Article

British Muslims Navigating between Individualism and Traditional Authority

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Abstract: According to some sociologists, one of the hallmarks of modernity is the end of 'pre-determined' identities and its replacement with bricolage projects in which people literally create 'do-it-yourself' identities. This has also significantly impacted the religious sphere, where it has been argued that traditional authorities are constantly undermined by individualistic cultures, print media, rising literacy rates and, more recently, the internet. Through analysing online discussions, this article explores how some young, devout British Muslims navigate between individualism and their own personal understanding of Islam on the one hand and following traditional religious authority figures on the other. This article argues that British Muslims who are consciously trying to practise their faith are neither following traditional religious authoritative figures or institutions blindly nor fully rationalising and individualising their faith. Rather, they are involved in a complex process of choosing and self-restricting themselves to certain scholars that they believe are representative of Islam and thereafter critically *engaging* with the scholar and his or her verdicts by adding in their own opinions, experiences and even Islamic textual evidence. While this illustrates how religious authority is transforming in the age of new media, the persistent engagement with scholars also indicates how they still play a significant role in the shaping of Islam in Britain.

Keywords: Islam in Britain; British Muslims; religious authority; individualism; rationalisation of religion; representation; leadership

1. Introduction

On a Saturday afternoon in August 2015, I received a frantic message on a WhatsApp group with old friends:

Naima: Is beer battered fish halal? Quick I am in a line and about to order!

Zoya: Irfaan [her husband] says its *makruh* [disliked but allowed]. But I think its halal as the shaykh said if you can't get drunk on it no matter how much you eat, then its fine. Even if Naima eats 50 of them (which she is capable of doing) she still would not be drunk! So just eat it fatty!

Amina: I'm googling *fatwas* online—they are saying no.

[Half an hour later]

Naima: I ate it! 😳

This brief conversation on WhatsApp gives us a glimpse into the complex workings of religious authority in our modern age. From 'googled' *fatwas*, extrapolating general rulings, to individual reasoning—each are part of an intricate mosaic of how religious authority operates in Britain. Amina found that 'googled' *fatwas* specifically on this issue said no. Zoya had heard a basic principle in an Islamic lecture about food that she extrapolated for this specific context. Ultimately, Naima made her own decision and agreed with the latter.

This article explores the interconnection of three broad trends discussed widely in the literature: The fragmentation and transformation of religious authority; growing individualisation; and increased religiosity and participation in 'traditional' religious groups amongst British-born Muslims. In bringing together these different strands in the British context, this article argues that British Muslims who are consciously trying to practise their faith are neither following traditional religious authoritative figures or institutions blindly nor fully rationalising and individualising their faith. Rather, they are involved in a complex process of first choosing and self-restricting themselves to certain scholars and thereafter critically *engaging* with the scholar and his or her verdicts. In other words, it is less about acceptance or rejection but more about critically understanding and partaking in the process of authority by including their personal opinions, experiences and even challenging them with evidence from the Quran and Hadith.

1.1. Fragmentation of Religious Authority

The fragmentation and decline of influence of traditional religious authoritative figures and the growth of autodidactic, self-taught amateurs has been a defining feature of modern Islam (Eickelman and Piscatori 2004; Yildirim 2019). While, historically, the *ulama* played a central role as the 'Guardians of Religion' (Hallaq 2003, p. 258), the crisis of authority, which began in the Muslim world from the nineteenth century, led to the loss of power, the erosion of religious authority structures and the individualisation of belief—with the task of preserving Islam falling on each individual Muslim (Robinson 2009). Instead of Muslims travelling to the Middle East for their studies, they were travelling to Paris, Oxford or Cambridge in favour of secular institutions. In this context, 'new religious intellectuals' who arose 'outside the traditional system for transmitting knowledge' and were educated in secular systems had become increasingly popular (Eickelman and Piscatori 2004, pp. 43–44). As a result, the *ulama* were gradually side-lined as they became 'less central to the working of Muslim societies' (Robinson 2009). Figures outside the realm of the *ulama* gained popularity, such as the school teacher Rashid Ghanoushi of Tunisia, the lawyer Hasan At-Turabi of Sudan, the engineers Mehdi Bazargan of Iran and Mahamed Shahrour of Syria, Mawdudi of South Asia, and Al-Banna of Egypt. Even amongst Shia Islam, Jones (2012) highlights the pivotal role of new religious intellectuals in shaping their social transition in colonial India.

Another major development which severely weakened traditional authority was the changes in the legal institutional structure. As Brown (1997) illustrates, this was a gradual process from the end of the nineteenth century, where scholars were cast out of the legal system, ultimately severing the relationship between law and religion, and thus scholars and societal influence.

Furthermore, the growth of mass education, print media and rising rates of literacy further fuelled the fragmentation of religious authority (Eickelman and Piscatori 2004). While the *ulama* attempted to co-opt the printing press, paradoxically, it also undermined the transmission of knowledge from person to person (Robinson 2009).

