

**RECONCEPTUALIZING THE CONTEMPORARY ULAMA:
AL-AZHAR, LAY ISLAM, AND THE EGYPTIAN STATE
IN THE LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY**

by

Shadaab H. Rahemtulla
Bachelor of Arts (Honors), Simon Fraser University, 2005

THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS

In the Department
of History

© Shadaab H. Rahemtulla 2007

SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY

2007

All rights reserved. This work may not be
reproduced in whole or in part, by photocopy
or other means, without permission of the author.

APPROVAL

Name: Shadaab H. Rahemtulla
Degree: Master of Arts
Title of Thesis: Reconceptualizing the Contemporary Ulama: Al-Azhar, Lay Islam, and the Egyptian State in the Late Twentieth Century

Examining Committee:

Chair: Karen Ferguson
Associate Professor of History

Paul Sedra
Senior Supervisor
Assistant Professor of History

Derryl MacLean
Supervisor
Associate Professor of History

Thomas Kuhn
Supervisor
Assistant Professor of History

Martin Bunton
External Examiner
Assistant Professor of History
University of Victoria

Date Defended/Approved:

Aug. 23rd, '07



SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY
LIBRARY

Declaration of Partial Copyright Licence

The author, whose copyright is declared on the title page of this work, has granted to Simon Fraser University the right to lend this thesis, project or extended essay to users of the Simon Fraser University Library, and to make partial or single copies only for such users or in response to a request from the library of any other university, or other educational institution, on its own behalf or for one of its users.

The author has further granted permission to Simon Fraser University to keep or make a digital copy for use in its circulating collection (currently available to the public at the "Institutional Repository" link of the SFU Library website <www.lib.sfu.ca> at: <<http://ir.lib.sfu.ca/handle/1892/112>>) and, without changing the content, to translate the thesis/project or extended essays, if technically possible, to any medium or format for the purpose of preservation of the digital work.

The author has further agreed that permission for multiple copying of this work for scholarly purposes may be granted by either the author or the Dean of Graduate Studies.

It is understood that copying or publication of this work for financial gain shall not be allowed without the author's written permission.

Permission for public performance, or limited permission for private scholarly use, of any multimedia materials forming part of this work, may have been granted by the author. This information may be found on the separately catalogued multimedia material and in the signed Partial Copyright Licence.

While licensing SFU to permit the above uses, the author retains copyright in the thesis, project or extended essays, including the right to change the work for subsequent purposes, including editing and publishing the work in whole or in part, and licensing other parties, as the author may desire.

The original Partial Copyright Licence attesting to these terms, and signed by this author, may be found in the original bound copy of this work, retained in the Simon Fraser University Archive.

Simon Fraser University Library
Burnaby, BC, Canada

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the role of the historic interpreters of Islam, the ulama, in the religious revival that has swept Egypt since the 1970s. The existing literature has generally portrayed the resurgence as having been led by laymen, who were compelled to take on leadership positions due to the growing isolation and passivity of the “traditional” ulama. Challenging this narrative, I argue that the ulama are hardly traditional actors that have been co-opted wholesale by the state by showing how the boundaries have blurred considerably between the ulama and lay Islamic activists since the 1970s, which has led the former to assume increasingly a role of dissent within Egyptian society. Such protest is historically significant not only because it forces us to reassess the role of the ulama within the revival, but also because it raises some larger questions about the very identity of the ulama within contemporary Muslim societies.

Keywords: Political Islam; Al-Azhar; Ulama; Religious Revival; Modern Egypt.

Subject Terms: 20th Century; Middle East; North Africa; Islam; History; Politics.

In memory of Dr. William L. Cleveland

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The writing of this thesis has been a deeply rewarding experience. It not only represents the culmination of a long-standing interest in the sociopolitical role of Islam in contemporary Muslim societies, but also marks the end of a six-year study at SFU. The university has been blessed with a solid history program. Indeed, the History Department – in both its warm collegiality and commitment to the critical study of the past – is a model of what a community of scholarly learning should be. Many scholars and fellow students have enriched my stay in the department, but there are four professors in particular that have played a key role in my development as a historian, and, more importantly, as a human being. I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to the late Dr. William Cleveland, Dr. Derryl MacLean, Dr. Thomas Kuhn, and Dr. Paul Sedra for training me to think and write critically about the past, and to articulate my ideas persuasively in comparative and nuanced ways. I am especially grateful to Paul for taking over the supervision of the work following Dr. Cleveland's passing, and for his selfless dedication to the thesis. He raised all the right questions, and consistently pushed me to define my terms more rigorously. I would like to thank my loving parents for their unflinching encouragement and support over the years. If I am still in graduate studies, it is because of them. Finally, I would like to thank God – my closest friend – for giving me the opportunity to seek and contribute to knowledge. He has made my life meaningful, and for that I am forever grateful.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Approval	ii
Abstract	iii
Dedication	iv
Acknowledgements	v
Table of Contents	vi
INTRODUCTION	1
Modern Egypt: A Brief Background	2
The Muslim Brotherhood	8
Al-Azhar before the Nineteenth Century.....	11
CHAPTER 1: DEFINING THE CONTEMPORARY ULAMA	15
Introduction	15
The Historical Irony of the Modern Ulama	16
The Fragmentation of Religious Authority.....	27
Conclusions	37
CHAPTER 2: THE ULAMA AND LAY ISLAMIC MOVEMENTS	44
Introduction	44
Al-Azhar before the Age of Nasser	44
Nasser’s Reforms of al-Azhar and their Consequences	50
Functionalizing Islam: The Islamic Revival in Contemporary Egypt	55
Putting Islam to Work: Shaykh Shaarawi and Shaykh Kishk	62
The Ulama and the Muslim Brotherhood	67
The Ulama and Militant Islamic Groups	76
Conclusions	81
CHAPTER 3: INDEPENDENT MOSQUES, THE STATE, AND THE HIGH ULAMA ...	84
Introduction	84
Venues of Protest: “Private” and “Government” Mosques	85
The Ulama’s Growing Criticism of the State	92
Challenging the Higher Ranks of al-Azhar	97
The High Ulama and the Regime: A Changing Relationship.....	100
Conclusions	105
CONCLUSIONS	108
Introduction	108
The Age of Modernization Theory	108
A New Scholarly Spotlight: The Rise of “Lay” Islam	113
Rethinking the Role of the Ulama in the Revival.....	116
A Problem of Definition: The Ulama as a Social Group?	120
The Historic Heritage: The Islamic Intellectual Tradition.....	124

“Lay” Islam and the Tradition: A Necessary Engagement.....	126
Redefining the Contemporary Ulama.....	130
Conclusions	131
BIBLIOGRAPHY	136
Archival Sources	136
Unpublished Sources	136
Secondary Sources.....	136

INTRODUCTION

The religious resurgence that has swept through the Middle East and South Asia since the 1970s has long intrigued scholars of contemporary Islam. They have generally portrayed the historiography of the Islamic revival as led by laymen, compelled to take on leadership positions due to the growing isolation, passivity, and rigidity of the historic interpreters of Islam, the ulama.¹ A new scholarship has emerged, however, that seeks to provide a more nuanced history by examining patterns of continuity and change in the complex relationship between the ulama and their respective societies.² In this thesis, I will argue that the ulama are hardly “traditional” and passive actors who have been co-opted wholesale by the state, but rather – as the case of modern Egypt illustrates – that the ulama play a critical role in the Islamic revival, as well as society in general. I will advance this thesis by showing how the boundaries have blurred significantly between the ulama and lay Islamic activists since the 1970s, which in turn has led the ulama to assume increasingly a role of dissent within society.

Such extensive interaction and mixing between the ulama and lay Islamic activists was a result of the historic convergence of two rather remarkable intellectual developments in late twentieth century Egypt: (a) the ability of the ulama to speak in new ways to broader segments of society following Nasser’s reforms of al-Azhar in the 1960s,

¹ In this thesis, I will italicize all Arabic words except for alim, ulama, Qur’an, hadith, and al-Azhar, as well as the names of peoples and places. Aside from such commonly used words as “ulama” and “awqaf”, I will simply add an “s” to the end of singular Arabic nouns to denote the plural.

² The most compelling examples of this revisionist literature are Robert W. Hefner and Muhammad Qasim Zaman eds, *Schooling Islam: The Culture and Politics of Modern Muslim Education* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam: Custodians of Change* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002); Malika Zeghal, “Religion and Politics in Egypt: The Ulama of al-Azhar, Radical Islam, and the State (1952-94),” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 31, (1999); and Malika Zeghal, *Gardiens de l’Islam. Les oulemas d’al-Azhar dans l’Egypte contemporaine* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Politiques, 1996).

and (b) the increasingly thorough penetration of Islam as a “functional” discourse within Egyptian society, which in turn has allowed the ulama (among others claiming to speak for Islam) to increase their audiences considerably. Standing next to lay Islamic activists, the ulama have become increasingly critical of the regime, channeling their protest through independent mosques spread throughout the country. These historic interpreters of Islam have boldly challenged not only the government’s domestic and international policies, but also the compliance of high-ranking Azhari officials. Such protest is historically significant not only because it forces us to reconsider the role of the ulama within the Islamic revival in late twentieth century Egypt, but also because it provokes some larger questions concerning the very identity of the ulama within contemporary Muslim societies. This thesis will first set the context for discussion by providing a brief history of modern Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood, and al-Azhar. Before embarking upon an exploration of the changing relationship between the ulama and lay Islamic activists, however, the first chapter will be dedicated to the important task of defining what is meant exactly by “the ulama” in this thesis.

Modern Egypt: A Brief Background

Over the course of the nineteenth century Egypt became increasingly integrated into the European-dominated global economy, eventually leading to outright British occupation in 1882. The Ottoman governor of Egypt in the first half of the nineteenth century, Muhammad Ali Pasha, sought to carve out a dynastic state for himself and his family. Building a modern army modeled on European designs, Muhammad Ali waged a series of military campaigns to expand the boundaries of his burgeoning empire, which soon swallowed the Sudan, Ottoman Syria, and the Hejaz. Although the pasha is

generally presented within Egyptian nationalist historiography as being the founder of modern Egypt, recent scholarship has problematized this portrayal. As the revisionist research of Khaled Fahmy has shown, the soldiers of the Pasha's army did not exactly rush forth to bear arms for the nation, responding to an innate, timeless Egyptian national consciousness, but rather perceived conscription into the military as a highly oppressive act being perpetrated by an unjust regime,³ and resisted in complex ways the attempts of the centralizing state to exert control and ownership over their bodies. The various military, administrative, legal, and cultural projects of Muhammad Ali and his immediate successors (most notably the Westernizing spendthrift Khedive Ismail) would cost a significant sum of money – much more than what local revenue could generate. Egypt's rulers thus turned to European banks for loans, which soon snowballed into a hefty international debt.⁴ In 1876 Egypt had to default on its loan payments and filed for bankruptcy. This fateful declaration set off a series of tumultuous events that culminated in British forces invading and occupying the country in 1882, inaugurating a period of imperial rule that would last well into the interwar years.

Although Egypt was able to attain a measure of sovereignty by 1936, independence did not exactly bring about a more egalitarian economic order. Mounting frustration with the British occupation had crystallized into a nationalist revolution that swept the country in 1919. Although Egyptian nationalism had its roots in a highly educated, elite cadre of intellectuals and landowners, by the eve of the revolution the

³ Khaled Fahmy, *All the Pasha's Men: Mehmed Ali, his Army, and the Making of Modern Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 306-307.

⁴ Roger Owen, *The Middle East in the World Economy: 1800-1914* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 1993), 122.

nationalist cause commanded mass legitimacy.⁵ After unleashing a barrage of violence against the resisting population, the British finally (and unilaterally) awarded Egypt independence in 1922. It was hardly a meaningful sovereignty. The British retained control of Egypt's national defense, imperial communications, the future of the Sudan, and the protection of foreign minorities.⁶ Only in 1936 would these qualifications be lifted, although the British would maintain military personnel in the Suez region right into the 1950s. The historiography has tended to portray politics in interwar Egypt as being caught in a three-way power struggle between the Wafd (the ruling party that had led the nationalist movement), the monarchy, and the British.⁷ Although the latter would usually ally with the king in an attempt to stifle the efforts of the Wafd in parliament, it is important to note that the large landowning leaders of the Wafd expressed little concern for the growing socioeconomic grievances of the everyday Egyptian, especially during the difficult decade of the 1930s. Indeed, during the first thirty years of formal independence wealth disparity between landed Egyptians and the rest of the population increased. By the eve of the 1952 military coup, six percent of Egyptian landowners owned over sixty-five percent of all cultivated land.⁸

With the rise of Nasser, however, a degree of wealth redistribution would take place domestically, and in the international arena Egypt would be oriented away from the United States and towards the Soviet bloc. In 1952 a military coup would topple Egypt's fledgling parliamentary monarchy, spelling the end of a ruling dynasty that traced its

⁵ Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age: 1798-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 209.

⁶ Raymond W. Baker, *Egypt's Uncertain Revolution under Nasser and Sadat* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), 2.

⁷ James Jankowski, *Egypt: A Short History* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2000), 114.

⁸ Baker, *Egypt's Uncertain Revolution under Nasser and Sadat*, 7.

roots back to Muhammad Ali Pasha. A leading figure in the coup, colonel Gamal Abd al-Nasser would become a highly charismatic and domineering figure in Egypt and the greater Arab world. Nasser is best known for his international feats, in particular the nationalization of the Suez Canal in 1956, which put a decisive end to a British military presence in the country. The historic event that marked Egypt's new global orientation was Nasser's trumping of the Baghdad Pact – a Cold War alliance that the British and Americans sought to seal with Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, and a number of Arab states in order to block Soviet influence in the Middle East – by signing an arms agreement with communist Czechoslovakia in 1955.⁹ Nasser became a major proponent of pan-Arab nationalism and “Arab socialism”, assuming a leadership role in the global anti-imperialist Third World movement. Much of his charismatic appeal at home and abroad would eventually be undermined, however, with Egypt's disastrous defeat by Israel in the 1967 June War. At the domestic level, a number of important socioeconomic reforms were undertaken under the rubric of “Arab socialism”, most notably land reform. Under Nasser's regime over 800,000 feddans of land were redistributed to Egypt's rural population. Whereas landless families represented just under forty-five percent of rural Egyptians at the time of the military coup, by 1965 this number had been reduced to twenty-eight percent.¹⁰ The popularity of land reform aside, it must be added that Nasser's regime was highly authoritarian. Any criticism of the government was prohibited, and state attempts at silencing dissent included a systematic takeover of the universities – deans were no longer elected, for example, but were now appointed by the regime – a brutal crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood, and a massive arrest campaign

⁹ Ibid, 38-39.

¹⁰ Jankowski, *Egypt: A Short History*, 149.

of committed communists.¹¹ Hence, Nasser's regime was not as ideological as its socialist rhetoric claimed; at its core it remained a military order. Indeed, over the course of the 1950s and 1960s military personnel would become increasingly prominent within Egyptian governance, occupying key political posts.¹²

Under the reign of Anwar as-Sadat (1970-81), Egypt would be reoriented towards the United States and embark upon a new economic path of liberalization and privatization. Over the course of the Sadat era relations between Egypt and Israel were normalized, culminating in a formal peace treaty in 1979. The US played a pioneering part in this process, and starting from the early 1970s Egypt began to receive a significant sum of American economic and military aid, growing to over two billion dollars a year by the 1980s.¹³ The US would thus become a major player in Egypt both politically and economically. John Waterbury describes the nature of this new relationship:

...the US had become Egypt's major trading partner, its single most important source of aid, virtually its sole source of armaments, and the provider of a quarter of its basic grain needs.¹⁴

This alliance of dependence entrenched Egypt further into the Western-dominated world economy, which had an inevitable impact on domestic economics, forcing the country towards free market liberalization. Under Sadat's policy of *Infitah* (literally: "the Opening"), the private sector was opened up, European and American investment encouraged, and oil money from other Arab states welcomed.¹⁵ Whereas the Nasser era witnessed a considerable degree of wealth redistribution, Sadat's economic liberalization

¹¹ John Waterbury, *The Egypt of Nasser and Sadat: The Political Economy of Two Regimes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 345.

¹² Baker, *Egypt's Uncertain Revolution under Nasser and Sadat*, 48.

¹³ Jankowski, *Egypt: A Short History*, 167.

¹⁴ Waterbury, 404.

¹⁵ Jankowski, *Egypt: A Short History*, 171.

resulted in a greater widening of socioeconomic disparities. Although there was certainly less censorship and more freedom of speech in the Sadat era – one of the president’s first actions, for example, was to release scores of prisoners jailed by Nasser’s police apparatus – it is important to note that political liberalization under Sadat was relative, not absolute. As Raymond W. Baker has observed, over the course of the 1970s power became vested increasingly within the military and policing establishment, and away from civilian governing institutions.¹⁶

The Egypt of Husni Mubarak (1981 to the present) represents a pattern of continuity from the Sadat era. As a result of the peace treaty with Israel, Egypt was kicked out of the Arab League and isolated from the larger Arab world. Seeking to salvage his credibility in the Middle East, Mubarak attempted to shore up relations with other Arab countries. He stopped the Egyptian state-controlled press, for example, from condemning radical Arab regimes, such as Libya and Syria – an initiative that was welcomed by many Arab governments.¹⁷ That being said, however, there were few substantive changes in the country’s foreign policy. In fact, Egyptian-US relations grew closer as the Mubarak era progressed. Egypt’s involvement in the first Gulf War is telling of just how entrenched relations had become between the two countries by the early 1990s. Mubarak quickly joined the US-led coalition against Iraq, contributing over 35,000 troops to the military campaign.¹⁸ This was a shocking move on the part of the Egyptian president, considering the fact that the US-led coalition (in particular the stationing of over 500,000 American troops on Saudi soil, and thus in close proximity to

¹⁶ Baker, *Egypt’s Uncertain Revolution under Nasser and Sadat*, 158.

¹⁷ Hesham al-Awadi, *In Pursuit of Legitimacy: The Muslim Brotherhood and Mubarak, 1982-2000* (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 2004), 52.

¹⁸ Jankowski, *Egypt: A Short History*, 178-179.

the holy cities of Mecca and Medina) had been widely condemned throughout the Muslim world. Participation in the war had an immediate payoff for Mubarak's regime, however: Egypt was forgiven fully fourteen billion dollars of its foreign debt by Western creditors – a national debt that, by the eve of the Gulf Crisis, had grown to approximately fifty billion dollars.¹⁹ Given the regime's increasingly intimate relationship with the US internationally, it is hardly surprising that Egypt has continued to move towards economic liberalization. The same cannot be said of the political sphere. Although the president released political prisoners from the Sadat era and tolerated the activities of moderate, mainstream Islamic organizations in order to undermine a more pressing threat to the state – radical Islamic militancy²⁰ – the Egypt of Mubarak, like that of Nasser and Sadat, remains at its core an authoritarian enterprise. Mubarak is the only candidate allowed to run in presidential elections (in which he usually wins by about ninety-five percent of the vote), his National Democratic Party dominates the parliament and has infiltrated every corner of the bureaucracy, and the president has the final say over the creation of new political parties and the continued functioning of existing ones.²¹

The Muslim Brotherhood

The Muslim Brotherhood emerged as an Islamic mass movement in interwar Egypt. Established in 1928 by an elementary schoolteacher, Hasan al-Banna, the society not only engaged in *da'wa* (the calling of others to Islam), but also administered important charitable and social services to the greater population. This did much to boost the organization's credibility, especially given the fact that the Wafdist-dominated

¹⁹ Ibid, 180-181.

²⁰ Al-Awadi, 57.

²¹ John L. Esposito and John O. Voll, *Islam and Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 179.

government did little to address growing socioeconomic disparity in the country. To be sure, however, the Brotherhood was first and foremost a call for religious revival. The following extract from a letter written by Banna – which was also prescribed reading for all incoming members – sums up the movement’s mission succinctly:

My Brothers: you are not a benevolent society, nor a political party, nor a local organization having limited purposes. Rather, you are a new soul in the heart of this nation to give it life by means of the Qur’an; you are a new light which shines to destroy the darkness of materialism through knowing God; and you are a strong voice to recall the message of the Prophet.²²

The Brotherhood was not an informal group of individuals, but rather a highly structured movement modeled on modern forms of social organization. As the society grew in size, it developed a sophisticated, corporatist structure that enabled Banna to exercise and consolidate his control over the membership effectively. There was also a highly complex division of labor, such as through the creation and coordination of different committees that engaged in numerous activities, including the publication of a periodical press and the administering of cultural programs.²³ The Brotherhood’s call for religious revival – coupled with its efficient delivery of socioeconomic services – made it appealing to lower middle class youth disenchanted with the Wafdist status quo and alienated from the sheer elitism of interwar politics.²⁴ The growth of the Brotherhood over the course of the interwar era was, to say the least, remarkable: by the end of World War II it boasted an estimated membership of between 200,000 to just over 500,000 members, constituting

²² Richard P. Mitchell, *The Society of Muslim Brothers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 30.

²³ David Commins, “Hasan al-Banna (1906-1949),” in *Pioneers of Islamic Revival*, ed. Ali Rahnama (London: Zed Books Ltd, 1994), 132.

²⁴ Brynjar Lia, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers in Egypt: The Rise of an Islamic Mass Movement (1928-1942)* (Reading: Ithaca Press, 1998), 280.

the largest public organization in Egypt.²⁵ It is precisely because of the sheer size of the society, and its ability to speak on behalf of a growing, disenchanting lower middle class, that Brynjar Lia has argued that the emergence of the Brotherhood in the interwar years represents the rise of mass politics in Egypt.²⁶

Although the Nasser period witnessed a brutal crackdown on the organization, Islamic activism re-emerged on the Egyptian sociopolitical scene starting in the 1970s. The Free Officers were well aware that the Brotherhood, with its large following within Egyptian society, constituted the primary opposition to their status quo. Not yet in a position to challenge the powerful organization, Nasser wisely waited for a pretext. And sure enough it came: in the fall of 1954, a Brotherhood member (allegedly) attempted to assassinate the president while he was delivering a speech in Alexandria.²⁷ The regime responded immediately, burning down the organization's headquarters and arresting its leaders under charges of conspiracy.²⁸ Thousands of Brotherhood members were jailed, key leaders and intellectuals executed, many more forced into exile. The rise of Nasser did not spell the ultimate demise of the movement, however. As James Jankowski has observed: "The Brotherhood was too reflective of, and too deeply embedded in, Egyptian society to be completely eliminated; it would resurface again in the future."²⁹ Thanks in

²⁵ Jankowski, *Egypt: A Short History*, 132.

²⁶ Lia, 279-280.

²⁷ There is no substantive evidence that the Brotherhood carried out the assassination attempt; the regime may well have staged the attack. In his pioneering work on the Islamic organization, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers*, Richard P. Mitchell describes the incident as follows: "That evening, as Nasir stood before a huge throng recalling Egypt's and his own nationalist struggle and celebrating its consummation in the evacuation agreement, he was fired at eight times. In a moment long to be remembered for its drama, the prime minister paused momentarily in his speech as the shots rang out and then resumed, almost single-handedly keeping order, as the fullest impact of the shots penetrated the crowd...unharmful by the bullets, the prime minister finished and took leave of the crowd." (151)

²⁸ Gilles Kepel, *The Prophet and Pharaoh: Muslim Extremism in Egypt* (London: Al-Saqi Books, 1985), 26-27.

