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REDEFINING MUSLIM PUBLICS

Dale F. Eickelman and Jon W. Anderson

A new sense of public is emerging throughout Muslim-majority states and Muslim communities elsewhere. It is shaped by increasingly open contests over the authoritative use of the symbolic language of Islam. New and increasingly accessible modes of communication have made these contests increasingly global, so that even local disputes take on transnational dimensions. These increasingly open and accessible forms of communication play a significant role in fragmenting and contesting political and religious authority. Muslims, of course, act not just as Muslims but according to class interests, out of a sense of nationalism, on behalf of tribal or family networks, and from all the diverse motives that characterize human endeavor. Increasingly, however, large numbers of Muslims explain their goals in terms of the normative language of Islam. Muslim identity politics take many different forms that are not unitary or identical, but such politics have become a significant force in both Muslim-majority states and those in which Muslims form only a minority of the population. It is in this sense that one can speak of an emerging Muslim public sphere.

Situated outside formal state control, this distinctly Muslim public sphere exists at the intersections of religious, political, and social life. Facilitated by the proliferation of media in the modern world, the Muslim public can challenge or limit state and conventional religious authorities and contribute to the creation of civil society. With access to contemporary forms of communication that range from the press and broadcast media to fax ma-

chines and audio- and videocassettes and from the telephone to the Internet, Muslims, like members of Christian coalitions, Hindu revivalists (Juergensmeyer 1993), Jewish activists, Sikh militants, and protagonists of Asian and African values, have more rapid and flexible ways of building and sustaining contact with constituencies than was available in earlier decades. The asymmetries of the earlier mass media revolution are being reversed by new media in new hands. This combination of new media and new contributors to religious and political debates fosters an awareness on the part of all actors of the diverse ways in which Islam and Islamic values can be created and feeds into new senses of a public space that is discursive, performative, and participative, and not confined to formal institutions recognized by state authorities.

Public dialogue has long held a special place in the Muslim world. A religious public sphere of learned scholars, schools of jurisprudence, and their supporters was often autonomous from the official sphere of rulers in the early Islamic centuries. The precedent was set in the inquisition (*mihna*) of 833–848, in which four successive caliphs decreed that Muslims had to accept the belief that the Qur'an was created, in spite of intensely held popular support for the traditionalist view that it always existed. This authoritarian imposition of doctrine met fierce resistance, and the effort was abandoned after fifteen years. The result was to strengthen the role of men of learning (*'ulama*) in the public sphere from the third Islamic century through the modern era. Subsequent caliphs and other temporal rulers intervened in this sphere only with caution, and in general left it alone (Hurvitz 1997: 6).

In more recent times, especially since the Second World War and the end of colonial rule in many parts of the world, state authorities have used modern means of communication and bureaucracy to craft, refashion, and promote a publicly expressed code of competencies that all citizens or subjects should assimilate and practice in order to achieve modernity. Since the 1970s, few citizens of Muslim-majority countries unabashedly accept the legitimacy of state claims to monopolize this task. Just as there is a general scholarly recognition that there are multiple paths to modernity (Eisenstadt 1996: 396–426), there is a practical awareness that there are multiple claimants to the task of staging virtue (Salvatore 1998a: 87–89), including a public engagement in the name of religion. In this respect, Muslim activists, at least in public discourse, come close to what Warner (1990: 42–43) has called the republican virtues of colonial America, in which print or other media are used to direct consciousness to and craft certain models of civility, membership within a community, and citizenship within a nation, all resting on more or less mutual packages of commitments and expectations (Salvatore 1997: 55–56).

Publicly shared ideas of community, identity, and leadership take significantly new shapes in such engagements, even as many communities and authorities claim an unchanged continuity with the past. Mass educa-

tion, so important in the development of nationalism in an earlier era (Gellner 1983: 28-29), and a proliferation of media and means of communication have multiplied the possibilities for creating communities and networks among them, dissolving prior barriers of space and distance and opening new grounds for interaction and mutual recognition.

States in this century have taken it upon themselves to control the broadcast and printed word to foster common, shared, and modern identities at least as much as to deny these means to potential opponents. The centralized, asymmetrical structure of mass media is a product of this; states see these media as vehicles of consolidation and standardization. The correspondingly piecemeal and sporadic impulses to control the small media of fax machines, desktop publishing, and video- and audiocassettes demonstrate how those media contribute to the fragmentation of political and religious authority by bypassing established channels. When recast as differences between senders and receivers, distinctions between center and periphery become far more ambiguous and porous as the senders become multiple and shifting.