Many argue the internet has only exacerbated this trend of fragmentation and transformation (Bunt 2018). Cooke and Lawrence (2005) suggest:

> In short, authority is more diffuse now than it was two hundred, or even ten, years ago. *Ijtihad* used to be the purview of the *ulama*. The complex language of their religious discourse had blocked access to the amateur. However, the migrant engineer theologians changed all that by distributing authority among Muslim cybernaughts. (p. 23)

1.2. Individualisation of Belief

Specifically amongst Muslims in the West, one of the key tropes that has dominated the literature is the shift from an ethnic to a religious identity (Hinnells 2007; McLoughlin and Zavos 2013; Ansari 2004). British-born Muslims primarily define themselves through faith and prefer to use 'religious' identity markers, firmly demarcating and eschewing not only 'ethnic' cultural practices but also their parents' understanding of Islam, which is largely-based on the imams from their country of origin

(Gilliat-Ray 2010). In other words, young British Muslims are consciously deciding for themselves the role and purpose of religion in their life, which tend to be defined against the practices of their parents' or the first migrant generation more broadly.

Some view this shift as part of the individualisation of Muslims in the West. Cesari (2003), for instance, argues that the individualisation of belief is a distinctive characteristic of European Muslims, due to the declining influence of classical Islamic institutions, such as mosques and imams. This, she claims, is the 'quintessential difference' between European Muslims and Muslims in their countries of origin (ibid., p. 258). She suggests that the 'social adaptation process of Muslim minority groups has placed Islam within the three interrelated paradigms of secularization, individualization, and privatization, which have until recently been distinctive characteristics of Western societies' (ibid., pp. 258–60). Roy (2002), likewise, asserts that the individualisation of faith has also led to the 'delegitimation of religious professionals in favour of religious-minded laypersons' (p. 181).

This can be framed more broadly in the individualisation of modern life. Sociologists such as Giddens (1991), Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2008) stress that in our 'modern' era, pre-determined identities are largely replaced by bricolage projects in which people literally create do-it-yourself identities.

Tied in with this debate about individualisation is also the phenomenon of the 'objectification of religion', where religion is understood as an object that has to be rationalised. This 'objectification', as Eickelman and Piscatori (2004) argue, is a direct result of the rising literacy rates amongst Muslims, as well as the new media.

1.3. Rising Religious Trends and the Persistence of the Ulama

On the other hand, there are a number of other trends that complicate this idea of growing individualisation and dispensing with traditional institutions amongst Muslims in the West. The first is the persistence and even the proliferation of traditional religious groups. Studies show how many 'traditional' trends in the UK are attracting the British-born Muslim generation from different groups, including Salafism, Tablighi Jamaat and Sufism (Abo-Alabbas 2015; Hamid 2009, 2016; Inge 2016; Timol 2015). These movements all have strong traditional religious authority structures, albeit in different forms and hierarchies.

This indicates the continuing presence and importance of the *ulama*. As mentioned above, some describe the *ulama* as 'stagnant' and 'anachronistic in the modern world' (Roy 2002, pp. 90–93). However, Zaman (2007) highlights that the *ulama* have indeed 'enhanced their influence in contemporary Muslim societies' and are in fact 'a crucial part of changes in society' (p. 2). Their claim of representing the 'authentic' Islamic religious tradition is, according to Zaman, central to the persistent strength of the *ulama* (ibid.). The desire to recapture and revitalise 'authentic Islam' was one of the overarching sentiments that permeated throughout the Muslim world, and it was, and arguably still is, perceived as the panacea to the 'Muslim crisis' from the 19th century until the present day. It is the sense of *continuity* with the Islamic tradition 'that defines the *ulama* as *ulama'*, and it 'constitutes the most significant difference between them and their modernist and Islamist detractors' (ibid., p. 10).

The contemporary *ulama* are not speaking in the language of the medieval *ulama*. Rather, in an age of new media, they are speaking in a language designed for both the laity and for the *ulama* using both online and offline mechanisms while remaining embedded within the 'tradition'.

Perhaps one of the most striking manifestations of this is the rise of the modern 'celebrity scholar' and 'edutainment'—a combination of education and entertainment. Similar to popular Evangelical preachers, there are Muslim scholars who also boast large numbers of followers on social media channels and attract huge crowds at their events. Paradoxically, therefore, it seems that rather than simply fragmenting authority, the internet has also bolstered the profile of 'traditional' scholars and allowed them to reach vast and even global audiences. Their popularity has increased to such an extent that Western Muslim bloggers have from the early 2000s, in line with the prevalent usage of social media, coined the derogatory term 'celebrity shaykhs' (Usman 2014; Kamdar 2011). In academia, some

have called this 'media authority' juxtaposed against state-sponsored traditional figures who do not make use of new media (Herbst 2003; Nielsen 2016).

From another angle, there also appears to be a sentiment amongst average lay Muslims in guarding the sanctity and expertise of traditional scholarship. This is illustrated in certain phrases, jokes and memes that have become widespread amongst Western Muslims, such as the term 'Shaykh Google' (Haq 2015). This term is used in jest to describe those who have not formally trained in Islamic sciences and have simply 'googled' a few articles or *fatwas* on the internet yet pronounce pseudo-authoritatively on religious issues.

These three trends together indicate that while the traditional scholars and groups no longer have the monopoly they once enjoyed, they are still very much a part of the religious landscape. Using qualitative research, the aim of this article is to discuss how these three strands intersect. In other words, how do British Muslims interact with religious authority figures, institutions and verdicts in an age of growing individualisation and rationalisation of belief?