²⁹ James Jankowski, *Nasser's Egypt, Arab Nationalism, and the United Arab Republic* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002), 23.

part to the encouragement of Sadat – who manipulated Islamic symbols skillfully in order to counter the remnants of the Nasserist Left while at the same time bolstering his own credibility – religious activism indeed resurfaced in the 1970s. The political culture of Islam in this period, it should be noted, was remarkably different from that of the 1980s and onwards. Islamic activism in the 1970s was composed largely of radical, extremist organizations – with such names as the “Islamic Liberation Organization”, “Salvation from Hell”, and “Repentance and Emigration” – that held little legitimacy within Egyptian society and engaged in violent acts of militancy against the state,³⁰ culminating in the assassination of Sadat in 1981. However, in the following decades Islamic activism would transform into a broad-based, and generally peaceful, movement led by the reconstituted Brotherhood. Taking advantage of Mubarak’s relatively tolerant stance towards moderate Islamic activists, the Brotherhood has been able to rebuild its organizational structure, although it continues to remain officially illegal.³¹

Al-Azhar before the Nineteenth Century

Although al-Azhar was initially a Shi’a Muslim institution of learning, the mosque-university would take on a Sunni coloring with Saladin’s conquest of Egypt. Professing Ismaili beliefs, the Fatimids first took power in Tunisia, extending the wing of their empire over Egypt in the tenth century. The Fatimids would forever make their mark on Egyptian history: they founded a new city called Cairo (*al-Qahira*: literally, “the Victorious”) and built a grand mosque, al-Azhar, which soon became a wellspring of

³⁰ Esposito and Voll, 175.

³¹ Al-Awadi, 72.

Fatimid Islamic beliefs.³² It is worthwhile noting that al-Azhar was not conceived solely as a space for religious rituals, but also as a center of sociopolitical life. It was quite common within Muslim societies in this period for an invading general to establish a new mosque in the conquered land, which would then serve as both a focal point of religious life and an imperial place of assembly where such state activities as court sessions, the issuing of tax treatises, and the reading of proclamations would take place.³³ To be sure, al-Azhar was first and foremost a place of learning. It boasted a library and provided stipends for seekers of knowledge, and a number of Fatimid caliphs (such as al-Aziz and al-Hakim in the tenth and eleventh centuries, respectively) endowed al-Azhar with resources to pursue this very purpose.³⁴ It is precisely because of this dual function of worship and learning that al-Azhar is commonly referred to as a “mosque-university” – a term which will be used consistently throughout this thesis. In the late twelfth century an ambitious and talented Kurdish general, Salah ad-Din al-Ayubi (known widely as Saladin), would rise to power and carve out an empire stretching across Palestine, Syria, the Hejaz, Egypt, and modern-day Ethiopia.³⁵ It was with Saladin’s conquest of Egypt – which put a decisive end to Fatimid rule – that al-Azhar would be transformed into a Sunni institution of learning, and it has remained such ever since.

It was in the Ottoman period that al-Azhar would emerge as one of the great institutions of Islamic learning within the Muslim world. With the Ottoman conquest of Egypt in the sixteenth century, the mosque-university began to receive much official

³² Jankowski, *Egypt: A Short History*, 37. The word “al-Azhar” itself is derived from a famous title of Fatima (the daughter of Prophet Muhammad and wife of Ali): *az-Zahra*, or “the light”. Al-Azhar thus means “the brightest” or “the most shining”.

³³ Bayard Dodge, *Al-Azhar: A Millennium of Muslim Learning* (Washington, DC: Middle East Institute, 1961), 4.

³⁴ Marshall G.S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization Vol.2* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 25.

³⁵ Dodge, 35.

patronage from the Ottoman ruling elite, enabling it to overshadow other places of learning in the region and become the primary center of religious scholarship in Egypt.³⁶ World historian Marshall Hodgson cautions us from overemphasizing the historic prestige of al-Azhar, however. There were, after all, other very important places of study within the Muslim world. For example, Bukhara (located in modern-day Uzbekistan) was historically a highly reputed center of *Shari'ah* studies, and the city of Najaf was a wellspring of Twelver Shi'a Islamic thought.³⁷ A number of Azhari ulama would become influential players in the sociopolitical life of Ottoman Egypt. In the eighteenth century, for example, they played a critical role as intermediaries between the Ottoman regime and the greater populace, and supervised the charitable and religious endowments (s: *waqf*; p: *awqaf*).³⁸ Many ulama held credibility among broad segments of the population, and it was not uncommon for the ulama to act as a channel of expression for popular grievances. For example, al-Azhar became a major focal point of indigenous, urban resistance to the French when Napoleon invaded Egypt in 1798.³⁹ This is not to suggest that each and every alim was opposed to the French occupation. In fact, Napoleon attempted to use these historic interpreters of Islam to stabilize his imperial regime, and chose ten ulama – including the rector of al-Azhar – to comprise an advisory body to the French.⁴⁰ Hence, the political actions of the ulama have historically been far from monolithic. A more in-depth discussion of the contemporary ulama and their complex

³⁶ Jankowski, *Egypt: A Short History*, 61.

³⁷ Hodgson, 444.

³⁸ Juan R.I. Cole, *Colonialism and Revolution in the Middle East: Social and Cultural Origins of Egypt's 'Urabi Movement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 36.

³⁹ Jankowski, *Egypt: A Short History*, 71. The French occupation of Egypt would shortly end in 1801.

⁴⁰ Dodge, 107-108.

roles within Egyptian society over the past two centuries, however, will be set aside for the first chapter.

CHAPTER 1: DEFINING THE CONTEMPORARY ULAMA

Introduction

This thesis is about the story of political Islam. More precisely, it is about the contested role of the ulama within its narrative. Before any exhaustive exploration of this complex role can take place, however, it is necessary to dedicate the first chapter to the important task of clarifying what exactly is meant by “the ulama” in this thesis, a term which for the time being will be defined, simplistically, as the legal and religious scholars of Islam. Before arriving at a more rigorous and historically accurate meaning, however, I will first briefly trace the modern history of the ulama, showing that although their societal roles and functions have been reduced considerably over the past two hundred years, this has hardly led to their demise as a self-identifying group. On the contrary, what it means to be a member of the ulama has become increasingly refined and specific throughout this period. The second part of this chapter will show that – despite the recent evolution of the ulama into a concrete category – the past century has also witnessed a profound fragmentation of religious authority. Increased literacy through mass educational systems has sparked a significant transformation in the very nature of “reading”, enabling more believers to access and interpret the sacred text.¹ This has not only challenged the ulama’s religious authority as the historic interpreters of Islam, but has also rendered conventional definitions of the ulama – such as “those with

¹ What exactly constitutes “the sacred text” in Islam is a contested issue. For example, although hadith (the reported sayings and actions of the Prophet) holds much legitimacy as a source of understanding and constructing the faith, not all hadith are accepted, nor are those that are accepted treated equally. The Qur’an, however, boasts overwhelming legitimacy as the absolute and literal word of God and hence the ultimate source of Islamic knowledge. Thus by “sacred text” I refer to the Qur’an in its totality and the *institution* of hadith (which is to be distinguished from hadith literature in its totality).

knowledge”, “the men of religion”, or “the religious scholars” – simplistic and historically imprecise. It will be the purpose of the concluding section of this chapter, therefore, to arrive at a more complex and contextualized definition.

The Historical Irony of the Modern Ulama

The ulama have historically played important roles within Muslim societies, such as in the fields of government administration, law, and education. Although Islam burst out of the Arabian peninsula in the seventh century, the ulama did not emerge as an interpreting class until almost two hundred years later with the formation of the classical schools of law.² The societal functions of the ulama were hardly restricted to religious and spiritual affairs, as they also took on important positions in the educational and legal spheres. By the 1700s, the ulama played a diverse number of prominent roles within Islamic societies, including those of judges, advisors, teachers, diplomats, negotiators, and bankers.³ By the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Egyptian ulama had made a formidable presence in occupations related to writing, constituting “the backbone” of the state administration.⁴ This is not to suggest that the ulama held a monopoly over fields related to writing. Copts and Jews, for example, had played key roles in Egyptian state administration since pre-Ottoman times.⁵

It is important, however, not to romanticize the prestige, power, and influence of the ulama within Muslim societies prior to the nineteenth century. Geneive Abdo’s

² Dale F. Eickelman and James Piscatori, *Muslim Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 47.

³ Afaf Lutfi A. Marsot, “The Political and Economic Functions of the Ulama in the Eighteenth Century,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 16, (1973): 131.

⁴ Jakob Skovgaard-Peterson, *Defining Islam for the Egyptian State: Muftis and Fatwas of the Dar al-Ifta* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 40.

⁵ Nelly Hanna ed. *The State and its Servants: Administration in Egypt from Ottoman Times to the Present* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1995), 3.

sweeping account is an example of such a narrative: “For centuries the rigid ulama class, literally “the ones with knowledge”, has faithfully served the political interests of the ruling powers...”⁶ Despite their prominence within the legal, educational, and administrative professions, not all the ulama were affluent; they have been anything but a unified “class”. Indeed, the ulama have historically constituted an extremely diverse and socially fragmented group. In Egypt in the late 1700s and early 1800s, they were not only administrative officials, but also represented a fair share of commoners whose earnings were barely sufficient to take care of their own families, as well as poorer communities that could not even meet this expense and thus were desperately dependent on charities.⁷ In addition to their social diversity, the ulama have also taken on dissenting roles and protested the actions of the status quo. Al-Azhar, for example, gained a reputation in the 1700s for being a bastion of dissent and a popular medium through which the everyday Egyptian could voice his frustrations.⁸ Hence, the political actions of the ulama have historically been far more complex than simply apologizing for state power. Like other historical actors, the ulama have consistently acted out of their own vested interests, and even today they have tended to ally with and lobby for specific socioeconomic sectors of society. The ulama of Iran, for example, have staunchly defended the interests of the bazaari merchant class,⁹ with whom they have intermarried extensively.

The rise of Muhammad Ali in the 1800s inaugurated a period of significant decline in the historical functions and roles of the Egyptian ulama. A governor of the

⁶ Geneive Abdo, *No God But God: Egypt and the Triumph of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 43.

⁷ Indira Falk Gesink, *Beyond Modernisms: Opposition and Negotiation in the Azhar Reform Debate in Egypt, 1870-1911* (Ph.D. Dissertation: Washington University, 2000), 60-61.

⁸ Marsot, 133.

⁹ Eickelman and Piscatori, 59.

Ottoman province of Egypt, Muhammad Ali strove to carve out a dynastic state for himself, primarily through state centralization and the building of a modern army. A key source through which he was able to finance such sweeping military reforms was by seizing the religious and charitable endowments (*awqaf*). The appropriation of the *awqaf* had a devastating impact on al-Azhar, as these endowments constituted almost one-fifth of all cultivated lands in Egypt.¹⁰ This was a crippling blow to the financial independence of the mosque-university – an economic dilemma exacerbated further by the Pasha’s direct intervention in the affairs of al-Azhar, such as by dismissing dissidents and tampering with the administration’s leadership.¹¹ Not all the ulama lost out in this period, however. As Indira Gesink points out, the Pasha only acted against those members of the ulama who stood as a direct obstacle to his authority by resisting the ever-expanding reach of the state.¹² These reforms under Muhammad Ali were historically significant not because they initiated the ulama’s “decline”, but rather because they symbolized the start of a long-term historical process in which the state would increasingly attempt to undermine, challenge, and trample upon the authority of the ulama. It is for precisely this reason that Malika Zeghal has described Nasser’s attack on al-Azhar, almost a hundred and fifty years later, as “the finishing touches to the reforms of the 1800s”.¹³

Indeed, over the course of the 1800s and the first half of the 1900s the Egyptian ulama suffered major losses in the legal and educational spheres. In the late 1800s, the *Shari’ah* courts went from being the only courts of law to suffering almost wholesale replacement by the Mixed Courts in 1876 and the National Courts in 1883 – both of

¹⁰ Patrick D. Gaffney, “The Changing Voices of Islam: Professional Preachers in Contemporary Egypt,” *The Muslim World* 81, (1991): 30.

¹¹ Abdo, 48.

¹² Gesink, 71.

¹³ Zeghal, “Religion and Politics in Egypt,” 374.

which were staffed with graduates of the secular legal schools – shrinking the scope of the *Shari'ah* courts to the realm of personal status law and the administration of *awqaf*.¹⁴ A similar process was taking place in the sphere of education: rival institutions were emerging on the scene that challenged al-Azhar as the preeminent point of entry into employment. The rise of the Teachers' Training College (*Dar al-Ulum*) is a compelling example of such an institution: unlike al-Azhar which could no longer promise its graduates jobs in the burgeoning school system, an education at the celebrated Teachers' Training College basically guaranteed the student employment upon graduation.¹⁵ Hence, the late 1800s and early 1900s witnessed a major societal transformation in which two types of institutions came to exist side by side: the long-standing mosque-university centers of Islamic learning and a new string of secular educational institutions, with the latter gradually dislodging the former's historic foothold in law, education, and government administration.¹⁶ The Egyptian example encapsulates roughly the experiences of other Muslim societies in the same period. Similar (though not identical) patterns were cropping up in colonial Morocco: whereas the country's elite used to have their children educated in the great mosque-universities, such as *al-Qarawiyyin*, these religious institutions lost much of their former affluence with the establishment of French secular schools in the 1930s, the graduates of which became very successful in securing posts within the colonial bureaucracy.¹⁷

¹⁴ Skovgaard-Peterson, 60.

¹⁵ Gesink, 279-280.

¹⁶ John L. Esposito, *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 54 - 55.

¹⁷ Dale F. Eickelman, *Knowledge and Power in Morocco: The Education of a Twentieth Century Notable* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 163.

Rather than fading away and becoming obsolete in the face of powerful challenges to their authority, however, the ulama instead crystallized into a more concrete and identifiable group in this very period. In order to appreciate this seemingly ironic historical development, we need to examine how Islamic education functioned prior to the nineteenth century. The historiography has tended to position the *madrassa* (a school of religious learning) at the center of Islamic education. For example, Meir Hatina writes:

The late eleventh century, however, witnessed the rise of another, higher institution of learning, the *madrassa*, dedicated to the study of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*)...Men who were educated there became religious functionaries, judges, notaries, and ministers. The *madrassa* emerged as an important vehicle for social mobility, becoming one of the pillars of the sociopolitical order in the urban Muslim world.¹⁸

The underlying assumption here is that religious training was basically the equivalent of a contemporary university education, albeit in a medieval setting: a prolonged and structured study at a permanent location in a single school with a set curriculum. In other words, Hatina falls into the historian's trap of superimposing the educational culture of a contemporary period – defined by European-based conceptions of learning centered on “the institution” – over an earlier time and non-European place. In stark contrast, the journey of knowledge in medieval Muslim societies was anything but structured, standardized, and stationary, but rather exactly that, a journey. Learning was highly informal, and the typical educational path of an aspiring alim might be that of a young boy at first studying with immediate family members or neighbors, and then traveling far and wide, from city to city, searching for scholars reputed for their expertise in specific disciplines, all the while crashing at the homes of generous relatives or hospitable

¹⁸ Meir Hatina, “Historical Legacy and the Challenge of Modernity in the Middle East: The Case of al-Azhar in Egypt,” *The Muslim World* 93, (2003): 51.

strangers.¹⁹ A fair amount of learning would take place in mosques – religious spaces that were not designated for education exclusively, but rather worship and community gatherings in general. Upon completion of memorizing the Qur’an, a student might travel to one of the major mosques where other seekers of knowledge would informally gather, sitting in circles around a teacher.²⁰ In fact, it was only after a protracted and undefined period of participation in such informal knowledge circles (*halaqas*) in the primary mosques that a student might decide to further his studies and move on to an established center of learning, the mosque-university.

Even when a student arrived at a mosque-university, such as al-Azhar in Egypt, there was no explicit educational structure or curriculum that was laid out before him. Like learning in the mosques, education in al-Azhar at the beginning of the 1800s revolved around informal knowledge circles that in no way constituted a coordinated and unified pedagogical system.²¹ Similar to Egypt, in the Indian Islamic centers of learning there were neither examination procedures (in other words a standardized form of testing a student’s knowledge in a given field) nor a curriculum that each student was required to fulfill. Upon completion of studies a student would not be awarded standardized certificates of completion, but rather would receive, at various different points in time, personally written *sanads* or *ijazas* from his teachers, which were basically lists of the various works he had studied under that specific alim.²² These loosely penned slips of paper allowed the student to teach these texts to others. It is important to note that there was no set and agreed-upon procedure by which an alim could ascertain at what time, and

¹⁹ Barbara D. Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860-1900* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 19.

²⁰ Eickelman, *Knowledge and Power in Morocco*, 68.

²¹ Skovgaard-Peterson, 47.

²² Metcalf, 94.

after the successful completion of what texts, a student was ready to receive an *ijaza*, and hence the very granting of these documents was a thoroughly subjective decision, the parameters of which were defined almost completely by each individual alim on a selective case-by-case basis.²³

This is not to give the impression, of course, that Islamic education was at best inchoate and at worst chaotic. There was an underlying, universal method of learning in Muslim societies – what Timothy Mitchell has dubbed “The Order of the Text”. In this process, learning began first and foremost with the foundational text of the faith (the Qur’an) and then worked its way outwards to secondary texts that helped elucidate the meaning of the first: the hadith literature, followed by the classical commentaries of the Qur’an, and so on moving outwards.²⁴ It is interesting to note that the Order of the Text also played out in the daily schedule of students: the Qur’an would be the first subject taught in the morning, followed by hadith studies, Qur’anic commentary, and by the late evening reaching such distant topics as mysticism.²⁵

Moreover, the boundaries between the student and scholar were almost always vague, informal, and fluid. It was unusual for mosque-universities to have an explicit divide, or indeed any form of formal categorization, between scholars and aspiring scholars: everyone was, essentially, a student of knowledge. For example in Morocco, the *Yusufiyya* – a mosque-university based in Marrakech – had no formal system by which to distinguish between faculty and students.²⁶ Moreover, the critical transition from student to scholar was a movement left to the initiative of the student, not the teacher. Peer

²³ Chris A. Eccel, *Egypt, Islam, and Social Change: al-Azhar in Conflict and Accommodation* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz, 1984), 127.

²⁴ Timothy Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 84.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 84.

²⁶ Eickelman, *Knowledge and Power in Morocco*, 86.

learning was an integral part of Islamic education and more advanced students would tutor others in their knowledge circles. It was after a student had informally established a reputation for himself as a learned tutor among his fellow colleagues – coupled with the accumulation of various *ijazas* from his teachers – that he would then, on his own initiative, step forward and present himself as an *alim*.²⁷ Hence, not only was there a lack of any formal appointment system in becoming a scholar, but it was not even those that were teaching who designated the accomplished student as a scholar. This did not mean that what the teachers thought was irrelevant. On the contrary, the student asserted himself as an *alim* only once he was “assured of the implicit consent of established men of learning.”²⁸ Hence, it would be historically imprecise and dangerously misleading to assume that *ijazas* simply acted as the equivalents of contemporary university diplomas; skillful informal networking and careful reputation management were just as essential in becoming an *alim*.

With the rise of European colonialism and its successor system of nation-states, however, the fluid world of Islamic higher learning gradually transformed into one of hierarchal institutions, rigid policies, and standardized procedures. In certain Muslim societies, colonial officers and planners attempted to co-opt the *ulama* in order to perpetuate imperial rule. In Morocco, for example, the French utilized the *ulama* – who at the time constituted the only literate community – in order to enlarge and further the structures of colonial administration and taxation.²⁹ The growth of the intrusive state in Morocco thus bred the beginnings of the centralization of education in that country. It is important not to reduce the complex and contested emergence of European-based forms

²⁷ Eccel, 127.

²⁸ Eickelman, *Knowledge and Power in Morocco*, 87.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 6.

of knowledge in Muslim societies, however, to the elite and simplistic story of colonial officers coercively imposing new administrative systems from the top-down. Colonialism operated in far more sophisticated and subtle ways. For example, in nineteenth century India the founders of the *Deoband* school, all of whom were ulama, conceptualized and built the new *madrasa* in the Lancaster mold of an English school, as they were convinced that the discipline, structure, and uniformity of British-style pedagogy was more effective and thus superior to indigenous forms of learning – a worldview heavily informed by the founders’ own professional backgrounds as former civil servants of the British colonial administration.³⁰ Moreover, the *Deoband* case was hardly an exceptional one, as *madrasas* throughout South Asia also underwent administrative transformations in this very period.³¹ Hence, imperial ideas and conceptions of organization, such as that of education, were far more complex and pervasive within indigenous communities than that suggested in the conventional colonial model of French Morocco. Indeed, as Brinkley Messick argues in the case of highland Yemen, the changing nature of administrative, educational, and legal forms of knowledge from indigenous expressions to those defined by the European experience – as illustrated in the transition of fluid, porous discursive traditions into rigid nation-state frameworks – was part and parcel of a larger gradual incorporation into the world system.³²

The course of study at mosque-universities became more explicit and standardized, and a rigid demarcation line emerged distinguishing student from scholar. Whereas before there was no conception of admission requirements to enter a knowledge

³⁰ Metcalf, 94.

³¹ Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam*, 68.

³² Brinkley Messick, *The Calligraphic State: Textual Domination and History in a Muslim Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 254.

circle, nor a set curriculum, nor for that matter any assumption of necessary continuity within the student's course of study, procedures were now set up that institutionalized and standardized admission and graduation, thus defining the exact time period of learning. In *Deoband*, for example, certain criteria were necessary for admission to the school: entrance examinations were administered and a student, if successful, was admitted to a set study program of exactly ten years.³³ This was a significant innovation in Islamic learning, as it was now crystal clear as to when a student started his studies, when he was to finish, and therefore at what specific point in time he would become an alim. Another novel departure from established Islamic practices was the creation of standardized certificates and diplomas that authoritatively designated someone as an alim. In the late 1800s a reform was introduced within al-Azhar in which an *alimiyya* (a doctorate diploma) was to be conferred on students who had completed their, now required, eleven fields of study.³⁴ For students who wished to finish earlier than the required twelve years, a different degree – the *ahliyyah* – with a new completion exam was presented to those who had completed eight years of study.³⁵ As a formal and rigid certification system replaced the fluid *ijaza* networks, it became clearer and more precise as to who exactly was an alim. A more concrete sense of ulama identity was thus gradually emerging.

It would be simplistic and sweeping to assume that the Azhari ulama passively and silently accepted the various administrative and educational reforms that were taking place in the 1800s. Indeed, reforms such as the addition of new subjects and the reorganization of such spaces as the Azhari libraries met with considerable dissent and

³³ Metcalf, 100. This length of time was later reduced to six years.

³⁴ Skovgaard-Peterson, 45.

³⁵ Gesink, 365.

opposition from the ulama.³⁶ It is important, however, not to portray such protest as a simplistic binary clash of reformer versus traditionalist: as Gesink has insightfully noted, the differences between those advocating reform and their more conservative rivals in al-Azhar were hardly fixed and static, as stances changed dramatically depending on the specific reform under question, as well as the current political context of the individual players debating the reforms.³⁷

An alim's affiliation with a single established institution of Islamic higher learning also became more pronounced in this period, and thus solidified further what it meant to be a member of the ulama. As noted, Islamic education in premodern times was one of constant mobility and fluid networking. In the twentieth century, however, places of Islamic learning, which had no previous affiliation with one another, were suddenly fused together and refashioned into a single institutional complex. For example, in independent Morocco centers of Islamic learning that had operated autonomously for centuries were now collectively brought under the umbrella of the ever expanding *al-Qarawiyyin* in Fez: the Islamic institution of higher learning in Rabat was formally integrated into the *Qarawiyyin*, in Tetouan the *madrasa* was transformed into the "Faculty of Islamic Theology of the *Qarawiyyin* University", and in the south the *Yusufiyya* was renamed as the "Faculty of Arabic Language and Literature of the *Qarawiyyin* in Marrakech".³⁸ A similar process took shape in Egypt. In the late 1800s, various independent *madrasas* located in such rural, distant, and isolated areas as Damietta, Dasuq, and Tanta suddenly became affiliated with al-Azhar, a centralization project culminating in the proclamation of the Shaykh al-Azhar as the head of all Egyptian

³⁶ Eccel, 177.

³⁷ Gesink, 51.

³⁸ Eickelman, *Knowledge and Power in Morocco*, 170.

ulama.³⁹ Hence, whereas at an earlier time the ulama loosely comprised individuals learned in religion through multiple and diverse educational paths at scattered and autonomous centers of learning, what it now meant to be an alim was much more defined: a certified graduate from an established institution who had undertaken a preplanned and standardized course of study.