Some new media seen as innovative even in the 1980s are now almost taken for granted. In countries such as Saudi Arabia, the same fax machines that rapidly disseminate criticisms of the regime are also essential to the conduct of business. The state is powerless to limit their use without disrupting the economy. Audiocassette tapes spread the sermons of Ayatollah Khomeini and others in the pre-revolutionary Iran of the 1970s, just as videotapes of anti-regime preachers and demonstrations today circulate in some countries of the Arabian peninsula. One such video, showing employees of the Saudi embassy in London videotaping masked demonstrators while the demonstrators videotape the embassy (CDLR 1994), indicates both how commonplace and how flexible the new media have become. Some of these media utilize existing formats, such as desktop-published newspapers. Others, such as Islamic law journals, create an innovative format in which readers from different walks of life—not just conventionally trained religious specialists—exchange views with editors and thus contribute to enlarging the ways in which legal interpretations are made and who can make them. Broadcast *fatwas*, or religious rulings, have much the same effect: they convert a form of highly personalized interpretation that in an earlier era was provided to individual questioners into more generic messages for a mass audience (Messick 1996: 319–20), and, thereby, shift part of the burden of interpretation to the listener/reader.

Internationally circulated Islamic educational videos, CD-ROMs, booklets, and Internet communications ranging from e-mail to World Wide Web pages frequently borrow formats as new and innovative to Western audiences as they are in Muslim contexts. It is not just that they are new; they are impersonal in the sense that they may be fitted to multiple contexts, put to diverse uses, employed by different people. Place becomes less contextu-

ally important than use: Is Pat Robertson's Web page less innovative than that of the Muslim Students Association? Perhaps because of a Western tendency to distinguish between spiritual and technical matters, the use of high-tech communications for religious purposes continues to seem noteworthy to secularists when they initially encounter it, but from Indonesia to Morocco, e-mail and the Internet foster new and rapid forms of communication and coordination for the religiously minded. Indeed, recent scholarly work on globalization and localization in the creation of Muslim private and public spheres in Indonesia (Bowen 1993: 315-30, Hefner 1997, George 1997) has been incorporated into the ongoing discourse of Muslim intellectuals in Indonesia and elsewhere.

Messages also migrate from one medium to another. Novels and recently even comic books (Douglas and Malti-Douglas 1994) address questions of how to lead an Islamic life, a domain previously exclusive to religious scholars who gave advice in the form of religious decrees (*fatwas*) or published booklets. The proliferation and privatization of television and radio, furthest advanced in Turkey and Lebanon among Muslim-majority countries although still subject to significant government restrictions (Kinzer 1997), includes a significant amount of religious discourse and subtle changes in what is deemed "religious" as broadcasters, competing for market share, reach beyond traditional religious figures to draw the widest audiences. These are counterparts in the public sphere of the earlier displacement of subversive or dissenting messages into more private channels, such as jokes or, in some cases, theater enjoyed primarily by the elite. Newer media reverse this flow and open channels to an expanding public space.

Two effects follow from the boundary crossings of these messages. First, asymmetries between senders and receivers, and between producers and consumers, are reduced as more people participate in religious and civil discourse. In this sense, the new media are more participatory, whether by the access they give for the uninitiated to join the conversation or by the implicit invitation to interpret that accompanies more generic, less personalized messages bound to particular contexts. This incompleteness that invites the further interpretation of messages is the mirror of more symmetrical, more interactive sender-receiver relations that characterize the newer media to which these messages migrate.

Second, boundaries between public and private communication that once seemed clear become blurred as telephones and faxes are used to cross frontiers once readily policed by censors, and conversations that were previously confined to people who knew each other move into a public of anonymous senders and recipients, and thus into a rhetoric of norms that transform the social imaginary and the idea of the public (Warner 1992: 378-79). Messages intended for one medium, such as print, may acquire significantly different meanings when broadcast or faxed, and in all media there are competing and fragmented voices. Thus a leading Arab secularist, Syria's

Sadeq Jalal al-ʿAzm, can debate Shaykh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, a leading preacher and conservative religious scholar, on a Qatar-based pan-Arab satellite channel (al-Jazira TV 1997). Even now, such a debate would be unlikely on the state-controlled broadcast media, which generally avoid religious controversy. However, the Qaradawi/al-ʿAzm debate took place in an alternative broadcast medium, satellite television, where the weighting of questions primarily toward a fundamentalist religious viewpoint provided cover for the more unconventional secularist view expressed by al-ʿAzm. Viewpoints suppressed in one medium almost inevitably find an outlet in others. Thus the newer small media give broader access to these messages and widen the base of their producers, erode the gap between producer and consumer, and create new standards of public rhetoric. They create public space.