2. Methodology

The research findings in this article came out of another study on sectarianism in Britain, where the primary methodology was the analysis of semistructured interviews, magazines and lectures. During the interviews, many participants, who were British-born Muslims, spoke generally about the importance of learning Islam and rationalising Islamic practices, drawing a distinction between themselves and the first generation who, from their experiences, would practise Islam without an in-depth understanding. Another salient point that came out of the interviews was the importance of online websites for learning more about Islam and engaging with other Muslims. This led to the further research of online spaces.

The online 'Muslim world' in the English-language is continuously growing, but my focus was on any material linked to Salafism and Islamism, which were the two groups in the initial study. It was here where I found online debates over very specific issues (not around sectarianism) that allowed for a more nuanced analysis into the inner contestations of Islamic authority in Britain. To get a range of online material, I chose three different types of online platforms and discussion topics: A forum, a personal blog and a website which regularly published articles and allows anyone to comment.

Online forums and blogs are a relatively new space for research and therefore require different ethical considerations, types of analysis and, most importantly, different advantages in comparison to traditional methods (Snee et al. 2016). Studies have found the anonymity of online interaction reduces social desirability and has a disinhibiting effect on users, which leads to more honest and open responses (Joinson et al. 2008; Edmunds 1999). It allows participants to freely interact with others without physical, geographical or social–cultural barriers which occur in face-to-face discussions or interviews. Furthermore, online ethnography, or 'netnography', as Kozinets (2010) puts it, gives the researcher a 'window into naturally occurring behaviour' (p. 56) in an unobtrusive way (Eysenbach and Till 2001; Paccagnella 2006). This also allows the researcher to analyse the interactions between members or participants.

This, however, raises many issues, namely, consent and lack of background knowledge of each participant. Consent is one of the ethical foundations of research, and there is a debate about whether or not online spaces are considered 'public' or 'private' (Wood and Griffiths 2007; Sveningsson 2004; Griffiths and Whitty 2010). The three online spaces used in this study are all public platforms which do not require any form of login or registration in order to read its content. Anyone is allowed to read and post a comment as long as they follow their rules, which typically exclude extremist or rude language. I, as the researcher, did not participate in any of the discussions or encourage any of the comments. In fact, these discussions occurred a few years before my research and, hitherto, still remain on the sites, indicating that the website owners do not feel the need to remove any of their discussions and are thus comfortable with this information to still remain public.

The other disadvantage to online studies is the lack of biographical information on the participants. Most people use nicknames and hidden personas, which, as discussed above, encourages honest and open discussion but obscures the participants' backgrounds and context. This also poses an issue when a study specifically wants to focus on Muslims who live in a particular country. While I cannot guarantee that all participants are British Muslims, the websites were carefully chosen where it would be highly likely that they would be the core participants. Each website is discussed below in more detail. To put it here briefly, one of the sites was of a British blogger who had an online altercation with a British Muslim preacher about his speech given at an event that occurred in London. The other website is the platform for a prominent British scholar. While he is also known internationally, he is based in Britain and most of the articles in his site refer to British Muslims in particular, and Western Muslims in general. The third website is a forum and is admittedly the most difficult to ascertain if the Muslims live in Britain. Through language, examples and references, however, one can glean that some of the core participants in this forum are British.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the freedom and openness of the online forums provides a platform for rich analysis where subtle yet important tensions can be carefully examined. While interviewees spoke in generic terms, these online discussions allow the researcher to examine participants engaging directly with the issue of religious authority, leading to insights unattainable by other data collecting methods.

3. Islam21C and Attractive Hijabs

Islam21C is a website which discusses latest news items, politics, international affairs and contemporary challenges facing Muslims in the West. However, since the main organisers are based in the UK, there appears to be more of a focus towards matters pertaining to British Muslims. They currently boast 253,000 followers on Facebook and almost 10,000 followers on Twitter (Islam21C n.d.). Their main Shaykh is a well-known senior scholar in Britain, Haitham Al-Haddad, who also serves as a judge for the Islamic Sharia Council (UK & Eire) (Al-Haddad 2012). His family were originally from Palestine, but Al-Haddad was born and raised in Saudi Arabia, where he studied under prominent Salafi scholars such as Ibn Baz. He also holds a PhD from SOAS, University of London, in Islamic Fiqh and Jurisprudence (ibid.).

The website regularly posts many articles, and one of the most popular articles is entitled, 'Attractive hijabs and Shariah' (Al-Haddad 2011). Published in April 2011, it spawned an intense debate with 152 comments, making it hitherto one of the most-commented-on articles on the website.[1] In this article, Al-Haddad argues that many Muslim women have misunderstood the concept of the headscarf and modest dress and are wearing 'un-Islamic hijabs' in the form of "[t]ight jeans (also known as 'skinny jeans'), long leather high-heeled boots and tight shirts with a headscarf"(ibid.). He argues that the hijab is more comprehensive than just covering your hair and that it is ultimately an 'act of *ibaadah* [worship]'; it is 'very much defined by Islamic law ... and not cultural habits or one's *idea* of what modesty is, or should be' (ibid.). Quoting verses from the Quran, he asserts that the:

> main aim of hijab is to stop fitnah [temptation or civil unrest]; females who are attractive by nature attract the gaze of males which then leads to other greater sins such as fornication and adultery. Allah commanded women neither to display their adornment nor to display any form of behaviour that might attract the attention of men. (ibid.)