The Fragmentation of Religious Authority

Historically, the number of ulama has always constituted a tiny portion of the population. Indeed, as one Yemeni thinker put it, “scholars used to be as rare as shooting stars”.⁴⁰ The scarcity of the ulama was not only a fact of life in the premodern Islamic world, but held true right up to the 1800s and early 1900s. Indeed, the ulama remained a tiny fragment of the population right up to the first half of the 1900s. For example in Morocco, a country that in 1931 had a population of just under six million, there were only 1200 students studying in the major mosque-universities – a meager one-fifth of a percent of the population.⁴¹ Hence, it was quite out of the ordinary to become an alim. And since the ulama constituted one of the few literate communities, the ability to read – and thus access the religious texts – was also quite rare.

Although most Muslims attended some sort of Qur’anic school in their childhood years, their time there was relatively short and rarely resulted in literacy. Knowledge and its acquisition have traditionally been celebrated within Muslim societies. Thus it was common practice for most Muslims to be sent to a *kuttab* in their childhood years, in

³⁹ Skovgaard-Peterson, 46.

⁴⁰ Messick, 153.

⁴¹ Eickelman, *Knowledge and Power in Morocco*, 85.

which they would be introduced to the Qur'an.⁴² It is here that they would be exposed to classical Arabic (as opposed to its modern colloquial manifestations). Just because the students were introduced to the Qur'an, however, did not by any means imply that they would achieve solid literacy. For example, in nineteenth century Egypt most students never studied beyond the *kuttab*.⁴³ Attendance at a Qur'anic school did not even translate into reasonable literary skills – a working albeit elementary knowledge of written Arabic – as most students left the schools having memorized a few Qur'anic verses,⁴⁴ and that without comprehending their meaning or grammatical composition. Most children had to leave the schools in order to support their families, and therefore those who were able to complete successfully the memorization of the Qur'an were either financially affluent or growing up in a literate household,⁴⁵ and thus likely that of an alim. This system of learning, therefore, required not only economic means, but also a substantial amount of familial support through constant encouragement and personal tutoring.

Memorization played a key role in Islamic education and thus the process of learning in general. As discussed earlier, the seeking of knowledge was comprised of long, arduous, and multiple apprenticeships. Memorization and recitation constituted the crux of this educational system,⁴⁶ acting as the gateways through which a student could

⁴² I will define *kuttab* (p: *katatib*) using Gregory Starrett's concise description: "small local institutions for the memorization of the Qur'an". See Gregory Starrett, *Putting Islam to Work: Education, Politics, and Religious Transformation in Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 27. It is misleading to define the *kuttab* as being the equivalent of a primary school because the methods of instruction employed in both were radically different: whereas the *kuttab* focused primarily on the memorization of the Qur'an (a historic starting point in the journey of learning within Muslim societies) the primary school embodied a specifically Lancaster, and thus European, mold of pedagogy, discipline, and socialization, such as through the use of various textbooks, the teaching of multiple subjects, and the organization of time and space around schedules and hierarchal seating arrangements. See Starrett, 34-35.

⁴³ Gesink, 119.

⁴⁴ Eickelman, *Knowledge and Power in Morocco*, 61.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 65.

⁴⁶ Messick, 21.

enter the world of higher Islamic learning. Indeed, the memorization of the Qur'an was the first crucial step in the study of the Islamic religious tradition and other supplementary texts.⁴⁷ Such a pedagogical emphasis on memory was a natural outgrowth of how knowledge (*ilm*) was perceived: as something that was inextricably intertwined with the remembered word, textually derived, and thus accumulatively collected from the foundational texts (the Qur'an and hadith).⁴⁸ This is not to imply, however, that the role of memory was emphasized to the same degree everywhere. For example, memory played a much heavier role in Islamic learning in Morocco than it did in other Muslim societies.⁴⁹

This strong emphasis on rote education should not be viewed through an Enlightenment lens, and thus as one of primitive backwardness, for memory played a much more complex role in learning: it lay at the very core of the act of "reading". Historically, the oral word has played a significant role in the legal and everyday life of Muslim societies. *Shari'ah* court judges in the premodern period, for example, did not refer to written and codified manuals of law when deliberating a case; the rulings, principles, and legal objectives were simply recalled by memory at the appropriate time by the jurist.⁵⁰ Thus, memory was located at the very center of culture and discourse. This was not because the written word was unimportant, but rather because writing "was not the mechanical representation of an author's meaning, and in this sense there was no simple 'presence' of an author in a text."⁵¹ An intermediary was required, therefore, to provide the intended, original message that its author had locked within the words. This

⁴⁷ Eickelman, *Knowledge and Power in Morocco*, 57-58.

⁴⁸ Gesink, 336.

⁴⁹ Eickelman, *Knowledge and Power in Morocco*, 58-59.

⁵⁰ Messick, 22.

⁵¹ Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*, 151.

was the celebrated role of the alim; it was his duty to draw meaning from the memorized letter. The key point here is that this very act of unlocking – of a student finally understanding the text, which he had long since memorized, vis-à-vis his elucidating mentor – was part and parcel of the reading process. Hence, reading was by its very nature an intensely social exercise.

Such an integral emphasis on an intermediary to unlock and thus deliver the meaning of the memorized but unknown letter inevitably had major consequences in the construction of religious authority. Patrick Gaffney writes that the expression of religious authority is inherently linked to varying understandings of what constitutes knowledge.⁵² If knowledge is understood as an accumulated tradition of the human-mediated text via memory and recitation, then the inevitable social consequence would be the formation of interpretative hierarchies. The *ijaza* networks played a key regenerative role in these vertical formations as each student, via the *ijaza*, was connected – through a long and complex historical chain of human, oral mediators of the sacred texts – to the ulama of the earlier generations, stretching all the way back (allegedly) to the first Muslims.⁵³ Indeed, the very appeal of the ulama in Islam lies in their guardianship of this complex chain of scholarly transmission – the ulama’s intellectual religious tradition – that links the past to the present, and vice versa.⁵⁴ It is hardly shocking, therefore, that readings of the texts would gravitate toward the conservative and dare not embark upon a radical interpretive break with earlier works. There was no need to justify readings that conformed to and reified past interpretations: rather than defending the ideological bases

⁵² Patrick D. Gaffney, *The Prophet’s Pulpit: Islamic Preaching in Contemporary Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 34-35.

⁵³ Gesink, 80.

⁵⁴ Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam*, 180.

of such entrenched forms of reading *in and of themselves* (and thus in relation to the only text that was not an interpretation, the Qur'an) the teacher would simply have to cite the opinions and commentaries of earlier scholars.⁵⁵ This does not mean that in practice there was no significant criticism at all to such religious authority within the ranks of the ulama. Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, for example, ferociously attacked the educational content of most *madrasas*, his primary grievance being that the format of the knowledge circle and its heavy reliance upon the readings and research of earlier scholars stagnated independent critical thought, leading students to support blindly the practice of *taqlid* (emulation).⁵⁶

The Qur'anic commentary (*tafsir*) was one of the most powerful and enduring constructions of the ulama's religious authority. The commentary defined the scholarly culture of the ulama, reaffirming and reinforcing the authority, and indeed the very identity, of the legal religious tradition.⁵⁷ The study of the classical Qur'anic commentaries constituted a significant part of the ulama's educational path, and was studied immediately after the Qur'an and hadith,⁵⁸ a privileged position in the pedagogical order that reflects its revered status. The commentary played an important role in establishing the instructor's authority as an alim because it intimately linked the teacher to the text: when the alim would recite a new passage of a text (*al-matn*) to a student, he would follow this recitation by his own explanatory commentary (*ash-sharh*),⁵⁹ lacing his elucidation with extensive references to the opinions and findings of earlier ulama. Religious authority was constructed and reified not only through classical

⁵⁵ Eickelman, *Knowledge and Power in Morocco*, 179.

⁵⁶ Gesink, 203.

⁵⁷ Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam*, 38.

⁵⁸ Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*, 84.

⁵⁹ Messick, 30.

commentaries, but contemporary ones as well. The commentary of a prominent teacher would usually be recorded by his closest students. Muhammad Qasim Zaman's keen observations on how the commentary of the South Asian alim, Rashid Ahmed, was compiled by his top student, Muhammad Yahya, demonstrates how religious authority was recreated through the construction of commentary effectively:

But it is not only Rashid Ahmed's presence, or his personal authority, that is perpetuated through this commentary. Muhammad Yahya, who wrote the lectures; his son Muhammad Zakariyya, who added an introduction and glosses to the commentary; and Abu'l Hassan Ali Nadwi (d.1999), the former rector of Nadwat al-Ulama of Lucknow and the most influential Indian religious scholar of his generation...who added a short biography of Muhammad Zakariyya...⁶⁰

Hence, the very act of compiling commentary was not fundamentally different from that of reading. It was at its core a social exercise in discursive networking among the ulama. Commentary was thus much more than a simple act of intellectual inquiry and spiritual reflection; it was a highly politicized project.

The second half of the twentieth century, however, witnessed a major transformation in the very nature of reading, which was due primarily to the rise of mass educational structures within Muslim societies. Whereas in Morocco the ulama were the sole literate community in the first two decades of the twentieth century, their monopoly on reading had eroded by the late 1920s when the children of the Moroccan elite began to graduate from the French colonial schools.⁶¹ This is not to suggest that colonialism basically triggered the rise of modern education systems, as these institutions were also emerging from within. For example, the rise of modern European-based education systems in Egypt began with the initiative of Muhammad Ali and his grandson Ismail in

⁶⁰ Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam*, 52.

⁶¹ Eickelman, *Knowledge and Power in Morocco*, 8.

the 1800s. Whereas the Pasha's primary interest was establishing professional schools for the training of translators, military officers, engineers, and physicians (projects all directed to his goal of building a modern European-style army), it was under the reign of Ismail that more substantive attention was paid to primary and secondary education.⁶² It is important to note, however, that such educational structures that were further developed under Ismail's rule were elitist and did not reach the larger population. Mass state-sponsored education systems would arrive in the Middle East and North Africa much later, beginning in the mid-twentieth century: in Egypt after the 1952 "Revolution", in Morocco by the late 1950s, and in such isolated states as Oman and Yemen by the 1970s.⁶³

The rise of mass literacy stimulated a significant alteration in the process of reading by enabling direct access to the texts and thus undermining the historic role of the intermediary. This rise in mass literacy was illustrative of a larger historical process. Specifically, it was part of a shift from a manuscript cultural tradition to a new lettered world defined by the speed of print culture.⁶⁴ This had profoundly negative consequences, however, for the role of the alim in reading, as various printed texts such as manuals, textbooks, and encyclopedias began to assume the role of what had historically been that of the teacher.⁶⁵ More precisely, there was a transformation taking place within the very nature of the words. Whereas before writing had been silent – in that reading required the presence of the alim to interpret and thus provide authoritative

⁶² Donald M. Reid, *Cairo University and the Making of Modern Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 14-15.

⁶³ Eickelman and Piscatori, 39-40. It should be added, however, that prior to the military coup in Egypt plans for mass education had already been put into place by the Minister of Education Taha Husayn, who firmly believed that education must be accessible to all Egyptians. As a well-known saying of Husayn testifies: "Education is like the water we drink and the air we breathe."

⁶⁴ Messick, 252-253.

⁶⁵ Eickelman and Piscatori, 44.

definition – the words now, in a sense, began to speak on their own. Messick describes this metamorphosis of the written word:

The new writing that has emerged is more separately assured, more authoritative in and of itself. No longer must writing so regularly call upon speech, its “parent”, as Socrates called it, for support.⁶⁶

In other words, by rendering moot the formerly required role of the literate intermediary to make sense of the word, the student of Islam could now read and interpret the sacred texts, and thus *the faith*, directly for him or herself – a development that represented a significant break with past Islamic practices of knowledge dissemination.⁶⁷

This transformation in reading led to a major fragmentation of religious authority as new, formerly illiterate communities and individuals began to interpret the sacred texts directly and, in doing so, compete with the ulama for religious authority. Much has been written of the emergence of lay political Islamic movements since the 1970s. The scholarship has tended to emphasize the radical and at times violent character of this Islamic revival, particularly in its treatment of the turbulent years of the 1970s. To be sure, the jihad of these militant groups was not an intellectual one: they did not criticize the ulama’s historic monopoly over religious interpretation in and of itself, but rather condemned the ulama for using these “official” interpretations to legitimize the unjust and tyrannical actions of the status quo.⁶⁸ The fragmentation of religious authority, however, also had major non-violent but equally profound intellectual consequences. The widespread literacy that came packaged with mass education allowed communities that were previously excluded to partake in Islamic learning and religious discourse, most

⁶⁶ Messick, 253.

⁶⁷ Eickelman, *Knowledge and Power in Morocco*, 178.

⁶⁸ Zeghal, “Religion and Politics in Egypt”, 382.

significantly women.⁶⁹ Life-long apprenticeships of memory-based learning stretched over long and arduous travels were no longer an essential prerequisite to approach and interpret the text, and thus could now include anyone who could read and “claim a strong Islamic commitment”, such as the educated urban youth.⁷⁰ It is important, however, not to portray this remarkable fragmentation as the harbinger of the ulama’s ultimate downfall, for these historic interpreters of Islam have deftly manipulated print culture to pursue their own vested interests. As Zaman has insightfully pointed out, print culture and the rapid increase in literacy not only provided a cheaper and more effective means with which the ulama could reach new mass audiences, but also allowed them to acquire religious texts and commentaries that would have been impossible to access and retrieve in the manuscript age.⁷¹

The interpretation of the sacred texts by new communities with diverse educational roots has in turn led to creative forms of hybridity in the production of Islamic knowledge. Olivier Roy observes that because of their educational backgrounds in various secular and scientific fields, the Islamists’ protest led to highly fragmented intellectual products that were not drawn in an in-depth manner from one pool of knowledge exclusively, but rather borrowed in complex ways from multiple clusters of thought.⁷² The Syrian civil engineer Muhammad Shahrur, for example, draws the source material of his Islamic writings from such diverse pools of knowledge as the Qur’an, civil

⁶⁹ Dale F. Eickelman and Jon W. Anderson, “Redefining Muslim Publics,” in *New Media in the Muslim World: The Emerging Public Sphere*, eds. Dale F. Eickelman and Jon W. Anderson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 11.

⁷⁰ Eickelman, *Knowledge and Power in Morocco*, 168-169.

⁷¹ Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam*, 54.

⁷² Olivier Roy, as cited in Zeghal, “Religion and Politics in Egypt,” 380.

engineering theory, and the linguistics of Sapir, Saussure, and Wharf.⁷³ Therefore, there is not only a challenge to the ulama's authority in terms of new people interpreting the text alongside the ulama, but also novel synthetic ways of reading. It is worthwhile pointing out, however, that lay Islamic activists have also manipulated the historic tools of the ulama extensively in constructing their own religious authority. For example, the prime works of two pioneering lay Islamic intellectuals, Pakistan's Abul A'la Mawdudi and Egypt's Sayyid Qutb, were Qur'anic commentaries⁷⁴ – the signature trademark of traditional scholarship.

Although it would be sweeping to portray the ulama as a rigid, monolithic bastion of conservatism nervously guarding their historic role as the sole interpreters of the Qur'an and hadith, the fundamental challenge and threat that this new, literate Islamic movement represents should not be underestimated. Members of the ulama regularly debate over who has the authority within their own ranks to issue judgments, religious edicts, and opinions, and in such countries as Egypt it is commonplace for ulama to dismiss their own colleagues as unlearned and unfit to offer religious expertise.⁷⁵ Hence, the ulama are hardly a monolithic bloc. Moreover, there is no consensus within the ulama that they alone should have the right to interpret the sacred texts. There are a number of established and highly influential Egyptian ulama, for example, who disagree with the notion that al-Azhar has a sacred monopoly over religious thought within the country, and thus call for interpretative pluralism.⁷⁶ Such inclusive calls echo those of Islamic reformers in the 1800s, such as al-Afghani, who advocated that the everyday believer

⁷³ Eickelman and Anderson, 12.

⁷⁴ Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam*, 39.

⁷⁵ Abdo, 51.

⁷⁶ Zeghal, "Religion and Politics in Egypt," 372.

must also be able to engage in *ijtihad* (independent critical thought) and not just the ulama.⁷⁷ That being said, the presence of the layperson in a space that had once been the exclusive property of the alim nonetheless represents a potentially fatal blow to the very role of the ulama's intellectual religious tradition (such as the compilation and narratives of hadith literature and the classical Qur'anic commentaries that have heavily influenced Islamic legal codes) and thus the very purpose of the ulama. Regardless of how open select ulama may be to religious pluralism, the overwhelming majority of them would never go as far as to call – as numerous lay Islamic activists and thinkers have already done – for a radical systematic rethinking of the historic intellectual religious tradition, for it is within this tradition, and the right of the ulama to guard and interpret it, that “the central basis of all their claims to religious authority and of their identity as ulama” lies.⁷⁸

Conclusions

The historical irony of the modern ulama lies in the fact that at the same time as their societal roles have been reduced over the past two centuries, what it has meant to be an alim has become more defined and specific. The ulama – although always constituting a diverse and fragmented group – have historically played prominent roles within Muslim societies, particularly in the fields of state administration, education, and law. The Egyptian ulama's sociopolitical standing was largely undermined in the nineteenth century, however, with the rise of Muhammad Ali's centralizing state and the subsequent emergence of new secular educational and legal systems. Yet such increasing marginalization did not lead to the collapse of the ulama as a self-identifying group.

⁷⁷ Gesink, 264.

⁷⁸ Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam*, 189-190.

Historically, Islamic learning was a highly informal process entailing a long, arduous journey in which a student of knowledge would travel far and wide to seek out reputed scholars. Even if a student chose to study at an established mosque-university – such as al-Azhar – there was no standardized, coordinated system of pedagogy, as learning was centered on informal knowledge circles. Although accomplished students would accumulate various *ijazas*, there was no predetermined length of study, and hence no concrete distinction existed between student and scholar. Indeed, everyone was a student of knowledge. Islamic learning would undergo a radical transformation in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, however. Influenced in complex ways by European colonialism and the steady incorporation of Muslim societies into the world system, the formerly fluid universe of Islamic learning became institutionalized and standardized as formal curricula were introduced, set time periods of study were established, certificates replaced the *ijaza* networks, and a clear distinction emerged between alim and aspiring alim. Moreover, scattered centers of Islamic learning that had no previous affiliation with one another were suddenly fused together into larger educational complexes. Hence, it became much more defined in the modern period as to who exactly was a member of the ulama: a certified graduate who had undertaken a standardized course of study in a specific institution for a set time period.

At the same time as the ulama evolved into a concrete category, the rise of mass literacy triggered a profound fragmentation of religious authority that has challenged the ulama's role as the long-standing interpreters of Islam. The ulama have historically comprised a tiny fragment of the population, constituting one of the few literate communities. Although most Muslims were sent to a *kuttab* at a young age, attendance at

such institutions rarely resulted in literacy. Hence, illiteracy was very much the norm. Memory and recitation played a key role in Islamic learning, representing the first pedagogical step for a student of knowledge. Memorization lay at the very core of the act of reading. Far from being an individual exercise, reading required an intermediary – the celebrated role of the alim – to stamp authoritative definition into the words, and in doing so unlock the original, intended meaning of the text that the student had long since confined to memory. This intensely social form of reading inevitably led to the production of interpretative hierarchies – a scholarly genealogy that traced its roots (through the *ijaza* system) all the way back, allegedly, to the first generation of Muslims. Readings thus tended to be conservative, reinforcing the opinions and stances of the ulama of earlier periods. The Qur’anic commentary was a critical site of discursive networking among the ulama, and a primary medium through which their religious authority was constructed. The rise of mass educational systems within Muslim societies in the twentieth century, however, triggered a transformation in the nature of reading. Whereas before reading required mediation – and thus an intermediary to stamp decisive meaning into the necessary ambiguity of the silent text – the words now became more authoritative in and of themselves, and thus, in a sense, began to speak on their own. Mass literacy enabled new, formerly illiterate communities (such as women) to approach the sacred text directly and interpret the faith for themselves. Moreover, the diverse educational backgrounds of such laypeople led to highly synthetic readings that drew in complex ways from multiple pools of thought. Indeed, these new interpreters – and the novel ways with which they have approached the texts – represent a major challenge to the historic intellectual religious tradition, and thus the very purpose of the ulama.

* * *

Traditional Orientalists have tended to define the ulama through a philological framework that clearly does not hold to the complexities of the modern context.⁷⁹ The word *alim* was derived from its root stem *ilm* (knowledge) and thus defined simply as “one with knowledge,” connotating someone held in privileged status due to achievements in Islamic learning.⁸⁰ Indeed, this was the very definition and framework through which the ulama identified and perceived themselves. According to the ulama, society was split into two categories – the scholar who had knowledge (*alim*) and the “ignorant person” (*jahil*) – and thus it became quite common within the literature of the ulama to distinguish between two groups: “the special people” (referring to those who were learned: themselves) and the uneducated masses, “the ordinary people”.⁸¹ Contemporary Western scholars have utilized more functional definitions. James Piscatori and Dale F. Eickelman, for example, have referred to the ulama as “an interpreting class”.⁸² Although this definition is more useful and rigorous than simply “those who know”, it remains unsatisfying in light of the recent fragmentation of religious authority. After all, lay Islamic readers have now also attained extensive religious knowledge and have undertaken their own interpretations of the sacred texts, articulating their ideas persuasively in novel and sophisticated ways.

⁷⁹ See, for example, Edward W. Lane, *An Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* 5th ed. (New York: Dover Publications, 1973); H.A.R. Gibb, *Mohammedanism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962); and Bernard Lewis, *The Political Language of Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

⁸⁰ Gaffney, *The Prophet's Pulpit*, 38-39.

⁸¹ Messick, 153.

⁸² Eickelman and Piscatori, 47.

Due to the increased centralization and institutionalization of Islamic knowledge, the definition of the Egyptian ulama in this thesis will center on al-Azhar. Drawing from Malika Zeghal's definition of an Azhari, I will define the ulama within the Egyptian context as anyone who is either a student or a graduate from an educational institution run by al-Azhar. This includes the students and graduates of the advanced centers of learning as well as the Azhari-administered secondary schools, and thus an individual does not have to be teaching or employed within the physical confines of al-Azhar to be classified as an alim.⁸³ Indeed, the ulama are interspersed throughout the complex social fabric of Egypt, serving as government functionaries in such ministries as *Awqaf*, Education, and Justice, teaching in the secular schools, and working as professional preachers in government and private mosques.⁸⁴ Hence, the Egyptian ulama are an extremely diverse group, and their multiple career paths (that have ventured deeper into secular spaces) are just as fragmented. The common thread that binds them all, however, is their education at al-Azhar.

Although the "Islamic credentials" of the ulama as defined in this thesis are an affiliation with al-Azhar, this does not mean that their training must be restricted to religious matters solely and an Azhari education exclusively. An important change that has taken place within the educational path of the ulama in the late nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth has been increased hybridity within the course of study. In Morocco since the 1960s, for example, aspiring ulama have had to read a number of secular works alongside religious texts.⁸⁵ Such exposure to secular literature within *madrasa* education is taking place in other Muslim societies as well. In the case of South

⁸³ Zeghal, "Religion and Politics in Egypt," 397.

⁸⁴ Gaffney, *The Prophet's Pulpit*, 39.

⁸⁵ Eickelman, *Knowledge and Power in Morocco*, 171.

Asia, *madrassa* curricula, at the primary level at least, now include coursework from the secular state schooling system.⁸⁶ It is important not to over-emphasize such educational hybridity within the ulama's training, however, by assuming that just because an educational reform is discussed, or legislation is actually passed, in a mosque-university, that it necessarily translates into reality. For example, there was much talk among the founders of the *Deoband* school of including the trades (such as cartography and surveying) within the Islamic curriculum, and yet such reformist ideas were never implemented.⁸⁷ Al-Azhar is another case in point. The Azhar Organization Code of 1896 called for the introduction of secular subjects such as algebra, arithmetic, and geography.⁸⁸ Not only were such subjects never actually introduced, but the very idea of their inclusion fomented stiff resistance from the ulama. As the next chapter will show, the introduction of secular coursework within al-Azhar did not take place in any substantive way until the rise of Nasser in the mid-twentieth century.