In this respect, new media share some of the properties of ritual in that they are performative. Media do not merely convey messages; they are also part of the message. When Saudi traditionalist *ʿulama* opposed the introduction of radio broadcasting, Ibn Saud quelled their protests by inaugurating Saudi broadcasting with a Qurʾanic recitation, which has been a staple ever since. More recently, King Fahd used television in a major 1992 speech, a year after the end of the 1991 Gulf War, to reaffirm the kingdom's existing political values and contain growing dissent (Rasheed 1996: 359–63). Lacking access to this medium of legitimacy, opponents within Saudi Arabia and elsewhere replied primarily through the small media; but some, such as opponents within the religious establishment, replied through mosques and foreign newspapers. Although some of these media are prohibited or, in the case of mosques, not expressly authorized, the various protagonists are drawn together into an increasingly public sphere of performance with the enhanced accessibility of new media. As Taylor (1993: 220–21) argues, members of modern societies are deemed to meet in a common space through a variety of media and through face-to-face encounters, and “thus to be able to form a common mind about matters of shared concern.”

ISLAM AND INFORMATION

The new technologies of communication facilitate distinctively modern senses of religious and political identity that, rooted in specific local contexts, are also systematized on a translocal horizon opened by new forms of communication. Notwithstanding modern claims that Islam as practiced is uniform and universal, religious identities are everywhere joined to ethnic, political, and linguistic ones, where heightened senses of Muslim identity traditionally figure in local, regional, national, and transnational agendas and claims for leadership. At a local level, Moro nationalism in the Philippines is fueled by appeals to common Muslim identity, but the appeal

is to a distinct ethnolinguistic group. It took shape only with the emergence of a colonial elite educated under U.S. rule, and emerged as a viable popular movement only after Philippine independence (McKenna 1998). At a more global level, the Organization of the Islamic Conference, a truly international body, works through state organizations and copes with both national and international rivals. Such identities are set in relations to specific others. And, as times change, many would agree with conservative Muslim intellectuals like Pakistan's Zafar Ishaq Ansari (1997), who observes that there is no longer any hard and fast line between West and rest, either as ideal types or as functioning communities, as we become aware of contemporary flows of communication. Boundaries are no longer primarily territorial, although these still count, but much more complex and cross-cutting. Those thought of as religious and civilizational, as Huntington (1993) and others remind us, transcend locality, as do other, intermediate levels in which specific bonds of loyalty and trust are elaborated for the purposes of business, worship, and community (Fukuyama 1996).

The emergence of a public sphere in which precedence is given to those who can authoritatively articulate universal standards depends on print and other media to assert this alternative sense of identity. Even as spokespersons for some groups assert that they seek a return to past values, as do some ethnonationalists and Muslim fundamentalists, they do so in a distinctively modern way, oriented to the future and assimilating new technologies and communicative forms (Bayart 1996: 239–41). In an era of restructuring state sectors, advancing market economies, global media cultures—including the globalization of idealized ethnic, sectarian, and regional cultures—and rapid flows of people and money, attempts to speak of transnational cultures, religious traditions, civil societies, or public spheres must take into account a fluidity of identities in these contexts that rests on their essentially, and alternatively, mediated character.

As in earlier public spheres, challenges to authority revolve around rights to interpret. Consequently, Muslim politics is less an expression of a unitary voice (although many would claim this as the goal) than an engagement to argue over correct interpretations. What is new today is that these engagements spill out of a few specialized channels into many generalized ones. They do not necessarily become more public than in the past—mosque-universities were public places and legal writings were public documents, although few had access to them; they instead become public in different ways. Their characteristic feature is more, and new, interpreters and, from them, the engagement of a more diverse and wider public.