The article attracted a wide variety of commentators. This is a website where anyone can easily comment without any form of membership or signing up. Comments are not structured as a linear conversation between members, but as a list of people's comments on the article and people reacting to

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[1]   In 2017, it was the second-most commented on, yet they have since removed ranking based on comments; however, browsing through, it is still clearly in the top five most-commented articles.

other's remarks. Judging on the nicknames used in the comments, 78 women and 49 men commented and there were also 25 people where ascertaining the gender was either unclear or not possible. Generally speaking, women wanted to make clear that they were in fact women and thus speaking from a specific vantage point and so most used clear female names to indicate this. Yet even if we do not assume the unknowns are male, there still seems to be a good mix of male and female commentators, which indicates that this debate went beyond issues simply relating to women and struck a chord amongst both genders.

What is striking in the comments is how many participants constructed their agreement with the article on the basis that it was grounded in Islamic texts, *not* because of Al-Haddad's scholarly qualifications. For example, Tamam wrote:

> I find nothing wrong in what the Shaykh said, all of his points are backed up with Al Quran and Hadith. (ibid.)

Umm salsabeel added:

> I completely agree with the shaykh. Hijab has become such a fashion statement! Sisters should realise that wearing the hijab is an act of worship. Wearing skinny jeans and a headscarf is completely contradictory. The prophet (SAW)'s wives and the female companions did not wear a headscarf and tight fitting attractive clothing did they? Why are the sisters attacking the Shaykh? He is stating the facts through the Quran and Sunnah! (ibid. emphasis added)

Umm Khadijah responded to comments insinuating that people were supporting Al-Haddad as they are his 'minions' or 'fans', referring to the 'celebrity shaykh' culture discussed above:

> Erm just to clarify these comments in favour of the article is not because its an article by shaykh haitham, rather if any shaykh states something to be done in accordance to the Quran and Sunnah and people come out opposing that, and not only opposing but trying to justify their opposition then yeh you are going to get comments which try and uphold the statement. (ibid.)

By claiming the article only represents the sacred texts, not the scholar, what is obscured is how the scholar is implicated in interpreting the text. By making the scholar invisible, these commentators have also erased his subjectivity. Other people, however, were quick to point this out and underscored his foreign upbringing and gender. Umm Yahya wrote:

> I don't blame Sh Haddad for his views, I guess we would all have them if we came from Saudi Arabia, but that's the point, we're not in S.Arabia ... Wearing a colourful hijab there may be temptation for the many perverted Saudi men, but here in the west a colourful hijab does not have a sexual connotation which I believe to be the reasoning behind the shaykh's statement. As I have experienced many times, many Saudi scholars are unfit to talk about feminine issues outside of THEIR country as the rest of the world is quite different. ... His views on colourful hijabs are ridiculous, and there are many Hadith that talk about the colour of *sahabiyaat's* [female companions of the Prophet] outer garments and *khimars* [long cloaks]. He also assumes many insulting stereotypes for which I'm sure he'll have no fans. Maybe he should should [sic] hang around some iNtelligent [sic] BRITISH people who can maybe give him some cultural learnings [sic]. (ibid.)

In a somewhat lighter tone, Yvonne Ridley—a prominent British journalist and convert to Islam (Ridley n.d.)—wrote:

> A Western female perspective—Any sister choosing to cover while living in the West is immediately propelled into the spotlight and attracts attention. That is the reality. In some cases, sisters choosing to wear traditional Arab dress acceptable in Saudi, will draw even more attention to themselves in downtown Luton! ... This is not a case of 'one size fits

all'—what works for sisters in Saudi might not work for those living in Malaysia, Pakistan, France, UK or America. (Al-Haddad 2011)

Therefore, here we see how some are focusing on the scholar and his background, as opposed to his evidence or training. For many commentators, the issue was not his nationality but his gender. Another participant oscillating between respect for Al-Haddad and criticism, wrote:

> I take the point being made and agree . . . . I thank you also for being so bold . . . However the limitation to being a male scholar is of course not having a female mind . . . I think it important god fearing women also respond in order to get across another perspective.

> In essence I think it needs to be recognised that part of why women like to wear attractive hijabs is a love for pretty things and creativity. In much the same way that some men enjoy looking at the angles of cars and football . . . I believe if we are to be effective in channelling sisters towards the Halal we must at the same time advocate halal alternatives for self expression . . . (ibid.)

Muslimah 1978, while not questioning his subjectivity and, in her comment, also being careful to be respectful, nevertheless felt that she must provide 'feedback' to Al-Haddad:

> Feedback—Jazakumullah khair [thank you] to the Shaykh . . . This is a very common problem regarding hijab and it is important to clarify.

> However, I would like to give a couple of points of feedback regarding what has been written. I feel that though the majority of points made are correct, there are a few opinions here that I feel should be omitted. . . . (ibid.)