Finally, in this thesis I will differentiate between “the high ulama” and “the ulama” in general. Although the ulama have crystallized into a more coherent, concrete, and defined group than perhaps at any other point in their history, it is important not to assume that their discourses are monolithic. Indeed, multiple stances and perspectives have long existed within the intellectual world of the ulama, and thus – as Zaman wisely warns – it is “crucial that we not mistake the flexibility of their discourses for incoherence.”⁸⁹ Hence, the presence of internal criticism within the ulama should not be taken as a sign of their incipient demise. Taking such caution into consideration within

⁸⁶ Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam*, 83.

⁸⁷ Metcalf, 103.

⁸⁸ Gesink, 375-377.

⁸⁹ Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam*, 187.

the context of Egypt, I will selectively borrow Afaf Lutfi Marsot's term "the high ulama" to refer specifically to those ulama who occupy the higher administrative and religious ranks of al-Azhar,⁹⁰ including such prestigious and powerful positions as the Rector of al-Azhar and the Shaykh al-Azhar. This distinction is key, as it has become increasingly common in late twentieth century Egypt for ulama located on the periphery to protest the actions of their counterparts within the higher ranks of al-Azhar.⁹¹ An in-depth discussion of the roots and dynamics of this remarkable historical development, however, will be reserved for the next chapter.

⁹⁰ Marsot, 131. The author also uses "the high ulama" to refer to the muftis of the various schools, established and prominent scholars, the spiritual leaderships of two major Egyptian Sufi orders, so on. In this paper, however, the high ulama will refer exclusively to high-ranking religious and administrative officials *within* al-Azhar.

⁹¹ Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam*, 179.

CHAPTER 2: THE ULAMA AND LAY ISLAMIC MOVEMENTS

Introduction

A key feature of the historiography on the religious revival, particularly with regard to Egypt, is the portrayal of the ulama and lay Islamic activists as existing and operating in isolation from each other. The ulama have hardly been isolated from the currents of change that have affected other segments of society, however, which has had important consequences on their interaction with laypeople. In this chapter, I will argue that since the 1970s the boundaries have blurred considerably between the ulama and lay Islamic activists. This extensive interaction is the result of the historic convergence of two remarkable intellectual developments in late twentieth century Egypt: (a) the ability of the ulama to speak in new ways to broader segments of society following Nasser's reforms of al-Azhar in the 1960s, and (b) the increasingly thorough penetration of Islam as an objectified entity and functional discourse within Egyptian society, which in turn has allowed the ulama (among others claiming to speak for Islam) to expand their audiences significantly. This chapter will then document the extensive mixing between al-Azhar graduates and the Muslim Brotherhood, as well as radical lay Islamic movements, in the 1970s and 1980s.

Al-Azhar before the Age of Nasser

By the eve of the Nasser era al-Azhar's student composition had become primarily rural and lower class, as its educational curriculum failed to provide the training and skills necessary to gain employment upon graduation. As Chris Eccel has shown,

over the course of the interwar era more well-to-do Egyptians became increasingly scarce within the university's student body.¹ Such youth were deserting al-Azhar for the secular state schools,² such as Cairo University (then known as King Fuad I University), which offered far more lucrative future career opportunities. Indeed, the Azhari curriculum lacked the same relevance for employment and social advancement as the secular state schools. The courses that were offered were based exclusively on "religious" content. The curriculum was comprised of coursework located firmly within the domains of Arabic and Islamic studies, such as "jurisprudence, fikh, syntax, morphology, construction of sentences, eloquent expression using prosody, rhyming, metaphor and simile, ornamentation of speech, monotheism and its theology, logic, tafsir, and hadith."³ Hence, "non-religious" subjects were not taught within the Azhari curriculum, such as the sciences,⁴ which would have been key in acquiring the training necessary to gain suitable employment.

Here I will digress for a moment to shed some light on the idea of differentiating between "secular" and "religious" knowledge – a demarcation that is itself an outcome of a historical process. The construction of such categories as secular and religious within the context of knowledge production has been a rather recent development, and is very much the product of a European historical experience. Indeed, a concrete distinction between religion and science first emerged in European societies in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.⁵ To differentiate rigidly between science and religion is to assume

¹ Eccel, 292.

² Reid, 141.

³ Eccel, 150.

⁴ Hourani, 137.

⁵ Stanley J. Tambiah, *Magic, Science, Religion, and the Scope of Rationality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 11.

that the former is essentially progressive, and, consequently, that the latter is qualitatively transhistorical, and thus a stagnant and unchanging entity. Yet this is hardly an accurate portrayal of the complex historical trajectories of various religious traditions. Talal Asad sums up the historicity of religion succinctly: “Religious traditions have undergone the most radical transformations over time. Divine texts may be unalterable, but the ingenuities of human interpretations are endless.”⁶ Asad’s astute observations on the dynamism and fluidity of religion are particularly salient when discussing Islam. To speak of “Islamic” knowledge as a fixed entity presumes a transhistorical essence about Islam as a category of analysis. Rather than being a single, unchanging, and total system, in practice Islam has come to encapsulate a host of rich, textured, and highly fluid rituals and activities that – although sharing key similarities in beliefs and practices – also display dramatic differences, even contradictions, within and between Islamic societies stretched over time and space.⁷

Shaykh Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905) – the intellectual pioneer of Islamic modernism in Egypt – is an example of someone who was deeply troubled by the state of education at al-Azhar, and thus sought to reform it from within. Abduh had high hopes for al-Azhar when he arrived in Cairo in 1866. He was sorely disappointed, however,

⁶ Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 236.

⁷ Michael Gilsenan, *Recognizing Islam: Religion and Society in the Modern Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1993), 19. This is not to suggest, however, that Asad and Gilsenan share the same approach to incorporating context, and thus change, in the study of Islam. Whereas Gilsenan is interested in understanding Islam simply as multiple lived realities – and thus *Islams* – Asad finds this approach, and this word in particular, to be very problematic, as such “Islams” do not exist in isolation, but rather vigorously compete with each other over the meaning of Islam.

when he witnessed the sheer weight given to rote memorization without any comparable attention paid to comprehension.⁸ The following excerpt captures Abduh's frustrations:

...and it is the very same method of instruction in the Azhar; and this is the effect experienced by 95 out of a 100 of those whom fate permit to attend upon someone who does not follow this manner of instruction, namely, wherein the teacher throws out what he knows, and what he does not know, without paying regard to the pupil and his capacity for understanding. But the majority of the students who do not understand, deceive themselves into supposing they do understand something...⁹

Abduh's grievances with the educational system, however, were not confined to pedagogy. He was also concerned with the absence of such fields of knowledge as logic and the sciences, which had been studied by Muslim philosophers and scientists in past centuries.¹⁰ A man of action, Abduh sought to spur change by advocating for reform within the system. Even the staunchly secular Taha Husayn, to whom a few words will be devoted shortly, could not help but notice Abduh's efforts at al-Azhar: Husayn narrates in his memoirs that while studying at the mosque-university he noticed that certain students (who held grievances with the Azhari educational system), as well as a number of instructors, gravitated towards the reformist shaykh.¹¹ While undoubtedly making profound long-term contributions to Islamic modernism in Egypt and beyond, Abduh's efforts in reforming the specific educational practices at al-Azhar were at best limited. Although he created and chaired a committee within the mosque-university to push for numerous reforms, which included revisions to the curriculum, the body did not last due

⁸ Yvonne Haddad, "Muhammad Abduh: Pioneer of Islamic Reform," in *Pioneers of Islamic Revival*, ed. Ali Rahnema (London: Zed Books Ltd, 1994), 31.

⁹ Charles Adams, *Islam and Modernism in Egypt: A Study of the Modern Reform Movement Inaugurated by Muhammad Abduh* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1968), 22.

¹⁰ Gesink, 208.

¹¹ Taha Husayn, *The Days* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1997), 146.

to considerable opposition from the ulama, as well as the khedive, culminating in Abduh's resignation from the council in 1905.¹²

Taha Husayn (d. 1973) was a former student of al-Azhar who was deeply disillusioned by the content and quality of its educational system. Born in 1889, the blind Husayn was destined to become one of the great men of letters in modern Egypt. He attended a *kuttab* in the countryside, and upon completion of his studies, traveled to Cairo and enrolled at al-Azhar. After completing his education at the mosque-university, he furthered his studies at the Egyptian University, traveled to France and obtained a graduate degree from the Sorbonne, returned to Egypt and became a professor at the Egyptian University, and capped off his already impressive career serving as the Minister of Education.¹³

Husayn was shocked by the educational standards at al-Azhar. In his celebrated autobiography, *The Days*, he writes that there were no rigorous standards applied in the mosque-university's admission procedures. On the day of his own admission examination, he had, quite reasonably, expected to be tested on not only the memorization of the Qur'an in its entirety, but also on the rules of Arabic grammar. Instead, he was requested to recite only a handful of verses, and that without providing their meaning or explaining their grammatical composition.¹⁴ The lack of literature studies in the Azhari curriculum aggravated Husayn; in his writings he recounts vividly how, as a student, he would long for the holidays in which he could immerse himself in

¹² Hourani, 154-155.

¹³ Eccel, 211.

¹⁴ Husayn, 173.

the literary and historical works of Fathy Zaghoul, Qasim Amin, and Jurji Zaydan.¹⁵ Husayn's account of student life at al-Azhar suggests that only four main subjects were taught: hadith studies, Qur'anic commentary, theology, and "first principles".¹⁶ It is important to note that unlike Abduh, Husayn's grievances with the mosque-university were not concerned with revival or reform: his caustic criticism of al-Azhar constituted an attack on Islamic education,¹⁷ and (particularly after his return from France) was framed through the Eurocentric language of progress and secular liberalism.

This is not to imply that al-Azhar did not undergo any changes at all in the early twentieth century. British colonial sources have tended to portray the students and faculty of al-Azhar as being almost fanatically opposed to any and all reforms. For example, in his dispatch describing the student strikes at the mosque-university in 1909, Sir Eldon Gorst – who had recently succeeded Lord Cromer as Egypt's Consul-General – claimed that a number of proposed reforms in 1908 were "viewed with suspicion and dislike by the older students and by the more retrograde section of the Ulema, who combined to resist their application."¹⁸ Gorst then went on to describe a series of seething strikes at al-Azhar in which thousands of students participated. As the research of Indira Gesink has

¹⁵ Ibid, 226-227. Although Jurji Zaydan (1861-1914) was born to a Greek Orthodox family in Beirut, his career as a celebrated writer and Arab luminary took off in the three decades he spent in Cairo. He authored a number of major works dealing with Arab and Islamic history, and in 1892 founded the journal *al-Hilal* (the Crescent). Zaydan would become a pivotal force in the Arab intellectual awakening (*an-Nahda*) of the nineteenth century. Qasim Amin (1865-1908) studied law in France and returned to Egypt to become a judge. He played an important role in the nationalist movement, and was a founding member of Cairo University. Amin is best known, however, for his writings that lobbied for women's rights through the Western feminist framework of casting Islam as the primary culprit behind the subjugation of Egyptian women. Fathy Zaghoul was the younger brother of Saad Zaghoul (the first prime minister of Egypt) and was actively involved in the Egyptian nationalist movement. He also played an influential role in intellectual circles within Egypt in the early twentieth century, translating a number of European works into Arabic, such as that of the French sociologist and anthropologist Gustave Le Bon (1841-1931).

¹⁶ Ibid, 116.

¹⁷ Hatina, 57.

¹⁸ The National Archives of the United Kingdom, London, Public Record Office (PRO) FO 371/661, letter from Sir Eldon Gorst to Sir Edward Grey, 20 February 1909.

clarified, however, the 1909 student strikers were not opposing curricular change (they in fact initially mobilized for the very purpose of supporting and promoting educational reform) but rather had become drawn into a violent wave of anti-colonial, nationalist protest that was sweeping through Egypt.¹⁹ Indeed, the quality of education at al-Azhar, coupled with its deteriorating physical condition, fostered a widespread feeling within the mosque-university that some sort of reform was required to revitalize the rigor of Islamic education, and thus return al-Azhar to a long-lost glorious past.²⁰ A number of modest reforms were thus undertaken. In 1911, for example, a law was enacted that reorganized the university's administration by appointing a supervisor for each department, forming a secretariat, and setting up more rigorous guidelines and procedures for university appointments.²¹ That being said, however, the educational content of al-Azhar did not undergo any major transformation in the early twentieth century. For example, even though the 1911 reform law made certain administrative reforms, it did not alter the content of the Azhari curriculum,²² such as by introducing new courses.

Nasser's Reforms of al-Azhar and their Consequences

In order to increase his own legitimacy, Nasser attempted to bring al-Azhar under the wing of the government by adding new faculties and reorganizing the university's administration extensively. Despite his rhetoric of secular Arab socialism, Nasser manipulated Islamic symbols skillfully in order to increase his own legitimacy and standing within Egyptian society. For example, the Free Officers made official visits to al-Azhar and regularly attended the Friday prayers at the Islamic university (or another

¹⁹ Gesink, 468.

²⁰ Kate Zebiri, *Mahmud Shaltut and Islamic Modernism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 18.

²¹ Dodge, 140.

²² Skovgaard-Peterson, 148.

major mosque) in order to show their respect towards Islam.²³ Nasser understood that he would have to affiliate himself more closely with this bastion of religious learning, however, if he were to maintain and strengthen his credentials as a leader in the Muslim world. Hence, in 1961 he placed the mosque-university under the supervision of the Ministry of *Awqaf*, justifying his actions under the rhetoric of modernization and the necessity of making the university's curriculum relevant to the needs of the modern world. Schools of engineering and medicine were constructed, a woman's college was built, and the curriculum was revised significantly to include the liberal arts and sciences.²⁴ The reforms led to the construction of an entirely new campus in the district of Nasr City²⁵ – a considerable distance away from the historic mosque-university in Islamic Cairo. These reforms also involved major administrative changes within al-Azhar, as the university was subdivided and reshuffled into five major departments: the Supreme Council (the executive branch of the university where the rector was located), the Muslim Research Academy, the Muslim Culture and Missions Department, the al-Azhar Institutes, and finally al-Azhar University itself.²⁶

It is important to note that the ulama did not just passively accept Nasser's attack on al-Azhar's independence. The historiography of Nasser's reforms within al-Azhar has generally portrayed the ulama as acquiescing wholesale to the moves of the regime and being too weak to resist their fate. Gilles Kepel portrays the ulama's reaction to the reforms in the following manner: "Some of the students and teachers submitted to these

²³ Daniel Crecelius, "Al-Azhar in the Revolution," *Middle East Journal* 20, (1966): 34.

²⁴ Gaffney, "The Changing Voices of Islam," 29.

²⁵ Tamir Moustafa, "Conflict and Cooperation between the State and Religious Institutions in Contemporary Egypt," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 32, (2000): 6.

²⁶ Crecelius, "Al-Azhar in the Revolution," 45.

changes; other ulama, since they could not resist openly, merely dragged their heels.”²⁷ In reality, the ulama were much more articulate and a considerable number of them spoke out against the regime. They were quickly silenced, however. Between 1959 and 1963 the number of Azhari faculty members dropped from 298 to 215, and Tamir Moustafa writes that the eighty-three professors purged likely met this fate because of their explicit objection to Nasser’s actions.²⁸ Shaykh Abd al-Hameed Kishk was an example of a prominent scholar and Azhari who was very critical of the regime, and as a result was arrested in 1966 and jailed for two years.²⁹ Hence, although Nasser was indeed able to implement his reforms, the ulama of al-Azhar were hardly subservient and submissive. Rather, as Geneive Abdo has observed, the 1961 reforms led to the creation of “a generation of rejectionists” within the university and, as we will see in the next chapter, “laid the foundation for political opposition grounded in religion.”³⁰

By exerting government control over al-Azhar, Nasser gave the ulama access to a rich pool of financial resources which in turn allowed the university to increase considerably its student enrollment and educational branches throughout the country. With government control over al-Azhar came a dramatic growth in the university’s budget: whereas in 1948 the annual budget was just over 900,000 Egyptian pounds, by 1966 it had risen to almost seven million Egyptian pounds.³¹ Hence, in a period of less than twenty years al-Azhar’s financial resources had multiplied over seven-fold. Such vast financial resources had a profound impact on the student body, as they allowed al-

²⁷ Gilles Kepel, *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 53.

²⁸ Moustafa, 5.

²⁹ Kepel, *The Prophet and Pharaoh*, 175.

³⁰ Abdo, 50.

³¹ Hatina, 60.

Azhar nearly to double enrollment.³² The new and generous budget also had major long-term consequences for the overall size of the university: whereas in the 1962-1963 academic year (and hence before the effects of Nasser's reforms were fully felt) there were 212 Azhari institutes that enrolled 64,390 students, by the 1982-1983 academic year there were 302,044 students enrolled in 1,273 institutes, and by the 1992-1993 academic year there were just under a million students enrolled in 3,161 institutes.³³ Hence, the new budget allowed al-Azhar to increase dramatically its student body both in the short and long-term by opening up more institutes and centers directly affiliated with the university. Moreover, these institutes (which included primary and secondary schools) were spread throughout the country,³⁴ which in turn allowed al-Azhar to extend its reach further into both urban and rural Egyptian society.

The Azhari curriculum underwent a major transformation under Nasser as subjects falling outside traditional understandings of Islamic studies were also taught. A growing number of outside professors whose training was primarily secular were hired by the new colleges,³⁵ especially in the faculties of engineering and medicine. Western languages were also introduced into the curriculum. For example, English was used as the language of instruction in the faculties of engineering and medicine.³⁶ It is important to note that the educational content was not reformed solely by the addition of new schools of biological and medical sciences; the course content of the faculties specializing in religious studies also underwent a major transformation. For example,

³² Moustafa, 6.

³³ Zeghal, "Religion and Politics in Egypt," 379.

³⁴ Moustafa, 15.

³⁵ Eccel, 500.

³⁶ Crecelius, "Al-Azhar in the Revolution," 48.

qanun, or secular law, was introduced into the curriculum of the Faculty of *Shari'ah*,³⁷ which was renamed the Faculty of *Shari'ah* and *Qanun*. Moreover, the amount of coursework in secular subjects now mandatory within the religious faculties was significant: Donald Reid writes that by 1968, less than fifty percent of instruction for undergraduates in the Faculty of *Shari'ah* and *Qanun* was in Islamic studies.³⁸

A major long-term consequence of the teaching of secular subjects alongside religious studies was the production of Azhari graduates who were able to utilize vocabularies and intellectual frameworks similar to those from the secular universities. As Malika Zeghal has argued, the introduction of the sciences and such coursework alongside religious instruction had a major impact on the Azhari students' educational background, as it "transformed the religious scholars into intellectuals who had the same references and vocabulary as their Islamist colleagues educated in modern universities."³⁹ This is not to say that Azharis and lay Islamic activists in the secular universities were never able to understand each other before, but rather that – because of exposure to new forms of learning – Azhari graduates were now able to comprehend and interact with lay Islamic activists, as well as other members of society, more effectively and naturally than before.⁴⁰ Moreover, graduates of the Azhari secondary schools could now enroll in secular colleges and universities, as the reformed secondary institutes offered certificates in agriculture, industry, and commerce.⁴¹ Hence, Azhari graduates from the secondary schools had the opportunity to utilize their new vocabularies with students in the other universities.

³⁷ Skovgaard-Peterson, 186.

³⁸ Reid, 211.

³⁹ Zeghal, "Religion and Politics in Egypt," 380.

⁴⁰ Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam*, 145.

⁴¹ Crecelius, "Al-Azhar in the Revolution," 47.

It is important to note that by new vocabularies I do not mean an enlightened “secular knowledge” – a problematic presumption that has already been discussed – but rather a solid orientation on the part of Azharis with the rules of engagement (the limits and parameters) of different pools of thought. Courses offered in science, for example, would inevitably introduce students to the vocabulary – the internal structure – of scientific inquiry and methodology, such as the guiding principle that older established theories can be overturned by more robust, rigorous ones that provoke more compelling questions, the general requirements of what constitutes evidence, and the standardized ways in which observations are tested.⁴² An Azhari graduate familiar with such (constructed) flows of reasoning would inevitably be able to communicate and thus network with an engineer, physician, or pharmacist much more effectively than before.

Functionalizing Islam: The Islamic Revival in Contemporary Egypt

The emergence of Islam as a social and political force since the 1970s has also had a profound impact on the ulama’s interaction with broader segments of society. Nasser’s rhetoric of “Arab socialism” was seen as bankrupt following his disastrous defeat by Israel in the 1967 June War. As a result, many Egyptians began to feel that it was time to stop importing foreign ideologies, ideas, and concepts, and instead sought to attain a more indigenous form of collective identity and expression: Islam. Indeed, since the 1970s the Middle East, and Egypt in particular, has witnessed the rise of Islam as a potent sociopolitical force. The Islamic revival within Egypt was also further stimulated and encouraged by the state, beginning with the Sadat administration. By the late 1980s

⁴² Tambiah, 140-142.

the Islamic resurgence was in full swing within Egyptian society. As Gregory Starrett describes it:

Egypt's public environment is swamped with the signifiers of religion: on signs, billboards, murals, advertisements, radio and television programs, public events, the covers of books and magazines for sale on every streetcorner, and in the style of public dress and grooming.⁴³

Hence, Islam came to play an important and powerful role at multiple levels as millions of people sought to make it a more central part of their lives. As Starrett's quote suggests, however, this was more than just a popular revival from below as state institutions – such as the government-controlled media and the education system – were also saturated with signifiers of Islam. In other words, the regime sought to co-opt Islam in order to salvage whatever remaining legitimacy it had. That this revival was spread throughout Egyptian society cannot be overemphasized. Unlike the interwar years which witnessed a frustrated and young lower middle class take up the banner of Islam, the religious revival in the 1980s and 1990s crossed class boundaries as significant segments of upper class Egyptians also began to attend religious programs, wear the veil, and lead a more “Islamically-informed” way of life.⁴⁴

The underlying causes of the Islamic revival have long been explained through the language of socioeconomic deprivation. Saad Eddin Ibrahim's seminal article, “Anatomy of Egypt's Militant Islamic Groups: Methodological Notes and Preliminary Findings” (1980), was a pioneering contribution to this approach.⁴⁵ The conclusions of

⁴³ Starrett, 89.

⁴⁴ Esposito, *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?*, 100.

⁴⁵ Saad Eddin Ibrahim (b.1938) is Professor of Sociology at the American University in Cairo (AUC). In 1988 he founded the AUC-affiliated Ibn Khaldun Center for Development Studies – a research and publication institute focussing on democracy, human rights, and civil society in Egypt. An internationally renowned human rights activist, Ibrahim has been highly critical of Mubarak's authoritarian regime. During the Egyptian parliamentary elections in 2000, security officials arrested Ibrahim and twenty-seven fellow researchers from the Ibn Khaldun Center, which was subsequently shut down and ransacked. Although the

the publication were drawn from an impressive amount of primary research: Ibrahim and his colleagues conducted just over four hundred hours of interviews with thirty-three imprisoned Islamic militants from *Takfir wa al-Hijra* (Repentance and Holy Flight) and *al-Fanniya al-'Askariya* (literally, Technical Military Academy; also known as the Islamic Liberation Organization) over a two year period starting in 1977.⁴⁶ Ibrahim summed up the educational background and social composition of the interviewees as follows:

The typical member of the militant Islamic groups could therefore be described as young (early twenties), of rural or small-town background, from the middle or lower-middle class, with high achievement and motivation, upwardly mobile, with science or engineering education, and from a normally cohesive family.⁴⁷

Hence, Ibrahim was able to problematize successfully the stereotypical portrayal of the Islamic revival as being triggered by some sort of perverse, pathological state of mind. After all, the members of these groups were highly educated and accomplished relative to the average Egyptian. Yet Ibrahim went further to argue that socioeconomic deprivation – coupled with such national crises as foreign intervention – constituted the primary cause behind the rise of Islam as a sociopolitical force.⁴⁸ He then used this simplistic, sweeping explanation – socioeconomic disparity as being the principal catalyst behind political Islam – to come to terms with the emergence of complex Islamic movements not

detainees were tried and sentenced – with prison terms ranging from one to seven years – the Egyptian High Court later overruled these sentences, and acquitted the defendants from all charges. The Ibn Khaldun Center reopened and resumed its activities in 2003.

