

CIS Research Division Repository

Changing Structures of Islamic Authority and Consequences for Social Change

Masooda Bano

English

Public Lecture | December 05, 2012

Research Division (RD)

College of Islamic Studies | Hamad Bin Khalifa University

Doha, Qatar

Changing Structures of Islamic Authority and Consequences for Social Change

In a public lecture given at Qatar Faculty of Islamic Studies, Dr Masooda Bano (Oxford University) presented her continuing project on the study of centers of Islamic authority. The “ambitious project”, as she defines it, is expected to take 5 to 6 years to be finalized. It aims to study ongoing reform attempts both in the “majority Muslim societies” and Muslim minority contexts in order to identify how reform is understood by various institutions, what kind of methodologies have been developed in those reform attempts, and which sort of following these reforms attract.

As her starting point, Dr Bano draws on a theoretical assumption from sociology of religions which suggests that the religions need to be adaptive in order to stay relevant in a changing context and retain followers. In addition to the theory, she argued that history of Islamic tradition has witnessed a lot of movements of adaptation. Deoband movement, for her, was an example of such adaptation movements, by being a response to the changing needs of the colonial context. According to her, there are a number evidences showing that Muslim societies currently are in transition. Therefore once again “Islam is under pressure to adapt to this changing context”. Her field work within South Asian and European Muslim societies has some indications of changing context. For instance working with Pakistani and Bangladeshi university students, she has found that following September 11 due to emphasis on Islam and radicalization there have been increasing intellectual engagement with the question of what Islam is. Her findings suggest that students who never participated in Islamic discourse before, now takes interest in it, because “in a way they are confronted by their muslimness”. Similarly, Dr Bano discovered practical evidence in the European context particularly among the second generations Muslims. Young Muslims between the age of 20 and 25 have told her that before September 11 their muslimness wasn’t an important factor for them, whereas now they consciously think about what being Muslim means.

Moreover she added that currently there is a youth bulge in the Muslim world accompanied by higher rates of educational attainment. The globalization of media also makes the exposure of the western ideas possible to the youth much more directly. All these bring about “instability and questioning” to these societies, according to Dr Bano, and contributes to the changing Muslim context. The Muslim youth feel the need of addressing their muslimness more than a generation before as one of the significant implication of this change.

Dr Bano stated that currently two sorts of structures of authority are available in the contemporary Muslim societies. First one is the traditional centers of authority which despite of their long histories keep their relevancy and enjoy high numbers of following. *Al-Azhar* in Egypt and *Deoband* in India

are examples of such structures of Islamic authority the influence of which go beyond national borders. *Diyamet* is another institution that Dr Bano analyzes under the category of traditional centres of authority, although it significantly differs from al-Azhar and Deoband. The inclusion of Diyanet to the study is necessary for her considering its central role within the Turkish Muslim communities in Europe. Dr Bano argued that the nature of current ruling political regime in Turkey influences the way Diyanet reshapes itself.

The second category that Dr Banoo is looking at is the contemporary structures of authority which have been established more recently. Zaytuna College, Dar ul Qasim and International Institute of Islamic Thought (all based in the United States), Alquería de Rosales in Spain, Research Centre for Islamic Legislation and Ethics in Qatar are the institutes she identifies as new centers of Islamic authority. She provided examples of how reform is understood differently in those institutions. For instance, her findings suggest that in Zaytuna College reform means a balanced curriculum for Islamic education, in which students read classical Muslim intellectual scholars like Ibn Rushd and Al-Ghazali along with western classics like Plato and Socrates. On the other hand, in Dar ul Qasim, which originates from Deobandi tradition, reform is understood as training students in four schools of Islamic jurisprudence, before directing them to focus on one school.

The uniqueness of this project, Dr Bano argued, is its potential to provide a comparative perspective on Islamic reform. She believes that already existing studies on the subject mostly have a narrow focus and concern specific movements or geographies.

Dr Jasser Auda also contributed to the discussion by presenting a number of projects undertaken by CILE, one of the institutes that Dr Bano is studying. In regards to the question of authority, Dr Auda stated the CILE center aims to achieve a shift in the consciousness of Muslims which will give authority to the principles rather than certain people. The centre is also actively engage with bringing professionals from different disciplines together with traditional scholars to address contemporary problems. According to Dr Auda, Islamic tradition historically has not been contextualized enough reflecting in the lack on consideration of “the reality with its different dimensions whether it is economic reality or political”. Related to this, Dr Bano added that similar phenomenon is happening in madrasa context. Some madrasas as reform project start teaching “secular subjects” which according to her hasn’t accomplished what was intended. Her perspective is that rather than bringing scholars of sharia with experts from various scientific fields, there need to be people in between to do “central thinking”.