Here we see that there are those who do not believe Al-Haddad can represent them or understand the Western cultural context. However, even those who *do* recognise and respect Al-Haddad as a scholar still feel they can criticise, correct, offer their own opinions and give him 'feedback'. This illustrates how religious authority is not simply being accepted or rejected but Muslims are adding their opinions, their experiences and judging the scholar based on his background, upbringing and gender regardless of whether or not they respect the individual as a scholar.

This desire to be 'part of the process' resonates with Jenkin's (2003) concept of 'participatory culture'. He defines this as patterns of media consumption online profoundly shaped by new media technologies that allow the average citizen to 'participate in the archiving, annotation, appropriation, transformation, and recirculation of media content'; it is 'the new style of consumerism that emerges in this environment' (ibid., p. 286). This new consumerism is not passive, but active. This concept of 'participatory culture', I suggest, can also be fruitfully applied to religious authority. Scholar's opinions, articles and books are not only passively circulated, accepted or rejected but also annotated and discussed, often with appended personal references and justifications.

This 'participatory culture' is not limited to personal opinions, but some even challenge the scholar by providing counter-evidence and interrogating his choice of clothing. Samy questioned:

> Colorful Hijabs? Perfectly Islamic. Allah is Beautiful and loves beauty. Dr. Haitham, what are YOU wearing? What is that white thingee you have on? Is that the dress of the people you live with? Prophet Muhammad (May Allah bless him and grant him peace) used to wear the dress of the pagans he lived with (Abu Jahal and Abu Lahab.) YOU are being unIslamic by sticking out and putting our lives in danger! Dr. Haitham and the British Salafi . . . TAKE OFF that thowb [male Arab dress] or Shalwar khamis [generic Pakistani dress] NOW. (Al-Haddad 2011)

Samy pointed out the Muslims at the time of the Prophet and pagans dressed in the same attire. Therefore, he extrapolates that Al-Haddad, living in Britain, should also wear British clothes and not Arab clothes. He is attempting to use scholarly arguments against him in a stinging personal attack.

Mona demanded proof in support of certain points:

> Being a strong advocate for colourful hijabs, I must say that I feel insulted by your apparant
> [sic] lack of knowledge in this. Wearing a colourful hjiab is not to entice 'brothers' in some
> hidden way. . . . Until somebody shows me a clear and undisputed Hadith from the Prophet
> (SAW), CLEARLY stating that hijabs have to be black, I think Sh., you are COMPLETELY out
> of order for making such a ridiculous statement! . . . Anyways, I agree with the skinny jeans
> and that being completely wrong. But colourful hijabs ENCTICING [sic]? You couldn't have
> been more wrong Sh. (ibid., emphasis added)

This remark about showing 'clear proof' was common in the discussion and prompted others to list
numerous Hadith. Some messages listed 'evidence' that supported the claim that women at the time
of the Prophet wore colours, and, in response, other posts sought to show that women only wore
black. What these responses show is that the scholar's verdict is no longer sufficient; there is a need to
rationalise and see the clear texts for oneself.

The prevalence of personal opinions, accusations and demands for proofs from Al-Haddad led a
few people to reprimand the very idea of challenging scholars in the first place. Kezah Revert wrote:

> Subhanallah [glory be to God]—I thought that by having worked towards and having earned
> the deserving title of Shaykh would ensure some credibility and room for benefit of doubt
> (lots of dubious scholars out there) amongst the readers of this article. The Shaykh is a man
> of knowledge, part of the trusted ulama, keepers and guardians of the deen [faith]. If we
> cannot accept advice from our scholars we are in a very troubled place. The ethnicity or
> nationality of the Shaykh and whether this entitles him to speak about European Muslims
> etc. is absurd. Islam was revealed for all nations for all times. Any form of compromise
> is just that. We are no less mocked and ridiculed than the early Muslims, so fitting in, not
> standing out—making excuses for workplace etc. are irrelevant. (ibid.)

In a similar vein, Abu Abdurrahman wrote:

> It is absurd to imply that only a female is entitled to express her opinion on what hijab should
> constitute. . . .

> The people with most knowledge should speak, for they speak from the texts of revelation:
> the Quran and Sunnah with the understandingf [sic] of the ulama.

> The fact that we speak so easily from personal opinion in opposition to those speaking with
> knowledge of Quran and Sunnah, should be something quite alarming for each and everyone
> of us, and is the biggest social ill amongst our muslim community, as demonstrated by some
> of the acrimonious comments. (ibid.)

Throughout these comments, one can see that there is a constant tension between following the scholar
as he *is* a scholar, rationalising, and participating in the verdict by drawing on one's own experience.
For the majority of commentators, it was not a simple case of wholeheartedly following the scholar
or simply choosing what they want without reference to Islam. These lay Muslims are interacting
with this verdict by also quoting other verses of the Quran and Hadith, demanding specific proof and
challenging the logic of the scholar's argument. For most of the commentators, it is a process of careful
engagement and participation.