⁴⁶ Saad Eddin Ibrahim, “Anatomy of Egypt’s Militant Islamic Groups: Methodological Note and Preliminary Findings,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 12, (1980): 428.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 440.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 446-447.

only in other places (such as the *Mujahideen* in contemporary Iran), but also in earlier times: specifically, the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1930s.⁴⁹

John Esposito's edited volume, *Voices of Resurgent Islam* (1983), built upon and refined Ibrahim's conclusions into a more sophisticated analytical model: relative deprivation theory.⁵⁰ Although attempting to contextualize the rise of political Islamic activism within various Muslim societies, the thematic thread running through and unifying this collection of essays was the conviction that the Islamic resurgence was the result of an identity crisis growing out of a disillusionment with Western ideas and the failure of governments in many Muslim countries to resolve pressing economic, social, and political problems.⁵¹ This framework became the gold standard for most scholarship on the subject. Academics tended to perceive Islam as being nothing more than code language cloaked in religion, a persuasive means through which to voice deep-seated social grievances.⁵² Islam became associated with resistance to poverty and oppression, constituting a new symbolic vocabulary of empowerment for dispossessed and marginalized peoples within Muslim societies. The twin evils of authoritarian rule and socioeconomic disparity created conditions ripe for the Islamic spark to ignite, eventually spreading like wildfire throughout the Muslim world.⁵³ As the following excerpt from

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ A towering figure in the field of Islam and democracy, Esposito (b.1940) spent much of his earlier years studying Christianity: he stayed at a Catholic monastery for almost a decade, and took his undergraduate degree at St. Antony's College and a Masters in Theology at St. John's University. He would shift to studying Islam, however, when pursuing his PhD, which he took in 1974 from Temple University. A prolific writer, Esposito has published over forty books dealing with Islam and modern Muslim societies. In 1993 he founded the Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding at Georgetown University, where he is also Professor of Religion and International Affairs and Professor of Islamic Studies. Through his writings, speaking engagements, and consultation work, Esposito has become an influential voice against essentialist and reductionist portrayals of Islam as a medieval, monolithic civilization set on a collision course with the civilized West.

⁵¹ John Esposito ed., *Voices of Resurgent Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 11.

⁵² Kepel, *The Prophet and Pharaoh*, 22.

⁵³ Ali Rahnama ed., *Pioneers of Islamic Revival* (London: Zed Books Ltd, 1994), 1.

Esposito illustrates, mass disenchantment with unfulfilled state promises lay at the core of relative deprivation theory:

Government promises for a more prosperous future, coupled with government development programs, created rising but, too often, unrealized expectations. The positive benefits of modernization seemed to benefit the few, while the lot of the masses remained relatively unchanged.⁵⁴

It was when mounting frustration with such “unrealized expectations” breached a critical threshold that Islam apparently morphed into a powerful, politicized form of solidarity. Indeed, as a dynamic and vibrant tradition that connected the past to the present, Islam played no meaningful role in the historiography of the Islamic resurgence.

In a highly original book, *Putting Islam to Work: Education, Politics, and Religious Transformation in Egypt* (1998), Gregory Starrett provides a very different explanation as to the causes behind the revival. Escaping the entrenched framework of relative deprivation theory, Starrett argues that the rise of Islam as a political force is a result of the institutional transformation of Egypt through the emergence of a modern education system in the twentieth century that has, in turn, radically altered the way Islam as a religious tradition has been treated by Egyptians.⁵⁵ This *functionalization* of Islam, “putting it consciously to work for various types of social and political projects,”⁵⁶ has changed Islam’s role in Egyptian society significantly. The public education system played an instrumental part in this process by – beginning in the late nineteenth century under Cromer’s colonial regime – reifying, codifying, and packaging Islam as a language of moral code whose purpose was to promote state interests, such as by encouraging a pacifist form of Islam by citing Qur’anic verses out of context. Indigenous groups such as

⁵⁴ Esposito, *Voices of Resurgent Islam*, 12.

⁵⁵ Starrett, 6.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 10.

the Muslim Brotherhood, however, would later manipulate this colonial usage and deftly put Islam to work for their own agendas by invoking a more socially activist and anti-imperialist moral code.

The religious resurgence since the 1970s is therefore not an irrational, accidental byproduct of socioeconomic inequality, but rather a reflection of Islam's increasingly thorough penetration as a functional discourse within Egyptian society. This religious transformation, Starrett argues, is a result of colonial legacies and postcolonial realities, as institutional paradigms borrowed from the West – such as that of universal public schooling – have triggered new ways of conceptualizing Islam⁵⁷ by codifying, systematizing, and simplifying⁵⁸ what was historically a highly complex and porous religious tradition. This was a tradition, it must be noted, that was conventionally evoked through unified readings, not verses drawn in isolation. This has had far-reaching social consequences, as such objectification has enabled an exponentially larger number of Muslims – basically anyone who owned an “Islamic” booklet, cassette, or even a television set – to put Islam to work by participating in the new discourse of “Islamism”. It is interesting to note that even Saad Eddin Ibrahim, in his aforementioned study of Islamic militants in Egypt, could not help but notice his interviewees' highly functionalized and objectified treatment of Islam. As Ibrahim observed during the interview process, “almost the same words and phrases, the same Quranic verses, and the same Hadith were used by most members of each group in making their points regarding various issues.”⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Ibid, 17-18.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 231.

⁵⁹ Ibrahim, 429.

This functionalization of Islam allowed the Egyptian ulama to interact and mix more effectively with broader segments of society by creating a larger audience for their religious discourses. As Muhammad Qasim Zaman has insightfully pointed out, the Islamic revival – and the subsequent increased interest in religious literature such as books on how to lead a more “Islamically-informed” way of life, Islamic history, Islamic law, and Qur’anic stories – created the potential for the ulama (but also anyone claiming to speak for Islam) to widen their reach within society.⁶⁰ The 1980s saw a proliferation of Islamic literature that became widely circulated within Egyptian society. For example, between 1983 and 1986 alone the circulation of religious periodicals published within Egypt more than tripled, rising from 181,000 to 558,000.⁶¹ Hence, the ulama’s audiences grew dramatically, which in turn allowed the ulama to extend their reach deeper into society and tighten their grip by creating considerable followings. As will be shown shortly with the brief biographies of Shaykh Shaarawi and Shaykh Kishk, various media technologies also played a seminal role in expanding the religious market of the ulama, and not just to reading (and thus literate) audiences. Due to the proliferation of such Islam-related materials throughout Egyptian society, religious authority has now become more vested in the products themselves – books, magazines, pamphlets, but also media technologies such as cassettes, videos, and software programs – than the very processes of knowledge acquisition, such as certification from al-Azhar or a lengthy apprenticeship.⁶² Hence, the rise of a print and digital mass media has played a role similar to that of the public education system in functionalizing and objectifying Islam.

⁶⁰ Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam*, 149.

⁶¹ Starrett, 91.

⁶² *Ibid*, 232.

Putting Islam to Work: Shaykh Shaarawi and Shaykh Kishk

Shaykh Muhammad Mitwali ash-Shaarawi was a prime example of an alim who, starting from the 1970s, managed to create a large audience within Egyptian society. Born in 1911 in a village near the Nile Delta, he attended a *kuttab* and gained admission into the Faculty of Arabic Language at al-Azhar, where he received his degree in 1941.⁶³ He held a variety of prestigious religious posts throughout the Arab world, including president of *Ba'tha* (research) in an Islamic institute in Algeria, and visiting professor at the Faculty of *Shari'ah* in Mecca.⁶⁴ Upon his return to Egypt in the mid-1970s he was appointed Minister of *Awqaf*. His rise to fame, however, would be realized through a very different medium: television broadcasting. From the mid-1970s onwards, Shaarawi aired his own television show dealing with religious issues, titled *Nur 'alaa Nur (Light upon Light)*.⁶⁵ That the program's name is an excerpt from a famous verse of the Qur'an – the Verse of Light⁶⁶ – suggests that establishing such an explicit linkage to the sacred text played an important role in emphasizing his religious authority as an electronic alim. Such mass media became the gateway through which Shaarawi reached out and won the hearts of everyday Egyptians spread throughout the country. The books and audiotapes of the media star could be found in almost every corner of society, from explicitly religious spaces such as mosques to stereotypically secular realms such as hotels and airports, and

⁶³ Zeghal, *Gardiens de l'Islam*, 204.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Skovgaard-Peterson, 206.

⁶⁶ The thirty-fifth verse of *Surat an-Nur* (The Chapter of Light), the Verse of Light reads as follows: "God is the Light of the heavens and the earth, the likeness of His Light is as if there were a niche, and within it a lamp, the lamp enclosed in glass, the glass as it were a glittering star lit from a blessed tree, an olive, neither of the East nor of the West, whose oil well-nigh would shine, even if no fire touched it, Light upon Light, God guides to His Light whom He will, and God strikes similitudes for humankind, and God has knowledge of everything."

among both middle and working class Egyptians.⁶⁷ Indeed, Shaarawi's writings became so widespread that certain businesses even tried to cash in on his fame by advertising their consumer products on the inside covers of his publications – advertisements that came complete with Qur'anic citations and calligraphic-like Arabic script.⁶⁸

Shaarawi became a popular religious “brand name” among Egyptian women, as he focused much of his talks on the timely subject of Islam and gender. Shaarawi played a pioneering role, at least within Egypt, in rethinking and reshaping what it meant to be both Muslim and woman: he argued that a progressive Muslim woman was one who was not only “culturally authentic”, but also struggled for and exercised similar civil liberties and rights guaranteed for men,⁶⁹ such as the right to education and the right to employment. One of the ways through which Shaarawi disseminated such messages to a mass audience effectively, apart from the television set, was through writing short thirty-page primers on such complex topics as the place of women in Islam. These publications are historically significant because they represent a greater historical process within contemporary Muslim societies to systemize Islam,⁷⁰ in turn facilitating its mass functionalization by reducing highly complex and contested debates into simplistic, indeed polemical, language, and thus making them accessible to a much wider audience. These catechisms are also important because the proliferation of such short and highly simplified primers had a direct (and arguably negative) impact on the very rigor of the religious arguments deployed. For example, in response to the question as to whether a

⁶⁷ Esposito, *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?*, 100.

⁶⁸ Dale F. Eickelman, “Communication and Control in the Middle East: Publication and Its Discontents,” in *New Media in the Muslim World: The Emerging Public Sphere*, eds. Dale F. Eickelman and Jon W. Anderson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 38.

⁶⁹ Abdo, 146-147.

⁷⁰ Eickelman and Piscatori, 42.

woman's sins are forgiven when giving birth to a child, Shaarawi – without providing any evidence from the sacred text – simply affirmed that this was indeed the reward for any believing, God-trusting woman who was undergoing more pain in childbirth than usual.⁷¹ Hence, the systemization of Islam, coupled with the rise of mass reading audiences, has had a direct impact on the quality of the ulama's engagement with the very traditions and chains of narration that have historically been central in constructing their own interpretive authority.

The striking irony of Shaarawi is that although he commanded an impressive following from among both the upper and lower classes, he was complicit in a regime that desperately lacked legitimacy. Shaarawi was arguably the most popular alim within “official Islam” under the reign of Sadat.⁷² And “official” he certainly was. Shaarawi was hardly a peripheral alim: he did not operate on the streets, but rather was deeply intertwined with the government as a former Minister of *Awqaf*. Indeed, Shaarawi even supported Mubarak's decision to join the US-led coalition against Iraq in the 1991 Gulf War⁷³ – a foreign policy move that was condemned from almost every corner of Egyptian society. It would be simplistic, however, to portray Shaarawi as a mere mouthpiece of the status quo. Although involved in an intimate relationship with the regime, Shaarawi was well aware of certain bounds and limits that were to be respected in order not to jeopardize his own standing within Egyptian society. His sermons, for example, were of a highly populist nature, and even went as far as to support the practice of Islamic finance⁷⁴ – a somewhat contradictory position given his politics, as it was anti-

⁷¹ Zebiri, 124.

⁷² Abdo, 55.

⁷³ Esposito and Voll, 181.

⁷⁴ Nazih Ayubi, *Political Islam: Religion and Politics in the Arab World* (London: Routledge, 1991), 72.

government associations that set up Islamic financial organizations as an alternative to state banks, which engaged in usury. Yet despite such concessionary gestures, Shaarawi was careful not to venture to the other extreme of alienating himself from his primary patron. Unsurprisingly, in his televised sermons he did not pose any serious critique of the government.⁷⁵

Shaykh Abd al-Hameed Kishk is an example of an Azhari who also held vast legitimacy within Egyptian society, but – unlike Shaarawi – was highly critical of the regime. Kishk was born in 1933 to a family living off the spice business in the Egyptian province of Buhayra. Blind since childhood, he attended a *kuttab* and memorized the Qur'an at the age of thirteen.⁷⁶ Upon completing his studies in a religious institute in Alexandria, Kishk enrolled in the *Usul ad-Din* (Principles of Religion) Faculty at al-Azhar.⁷⁷ In 1961 he took up a position in a government mosque. Kishk mixed and mingled within lay Islamic activist circles right from the beginning of his preaching career. In the 1960s, for example, he was a major supporter of the Muslim Brotherhood,⁷⁸ which was quite a daring stance to take considering that the Nasser regime was instigating a brutal crackdown on the Brotherhood, successfully breaking (though not destroying) the organization. Such staunch support for the Brotherhood led to Kishk's arrest in 1966. He was released a couple of years later, however, and would resume his post as preacher at *Ayn al-Hayat* (Source of Life) Mosque in Cairo.⁷⁹ Kishk would be based in this mosque, which he would soon transform into a major hub of fiery anti-government preaching, until his death in the mid-1990s.

⁷⁵ Kepel, *The Prophet and Pharaoh*, 173.

⁷⁶ Zeghal, *Gardiens de l'Islam*, 214.

⁷⁷ Abdo, 65.

⁷⁸ Gaffney, *The Prophet's Pulpit*, 100.

⁷⁹ Kepel, *The Prophet and Pharaoh*, 175.

Kishk's charismatic and highly polemical sermons paved the path for him to become one of the most famous preachers within the Arab world in the late twentieth century. Dubbed the "star of Islamic preaching", Kishk became so popular within Egypt that the Ministry of *Awqaf* had to add a number of annexes to his mosque in order to accommodate the successive waves of followers that would flood the gates.⁸⁰ Kishk's fame was indeed a force to be reckoned with. His mark was to be found in almost every walk of life: tapes of his sermons were played in mosques, the streets, taxicabs, shops scattered throughout the city, airports, and in the houses of both the middle and working class.⁸¹ This critical usage of media technology – especially audiocassettes – enabled Kishk to create considerable audiences within the larger Arab world, and even in Arab Muslim communities as far away as Europe and North America.⁸² He was also a formidable presence through print culture by writing on "Islam" in newspaper columns and widely circulated books and pamphlets.⁸³ It is interesting to note, and telling of Kishk as a member of the ulama, that referencing the Qur'an played an important role in consolidating his credibility as a self-appointed spokesperson for Islam, and thus setting the stage for the controversial and highly politicized statements that came packaged with a classic Kishk sermon. As Gilles Kepel's analysis of Kishk's talks have shown, his impassioned speeches were generally precluded with a lengthy, sober lecture dedicated to Qur'anic commentary⁸⁴ – the historic hallmark of the ulama's authority.

⁸⁰ Abdo, 45.

⁸¹ Esposito, *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?*, 100.

⁸² Eickelman and Piscatori, 125.

⁸³ Esposito, *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?*, 100.

⁸⁴ Kepel, *The Prophet and Pharaoh*, 178.

The Ulama and the Muslim Brotherhood

Since the 1970s there has been increased interaction and mixing between the ulama and moderate lay Islamic activist organizations, especially the Muslim Brotherhood. Some of the most influential al-Azhar graduates in the Muslim world today (such as Shaykh Muhammad al-Ghazali and Shaykh Yusuf al-Qaradawi) actually sit on the editorial board of *ad-Da'wa (The Call)*, the official mouthpiece and newspaper of the Brotherhood.⁸⁵ Azharis have also worked with the Brotherhood in government institutions. For example, Shaykh Salah Abu Ismail was not only a member of the movement, but was also well-known throughout Egypt for being one of the foremost advocates and supporters of lay Islamic activists in the parliament.⁸⁶ Interaction between the ulama and lay Islamic activists was not restricted to the Brotherhood alone. For example, Shaykh Kishk had followers among numerous Islamic groups and associations.⁸⁷ Another reason as to why such ulama were able to interact and mix with laypeople so effectively was because many of these religious experts rejected the elitist notion that the ulama alone held a monopoly on religious interpretation,⁸⁸ and thus believed that interpretive authority was also accessible to educated lay Muslims. This critical idea harkens back to the writings of Shaykh Muhammad Abduh, who emphasized that the Qur'an must be understood first and foremost through reason,⁸⁹ and thus any Muslim who was capable of rational inquiry had the direct responsibility to read, think about, and interpret the text for himself.⁹⁰

⁸⁵ Ibid, 128.

⁸⁶ Gaffney, "The Changing Voices of Islam," 44.

⁸⁷ Abdo, 65.

⁸⁸ Zeghal, "Religion and Politics in Egypt," 372.

⁸⁹ Muhammad Abduh, *The Theology of Unity* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1966), 30-31.

⁹⁰ Ibid, 156.

Shaykh Muhammad al-Ghazali (d. 1996) is an example of an established alim who was actively involved with the Brotherhood. Born in 1917 in the Egyptian province of Buhayra, Ghazali was sent by his father to a *kuttab*, memorizing the Qur'an at the age of ten.⁹¹ After attending a religious institute in Alexandria, he enrolled in the Faculty of *Usul ad-Din* (Principles of Religion) at al-Azhar in Cairo, graduating in 1941 with his doctorate degree.⁹² In his professional career Ghazali played an influential role within a number of administrative and research bodies at al-Azhar, and became a key player within the Islamic Research Council.⁹³ Ghazali was a prolific writer whose works were circulated widely within Egyptian society. Indeed, at the time of his death in the mid-1990s, he was arguably the best-known religious lecturer in the country.⁹⁴ His activities were not confined to Egypt, however. Ghazali also played an active role in Islamic education in other parts of the Arab world. For example, he directed the Amir Abd al-Qadir Islamic University in Algeria from the date of its inception in 1984 until 1990.⁹⁵ It was through such academic posts, coupled with his numerous sermons and written works, that Ghazali was able to make a formidable name for himself within Algerian society as a learned alim and influential media personality.⁹⁶ His fame soon spread beyond the boundaries of Algeria and seeped into surrounding national communities, such as Tunisia, in which his writings had a profound impact on the country's burgeoning Islamic movement.⁹⁷

⁹¹ Zeghal, *Gardiens de l'Islam*, 212.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Moustafa, 14.

⁹⁴ Skovgaard-Peterson, 308.

⁹⁵ Olivier Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 126.

⁹⁶ Starrett, 210.

⁹⁷ Esposito, *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?*, 155.

Ghazali has had a long and active history in working with the Muslim Brotherhood. He was in fact introduced to the organization in its formative years: in 1937 Ghazali met the Brotherhood's founder, Hasan al-Banna, when the latter was giving a sermon in Alexandria, and soon became a member of the movement.⁹⁸ Ghazali would play a pioneering role in the reconstruction of the Brotherhood following the turbulent Nasser years. He encouraged and supported the idea of establishing Islamic associations in Egypt's university campuses in the 1970s⁹⁹ – the graduates of which would come to form the backbone of the Brotherhood a decade later. Physicians and medical students based within the universities in the 1970s (many of whom would become active Brotherhood members) have attested to the fact that the critical guidance provided by such ulama as Ghazali, Hasan al-Baquri, and Sayyed Sabiq played a crucial role in spurring the Islamic movement on the campuses.¹⁰⁰ The brunt of Ghazali's contributions to the Brotherhood was through his writings, however, which were channeled through the organization's various media outlets. For example, in addition to writing for the official mouthpiece of the Brotherhood – *ad-Da'wa* – he also penned a weekly column in the 1980s for another paper affiliated with the movement, *ash-Sha'b (The People)*.¹⁰¹

This is not to suggest, however, that significant tensions did not emerge at specific points in time between Ghazali and the official Brotherhood leadership. In fact, a major rift took place between the two in the 1950s. Whereas the organization was very coherent and unified under the charismatic and domineering leadership of Banna, a crisis in centralized authority would confront the movement with its founder's assassination in

⁹⁸ Zeghal, *Gardiens de l'Islam*, 212.

⁹⁹ Abdo, 120.

¹⁰⁰ Robert Bianchi, *Unruly Corporatism: Associational Life in Twentieth-Century Egypt* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 193.

¹⁰¹ Starrett, 210.

1949, leading to the emergence of new influential voices located outside official leadership circles, such as that of Ghazali.¹⁰² Since he had begun writing on various Islamic topics in 1948, Ghazali had succeeded in creating a considerable intellectual following among the general members of the Brotherhood. Recognizing this looming threat to their authority, the official leadership of the Brotherhood realized that it was necessary to act and defend their interests: in 1953 the secretary-general moved that writers located within the organization's membership (the most influential of whom was clearly Ghazali) should first submit their articles and books to the administration of Supreme Guide Hasan al-Hudaybi for "clearance" before publication, and failure of doing so would lead to a possible boycott of that writer's works by the general membership.¹⁰³ This attempt to silence dissent within the ranks of the organization was ultimately unsuccessful, and thus more drastic and decisive action was required. In December 1953 Ghazali and several other members were expelled from the Brotherhood under charges of attempting to overthrow al-Hudaybi.¹⁰⁴ The popular shaykh was later reinstated into the organization, however. Ghazali was simply too influential an alim for an ambitious Islamic movement to ignore.

Shaykh Yusuf al-Qaradawi is another example of an alim who was well known both within Egypt and the larger Arab world. Born in 1926, Qaradawi attended a *kuttab* and memorized the Qur'an at the age of ten. He then joined the al-Azhar Theological Seminary, becoming a pupil of one of the most influential ulama of his time, Mahmud

¹⁰² Ayubi, 173.

¹⁰³ Mitchell, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers*, 188.

¹⁰⁴ Rainer Brunner, *Islamic Ecumenism in the Twentieth Century: The Azhar and Shi'ism between Rapprochement and Restraint* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 183.

Shaltut.¹⁰⁵ In the 1970s Qaradawi's aspirations turned towards the Gulf: he traveled to Qatar and set up the College of *Shari'ah* and Islamic Studies, as well as the Center of *Sunnah* and *Sirah* Studies in the University of Qatar. Despite such distance from his country of birth, Qaradawi maintained ties to al-Azhar, and was a designated professor in the university in the 1980s.¹⁰⁶ Ironically, it was Qaradawi's physical isolation from Egypt that played a key role in the rise of his own fame among Egyptians: it was through the televised broadcasts of his popular religious shows on the Qatar-based network *al-Jazeera*,¹⁰⁷ coupled with his erudition as a learned alim and a prolific writer, that he was able to become one of the most influential Sunni ulama within the larger Muslim world. Like Ghazali, Qaradawi seems to have also made a special mark on Algerian soil. The National Liberation Front (FLN) regime pursued a policy of importing major ulama, such as Qaradawi, in order to counter allegations of secularism by dissenting Islamic activists and thus to bolster its own fledgling religious legitimacy. Rather than fulfilling this purpose, however, the talks of such preachers only served to strengthen Islamic sentiment (and by extension the oppositional actors and movements that claimed to speak for Islam) within Algeria.¹⁰⁸

Qaradawi was actively involved in the Muslim Brotherhood and networked extensively with other lay Islamic activists and intellectuals within Egypt. A former member of the Brotherhood,¹⁰⁹ Qaradawi on numerous occasions expressed his deep admiration for the movement's charismatic founder. He lauded Banna for his diligence in advocating for solidarity and unity among Muslims while at the same time accepting the

¹⁰⁵ Zebiri, 79.

¹⁰⁶ Zeghal, *Gardiens de l'Islam*, 353.

¹⁰⁷ Kepel, *Jihad*, 234.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid*, 165.