The conversations and statements that contribute to this public sphere involve trusted partners, channels, media, topics, genres, and other communicative conventions set within different social realities. The result can be seen as both complex and evanescent since more publicness does not inevitably lead to greater participation in associational life—but it is the foundation from which associations can begin to emerge. Some channels, topics,

and genres that have risen to prominence appeal primarily to the middle-class Muslim educators, engineers, doctors, and accountants whose techniques of thought and analysis these conventions deploy. These new genres attract identifiable social segments just as a bureaucratized form of Sufism earlier in this century acquired a following in the burgeoning bureaucracy of Egypt (Gilsenan 1973). Others, such as the telephone and local, even neighborhood, television channels in Turkey, fit the personalized network structures and information-seeking behavior of proletarian migrants, whose own networks of kin and friends have become widely, even internationally, dispersed. Across the social scale, some appeals have gained international reach, such as those of the late Ali Shariati (Iran) and Sudan's Hasan al-Turabi, who cast traditional learning in a modern idiom to transcend traditional scholarship in style and substance. Syria's Muhammad Shahrur and Iran's Abdokarim Soroush have similarly attracted followers, interpreters, and translators disseminating their ideas.

The messages of these thinkers, as of more anonymous persons, are inseparable from their context not just in tone and style, but also in the means of communication that they and others choose. In an era of multiple and alternative channels of communication, issues of how various publics are reached, how messages with religious and political content are listened to in the new Middle East and Muslim world, and what the limits on form and content are in different channels of communication are as important as the overt content of their messages. Much attention has been paid to how institutions formally recognized by the state provide agreed-upon boundaries of civility. Less has been paid to means of communicating the "ties that bind" (Qur'an 31: 22), to use a Qur'anic phrase that suggests how submission to Islam relates to the overlapping ties of kinship, language, and nations that contribute equally to creating institutions and a healthy dispersion of authority. Such means range from the lowly telephone for mobilizing dispersed networks of migrants in Istanbul's working-class suburbs to the Internet for creating new networks in and to the Middle East's overseas populations; they include transformed genres from Islamic romances and political comic books to new law journals in Indonesia and imported religious education material for African-American Muslims. They extend to movie making and magazines as well as amateur cassettes and leaflets, all in multiple, overlapping, international conversations.

NEW PUBLICS AND NEW MEDIA

Throughout the Muslim world—South and Southeast Asia, the Middle East and Central Asia, Africa, and the Muslim communities of Europe, the United States, and elsewhere—increasingly vocal debates on what it means to be a Muslim and how to live a Muslim life frequently translate in highly divergent ways from one context to another. This means that the

available publics are significantly expanded not just in numbers or reach, but also in diversity of opinion, over what was possible just a few decades earlier. Upon publication of Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* in 1988, opposition press coverage in Pakistan emphasized how the government's heavy-handed censorship cut committed Pakistani Muslims off from discussions initiated by their counterparts elsewhere. Thus the editor of the mass circulation *Takbir* (Karachi) wrote of the tragedy that Muslims in Britain and the United States could have direct access to Rushdie's book, even if this pained their sensibilities, while censorship kept Muslims in Pakistan ignorant and unable to contribute to international debates (Salah ud-Din 1989).

Some of the new thinkers participating in debates within the Muslim-majority world are becoming better known, as boundaries both of debate and of channels in which debates flow shift. Ironically, however, while Arabic remains a universal medium at one level, language differences within the Muslim world significantly constrain the circulation of ideas. Some Indonesian religious intellectuals, often trained in the United States and Canada, interpret developments in the Arab world, but virtually no Arab intellectuals follow debates on Muslim intellectual and political life in Southeast Asia (Madjid 1997). To some Muslim intellectuals, English has emerged as a preferred medium to call attention to new ideas. One leading Arab religious intellectual recently observed that, even to spread ideas in the Arab world, it helps to have one's ideas known in the English-speaking world and taken seriously by speakers of English, Muslim and non-Muslim alike (personal communication, New York, March 22, 1997).

New media aid this process significantly. Minor and emergent channels of communication that have proliferated are not mass in the same sense as conventional print and broadcasting. They are composed and consumed within more specialized, often voluntarily entered fields where producers and consumers, senders and receivers, are far less distinguishable than broadcasters or the press and their audiences. Instead, they merge in a kind of transnational community that moves the center of discussion and its impetus off-shore or overseas because their technology is mobile or was first available there (Anderson 1997). At times these contributions are anonymous, as is the case with some Internet postings, a tactic that transforms the notion of the public toward participation, as might illicit leaflets. In colonial America and the early years of the American republic, anonymous pamphlets were a major factor in sustaining an emerging public space (Warner 1990). At times, the anonymous leaflet or Internet posting plays a similar role today, as do generic spokespersons in the conventional press; although in some new media such messages are hard to distinguish from those of crackpots or fringe elements, or from disinformation contributed by regional security services.