4. Ahl Al Hadith Forum

The nuances between following different scholars, understanding their rulings and 'participating'
in the process are perhaps made clearer through an analysis of some of the discussions on the
Ahl-al-Hadith forums—a Salafi forum in the English language. Salafism is a trend in Sunni Islam,
which emphasises meticulously following Quran and Hadith in the hopes of emulating the first three

generations of Islam, known as the *salaf* (Meijer 2009). It is a growing trend, especially amongst British-born Muslims (see Inge 2016; Hamid 2016).[2]

One long thread dated from March 2009 contains a detailed discussion of particular scholars and opinions. The original post is about an e-book that describes the 'grave mistakes' of Yusuf Qaradawi—arguably one of the most influential Arab scholars and a supporter of the Muslim Brotherhood (Helfont 2009). Immediately, another person posted a book written by Saalih al-Fawzan—a scholar revered by many Salafis and part of the official clerical establishment in Saudi Arabia. Al-Fawzan's book examines Qaradawi's *fatwas* and 'clarifies the correct opinion on each of the matters' (Ahl-al-Hadeeth Forums 2009). This resulted in a long debate.

A key part of the discussion pivoted on whether or not Qaradawi was indeed a scholar. If he was a scholar, then this would have been a case of legitimate differences of opinion between two reputable authorities; but if he was *not* a scholar, then his views could be rejected outright. As one member, Basam, posted:

> The Salafi position (from respected scholars like Albani, Bin Baz, Fawzaan bin Fawzaan and others) on Qaradawee is that he is not a reliable scholar. That is the Salafi verdict rather you agree with it or not. Brother Hanbali [another member of the forum] and others are free to disagree, but remember that the Salafi scholars have spoken. So if you want to respect Qaradawee just bear in mind and drill it into your head that you are not following Salafi manhaj [path] at this point. (ibid.)

In this post, Basam sees no need to engage directly with Qaradawi's *fatwas*. Rather, he argues on the basis of the fact that the leading Salafi scholars, whom he lists, do not see Qaradawi as a 'reliable scholar'. Basam is clearly not performing his own *ijtihad* (individual reasoning), as he is not researching or studying the issue by himself. Instead, he arrived at his position because he is, in his own opinion, a Salafi and thus following the verdict of Salafi scholars.

Another member, 'Hanbali', responded:

> I consider Shaykh Salman Al-Oudah to be Salafi, and my favourite one at that. And he is on good terms with Shaykh Yusuf Qaradhawi. . . .

> If I am not on the Salafi 'manhaj' [path] with regards to that, then good. Al-hamdulillah [praise be to God]. (ibid.)

Here, Hanbali swiftly responded by challenging Basam's definition of 'Salafi'. He says that he does not agree with all of Qaradawi's positions, but he considers him nonetheless to be a reputable scholar since Salman al-Oudah—a popular yet controversial Salaif scholar—is 'on good terms' with Qaradawi, and he respects al-Oudah and considers him to be within the bounds of Salafism.

Basam retorted, in a sarcastic tone:

> Thanks for making that clear. I was worried that you would confuse people into making them think that there was a valid difference of opinion amongst Salafis on this issue. Rather, you made it clear that you are just following your own. (ibid.)

In another message, he expounded on his own concept of what was 'valid':

> I seriously hope you don't consider every difference of opinion a valid difference of opinion? Something is only a valid difference of opinion when there is [sic] actually good arguments from Quran and Sunnah or qiyas [analogical reasoning] to back up the person's position. (ibid.)

2　　Salafism represents a wide variety of groups, some of which are on the opposite ends of the spectrum and fiercely oppose each other. In the UK, there are some Salafi groups that strictly refer to certain Middle-Eastern Salafi scholars, particularly from Saudi Arabia. Other Salafi groups, while they still show respect to these scholars, due to many reasons, are more lenient and prefer to contextualise Islam to the British context. The latter groups are led by some of the Western-born graduates of the University of Medina, who have adapted their Salafi teachings (see Farquhar 2016; Hamid 2016).

Basam, I suggest, here is seeking to police the boundaries of Salafism. He argued that Hanbali was in fact following his own opinion, which had no validity. Just like the 'Shaykh Google' concept discussed above, there appears to be an underlying consensus on the forum that 'following your own ideas' is a serious error that must be carefully guarded against; the 'correct' method is to follow 'reliable' Salafi scholars. Even Qaradawi is accused by another member of the forum, Abd al-Musin, of not following the 'correct' methodology for seeking knowledge as he 'just follows his whims and desires', as opposed to sound scholarly tradition (ibid.).

Bouncing back from this attack, Hanbali clarified his thought process in the following terms:

> I do not know the arguments ... Contrary to your constant accusations, I actually do taqlid [blind following], not just 'speak out of my own whim.' I always keep myself within certain parameters, taking positions on all issues that fall under acceptable views within the Al-Maghrib/Muslim-Matters[3] circle that I have access to. I don't have access to Saudi scholars, and if I did, I would do taqlid of someone like Shaykh Salman Al-Oudah ...

> I use the term 'taqlid' loosely here, since I do try to understand the issues, but I keep in the general realm of acceptable beliefs as understood by the Al-Maghrib/Muslim-Matters type of people. But on issues that I have not studied up myself, I of course do taqlid in a more strict sense of the word. (ibid.)