¹⁰⁹ Skovgaard-Peterson, 206.

inevitability of disagreement and diversity in opinion.¹¹⁰ In addition to the Brotherhood, Qaradawi networked with other lay Islamic activists and intellectuals based in the universities, mainstream newspapers, and the courts. Together they spawned the emergence of a new intellectual Islamic movement in the early 1980s – *al-Wasatiyya* (the Middle Way) – that rejects both secularism and Islamic militancy, and instead seeks to navigate a complex middle way that bridges Islam and modernity.¹¹¹ In January 1998 Qaradawi began a journal (*al-Manaar*) with key players in this new intellectual trend, including such Islamic personalities as Muhammad Imara, Tariq al-Bishri¹¹² – one of the most respected judges in Egypt – and Fahmy Huwaidy, an internationally renowned journalist writing in *al-Ahram*.

The ulama’s presence within the membership of the Muslim Brotherhood is largely a result of their involvement with lay Islamic groups in the secular universities in the 1970s – a collaboration that was largely made possible by Sadat’s policies. Islam came to play a much more prominent role in the Sadat years (1970-81) – a key reason being to counter the scattered remnants of the Nasserist Left within Egyptian society. Hence, Sadat gave a significant amount of space and freedom for Islamic organizations to engage in their activities in the universities, provincial centers, and working class neighborhoods.¹¹³ He also allowed the Brotherhood, which had suffered the brunt of Nasser’s coercive apparatus, to resurface. Under the rhetoric of the “Corrective Revolution” (a government-administered process in 1971 that was publicized as “correcting” the authoritarian wrongs of Nasser’s police state), Sadat released scores of

¹¹⁰ Esposito and Voll, 44.

¹¹¹ For a thematic survey of *al-Wasatiyya*, see Raymond W. Baker, *Islam Without Fear: Egypt and the New Islamists* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

¹¹² Brunner, 39.

¹¹³ Bianchi, 161.

political prisoners,¹¹⁴ which included many members of the Brotherhood.¹¹⁵ He made substantive efforts to display publicly his deep commitment to Islam, and even called himself *ar-Ra'is al-Mu'min* (the Believing President). Sadat became well known for sporting a *zabeeb* – a dark callous that developed on the forehead as a result of prostrating during prayers, and was thus widely considered a sign of an observant believer – whenever making an appearance on national television.¹¹⁶ It is important to note that Sadat's Islamic sympathies extended far beyond rhetoric, and even made a lasting imprint on the legal sphere. In 1971, he enshrined Islam into the Egyptian constitution by citing the principles of the *Shari'ah* as “a principal source of legislation”, later to be changed to *the* principal source of legislation in 1980.¹¹⁷

During the 1970s, Egypt's universities saw the rise of student groups that strove to increase Islamic awareness among the student body, such as by organizing religious programs and lectures. The ulama were regularly invited to attend such programs and lecture on Islamic topics. For example, the *Jama'at al-Islamiyya* would invite world-renowned ulama such as Ghazali and Qaradawi to speak at their major events.¹¹⁸ Moreover, the student turnouts at these programs were at times so large that the government, feeling threatened by the mobilization of so many youth, intervened and shut them down. For example, in November 1978 Shaykh Kishk was scheduled to speak at Minya University. When thousands of students had gathered at the university to await his arrival, however, the government intervened and barred Shaykh Kishk from

¹¹⁴ Jankowski, *Egypt: A Short History*, 168.

¹¹⁵ Starrett, 80.

¹¹⁶ Abdo, 54.

¹¹⁷ Skovgaard-Peterson, 199-200.

¹¹⁸ Kepel, *The Prophet and Pharaoh*, 146.

speaking.¹¹⁹ Through such programs Islamic activists in the universities were able to make informal but important contacts with members of the ulama. Such informal networks sealed between the ulama and lay Islamic activists at the university level, in turn, carried over into the Brotherhood, as many of these students joined the organization upon graduation. The speaking engagements of the ulama at the universities are also important because they show that many ulama (although formally educated at the Azhari institutes) have seen their professional careers as preachers and spiritual guides develop outside of al-Azhar and in such social and educational spaces as Islamic associations and universities.¹²⁰ It is worthwhile noting that the ulama were not just present at the secular universities, but that members of lay Islamic groups (especially the Brotherhood) were also able to win a student following in al-Azhar. For example, in 1989 Brotherhood members, after having secured a majority of seats in the student union elections in Cairo University, Zaqaziq University, and Alexandria University two years earlier, captured a number of seats in al-Azhar's student union.¹²¹

An alliance between significant numbers of the ulama and the Muslim Brotherhood formed not only through increased interaction and mixing, but also by standing together in solidarity against secular intellectuals and state policies. The state-sponsored international conference on population control in 1994, which supported such practices as abortion, is a good example of this emerging solidarity. The Brotherhood condemned the conference immediately as an attack on Egypt's Islamic values, and challenged al-Azhar to do the same. A month later, al-Azhar also condemned the conference as espousing un-Islamic values – such as legitimizing premarital sex – and, in

¹¹⁹ Gaffney, *The Prophet's Pulpit*, 100-101.

¹²⁰ Zeghal, "Religion and Politics in Egypt," 386.

¹²¹ Al-Awadi, 122.

doing so, elicited great praise from the Brotherhood.¹²² The two were able not only to close ranks against certain state policies, but also drew common cause in attacking the writings of secular intellectuals,¹²³ such as “the apostate” Nasr Hameed Abu Zayd.¹²⁴ This is not to suggest that this is the first time that the ulama and the Brotherhood stood together on certain issues. For example, in 1950 they both spoke in unison against the secular writer Khalid Muhammad Khalid and successfully called for the banning of his book *From Here We Start*, which argued for the complete separation of religion and state.¹²⁵ Although there were isolated instances of earlier collaboration, however, such solidarity between lay Islamic activists and the ulama became much more consistent and pronounced after the 1970s.

The extensive interaction between the ulama and the Muslim Brotherhood in the post-Nasser period was remarkably different from their relationship in the interwar era. Earlier scholarly work on the Brotherhood suggested that there was considerable interaction between its members and the ulama in the interwar years. For example, Richard P. Mitchell wrote that the Azhari students came to form “an important and active core” of the Brotherhood.¹²⁶ More recent scholarship, however, has challenged Mitchell’s narrative. Brynjar Lia has argued that there was no significant Azhari following in the

¹²² Steven Barraclough, “Al-Azhar: Between the Government and the Islamists,” *Middle East Journal* 52, (1998): 245.

¹²³ Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam*, 148.

¹²⁴ Abu Zayd was a professor of Islamic Studies at Cairo University. After having published a work – *Critique of Islamic Discourse* (1992) – that called into question key Islamic beliefs, he was taken to court in 1993 under charges of apostasy by a team of Islamic activist lawyers collaborating with Shaykh Abd as-Sabour Shahin (an alim based in a major Cairo mosque). Abu Zayd’s critics argued that since he was – according to their reading – an apostate, his marriage with his wife (Ibtihal Yunis) was no longer valid. The Egyptian Appellate Court sided with the Islamic activists, ruling that as Abu Zayd denied key Islamic beliefs (such as the existence of heaven and hell, and that the Qur’an was the literal word of God) he was an apostate, and thus invalidated his marriage. Abu Zayd and Yunis fled Egypt and eventually settled in the Netherlands. For a discussion of the Abu Zayd affair and its aftereffects, see Abdo, 163-171.

¹²⁵ Hatina, 59.

¹²⁶ Mitchell, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers*, 212.

Brotherhood in the interwar era by showing that surveys of the delegates attending the Second and Third Conferences of the organization in the 1930s revealed an overwhelming majority of *effendi* titles, and not *shaykh* titles (which were characteristic of Azhar graduates).¹²⁷ Hence, it is safe to conclude that although outside groups, such as the Brotherhood, were indeed able to muster a certain following within al-Azhar, it was very limited and significantly less than in the secular universities.¹²⁸ It is also important to note that unlike, for example, the 1980s, the Brotherhood's membership and support-base in the interwar era did not cross class boundaries. Before the rise of Nasser, the Brotherhood was a movement that represented the voices of lay lower middle class youth.¹²⁹

The Ulama and Militant Islamic Groups

The ulama have not only shown their presence in moderate lay Islamic movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood, but also in radical militant organizations. The historical irony of extremist Islamic movements is that although in their rhetoric they tend to claim that no group (such as the ulama) has an exclusive monopoly over interpretation and therefore that all believers have the right to interpret the sacred texts,¹³⁰ such militant groups have tended to place members of the ulama into positions of leadership within their own organizations. For example, Shaykh Ali Abduh Ismail – an Azhari graduate – was in fact the original leader of Shukri Mustafa's Society of Muslims

¹²⁷ Lia, 224.

¹²⁸ Ahmed Abdalla, *The Student Movement and National Politics in Egypt, 1923-1973* (London: Al-Saqi Books, 1985), 56.

¹²⁹ Lia, 227.

¹³⁰ Ayubi, 67.

(*Takfir wa al-Hijra*),¹³¹ a cultish community that emerged in the 1970s and called for complete separation and isolation from the sinfulness of mainstream Egyptian society. Moreover, it is well known that Shaykh Omar Abd al-Rahman (another Azhari acting on the extreme periphery)¹³² was the spiritual leader of *al-Jihad* and the *Jama'at al-Islamiyya*. A lesser-known figure is the Azhari Yussef al-Badri, a radical shaykh who traveled in the company of many Egyptian Islamic activists to the United States to preach in a New Jersey mosque in the late 1980s.¹³³ Hence, ulama have also been at the forefront of militant Islamic groups despite the latter's calls for the democratization of religious interpretation. This historical contradiction between the rhetoric and practice of militant Islamic groups exists because they require the Islamic credentials of the ulama in order to increase their own legitimacy as radical oppositional movements that express their dissent through a religious framework. It is important to note that ulama within mainstream society and in the higher echelons of al-Azhar have been quick to condemn those ulama who have partaken in militant projects. For example, Shaykh Dhahabi (a high-ranking Azhari cleric) condemned the Society of Muslims as being heretical, and even compared the organization to Kharijism.¹³⁴

¹³¹ Kepel, *The Prophet and Pharaoh*, 75.

¹³² I will differentiate between "periphery" ulama and those located in the "extreme periphery". Ulama within the former are those who graduated from al-Azhar but did not hold key and influential posts within the mosque-university or the government bureaucracy. Hence, the course of their careers was charted primarily outside of al-Azhar, such as by preaching in mosques (both private and public), working with various Islamic organizations, so forth. Ulama in the "extreme periphery", however, denote those who complied with violence – such as by issuing *fatwas* that legitimized these actions – and thus affiliated and networked extensively with groups that espoused militancy.

¹³³ Abdo, 268.

¹³⁴ Kepel, *Jihad*, 85. The *Khawaarij* (literally, "those who leave") comprised a radical minority group within the burgeoning Muslim community in seventh-century Arabia. They adhered to a highly literalist interpretation of the Qur'an, considering anyone who committed a sin as leaving the fold of the faith. Although initially supporting the son-in-law of the Prophet and the fourth caliph, Ali ibn Abi Talib, they soon turned against Ali following his diplomacy in the Battle of Siffin (658 CE) with Muawiyya ibn Abu Sufyan – the leader of the Quraysh, of whom the *Khawaarij* were stringent enemies. A member of the

Omar Abd al-Rahman is a compelling case study of an alim on the extreme periphery of al-Azhar who has taken a leadership role in radical and militant Islamic organizations. Abd al-Rahman was born in 1938 in the Delta region of Egypt. His father sent him to a *kuttab* and he memorized the Qur'an at the age of eleven. He then moved to Cairo and attended al-Azhar, receiving his diploma from the Faculty of Theology in 1965.¹³⁵ Abd al-Rahman's area of expertise lay in the Qur'anic sciences and its *tafsir* (commentaries), and his research culminated in a doctoral dissertation titled "The Opponents of the Qur'an as Depicted in the Surat at-Tawba of the Qur'an."¹³⁶ Upon completion of his studies, Abd al-Rahman was assigned to preach in a mosque in Fayyum. It was not until he would become the mufti of the militant group *Tanzim al-Jihad* (Organization of Holy Struggle) in the 1970s, however, that Abd al-Rahman would rise to national prominence.¹³⁷ He would attain international fame shortly afterwards with the dawn of the Afghan Jihad. Following the Soviet invasion in the late 1970s, the United States encouraged militant religious militias to surface in Afghanistan in order to combat communism. Abd al-Rahman was a key player in mobilizing these highly doctrinal Islamic groups, and – with the full backing of the CIA and the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) – made regular visits to Peshawar in the 1980s.¹³⁸ Abd al-Rahman's activities would eventually catch up with him. Although he was able to escape sentencing following the assassination of Sadat in the early 1980s (an act facilitated by his own religious edict) Abd al-Rahman got into trouble with Egyptian authorities in the early

Khawarij (Abd Al-Rahman Ibn Muljim) would later murder Ali in 661CE in the city of Najaf. The *Khawarij* have long since disappeared into the dustbin of history.

¹³⁵ Zeghal, *Gardiens de l'Islam*, 337-338.

¹³⁶ Zeghal, "Religion and Politics in Egypt", 399.

¹³⁷ Gaffney, *The Prophet's Pulpit*, 82.

¹³⁸ Kepel, *Jihad*, 147.

1990s, and was forced to flee, of all places, to New Jersey. He was later implicated in the World Trade Center bombings in New York in 1993, and was sentenced to life imprisonment in the United States in 1996.

A key theme of Abd al-Rahman's teachings was his emphasis on the literalness of the Qur'an,¹³⁹ which was to be taken at face value without factoring in historical context (such as the occasions of revelation) or substantive references to hadith literature. Such an exclusively textual approach was compatible with the worldviews of extremist Islamic movements – such as *al-Jihad* and the *Jama'at al-Islamiyya* – which sought Abd al-Rahman's credentials as an Azhari to enhance the legitimacy of their own actions. For example, Abd al-Rahman released religious rulings that authorized *al-Jihad's* violent acts, the most notable being the gunning down of Sadat.¹⁴⁰ Direct engagement with the Qur'an played an important role in enabling Abd al-Rahman to construct his religious authority and legitimacy as not only an alim, but more significantly as a societal actor positioned in a radical oppositional stance to both the state and the mainstream ulama. In condemning the regime Abd al-Rahman did not cite names directly, but instead used ambiguous references from various *surahs* (Qur'anic chapters) to show that those who took it upon themselves to make laws were transgressing upon God's sovereignty, and thus were not believers and must not be followed.¹⁴¹ It is worthwhile noting that like moderate scholars, such as Qaradawi and Ghazali, militant ulama like Abd al-Rahman have also made their presence felt within the university campuses. It has been much harder for radical voices such as Abd al-Rahman's, however, to be heard within the universities to the same degree as the more moderate ulama, as the government has

¹³⁹ Gaffney, *The Prophet's Pulpit*, 138.

¹⁴⁰ Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam*, 148.

¹⁴¹ Eickelman and Piscatori, 125-126.

clamped down on such groups heavily. For example, in 1986 an *al-Jihad* member (who was also a university student) was actually shot dead at Asyut University by a security official while putting up a poster advertising a lecture by Abd al-Rahman.¹⁴²

It is worthwhile noting that despite his radical record, Abd al-Rahman has not forwarded militancy as the sole strategy at all times and places. Apart from allying with such militant organizations as *al-Jihad* and *Takfir wa al-Hijra*, Abd al-Rahman has also actively distanced himself – and indeed *been* distanced – from mainstream Islamic movements. For example, he refused outright to become a member of the moderate Muslim Brotherhood.¹⁴³ Abd al-Rahman has clearly taken part in his fair share of militancy. In 1992, for example, he released a religious edict legitimizing attacks on Egypt's tourist industry.¹⁴⁴ There were also important tensions, however, between Abd al-Rahman and militant oppositional groups. For example, he severely criticized the members of *Takfir wa al-Hijra* for lacking an adequate grounding in Islam, particularly in their knowledge of the Qur'an.¹⁴⁵ Moreover, it is rarely noted that at certain occasions Abd al-Rahman has endorsed peaceful ceasefire and called for negotiations between militant movements and the authoritarian state. Months before the 1997 Luxor massacre – in which fifty-eight tourists and four Egyptian police officers were killed – Abd al-Rahman (from his cell in the United States) explicitly endorsed proposals by both *al-Jihad* and the *Jama'at al-Islamiyya* calling for a ceasefire through direct negotiations with the Egyptian government.¹⁴⁶ The regime, however, rejected such requests.

¹⁴² Al-Awadi, 119.

¹⁴³ Zeghal, *Gardiens de l'Islam*, 338.

¹⁴⁴ Skovgaard-Peterson, 216.

¹⁴⁵ Ayubi, 80.

¹⁴⁶ Abdo, 194.

Conclusions

The historic convergence of two remarkable intellectual developments in late twentieth century Egypt has led to a significant amount of interaction and mixing between the ulama and lay Islamic activists. The first development was a direct (though unintended) consequence of Nasser's reforms of al-Azhar in the 1960s. Over the course of the interwar era, the Azhari student body grew increasingly rural and lower class, as more affluent youth gravitated towards the secular universities. This was primarily due to the fact that al-Azhar's curriculum lacked the coursework necessary to gain suitable employment upon graduation. Indeed, the curriculum was comprised of religious studies exclusively. Individuals located within the mosque-university, such as Shaykh Muhammad Abduh and Taha Husayn, criticized the absence of such subjects as the sciences, logic, and literature. Although several administrative reforms were undertaken, al-Azhar's curriculum remained largely unchanged in the interwar years. In order to boost the Islamic credentials of his regime, Nasser attempted to bring al-Azhar under the wing of the government by introducing a number of reforms, such as building faculties of engineering and medicine, and integrating the liberal arts and secular law into the curriculum. The teaching of secular subjects alongside traditional religious studies had a profound long-term consequence. By exposing the ulama to different forms of knowledge, it allowed these historic interpreters of Islam to use new vocabularies and intellectual frameworks, and thus to interact and mix much more effectively than before with lay Islamic activists based in the secular universities. The increasingly thorough penetration of Islam as a functional discourse within society also played a vital role in enabling such extensive interaction. A major religious revival has swept Egypt since the 1970s. Although socioeconomic contexts have played a certain role in the Islamic revival,

it is critically important not to reduce this complex phenomenon to the simplistic story of relative deprivation. The religious revival is also very much a product of the institutional transformation of the country. The rise of a mass educational system has worked to objectify, systemize, and indeed simplify Islam as a language of moral code, in turn allowing a significantly larger number of Muslims to partake in the discourse of “Islamism”. This functionalization of Islam has allowed the ulama (among others claiming to speak for Islam) to extend their reach deeper into society by creating larger audiences for their religious discourses. Shaykh Shaarawi and Shaykh Kishk – through their prolific output of primers, newspaper columns, and taped lectures (as well as the former’s popular television show) dealing with “Islamic” topics – represent two compelling examples of ulama who have put Islam to work in contemporary Egypt.

A key outcome of this historic convergence has been a considerable blurring in the boundaries between the ulama and lay Islamic activists. The ulama have made a sizable presence in the Brotherhood and have been actively involved in its various activities and programs. Shaykh Ghazali was a highly influential alim who not only created a considerable following within the organization’s general membership, but also played a pioneering role in the reconstruction of the movement following the turbulent Nasser years. Shaykh Qaradawi is another case in point. An internationally acclaimed alim, he was able to create a mass following in the larger Muslim world through his popular religious television show on *al-Jazeera*. Moreover, Qaradawi was not only a former Brotherhood member, but also mixed extensively with lay Islamic intellectuals based in the Egyptian courts, mainstream newspapers, and secular universities. The ulama’s pervasive presence in the Brotherhood is largely a result of their involvement

with lay Islamic student groups in the universities in the 1970s, many members of which would later join the organization upon graduation. Key alliances also formed between the Brotherhood and the ulama in opposing state policies, as well as in condemning secular intellectuals. The extensive mixing between the ulama and the Brotherhood in the late twentieth century stands in stark contrast to their relationship in the interwar years, as the organization represented the voices of lay lower middle class youth in this period. The ulama have also made their mark in militant Islamic movements. Despite the claim of radical Islamic activists that no group has an exclusive monopoly over religious interpretation, the ulama have been at the very forefront of such organizations, including *Takfir wa al-Hijra*, *al-Jihad*, and the *Jama'at al-Islamiyya*. This paradox in rhetoric and practice is precisely due to the fact that such militant groups require the Islamic credentials of the ulama in order to legitimize their own radical oppositional message. Abd al-Rahman is a classic example of an Azhari who has played a prominent role in militant Islamic organizations within Egypt (such as through his spiritual leadership of *al-Jihad* and the *Jama'at al-Islamiyya*) as well as abroad: in the late 1970s he mobilized radical religious militias to combat communism in Afghanistan, and in the early 1990s coordinated the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York.

CHAPTER 3: INDEPENDENT MOSQUES, THE STATE, AND THE HIGH ULAMA

Introduction

Just as scholarship on the modern Middle East and political Islam has tended to portray the ulama as having remained “traditional” and isolated from currents of social change, it has also presented these historic interpreters of Islam as having become co-opted by the regime.¹ Hence, not only did the ulama constitute a monolithic and unchanging bloc, but their modern role became simply to act as state puppets – an arm of the government whose primary purpose was to counter moderate and radical oppositional Islamic movements. In this chapter, I will argue that the extensive mixing and interaction between the ulama and lay Islamic activists in the late twentieth century led the ulama to assume increasingly a role of dissent. I will advance this thesis by examining the proliferation of “private” mosques throughout the country and their growing oppositional stance towards the state, as well as the increasingly contested space of “government” mosques. I will then explore the ulama’s severe criticism of not only the state’s domestic and international policies, but also the compliant behavior of the high ulama. Although the apologetic actions of the high ranking officials of al-Azhar have been condemned by ulama throughout the country, however, it is important to note that the relationship

¹ See, for example, Daniel Crecelius, “Nonideological Responses of the Egyptian Ulama to Modernization,” in *Scholars, Saints, and Sufis: Muslim Religious Institutions in the Middle East since 1500*, ed. Nikkie R. Keddie (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972); Daniel Crecelius, “Al-Azhar in the Revolution,” *Middle East Journal* 20, (1966): 31-49; Gilles Kepel, *The Prophet and Pharaoh: Muslim Extremism in Egypt* (London: Al-Saqi Books, 1985); and Olivier Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).

between the high ulama and the regime has hardly remained static, and indeed become increasingly complex. This chapter will conclude, therefore, with some notes and observations on this transforming alliance.

Venues of Protest: “Private” and “Government” Mosques

There are two major types of mosques that exist within contemporary Egypt: government (*hukumi*) mosques and private (*ahli*) mosques. Whereas the former are under the supervision of the Ministry of Religious Endowments and the imam is a government employee, the latter are controlled by private groups and individuals and hence the preacher is unconnected to the state.² That being said, however, historically private mosques have not been completely isolated from the Egyptian government. For example, Sadat, in line with his policy of manipulating Islam to counter the Left, actually supported the building of mosques outside of the state’s supervision and al-Azhar’s control.³ Private mosques within Egypt are extremely diverse, as they range from large structures that can house thousands of worshippers to significantly smaller buildings that, at first glance, may not even be recognizable as religious centers. As John Esposito has pointed out, private mosques in Egypt “include not only formal buildings but thousands of structures and rooms added onto hotels, hospitals, and private dwellings.”⁴ Moreover, due to the relatively small size of the vast majority of private mosques, they generally do not have any staff to ensure their maintenance and upkeep.⁵

The scholarly literature on private mosques in Egypt has generally tended to inflate the power and reach of the state, and hence has portrayed the majority (if not all)

² Kepel, *The Prophet and Pharaoh*, 81.

³ Al-Awadi, 36-37.

⁴ Esposito, *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?*, 139.