Except in Turkey and, until recently, in Lebanon, where privately owned

broadcast media have become increasingly circumscribed since the end of the civil war in 1995 (Norton 1997), television and radio are the province of official, usually state, institutions or, in the case of the Saudi-owned Middle East Broadcast Center (MBC), establishment commercial interests that limit their range of editorial expression. Through these media, establishments articulate their visions for education, worship, social services, politics, and entertainment (Altman 1998: 15-24). Emanating from a center, they provide an authorized, top-down pattern of communication, so that competing voices are more likely to emerge through the alternative small media. Audio- and videocassette tapes are ubiquitous in the Middle East, and most countries acknowledge their significance by conducting rigorous inspections at frontiers, where they are subject to special scrutiny. Arab Postal Union regulations ban the posting of video- and audiocassettes. Such tapes circulate sermons, religious instruction, chants, and occasionally subversive folk music, including North African *raï*, as well as other entertainments; they utilize accessible, affordable technologies and vernacular languages to get messages across borders and past official and self-appointed guardians. They extend the speech communities of mosque or locality and also, as Babb and Wadley (1995) have shown for India, homogenize and demarcate regions and localities. To such media as cassettes can now be added local and even neighborhood television and radio stations in Turkey, plus forms of narrow-casting that range from pamphlets to the telephone and Internet discussion groups. Such forms of media link religious identity and civic action to activities in daily life, family, neighborhood, education, dress, jurisprudence, and patterns of consumption.

New media refigure audiences as communities, because senders and receivers have far more in common, not just in interests but also in cultural style and social position. While not nearly as widespread as the production and consumption of cassette tapes and pamphlets, the Internet reproduces many of these features at the opposite end of the social scale. As is characteristic of all these new media, the social and cultural distance on the Internet between producer and consumer is radically reduced. Similarly, with small but influential magazines in Egypt or law reviews in Indonesia, the size of audience is sometimes less significant than the quality and nature of the audience reached for a given purpose.

Another characteristic of the new media is that they occupy an interstitial space between the super-literacy of traditional religious specialists and mass sub-literacy or illiteracy. Their natural home is the emerging middle, bourgeois classes of the Muslim world. They draw—dangerously, in the view of traditionalists—on the techniques of multiple media domains, producing a creolized discourse that is not authorized anywhere but instead links others in an intermediate discourse (Anderson 1995). To the enthusiasts of such forms of communications, the eclecticism they permit is attractive. They are set in contexts of a generation-long rise in the level of mass

education in Muslim countries and a relentless urbanization that has filled cities with both a work-seeking proletariat and career-seeking professionals whose mobility is international. Labor migration that puts Sri Lankan and Filipina maids and Pakistani construction workers in the Arab Gulf also facilitates the emigration of Egyptian, Palestinian, and Pakistani doctors, engineers, teachers, and administrators. Most labor migrants in the Muslim world are likely to be Muslims, which reinforces the international, or creole, character of their public space as an intermediate rather than merely disconnected or diasporic one. It is they who first consume and produce the new media, from *ra'i* music to Internet newsgroups.

The publics that emerge around these forms of communication create a globalization from below that complements and draws on techniques of globalization known in finance and mass marketing. While globalization from above is driven by multi-national corporations, globalization from below is traditionally associated with labor migration. Both constitute incorporation in an increasingly technological world. At their core are professional classes who are at least partly at home with the multiplying media of communication and the skills to operate them and more proletarian counterparts who use new media to incorporate expanding networks of otherwise traditional relations. Among the technicians of globalization as well as its participants, these professionals are both producers and consumers, forming communities on their own scale: interstitial, fluid, and resting on shared communications, a minimal definition of what constitutes a public space.

NEW PEOPLE

By new people, we mean those who have emerged and have benefited from the huge increase in modern mass education, especially higher education. Circles of literacy have been vastly widened and enhanced, creating a dense continuum between mass non-literacy and elite super-literacy. A generation of state-sponsored and, increasingly, private religious schools independent of state support spread the techniques of literacy and the demand for its products, along with a sense of the right to interpret religious texts or to choose interpretations attuned to immediate practical needs and aspirations. The transnational peak of this population takes the form of mobile professionals—a Tunisian Muslim psychotherapist in St. Louis or a Somali Muslim gynecologist in Toronto or an Egyptian Muslim computer programmer in Silicon Valley. But more modest examples of the beneficiaries of mass higher education are equally significant, as are those with less, but still some, education who move from rural village to working-class suburbs of Istanbul or Cairo or Dhaka.