In this rebuttal, Hanbali revealed how he usually navigates between 'following the scholars' and forming his own opinion. He was at pains to stress that that he does not follow his 'own whim' but remains firmly within the boundaries set by scholars he respects and to whom he has access. He also added that he researches certain topics to improve his own understanding but again quickly reiterated his previous point about restricting himself within a certain circle of scholars and staying within his limits and the 'realm of acceptable beliefs' as understood by the Salafis he follows. In a previous post about differences between the scholars he wrote, 'I like reading both of the two sides, since it gives perspective, and is a blessing' (ibid.). Thus, he explains how he walks a tightrope between abiding by the carefully-selected Salafi scholars on the one hand and forming his own ideas through research on the other. Scholarly opinion coupled with their own personal conviction forms the basis of his understanding of Islam.

In the same rich thread, another discussion centred on Qaradawi's *fatwa*, deemed by many to be 'controversial', for permitting women to attend mixed-gender universities. It is in this altercation that we see members peppering their responses with the language of the *ulama*, while also referring to their own experiences and opinions. Responding to the *fatwa*, the loquacious Hanbali remarked that the:

> funny thing is that we all go to mixed universities..., but suddenly when it comes to a scholar just being practical about things and living in the real world, then we blast him. (ibid.)

In response, Muhammad asked a rhetorical but pointed question:

> When did our actions become hujjah [proof] for shariah rulings? There is a difference between saying that something incorrect is correct and doing something which is incorrect. (ibid.)

The debate raged on, with a female member, Um Abdullah describing her story of attending a mixed university only to quit a few months later after she was forced to work closely with men. The conversation hinged on the difference between a woman's needs, which were permissible, and wants, which were not. Basam, the same member in the above discussion also enters this debate. 'Islam', he asserted in no uncertain terms, 'excuses needs and not wants'. It is not a *necessity* for women, he

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[3] This is a popular Salafi institute based in America but also popular in the UK. Many of their scholars used to write on the blog www.MuslimMatters.org.

argued, to attend mixed-gender universities while there are alternatives, such as online courses and women-only options available (ibid.).

This thread suggests that individualisation often is accompanied by self-imposed restrictions. For many Salafis, thinking and reasoning of your own accord without reference to the scholars is a grave mistake. While the boundaries of the 'acceptable scholar' category are contested, Salafis restrict themselves to the figures they deem part of this category, as they debate and decide which opinion to take. The very nature of the forum, and their conversations within it, illustrate their desire not simply to copy and paste the *fatwas* of different scholars but also to 'annotate' them by referring to their own experiences and their own rationalisation of the verdict.

This finding resonates with another study on Salafis in Germany, which examined an essential Salafi belief of *al-wala' wa-l-bara'* (loyalty and disavowal). When interviewing Tarek, a 55-year-old dental technician who labelled himself as a proud Salafi, he did a quick Google search when asked about this concept. He chose to read the verdict of a prominent Salafi preacher, Ibn Baz. This verdict spoke about hating disbelievers and treating them as enemies for the sake of God. Tarek swiftly reinterpreted this verdict as hating the *act* of disbelieving but not the *person* itself. While continuously stressing how he is not a scholar, and not openly criticising Ibn Baz, he still nevertheless expressed his opinion on this matter (Damir-Geilsdorf et al. 2019).

5. Ali and the Blogger

Another heated incident which occurred online was the debate between Ahtsham Ali, the former president of the Islamic Society of Britain (Ali 2015) and an anonymous British blogger (Coolness of Hind 2014a). At the 2011 Living Islam conference, Ali had conducted a seminar about gender segregation, at which he argued that there was no evidence in Islam that men and women have to be in separate rooms. The blogger was in fact not present at this seminar; he had read snippets of Ali's arguments in *The Times* and subsequently wrote a scathing critique of Ali and the Islamic Society of Britain more broadly accusing them of diluting Islam. Ali was informed about this online article and responded in the comments section. A protracted online debate between them ensued.

Ali, despite not being as well-known and distinguished as Al-Haddad (the scholar discussed above), nonetheless had studied for eighteen years under the prominent Iraqi scholar Abdullah al-Judai—one of the founding members of the European Council for Fatwa and Research (ibid.). Nine of those years, Ali mentions in his first few posts, were focused on *Usul al-fiqh* (science of legal jurisprudence), and he has been awarded an *ijaza* (certificate of permission) to teach this subject (ibid.). Nonetheless, despite this, out of deference to other scholars, he refrains from calling himself a 'Shaykh' and instead prefers the term 'forever student' (ibid.).

The blogger, on the other hand, as stated in his biography on his blog, only has a degree in English Law (Coolness of Hind 2014a). While he never claims to be a scholar and describes himself as nonsectarian, the blogger couches his argument in the language of the *ulama* and meticulously references all his quotes. After explaining how '[f]rom an *Usul al-Fiqh* [science of legal jurisprudence] point of view, [how] custom is to be taken into account', he reprimands Ali for not using 'correct' methodology:

> Had Ali delved into the technicalities of the types of emulation of a particular act of the Messenger (peace be upon), whether it was adah (habitual) or not, and clarifying that the culture of the locality is merely mubah (permissible), as opposed to emulation of actions of the Prophet (peace be upon), which are desirable and rewardable, then the statement could have had some credibility. (Coolness of Hind 2014b)

In response to this blog post, Ali at first wrote that he wanted to meet in person and explain his position clearly, an invitation that the blogger refused, as he wanted the 'confusion' Ali had created to be publicly resolved on his blog, as his initial speech was a public event. Ali agreed and then attempted to explain his position via the comments section; however, the conversation remained stuck on what comprised the basic methodology of *Usul-ul-fiqh*. Ali tried to show he was indeed following

the principles he had learnt in his intensive study and that the blogger was not following the standard procedures by including the opinions of scholars.