⁵ Gaffney, *The Prophet’s Pulpit*, 48-49.

of private mosques as having been at some point “nationalized” by the government. For example, Chris Eccel writes that in 1981 Sadat responded to the threat of militant Islamic activism by “placing all private mosques under the *Wizarat al-Awqaf*.”⁶ Esposito makes a similar and equally sweeping claim: “In an attempt to control the spread of radicalism, in July 1985 the Mubarak government placed all private mosques under the Ministry of Religious Endowments.”⁷ Even though there is a four year discrepancy between Eccel and Esposito in terms of when exactly private mosques were placed under government control, the common assumption between them is that the nationalization of private mosques in Egypt is in fact *possible*: they fail to acknowledge the sheer immensity of the task at hand. Tamir Moustafa also falls into this trap by arguing that the efforts of the Nasser, Sadat, and Mubarak regimes to nationalize private mosques culminated in over seventy percent of mosques being state-owned and controlled by the mid-1990s.⁸

In reality, the state has had little to no success in reigning in private mosques, primarily because they have consistently far outnumbered state-owned mosques. The number of private mosques dwarfed government mosques as far back as in Nasser’s Egypt: in 1962 there were 14,212 private mosques, while only 3,006 mosques were state-owned.⁹ This discrepancy seems to have only grown under Sadat in the 1970s. An internal survey drawn from the archives of the Ministry of *Awqaf* showed that in 1975 there were 23,575 private mosques and 5,163 government mosques.¹⁰ Moreover, between the mid-1970s and the early 1980s private mosques almost doubled while state-controlled mosques hardly increased in number: Geneive Abdo writes that in 1981 there were

⁶ Eccel, 531.

⁷ Esposito, *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?*, 98.

⁸ Moustafa, 7-8.

⁹ Bianchi, 190.

¹⁰ Gaffney, “The Changing Voices of Islam,” 40.

approximately 46,000 mosques in Egypt, of which only six thousand were controlled by the Ministry of Religious Endowments.¹¹ Hence, the state has clearly failed in its endeavor to reign in private mosques; this task of simply “placing” them wholesale under the wing of the government is clearly much more complex than scholars such as Eccel and Moustafa have assumed. Moreover, this task will become only more difficult for the government due to the continued proliferation of private mosques throughout Egypt.

Private mosques have become important meeting places for Islamic activists. Due to the fact that these institutions operate and function outside of the reach and supervision of the state, they have become very convenient locations for members of Islamic organizations to network and mobilize.¹² Moreover, these religious centers are not just borrowed by Islamic groups to hold a program or study circle, but many are in fact owned and operated by them. In the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s many private and voluntary Islamic organizations transformed into mosque-building associations, which emerged as one of the largest religious groups in the country.¹³ Many Islamic organizations have used such mosques to administer important social and economic services to members of society. For example, *Anas bin Malik* and *Mustafa Mahmud* – two major private mosques in Cairo – regularly provide social services that include free medical clinics for the poor, as well as religious programs such as Qur’an memorization and Islamic study circles.¹⁴ Such social services administered through private mosques have boosted the legitimacy of Islamic activist groups (and the numerous ulama affiliated with them)¹⁵ significantly.

¹¹ Abdo, 191.

¹² Esposito, *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?*, 138.

¹³ Bianchi, 187.

¹⁴ Starrett, 121.

¹⁵ This is not to assume that a private mosque must be staffed by an alim. In fact, the congregations of the majority of private mosques in Egypt are led by laypeople. Even if occupying preaching positions within a

Moreover, their credibility among broader segments of society has been enhanced further by the fact that the regime has made major budget cuts that have pulled back on subsidies on medicine, food, and clothing material,¹⁶ which in turn has led to a considerable drop in the standard of living.

Private mosques have taken an increasingly oppositional stance towards state policies. During the Sadat era, fiery preachers within independent mosques would regularly condemn the state and institutions allied with the state, including the government-controlled media and the higher-ranks of al-Azhar.¹⁷ Dissent was not restricted to sermons, however, as demonstrations criticizing the actions of the regime were held in numerous private mosques throughout the country, including religious centers in Cairo, Alexandria, Suez, Asyut, Fayyum, and Minya.¹⁸ For example, before his arrest in 1985, Shaykh Hafiz Salaama (whose mosque was known for being a center of dissent) had led demonstrations demanding the implementation of the *Shari'ah*.¹⁹ It is important, however, not to portray private mosques in Egypt as forming a united and monolithic bloc of dissent with identical grievances and without important tensions and differences between them. Some mosques were clearly more radical and extreme than others. In the towns of Manfalut and Abu Tij there were in fact recorded incidents of clashes between members of Islamic associations who ran private mosques in the area and radical Islamic groups attempting to takeover these mosques for their own use.²⁰

minority of private mosques, however, the ulama – due to the sheer number of these institutions scattered throughout the country – have been able to make a sizable presence within Egyptian society.

¹⁶ Ayubi, 196.

¹⁷ Esposito and Voll, 175-176.

¹⁸ Ayubi, 197.

¹⁹ Esposito, *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?*, 98.

²⁰ Bianchi, 204.

Government mosques have not exactly been centers of acquiescence either, and have also engaged in a degree of dissent. Just as the scholarly literature has tended to inflate the power exercised by the state over private mosques, it has also romanticized the amount of control that the regime has wielded over government mosques. Tamir Moustafa's portrayal of the power and authority that the regime allegedly exercises over government mosques encapsulates this historiographical trend effectively:

...the government has established specific regulations for controlling who preaches in state-owned mosques and what kinds of topics are addressed...The High Council drafts a quarterly plan detailing acceptable topics for Friday sermons for distribution to all state mosques. Imams who stray too far from the outlined topics are punished.²¹

The underlying assumption of Mustafa's narrative is that just because a certain mosque is government "run", the regime has control over every single aspect of its functioning. In reality, the state has not been successful in controlling the content of sermons in state-owned mosques, largely because these mosques themselves have experienced a severe shortage of registered imams. For example, in 1975 there were only 2,401 registered imams in 5,163 government mosques.²² This, in turn, has resulted in many state-owned mosques transforming into centers of dissent. It is worthwhile recalling that Shaykh Kishk – one of the most outspoken preachers in Egypt – was not an imam in an independent institution but was based throughout his career in a government mosque.²³ Indeed, some of the most popular and outspoken critics of the regime among the ulama, such as Shaykh Adil Aid, were based in state-owned mosques.²⁴ The government's lack of control over these so-called "state institutions" thus begs the following question: Is it

²¹ Moustafa, 8.

²² Gaffney, "The Changing Voices of Islam," 40.

²³ Kepel, *The Prophet and Pharaoh*, 175.

²⁴ Gaffney, *The Prophet's Pulpit*, 50.

even meaningful to differentiate between government and private mosques when discussing Islam and politics in contemporary Egypt? The case of Shaykh Mahmud Mahallawi further suggests otherwise.

Mahallawi was an alim who – through the venue of a government mosque – not only networked extensively with lay Islamic activists, but also launched severe criticisms at the regime. Born in the 1930s in the Egyptian province of Kafr al-Sheikh, Mahallawi studied in the Faculty of *Shari'ah* at al-Azhar and received a diploma from the university's Faculty of Arabic Language.²⁵ In the 1960s he would take on a preaching post in a government mosque in Alexandria. Like various other Azharis, Mahallawi would eventually become involved in the Muslim Brotherhood.²⁶ What is interesting about Mahallawi is that although his education lay within the domains of al-Azhar exclusively, his professional career spanned secular spaces as well. His training in Arabic, for example, enabled him to secure teaching posts in the secular state schools of Alexandria – positions he would then manipulate to encourage students to attend mosques.²⁷ Hence, Mahallawi's professional experiences are representative of an emerging hybridity within the career paths of the ulama. His mosque became a major hub of student life, and within it he provided not only numerous scientific instruments for student usage that were not available in sufficient numbers in the schools and universities (such as microscopes), but also built an annex to the mosque for doctors and medical students enrolled in the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Alexandria to administer various social and medical services.²⁸ Mahallawi was highly critical of the status quo, and

²⁵ Zeghal, *Gardiens de l'Islam*, 217.

²⁶ Al-Awadi, 121.

²⁷ Zeghal, *Gardiens de l'Islam*, 218.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 219.

his criticisms of the regime rang so severe that Sadat actually attacked him personally in a speech made before the Egyptian parliament.²⁹ Sadat did not confine his assault on Mahallawi to words, however. In September 1981, the shaykh was arrested along with numerous other dissident ulama, including Mahmud Id and Kishk.³⁰

Indeed, the state rarely remained idle while it was condemned from the pulpits, and attempted to suppress and silence dissent through a variety of means. A common tactic was refusing to issue building permits for new mosques, as well as withholding financial subsidies.³¹ A more drastic approach that was used to address the lack of registered preachers in “government mosques” was the recruiting and training of laymen (who were first tested for their loyalty to the regime) to deliver the Friday sermons instead of ulama.³² Such approaches to curtailing dissent were not successful, however, and the government – realizing that it was losing the battle of words to fiery preachers based in mosques scattered throughout the country – switched to more coercive measures. The Interior Ministry began to clamp down on dissent by conducting raids on both private and government mosques.³³ Despite its desperate resort to violence, the state was ultimately unsuccessful in achieving its objectives due to the sheer volume of mosques spread throughout the country. Moreover, the regime had a particularly hard time reigning in more radical and militant voices of dissent, such as in the case of Abd al-

²⁹ Gaffney, *The Prophet's Pulpit*, 50.

³⁰ Kepel, *The Prophet and Pharaoh*, 176. Mahallawi was later released and resumed his political preaching and social activities in his mosque in Alexandria.

³¹ Bianchi, 190.

³² Gaffney, “The Changing Voices of Islam,” 43.

³³ Starrett, 207.

Rahman's mosque in Fayyum, which the government in 1989 had to lay siege on for almost two years.³⁴

The Ulama's Growing Criticism of the State

The ulama have become increasingly critical and outspoken in opposing the government's foreign policies. Since Sadat's tenure as president, Egypt witnessed a realignment in foreign policy towards the United States, and, ever since, the Egyptian government has received a considerable sum of economic and military aid every year. Numerous ulama have criticized this relationship, such as Shaykh Ismail Sadiq al-Adawy, who explicitly called upon the regime to stop accepting \$2.1 billion a year in American aid.³⁵ As divisive an issue has been the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty, which has enraged Egyptians who have seen the intense suffering of the Palestinians under the Israeli occupation. Many Egyptians have opposed the government's peace treaty, and some have been more explicit in their criticism than others. For example, Shaykh Salaama (a very popular alim in Egypt) has called upon the government not only to withdraw from the peace treaty, but to wage a war against Israel.³⁶ Certain ulama on the extreme periphery have also engaged in more radical and violent forms of dissent. For example, Abd al-Rahman issued religious rulings legitimizing attacks on Western tourists in the late 1980s and early 1990s,³⁷ the intention being not only to destabilize the tourism-dominated Egyptian economy, but also to sever political relations between Egypt and the West. It is important to note that although criticism of state policies clearly jeopardized the ulama's safety in the face of an overwhelmingly authoritarian Egyptian

³⁴ Kepel, *Jihad*, 283.

³⁵ Abdo, 32-33.

³⁶ Ayubi, 72.

³⁷ Skovgaard-Peterson, 216.

regime, such anti-Israeli and anti-American rhetoric also served to boost their own credibility and standing among broader segments of society.³⁸

The majority of the ulama's dissent, however, has focused on the domestic sphere: specifically, the government's policy on issues of religion and moral conduct. While the ulama have criticized the lack of freedom of speech and human rights under the regime – such as by preachers in government mosques condemning the state-controlled media³⁹ – the majority of their dissent has focused on the government's turning a blind eye to growing Westernization and secularism within Egyptian society. For example, Abd al-Rahman condemned the government for not addressing (what he claimed to be) the rise of alcohol-consumption and gambling within Egypt.⁴⁰ It is interesting to note that the ulama's criticism of Westernization and secularism was framed through a discourse of national identity that seeks to underline the historic connection between Egypt and Islam. The following statement made by Qaradawi while the regime was working to preserve the Ramses II mummy is telling of the nature of this national-Islamic discourse:

Egypt is Muslim, not pharaonic; it is the land of 'Amr Ibn al-'As and not of Ramses...the youth of the jama'at Islamiyya are the true representatives of Egypt, and not the Avenue of the Pyramids [a street notorious for its nightclubs, dance halls, and casinos]...Egypt is young men who let their beards grow...It is the land of al-Azhar.⁴¹

By expressing their religious dissent through a nationalist framework, the ulama were able to situate themselves as the legitimate spokesmen and representatives of Egyptian society. Moreover, the ulama have not only criticized the government, but have also (in

³⁸ Abdo, 43.

³⁹ Esposito and Voll, 176.

⁴⁰ Eickelman and Piscatori, 71.

⁴¹ Kepel, *The Prophet and Pharaoh*, 150-151.

solidarity with lay Islamic activists) attacked individuals who they perceived as being fifth columns of the West, such as secular intellectuals.⁴²

At the same time as they denounced secularism the ulama called for the implementation of the *Shari'ah*. Some of the ulama have been quite vocal and outspoken on the importance of integrating religious law into political life, such as Shaykh Salaama, who went as far as leading demonstrations from his private mosque calling for the immediate application of the *Shari'ah*.⁴³ Other ulama have articulated themselves in more subtle and sophisticated ways. Many ulama in the private mosques have supported and stood in solidarity with lay Islamic activists in the government who have lobbied for *Shari'ah* implementation. For example, the Muslim Brotherhood – ever since its entry into Parliament in 1984 – has received significant support from ulama both inside and outside the government.⁴⁴ It should be noted, however, that neither the ulama nor the Brotherhood have been clear as to what they mean exactly by “the *Shari'ah*,” or what its application into public law would directly entail.

Shaykh Salah Abu Ismail is an example of an alim who worked alongside lay Islamic activists in the parliament in calling for a greater role of Islam within Egypt. After attending a *kuttab*, Abu Ismail enrolled at al-Azhar and graduated from the Faculty of *Shari'ah* in 1954. Yet his training was not restricted to Islamic legal studies. Upon completion of his Azhari schooling, Abu Ismail joined an educational program at the Faculty of Teaching at Ain Shams University, receiving his diploma in 1956.⁴⁵ Such a fragmented education would have lasting consequences on his professional career. Apart

⁴² Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam*, 148.

⁴³ Ayubi, 72.

⁴⁴ Zeghal, “Religion and Politics in Egypt,” 387.

⁴⁵ Zeghal, *Gardiens de l'Islam*, 253.

from operating within important Azhari bodies – such as the Academy of Islamic Research in which he worked on Qur’anic commentary – Abu Ismail also taught Arabic and Islamic studies in the secular state schools, and even worked as a school inspector under the Ministry of Education.⁴⁶ He was also involved heavily in the activities of lay Islamic activists: in the mid-1970s Abu Ismail played a key role in recruiting university students into the Brotherhood, including members that today represent the most powerful voices in the movement, such as the secretary-general Esam al-Aryan, Abu Al-Ilā Madi, and Abdul Mun’em Abu al-Futuh.⁴⁷ It was at the same time as he was recruiting students at the university campuses for the Brotherhood that Abu Ismail began to take part in politics by getting involved in municipal affairs and, in 1976, running in legislative elections.⁴⁸

Abu Ismail would become a pivotal figure in the Brotherhood’s moves within the parliament. He played an instrumental role in forging the historic alliance between the Brotherhood and the Liberal Party in the 1984 elections.⁴⁹ Abu Ismail had democratically won a seat in parliament, and from this seat became a major spokesperson for the application of the *Shari’ah* in Egyptian public life.⁵⁰ Hence, for Abu Ismail, Islamic activist lobbying was much more effective within government structures than operating on the streets or within the universities. That being said, ulama and lay Islamic activists based outside the government, such as in the universities, have engaged in anti-secularist lobbying that has worked to the great benefit of Islamic interests *within* the parliament. For example, in 1992 twenty-four professors – half from al-Azhar and half from Cairo

⁴⁶ Ibid, 254.

⁴⁷ Al-Awadi, 42.

⁴⁸ Zeghal, *Gardiens de l’Islam*, 254.

⁴⁹ Al-Awadi, 136.

⁵⁰ Gaffney, *The Prophet’s Pulpit*, 40.

University – presented themselves as a united front called the *Nadwat al-Ulama* (The Ulama’s Conference) and released a strong statement demanding that the Mubarak regime outlaw and ban Faraj Foda’s secular party, *Hizb al-Mustaqbal*.⁵¹ This naturally worked to the advantage of Islamic voices within the parliament, as Foda and his supporters stood in the way of their Islamizing agendas.

This is not to suggest that Abu Ismail confined his activism to the Egyptian parliament and such state bodies. Ironically, at the same time as he worked within the governing system he also promoted and legitimized oppositional activities that sought to undermine this very order. In solidarity with more dogmatic Islamic groups who refused to deal with what they perceived to be as an “infidel” state, Abu Ismail issued *fatwas* in support of the highly profitable enterprise of currency speculation.⁵² He also refused to take part in the delegations of ulama that were sent to the countryside at the behest of the government in the 1970s and 1980s to reach out to militant oppositional youth groups under the rubric of fostering dialogue,⁵³ and thus to promote and partake in state-sponsored projects of peace and religious toleration. Abu Ismail was an outspoken critic of the high ulama, who supported – and in doing so attempted to legitimize and apologize for – the actions of the authoritarian regime. At the time of his death in 1990, Abu Ismail was busy leading a media campaign (through the Brotherhood affiliated newspapers *al-I’tisam* and *Liwa al-Islam*) against the pro-regime Mufti of Egypt, Shaykh Muhammad Syed Tantawi.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Zeghal, “Religion and Politics in Egypt”, 389.

⁵² Ayubi, 193.

⁵³ Zeghal, “Religion and Politics in Egypt”, 386.

⁵⁴ Skovgaard-Peterson, 295-296.

Challenging the Higher Ranks of al-Azhar

Indeed, the ulama have not only condemned state policies, but have also criticized the high ulama of al-Azhar for their compliance and support of the status quo. The high-ranking officials of al-Azhar, such as the Shaykh al-Azhar, have become synonymous within Egyptian society and among lay Islamic activist and ulama circles as being state puppets that exist solely to legitimize the actions of the regime.⁵⁵ These include foreign policies, such as Egypt's alliance with the United States and the peace-treaty with Israel, and domestic policies as well, such as al-Azhar's support for government-run banks and the state's waged war against lay Islamic activists and private mosques. Al-Azhar was also attacked by both lay Islamic activists and the ulama for failing to live up to its role as the protector and bastion of Islam within Egypt. For example, the mosque-university was criticized for its inability to stop the spread of so-called deviant practices in popular Islam (such as saint-veneration) as well as the corruption of an increasingly Westernized Egyptian youth.⁵⁶ Kishk was a prime example of an alim who was an outspoken critic of al-Azhar for allowing itself to be bossed around by government officials.⁵⁷ The following quote from a Friday sermon delivered by Kishk in 1981 captures his frustration with the mosque-university:

In 1961 a terrible blow was dealt with al-Azhar in the name of a reform that was in fact its destruction...ever since the reform, the leadership of al-Azhar has ceased to render any service to Islam.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam*, 148.

⁵⁶ Bianchi, 161.

⁵⁷ Moustafa, 9.

⁵⁸ Kepel, *The Prophet and Pharaoh*, 183.

It is important to note that Kishk's criticism was not launched against the ulama of al-Azhar as a group, but rather – as is made clear in the above statement – at the high ulama who occupied key positions of authority within the mosque-university.

Shaykh al-Azhar Muhammad Syed Tantawi is a classic example of a high-ranking Azhari official who has been criticized and condemned by the ulama from all sides for his unrelenting support of the status quo. Born in a town in Upper Egypt in 1928, Tantawi attended a *kuttab* and, after memorizing the Qur'an, enrolled at a branch of al-Azhar in Alexandria. He received his doctorate degree in Qur'anic commentary and hadith studies in 1958, writing his dissertation on the depictions of the Children of Israel in the Qur'an and hadith literature.⁵⁹ He spent the earlier part of his scholarly career lecturing in religious studies at the University of Asyut, and later transferred to the Faculty of Islamic and Arabic Studies at al-Azhar in the late 1970s.⁶⁰ Hence, although Tantawi's formal education was rooted within a traditional Azhari scheme, his professional experience was a mixed one that included employment in the state universities. In 1986 he was appointed by the regime to the post of Mufti of Egypt. It was during his tenure as the Mufti of the Republic that a growing rift began to develop between himself and then Shaykh al-Azhar Gad al-Haqq,⁶¹ who was attempting to distance al-Azhar from the arms and influence of the state,⁶² and thus reclaim the independence of the mosque-university. That the Mufti was even influential enough to maintain a major rift with the powerful Shaykh al-Azhar suggests that the appointment of Tantawi to the rank of Mufti represented a remarkable

⁵⁹ Skovgaard-Peterson, 251.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Born in 1917, Gad al-Haqq followed the typical course of an aspiring alim – working his way from a *kuttab* to al-Azhar – and received his doctorate in Islamic law in the early 1940s. He followed a similar career path to that of now Shaykh al-Azhar Tantawi: after serving as the Mufti of the Republic from 1978 to 1982, he was appointed as Shaykh al-Azhar, serving in this position for fourteen years until his death in 1996. For more on Gad al-Haqq, see Zeghal, *Gardiens de l'Islam*, 264.

⁶² Abdo, 62.

growth in the power and influence of this office – indeed, the post of Mufti now became a major medium through which the regime could channel its interests.⁶³ Tantawi would eventually replace Gad al-Haqq as Shaykh al-Azhar in March 1996.

Tantawi has been one of the strongest backers of state policies, and has issued religious rulings to legitimize government actions. For example, in September 1989 he issued a ruling that declared that savings certificates did not engage in usury, and hence did not violate the Islamic prohibition of interest.⁶⁴ This was a very sensitive issue, especially considering the fact that savings certificates were issued by state banks, many of which had been condemned by the majority of ulama and lay Islamic activists as violating Islamic principles. Moreover, Tantawi's ruling was not only widely perceived within Egyptian society as a strong gesture of support for state-run banks, but also as an attack on the legitimacy of Islamic banks and investment companies.⁶⁵ The ruling led to an explosion of dissent, with fiery criticism being launched from Islamic newspapers in Cairo to preachers based in distant mosques in the countryside. The ulama were very articulate in their opposition to Tantawi's support of savings certificates, and a protest letter was actually signed by over a hundred leading ulama – including numerous Azhari professors, Kishk, and the militant Abd al-Rahman – demanding that the legal ruling be revoked immediately.⁶⁶ Despite strong and widespread opposition, however, Tantawi has been able to maintain (with much-needed government backing) his position of authority as Shaykh al-Azhar. Moreover, his later actions have only served to alienate himself and the high ulama of al-Azhar even more from lay Islamic activists and the ulama. For

⁶³ Skovgaard-Peterson, 250.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 296.

⁶⁵ Al-Awadi, 121.

⁶⁶ Skovgaard-Peterson, 306-307.

example, in an apologetic show of support for the regime's peace treaty with Israel, Tantawi invited the chief rabbi of Israel's Ashkenazi Jews, Yisrael Meir Lau, to al-Azhar to engage in religious dialogue in 1997.⁶⁷ Unsurprisingly, this shocking move was met with widespread condemnation from almost every corner of Egyptian society.

The High Ulama and the Regime: A Changing Relationship

It is important, however, not to project the alliance between the high ulama and the regime through an ahistorical lens. Whereas the higher echelons of al-Azhar were very much subservient to the whims of the government in the 1950s and 1960s, the relationship between the two has since transformed into a more complex, contested site. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Nasser – despite his socialist rhetoric – incorporated Islam into his political vocabulary. He set up bodies, such as the Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs, whose purpose was to establish and propagate the underlying link between the regime, Islam, and socialism. For example, the Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs published such articles as “Socialism and Islam” and “The Cause of the National Charter is the Cause of Islam” in its primary media outlet, *Minbar al-Islam* (The Pulpit of Islam).⁶⁸ Al-Azhar played an instrumental role in this legitimacy-building project by framing socialism as a system of social organization that was indigenous to Muslim societies, rather than being an alien Western import. Hence, Shaykh al-Azhar Mahmud Shaltut qualified “Arab socialism” by differentiating it from Western socialism's atheistic and materialistic tendencies, arguing that this more homebred form drew its ideological roots from Islam.⁶⁹ Nasser also used the high ulama extensively to counter and silence

⁶⁷ Abdo, 64.

⁶⁸ Moustafa, 7.