The widening circle of those affected by the new media rests on this foundation of expanded education constituting a market for new mixes of

ideas. In principle, traditional mosque-universities (*madrasas*) in the Muslim world were open to all members of the community; in practice, they empowered a narrow elite to interpret traditions and communicate authoritative interpretive techniques to others (Eickelman 1992: 106–10). Modern mass education means not only more widely spread skills, but also wider, competing repertoires of intellectual techniques and authorities and the erosion of exclusivities that previously defined communities of discourse.

These transformations increase the range of participants in discussions about Islamic values and practice. Women and minorities find their way into arenas of political and religious discourse. Women in Iran may formally acknowledge the male interpreters of Islamic discourse, but this acknowledgment is often marked with barely concealed irony and skepticism, the weapons of the weak in the face of arbitrary authority (Torab 1996: 241–44). Educated people who are not religious scholars increasingly contribute to the discussion of legal issues and create alternative sites for religious discourse and representation. Many of them claim legitimacy on the basis of simplified, systematized, and down-market interpretations of basic texts. Criticism from the shrinking numbers of traditionally educated scholars does not obscure the fact that the new media engage wider and more public communities with claims to interpret and to provide additional techniques of interpretation.

In book publishing, the work of the Syrian civil engineer Muhammad Shahrur is a case in point. His approach to rethinking the meaning of the Qur'an entails a Kantian notion of public enlightenment by ideas, independent of the writer's status and thus to be evaluated on their persuasiveness alone. Despite the length of Shahrur's first book (over 800 pages) and its cost (half a month's salary for a government engineer in Egypt), it sold over 25,000 copies in authorized printings in Syria and many more in pirate and photocopy editions throughout the Arab Middle East, even though formally banned in many of the countries of the region (Eickelman 1993; interview, Eickelman with Muhammad Shahrur, Hanover, N.H., November 27, 1998). At the other end of the spectrum, government-paid preachers (*khatibs*) appear on television from Morocco to Pakistan. Some preachers, such as Egypt's Muhammad Shahrur and Syria's Sa'id Ramadan al-Buti, achieve media fame. Most, however, have difficulty extending their reach beyond the Friday sermon and the mosque-university. Shahrur, by comparison, joins an ever-widening cadre of interpreters of Islam who link vernacular expression, modern education, and Islamic themes. Few *madrasas* are yet on-line, with curricula and faculty profiles, although the International Islamic University of Malaysia, and a counterpart in Herndon, Virginia, target modern (and international) audiences through the Internet, as do branches of major Sun orders, followers of the work of the Iranian thinker Abdolkarim Sorush, some *da'wa* (outreach) organizations, some of the theological schools in Qom, and at least one religious training school in Pakistan.

NEW THINKING

One feature of the new public sphere is a reintellectualization of Islamic discourse. Jeremiads against Western thought are still common, but critiques of Islamic micro-intellectuals or *lumpenintelligentsia*—to use Olivier Roy's (1992: 72) term—miss the point that such thinkers successfully join global and local communities of discourse and reach wider audiences than their predecessors.

By reintellectualization, we mean presenting Islamic doctrine and discourse in accessible, vernacular terms, even if this contributes to basic reconfigurations of doctrine and practice. Reintellectualization has sometimes been thought of as the province of folk or local Islam, a category that has been criticized for deflecting attention from the presence of the global in the local throughout the Muslim world. But more is involved with new media and new people: Islamic discourse has not only moved to the vernacular and become accessible to significantly wider publics, it has also become framed in styles of reasoning and forms of argument that draw on wider, less exclusive or erudite bodies of knowledge, including those of applied science and engineering. Shahrur draws his images from the Qur'an and civil engineering, as well as from the linguistics of de Saussure, Sapir, and Whorf. In an intellectual world of systems and subjects, Islam becomes approachable in different ways, one system in a world of systems. It has long been the case that Islam is recognized as an alternative among competing systems of religious belief and practice, and susceptible to multiple interpretive techniques. This in itself is not new—one thinks of the Andalusian 'Alī ibn Hazm (994–1064), author of extensive writings on various Muslim sects as well as the creeds of Jews and Christians, and of Christian missionaries in thirteenth-century Andalusia who learned Arabic in order to persuade Muslims of the error of their faith and the truth of Christianity—but now the available contrasts range beyond religious systems, so that some believers view Islam as competing with scientific disciplines, on the one hand, and secular political philosophies, on the other (for example, Ahmed 1992).

