropology of public reasoning’, the book shows how the particular ways Muslims have settled in France, and in which France governs religions, have created incentives for Muslims to develop new, pragmatic ways of thinking about religious issues in French society.

Students presenting will benefit from feedback from the senior members attending the workshop, while also becoming part of a research network on Changing Structures of Islamic Authority hosted as part of this project. Those interested to present at the workshop should write to Nicola Shepard (nicola.shepard@geh.ox.ac.uk) with a copy to Professor Bano (masooda.bano@geh.ox.ac.uk). Please let us have a note of the following information:

- Your name, institution and position
- The title of your proposed paper
- A 200-word abstract