The blogger's main contention was that Ali's words were based on nothing but his own 'uninformed personal opinions' and not in line with 'great classical scholars' of the past and the 'mainstream Islamic tradition'. He accused Ali of not being a 'true' scholar and demanded that he specify which teachers had taught him and what books he had studied, even going so far as stating that Ali was confused and was 'studying something else and thought it was *Usul-ul-fiqh*?' (ibid.). In the final remark, he charged Ali with acting as though he was a qualified scholar on par with other eminent scholars of the past. With deep sarcasm, he erupted:

> . . . you do not only think you are in the calibre of an Usuli but also a Mufti issuing rulings. Who else has the authority to DERIVE RULINGS and pick and dismiss from the great classical commentators on tafseer [exegesis of Quran] without any justifying explanations?

> Oh, I forget the reformation project requires every Amr and Zaid[4] to perform his or her own heart surgery on their imaan [belief] and then formulate their own personal fiqh [law]! So, of course, in the world of ISB [Islamic Society of Britain] reformation, fervour for this kind of freelance fatwa issuing is acceptable but not in mainstream Islam. (ibid.)

After these allegations, Ali stopped responding and the online debate ended abruptly.

While this online debate is markedly different from the above two examples, the same themes reoccur. First is the issue of representation of Islam and who is a 'true' scholar, and second, lay Muslims critically engaging with the scholar in the process of religious verdicts.

6. Concluding Remarks

All three discussions reveal the complex workings and inner contestations of how some young British Muslims strike a balance between traditional religious authority and individual rationalisation and practice of Islam. One central theme that ran throughout was the issue of representation. Who they deem as a 'true' scholar representing Islam in Britain was an essential, if not the most important aspect of the debate, in all three cases. The irony of religious authority is how in these discussions, most lay Muslims felt they could judge and decide for themselves. However, this was fiercely contested as people chose different criteria. For some, it was sufficient quotation from the Islamic texts; for others, the gender and/or nationality of the scholar was deemed central. Other criteria included other senior scholars' opinions within a specific trend of Islam or how they interacted with a certain group of famous classical scholars.

Once the person decides what they deem as the boundaries of 'true' scholarship, there seems to be a process of self-restriction to those scholars. This is perhaps clearer in the second example, where as soon as the *fatwa* of Qaradawi was posted, rather than discussing the actual content, it was dismissed instantly as the scholar himself was deemed as outside the fold of acceptability. Yet even the blogger had a list of scholars who he deemed only as acceptable, and anyone going against their verdicts were, in his opinion, clearly in the wrong. Likewise, in the first example, some simply dismissed Al-Haddad's opinions due to his gender or nationality.

Probably the most interesting finding in this study is how choice and self-restriction to certain scholars does *not* lead to deference, but rather critical engagement. Once the scholar is deemed worthy as a 'scholar' who can represent them, it is precisely at this point when young British Muslims begin to rationalise, discuss, annotate and amend the verdict. It was those who respected Al-Haddad who also gave him 'feedback' by adding their own experiences and even textual evidence. Like the example of the proud German Salafi Tarek, he first only searched for Ibn Baz's verdict online and then adapted it to match his own environment without criticising or dismissing the scholar.

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4   This is an expression that has the same meaning as 'any Tom, Dick and Harry', but using Muslim names.

This continuous engagement with traditional figures indicates not their demise but their enduring significance, albeit with transformations. It seems that the expectations of scholars have dramatically increased; not only are they expected to give rulings but also be able to explain the mechanism behind their rulings in a clear fashion in order to gain support, and even acceptance, from the Muslim masses. British Muslims are demanding from their scholars to provide textual evidence yet also link it in a practical sense to life in the modern world. Thus, traditional religious authority has not disappeared in a 'secular' world; rather, it requires deeper clarification and explanation. Referring back to Eickelman and Piscatori's (2004) 'objectification of religion', religious verdicts now need deeper justification, questioning, rationalisation and overall coherence to satisfy the religiously-minded lay-Muslims.

The citations of textual evidence by lay-Muslims, which used to be solely the purview of the trained *ulama*, either to support the verdict or to go against the scholar also indicates the need for this inner coherence. When textual evidence against the verdict is posed, the implicit question is 'how does this fit with this sacred text, which I have read or heard elsewhere?' When evidence is provided to support the scholar, the underlying statement is the opposite: It is the confirmation that the verdict is coherent and 'fits in' with the overall picture of Islam they have in their minds. Furthermore, the continuous usage of textual evidence also demonstrates the persistent desire for Islamic rulings to be grounded in the texts in order to stay true to the 'authentic' message of the faith. As mentioned above, Zaman argues, it is this desire that keeps the *ulama's* position in today's society. Yet, now they are being constantly challenged and questioned from below.

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