It is problematic to assert that the interpretation of Islamic precepts (*ijtihād*) was ever closed (Eickelman and Piscatori 1996: 26). Instead, the modern period in Egypt and Iran and parts of North Africa and South Asia compartmentalized Islamic practice into distinct institutions under colonial or secular governments. But even defensive accommodations, starting with Islamic responses to imperialism in northern India in the second half of the nineteenth century, have been accompanied by continuous reinterpretation. In its older conventional form as jurisprudence interpreted by traditionally educated scholars, the *shari'ā* had become increasingly marginalized and irrelevant to social life, of interest to religious scholars only. In its new form as a set of normative rules avidly discussed in the public sphere, not only are

elements of it implemented, often in novel circumstances, but it becomes a significant element of the political agenda (Brown 1997: 374, Eickelman 1998: 258, Nauimi 1996, Salvatore 1998b). One trend has been toward the *de facto* privatization of religious faith. Another trend has been toward radical doctrines, such as Khomeini's principle of *wilayat-i faqih*, which asserts the sovereignty of jurists over the texts they interpret. However, even among jurists in Iran, there has been vigorous debate over whether Khomeini's doctrine oversteps the appropriate role for the Shi'i religious establishment (Mir-Hosseini 1999). These two positions, however, merely define the ends of a continuum, the intermediate points of which acknowledge in practice a vigorous and growing religious public sphere and vigorous debate and diversity within it.

The reintellectualization of Islam is anchored less in long-standing conventions of interpretation than in the current experiences of believers. In this respect, Islamic discourse and practice is rapidly shifting from the boundary-minded forms it assumed after the advent of European imperial expansion into Muslim lands to a more confident and differentiated internal and external dialogue. The internal element of this reintellectualization engages many more believers in explicitly articulating Islamic beliefs than did its predecessors. As Gaffney (1994) relates in his detailed analysis of provincial Egyptian sermons, those identified as Islamists build their authority not only on personal reputation and knowledge of texts but, increasingly, from a demonstrated grasp of society and an ability to share with their audiences a grasp of their daily challenges. Similarly in Indonesia, the most politically influential religious intellectuals are those able to communicate their beliefs to large numbers of Muslims, delicately balancing state exigencies against the constantly growing religious public sphere (Hefner 1997). As Aswab Mahasin, an Indonesian human rights activist, remarked, the growing influence of Muslim social styles in the public sphere made many people who were previously embarrassed about their faith, because it looked backward and unmodern, proud to act like Muslims (cited in Hefner 1997: 111). Likewise, the relationship between Shi'i religious authority (*marja'*) and follower has always been two-way. Ambitious *ayatollahs* adjust their *fatwas* to accommodate popular opinion, just as reformist *ayatollahs* often have to give in to the wishes of their followers. The major post-revolutionary development in Iranian religious thought is the challenge to the seminary-trained clerics of Qom by Muslim intellectuals educated outside the seminary, such as the London-educated Abdolkarim Sorush (Mir-Hosseini 1999). At all times, believers have sought *fatwas* from religious authorities to guide them on specific issues. In turn, *fatwas* have conventionally responded to unique instances and have not been meant as generic pronouncements of doctrine or practice. When published or broadcast and thus widely distributed, however, they fill different, more anonymous and "public," functions.

A NEW RELIGIOUS PUBLIC SPHERE

The conjuncture of new media, new people, and the reintellectualization of Islamic discourse has broad implications. The first is that the translation or movement of messages from one medium to another changes the balance of what gets into circulation and who introduces new ideas. The proliferation of actors able to assert a public role leads to a fragmentation of authority, and it increases the numbers of persons involved in creating and sustaining a religious-civil public sphere. Even sloganeering—whether through graffiti, anonymous photocopied leaflets, or pamphlets—qualitatively changes the sum of Islamic discourse, even more so as many such documents are anonymous. The transposition of religious (and political) issues to new media also changes the associative ecology of Islamic discourse, juxtaposing religious issues in innovative ways with commerce, entertainment, and the professions, and contributing to the greater pervasiveness of religious themes in an increasingly redefined public life.

Issues such as who gets on national television and publishes mass-circulation books and newspapers and who gets confined to the small media contribute to the shaping of a new public sphere. Such channeling—who gets to speak in certain media or deflected to others—has always involved complex interlocking factors, such as official and unofficial censorship, available infrastructure, and gatekeepers who control access to newsprint, studios, and other required resources, including the training needed to use certain media. Messages are the complex products of many actors and factors, and when some actors and their messages are deflected from the major media into the smaller ones, the intermediaries between producers and audiences diminish, along with the ability of state and religious gatekeepers to influence what is said; and the sense of community correspondingly grows with senses of threat or insecurity. The determinant is not, however, the technological consequences of certain media. Media merely enable. Available technologies have a bearing on the messages communicated and the means of doing so, but equally important are the rising levels of education and the growing cultural understanding among the beneficiaries of mass education of politics and religion as embedded in contingent social relations, actions, and representations (Warner 1990: 6).

The second set of implications arising from the proliferation of new media is the emergence of new public spheres in which religious norms, practices, and values play a significant and sustained role that is not necessarily coterminous with civil society but that can offer powerful support to it (Hefner 1997: 110–16). In most Western contexts, religion has been formally consigned to the private sphere, although many observers comment that this may be due more to specific Western political reaction since the sixteenth century to a centralized and politicized church hierarchy than to

anything inherent in civil society itself. Muslim-majority countries have never had such a centralized church structure against which to react, and the basis for regime legitimacy in most Muslim states is more tenuous than that for many of their Western counterparts. The boundary between public and private in most Muslim-majority states has never been clear or fixed. Thus religious speeches at weddings in Damascus, attended by hundreds of guests, including prominent political authorities, are formally private events. Nonetheless, they are tolerated, guests spread word of what was said, and videotapes of the talk circulate after the event. A speech at a different wedding several days later may provide a sharp rejoinder that is equally communicated to a wide and diverse public through word of mouth and videotape. Neither speech is mentioned in the authorized state media, yet the talks and the fact of their circulation are known to state authorities, some of whom listened to the talks when initially given (Eickelman field notes, Damascus, August 16, 1997). Neither public in an official sense nor private in a personal one, this space is nevertheless a privileged one, with its own formalities and well-understood scope.

Such blurring of lines—or, as we put it here, such intermediate, connective spaces—remind us of the impossibility of distinguishing sharply between public and private and point to more important continuities between one sphere and another that make them public between the private, on the one hand, and the political, on the other. We believe that it is more useful to see such events as giving wedding speeches in Damascus, publishing texts on the Internet, opening law journals to debates about Islamic requirements, or moving those into the genre of romance novels as elements of a public sphere in which cultural entrepreneurs adapt existing cultural practices to new communicative environments. The result, of course, is to develop and promote new understandings of the role of religion in society. As media command attention to it, the emergence of this new public sphere in turn promotes changes in the orientation and style of official discourse, which at least indirectly is obliged to take account of what is said (as in the case of denunciations faxed to Saudi Arabia) or to be perceived as ignoring or tolerating it (as in the case of Damascus wedding speeches). It also has a significant effect on the everyday practices embedded in social relations, where religious or political authority is a matter of face-to-face biographical familiarity rather than the more formal credentials or structural position that is its equivalent in the large media.

These new publics emerge along a continuum between mass communication aimed at everyone and direct personal communications to specific others with whom one already has a personal relationship. This expanding space of public dealings with those whom Alfred Schutz called contemporaries beyond one's face-to-face associates (Schutz 1967: 15–19)—indeed doing everything possible to turn the anonymous or unknown contemporary into a consociate working under common assumptions of civility and

morality—is an important part of developing a public sphere in which religion plays a vital role. It contributes to the recognition that such a public is not mass and anonymous, but defined by mutual participation—indeed, by performance. In this sense, which Benedict Anderson (1991: 37–46) refers to as a growing sense of reading together, the public sphere emerges less from associations, more strictly the domain of civil society, than from ways of dealing confidently with others in an expanding social universe of shared communication.

We suggest that by looking at the intricate multiplicity of horizontal relationships, especially among the rapidly increasing numbers of beneficiaries of mass education, new messages, and new communication media, one discovers alternative ways of thinking about Islam, acting on Islamic principles, and creating senses of community and public space. Such a realization among large numbers of people is a measure of the potential for a rapidly emerging public sphere and a civil society that plays a vital role within it.

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