⁶⁹ Hatina, 59.

alternative lay Islamic voices. For example, at the same time as Nasser was cracking down on the Muslim Brotherhood, al-Azhar passed numerous public statements condemning any opposition to the status quo.⁷⁰ This is not to imply that the high ulama were completely passive. Shaltut himself protested Nasser's actions by submitting his resignation as Shaykh al-Azhar in August 1963. This resignation was not accepted, however, and he was forced to continue serving as Shaykh al-Azhar.⁷¹ Shaltut was simply too valuable a government tool (his office was a wellspring of public statements and *fatwas* supportive of the status quo) to be allowed to step down from this persuasive post. Hence, although there was certainly some form of resistance to Nasser by the high ulama, it was extremely limited and futile. Nasser was a powerful, indeed domineering, presence in the high ulama / regime relationship.

Although Sadat used Islam more explicitly as the political language of the state, this did not necessarily entail more autonomy and assertive space for the high ulama. As discussed in the second chapter, direct association with Islam signified Sadat's reign. However, the higher-ranks of al-Azhar acted as much of a mouthpiece for the state in the Sadat era than they did in the Nasser years.⁷² The case of Shaykh al-Azhar Abd al-Halim Mahmud (1973-1978) is telling of the sheer power Sadat's state wielded over the high ulama. Seeking to capitalize on the regime's newfound sympathy for Islam, in the early 1970s Mahmud demanded that the government implement the *Shari'ah*.⁷³ Rather than considering this request seriously, Sadat responded in 1974 with a decree that directly challenged Mahmud's authority as Shaykh al-Azhar, and (though not dismissing

⁷⁰ Barraclough, 238.

⁷¹ Abdo, 52.

⁷² Barraclough, 237.

⁷³ Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam*, 146.

Mahmud from the office altogether) transferred a number of his powers to the Ministry of Religious Endowments.⁷⁴ Hence, it is important for scholars of contemporary Islam not to romanticize the Sadat years by equating his interlacing of Islam and politics with increased independence on the part of the high ulama. To be sure, throughout his reign Sadat systematically clamped down on all members of the ulama who opposed or protested his policies and decrees, such as through legal sanctions.⁷⁵

It was in the Mubarak era (1981-present) that the high ulama emerged as more autonomous players and lobbyists in what was becoming an increasingly complex relationship with the regime. Shaykh al-Azhar Gad al-Haqq played a pioneering role in this newfound assertiveness. Beginning in the late 1980s, the Shaykh al-Azhar began to push for more autonomy (and thus to lessen, though not sever, the high ulama's dependence on the state) by openly condemning growing secularization in Egypt and opposing the various pro-regime religious edicts of then Mufti of Egypt Tantawi.⁷⁶ In the early 1990s the high ulama were able to become even more independent actors in their alliance with the government. The rise of Islamic activist movements in this period proved, paradoxically, to be of great advantage to the high ulama. As Tamir Moustafa has argued, the steady increase in Islamic militancy over the course of the 1990s gave the high ulama greater leverage over the state – which desperately needed their compliance to counter such religiously-framed dissent – in pressing for Islamization reforms within Egyptian public life.⁷⁷ In sharp contrast to the Sadat era, these demands of the high ulama found a receptive audience within Mubarak's official government circles. In 1994, for

⁷⁴ Zeghal, "Religion and Politics in Egypt," 383.

⁷⁵ Abdo, 54.

⁷⁶ Zeghal, "Religion and Politics in Egypt," 388.

⁷⁷ Moustafa, 3.

instance, the Council of State altered Egypt's censorship laws significantly, vesting al-Azhar's Islamic Research Centre with new powers that allowed it to censor various media outlets within Egypt,⁷⁸ including radio, television, and literature such as books.⁷⁹ This was a dramatic expansion of the Centre's sphere of influence, considering that before this landmark reform it only reviewed literature and films directly related to religious topics, while the ministries of culture and education dealt with more secular literature and artwork.⁸⁰ Since this censorship reform, numerous literary and artistic productions deemed "unIslamic" (particularly in the field of film and television) have been banned in Egypt. This has deeply frustrated and angered secular, and even certain Islamic, intellectuals and artists within the country.

The high ulama's bold response to the regime-sponsored United Nations International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in 1994 is a compelling example of the much more assertive role that al-Azhar came to play in its alliance with the state. This conference was a major international project for Mubarak: the event was drawing development experts and state officials from all over the world, and was thus a window of opportunity for Egypt to present itself as a major leader in the so-called Third World.⁸¹ Hence, the last thing Mubarak wanted was any domestic opposition to the ICPD, let alone heated public protest. Unfortunately for him, that is exactly what transpired. Islamic activists and the ulama (high and otherwise) stood together and spoke in solidarity against the conference, criticizing the ICPD's stances on abortion and premarital sex. A powerful channel of dissent was the newly resurrected "Ulama's Front"

⁷⁸ Barraclough, 242.

⁷⁹ Hatina, 63.

⁸⁰ Abdo, 66-67.

⁸¹ Moustafa, 13.

(a movement within al-Azhar that originally emerged in the 1940s to protest the writings of such secular intellectuals as Taha Husayn),⁸² which, with the blessing of Shaykh al-Azhar Gad al-Haqq,⁸³ condemned the ICPD as espousing unIslamic values. The high ulama were so outraged with the conference that they even went as far as to claim that the ICPD was nothing more than a Western imperialist plot to reduce the population of Muslims – making reference to the conference’s proposals on how to lessen Egypt’s birthrate – as the Muslim population was fast outgrowing the Christian population globally.⁸⁴

It is crucial not to exaggerate al-Azhar’s newfound dynamism in its relationship with the state. Despite their recent assertiveness, the high ulama nonetheless remained subservient to the regime. Indeed, a more autonomous and independent al-Azhar worked to the direct benefit of the government, which long since realized that the public image of a passive, co-opted, and easily manipulated al-Azhar undermined the mosque-university’s credibility within Egyptian society, and thus its ability to legitimize government actions and counter Islamically-framed dissent effectively.⁸⁵ Hence, the state had a self-vested interest in tolerating a cadre of high ulama who lobbied for the popular cause of greater Islamization within Egyptian public life and disagreed with the government on select religious issues. The state-sponsored appointment of the staunchly pro-regime Tantawi to the rank of Shaykh al-Azhar in 1996, however, suggests that the government felt that the high ulama had become a little too bold, and thus sought to reassert firmly its own authority. Tantawi’s ascendance to the administrative throne of al-

⁸² Zeghal, “Religion and Politics in Egypt,” 390.

⁸³ Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam*, 147.

⁸⁴ Abdo, 57.

⁸⁵ Moustafa, 3.

Azhar did not run smoothly with the high ulama. Over the course of Gad al-Haqq's fourteen-year tenure as Shaykh al-Azhar, the higher ranks of the mosque-university had become steeped with ulama who were deeply sympathetic to al-Haqq's vision of a more autonomous al-Azhar, and thus Tantawi faced much internal opposition in his initial months in office, not the least of which was the boycotting of his earlier meetings.⁸⁶ By 1997, however, Tantawi had successfully consolidated his control over the high ulama by silencing Gad al-Haqq loyalists and shutting down the main medium of dissent, the Ulama's Front.⁸⁷ Hence, the reign of Tantawi as Shaykh al-Azhar in many ways represents a rigid tightening of the regime over the higher echelons of al-Azhar. As Moustafa as insightfully noted, however, the appointment of Tantawi should not be read as a symbol of government power, but rather as a sign of state desperation: cognizant of the fact that its own legitimacy may be ultimately undermined in the long run with such an explicitly pro-regime and unpopular alim at the helm of al-Azhar, Mubarak seems to have resorted to securing more immediate and short-term results.⁸⁸

Conclusions

Independent mosques have become important venues through which the ulama have protested the actions of the regime. Private mosques have generally been portrayed in the scholarly literature as having become at some point "nationalized". The state has largely failed to exert control over private mosques, however, as they have consistently far outnumbered government mosques. For example, in 1981 there were approximately 46,000 private mosques in Egypt, as compared to six thousand state-controlled mosques.

⁸⁶ Abdo, 62-63.

⁸⁷ Moustafa, 16.

⁸⁸ Ibid, 17.

Private mosques have become popular meeting places for Islamic groups (as well as the numerous ulama affiliated with them), and have become a key medium through which dissent against the regime has been channeled. It is important to note that government mosques have hardly been mouthpieces of the status quo, but rather – due to the severe shortage of registered imams – have also taken on increasingly an oppositional stance against the state. Shaykh Kishk and Shaykh Mahallawi are two examples of ulama who were highly critical of the regime and were based throughout their careers in government mosques. Mahallawi mixed with lay Islamic activists extensively, and his mosque in Alexandria became a major center of dissent. Indeed, the highly contested nature of these so-called “government institutions” suggests that it is ultimately meaningless and self-defeating to differentiate between “private” and “government” mosques in the context of contemporary Egypt.

The ulama have become increasingly critical of not only the government’s international and domestic policies, but also the compliance of high-ranking Azhari officials. Although the ulama have criticized Egypt’s foreign policy, such as the peace treaty with Israel and the billions of American dollars received annually in economic and military aid, the brunt of their criticism has focused on domestic issues: specifically, the government’s turning a blind eye to growing Westernization and secularism. The ulama have demanded that the *Shari’ah* play a more important role in Egyptian public life. Shaykh Abu Ismail was an alim who became a major spokesperson for the implementation of the *Shari’ah* and worked with the Brotherhood in the parliament to achieve this objective. The ulama and lay Islamic activists have stood together in condemning the high-ranking officials of al-Azhar for attempting to legitimize the

regime's policies, such as the government's violent clampdown on oppositional lay Islamic groups. Shaykh al-Azhar Tantawi is a classic case study of an alim who has been widely criticized by ulama and Islamic activists alike for his staunch support of the regime, such as his endorsement of state banks and savings certificates. It should be noted, however, that the relationship between the high ulama and the government has not remained static. Although the higher echelons of al-Azhar were largely submissive to the regime in the Nasser and Sadat years, the relationship between the two grew increasingly complex under the rule of Mubarak. Beginning in the 1980s, the high ulama became more vocal in protesting growing secularization in the country, successfully achieving a number of Islamization reforms, such as gaining censorship rights over various media outlets. Moreover, in 1994 the high ulama went as far as to condemn openly the state-sponsored International Conference on Population and Development. It is important not to exaggerate the contested nature of this alliance, however, as the high-ranking officials of al-Azhar remain ultimately subservient to the status quo.

CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

In this concluding chapter, I will argue that the broader implications of this thesis are twofold. Firstly, the intellectual and political vitality of the ulama suggests that it is necessary to reconsider their role and standing within the religious revival – and society in general – in late twentieth century Egypt. I will forward this argument by examining the treatment of Islam in two successive periods in the historiography of the modern Middle East: the age of modernization theory in the 1950s and 1960s, and the scholarly shift towards “lay” Islam from the 1970s onwards. Secondly, the findings of this research provoke the following larger questions concerning the very identity of the ulama: can we even any longer speak of the “ulama” as a self-identifying, social group, and in what ways must we redefine the ulama in order to accommodate the modern Egyptian context? These questions are especially crucial because, although several scholars of contemporary Islam, such as Malika Zeghal and Muhammad Qasim Zaman, have called for a reexamination of the ulama’s role within modern Muslim societies, they have failed to address this larger issue of (re)definition. It will be the purpose of the second half of this chapter, therefore, to address the question of who exactly can claim to be an alim in the contemporary Muslim world.

The Age of Modernization Theory

Modernization theory emerged in the American social sciences in the 1950s and 1960s as the dominant framework through which the modern Middle East was studied.

This theoretical model became the primary medium through which US scholars studied social change not only in the Middle East, but also the rest of the so-called Third World.¹ Modernization theory sought to explain the transition from a “traditional” society to a “modern” one. The former was marked by despotism, kinship ties in politics, an agrarian economy, a heavy influence of religion, and a conservative attitude towards change, whereas the latter was characterized by secularism, an industrialized technology-based economy, democratic governing institutions, and a culture encouraging of experiment and innovation.² The societies of Europe and North America represented successful transitions to modernity, constituting the normative gold standard of political development. It should be noted that modernization theory was not uncontested in this period. A central critique of the theoretical model was its failure to incorporate external factors in the study of social change within so-called “traditional” societies, such as the lasting impact of colonialism, war, and global trade.³ Indeed, an alternative theoretical paradigm emerged – “dependency theory” – that would become one of modernization theory’s most enduring critiques. Dependency theory used a political economy approach to argue that so-called “traditional” societies were not suffering from despotism and poverty because of any religious, cultural, or psychological traits, but rather due to the gross maldistribution of wealth arising from their incorporation into the Western-dominated global economy.⁴ In terms of influence, however, this analytical model paled in comparison to modernization theory.

¹ Zachary Lockman, *Contending Visions of the Middle East: The History and Politics of Orientalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 133.

² Gesink, 44.

³ Dean C. Tipps, “Modernization Theory and the Comparative Study of Societies: A Critical Perspective,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 15, (1973): 212.

⁴ Lockman, 157-158.

Due to modernization theory's emphasis on secular political development, Islam came to be seen as politically and socially bankrupt, if not violently reactionary. Informed by the conviction that political development – as defined by the European historical experience – was possible only through the separation of religion and politics, scholars understood Islam as being socially irrelevant within a modern society. Hence, Islam and Islamic actors – be they laypeople or the ulama – were largely ignored by social scientists. This bypassing of the ulama, it should be noted, constituted a radical departure from traditional scholarship on the Middle East, as classical Orientalists had an almost fetish obsession with these historic interpreters of Islam. Indeed, prior to the nineteenth century, Orientalist scholarship on the Middle East had focused almost entirely on the ulama, as the ulama had authored the vast majority of primary texts.⁵ Moreover, the post-Enlightenment reduction of religion to a system of personal beliefs served only to reinforce the already dominant perception of Islam as a static and rigid religion incapable of reform.⁶

Manfred Halpern's highly influential work, *The Politics of Social Change in the Middle East and North Africa* (1963), is a classic example of such literature.⁷ Halpern describes the relationship between Islam and modernity as follows:

The cumulative growth of ideas, production, and power generated outside the Islamic system has penetrated that system and is tearing apart its repetitive patterns of balanced tensions. A system connecting man, God, and society is falling apart.⁸

⁵ Skovgaard-Peterson, 13.

⁶ Esposito, *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?*, 201.

⁷ Born in Germany in 1937, Halpern received his undergraduate degree in literature at the University of California in Los Angeles, and completed his graduate education in international studies at Johns Hopkins University. In 1958 he took up a post in the Department of Politics at Princeton University, where he taught courses on the Middle East and theories of sociopolitical change until his retirement in 1994. He died in 2001 at the age of 76.

⁸ Manfred Halpern, *The Politics of Social Change in the Middle East and North Africa* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), 25.

According to Halpern, not only did Islam and modernity evolve historically in isolation from one another, but Islam constituted an all-encompassing, total system that was inherently incapable of reform. It is precisely because of this essentialist and reductionist disposition towards Islam that Halpern – along with other American social scientists – looked towards such stereotypically secular and modern elements of society as the officer corps as being the harbingers of change and political development.⁹ The inconvenient fact that a number of explicitly Islamic organizations wielded mass followings posed a fundamental problem to Halpern’s analysis. Yet rather than reconsider his dismissive attitude towards Islam, he responded simply by writing these movements off as being nothing more than violent and reactionary cults. He condemned the *Jama’at-i-Islami* in South Asia and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, for example, as being fascist and totalitarian organizations that endorsed militancy and violence.¹⁰ The very idea that Islam could hold legitimacy and command popularity within contemporary Muslim societies was anathema to the likes of Halpern.

However, it was the earlier work of Daniel Lerner – author of *The Passing of Traditional Society: Modernizing the Middle East* (1958) – that represented the quintessential example of modernization theory.¹¹ This book became one of the most cited works on the Middle East, as well as modernization and social change in general, and thus heavily influenced area studies outside of the Middle East.¹² The conclusions of

⁹ Richard W. Bulliet, *The Case for Islamo-Christian Civilization* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 110. Recall that military coups had taken place in Egypt, Iraq, and Syria in the 1950s.

¹⁰ Halpern, 134-135.

¹¹ A professor of sociology at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Lerner (1917-1980) focused much of his research on the role of communication and attitude change within societies that were undergoing modernization. A prolific writer – he published just under twenty books – the majority of his works dealt with theories of communication, modernization, and social transformation.

¹² Lockman, 136.

Lerner's research were drawn from sixteen hundred surveys conducted in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Iran, Syria, and Turkey. The study was also informed, however, by an underlying ideological assumption. As Richard W. Bulliet has noted, the narrow genre of questions that Lerner put forth were premised on the idea that modernization was associated with exposure to new forms of media.¹³ Thus, the survey had a grossly disproportionate emphasis on those who had regular access to modern media. The first three questions (the subject matter of which defined the remaining 117 queries) were as follows: "Do you ever go to the movies? Do you ever read a newspaper? Do you ever listen to the radio?"¹⁴ In fact, Islam was hardly mentioned in the survey at all. Hence, right from the outset the research was designed to center on a small, highly unrepresentative group of individuals that fit into a Western conception of modernity.

Given the skewed nature of the survey questions, it is hardly surprising that Lerner's grand conclusion was that modernity had hardly taken root in the Middle East. He defined modernity as a psychological "state of mind" that looked positively towards progress, growth, and change, and was a process that had first been developed by societies in the North Atlantic region (the West) through such social phenomena as popular participation, industrialization, and secularization.¹⁵ Moreover, the European historical experience, according to Lerner, constituted the only feasible path toward modernity:

The "Western Model" is only historically Western; sociologically it is global...the same basic model reappears in virtually all continents of the world, regardless of variations in race, color, or creed. The Western model

¹³ Bulliet, 103.

¹⁴ Daniel Lerner, *The Passing of Traditional Society: Modernizing the Middle East* (London: Free Press, 1958), 415.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, viii.

must, in this sense, be freed from the constraints of ethnocentrism in order to function properly.¹⁶

The irony is perplexing. Not only is Lerner seemingly oblivious to his own stark Eurocentrism, but even goes as far as to argue that it is non-Western peoples – by wishing to create multiple modernities based on their own terms – who are somehow being ethnocentric. According to Lerner, the failure of non-Western societies to conform to Western modernity had nothing to do with colonialism and its legacies, continuing economic exploitation, or foreign intervention,¹⁷ but rather due to an underlying primitive, psychological state of mind that refused to undergo change. Using favorable attitudes towards Western culture as a measure of modernization, Lerner concluded his analysis by ranking the six states under question. Hence, the most Westernized countries – Turkey and Lebanon – stood at the top of the list, followed by Egypt and Syria (in which “social change is seriously out of phase”), while Jordan and Iran – in which “a modernizing process was barely visible” – were relegated to the bottom of the pile.¹⁸

A New Scholarly Spotlight: The Rise of “Lay” Islam

The explosion of Islamic activism on the Middle Eastern scene in the 1970s, however, forced scholars to reconsider the social relevance of Islam in contemporary politics. Although numerous events throughout the Middle East and South Asia were indicative of the rise of Islamic political activism in the late twentieth century, it was the Iranian revolution that garnered the most global attention. Shocked by the persuasive power of Islam, the Western media responded by circulating countless articles and

¹⁶ Ibid, viii-ix.

¹⁷ Lockman, 137.

¹⁸ Lerner, 401.

images about the allegedly violent and reactionary nature of the resurgence.¹⁹ The presence of Islam in politics presented a major crisis for Western scholars studying the contemporary Middle East and Muslim societies. The pressing relevance of religion in sociopolitical life not only stumped modernization theorists, but also those who employed the political economy approach of dependency theory.²⁰ Islam could no longer be ignored, and a plethora of work was subsequently published on the religious revival.

Zachary Lockman's comments sum up this new scholarly spotlight succinctly:

Whole forests were sacrificed for the paper needed to produce the hundreds of books and thousands of articles and conference papers that were produced on Islam and Islamism from the 1970s onward, amidst ongoing debates about how to interpret and explain this phenomenon – if indeed it could be characterized as a single phenomenon.²¹

Hence, whereas from the 1950s to the early 1970s Islam was considered nothing more than a dying remnant of the past, from the late 1970s onwards it became a primary focus of academic attention.

The relative deprivation lens through which the religious revival was studied played a key role behind the overwhelming emphasis on lay Islamic actors. What caught the eye of so many scholars was the fact that laypeople were playing a major part within the revival, and research thus began to focus heavily on the Islamic activism of the professionals (physicians, lawyers, and engineers), university students, and the urban bourgeoisie.²² Refusing to concede any vitality to Islam as a dynamic, religious tradition that in and of itself could boast tremendous popularity within the Middle East, scholars instead posited socioeconomic deprivation as the primary cause behind the resurgence.

¹⁹ Ibrahim, 423.

²⁰ Lockman, 172.

²¹ Ibid, 216.

²² Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam*, 1.

Islam was thus portrayed as a symbolic language signifying upward social mobility for the lower and middle classes, especially among the educated youth.²³ The argument of relative deprivation was as follows: those who were attracted to Islam were not necessarily poor in absolute terms, but rather felt deprived relative to others. Students and professionals were attracted to Islam because their salaries did not rise with their educational qualifications, especially compared to other more privileged groups in society, as well as their professional counterparts in other areas of the world.²⁴

This is not to suggest, of course, that economic factors played no role whatsoever in enticing people towards Islamic activism. There can be little doubt that professionals in Egypt were (and continue to be) grossly underpaid. Government statistics from the early 1990s, for example, show that the average monthly income of a physician was only 332 Egyptian pounds, and for a civil engineer a meager salary of 336 Egyptian pounds.²⁵ Rather, my argument is that positing relative deprivation as the primary, indeed sole, factor behind the resurgence enabled scholars to provide some sort of plausible explanation as to why the professional classes played such an active role in the religious revival *without* conceding any meaningful role to Islam.

The new scholarly emphasis on lay Islam represented a pattern of continuity from the era of modernization theory. Just as scholarship grounded in modernization theory singled out reformist rulers and Western-educated locals as the only agents capable of introducing and spurring on modernization within their respective societies,²⁶ academics now focused on individuals who were educated in explicitly “modern” spaces (such as

²³ Ibrahim, 448.

²⁴ Eickelman and Piscatori, 109-110.

²⁵ Abdo, 82.

²⁶ Lockman, 135-136.

the secular universities) and operated in “modern” professions, such as engineering, medicine, and pharmacy. The professionals were not only elevated because of their potential to bring about social change and political development, however, but also because they themselves – as a social group – were a direct product of modernization reforms.²⁷ Hence, they were more than just Islamic activists; they were modern Islamic activists.

This emphasis on professionals operating in new emerging public spaces was also encouraged by a burgeoning theoretical model called “civil society” – a frame of reference that has since become popular in academia, particularly in the field of political science. Civil society was defined as the large cluster of institutions that operated between the state on the one hand, and families and individuals on the other, and thus included such modern segments of society as trade unions, voluntary associations, clubs, and political organizations.²⁸ That lay Islamic actors were located neatly within the analytical parameters of civil society only served to reinforce entrenched scholarly assumptions of what “modern” Islamic activism should look like.

Rethinking the Role of the Ulama in the Revival

In stark contrast to the vigor and vitality of lay Islam, the ulama were presented as being in decline and co-opted wholesale by the state. Due to the categorical emphasis on secular intellectuals that came packaged with modernization theory in the 1950s and 1960s, the ulama had long been written off as socially irrelevant and absent within the

²⁷ Malika Zeghal, “The “Recentring” of Religious Knowledge and Discourse: The Case of al-Azhar in Twentieth-Century Egypt,” in *Schooling Islam: The Culture and Politics of Modern Muslim Education*, eds. Robert W. Hefner and Muhammad Q. Zaman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 107.

²⁸ Lockman, 222.

political sphere.²⁹ It is precisely because of this assumption that most scholars of the Middle East and contemporary Islam did not bother to take the time to meet with the ulama or visit their institutions, and instead networked almost exclusively with their intellectual counterparts in explicitly Western and modern settings,³⁰ such as secular universities. The ulama were thus written into history as medieval religious scholars, and were portrayed as having been co-opted en masse by the ever-expanding, intrusive state. It is worthwhile noting that not all the ulama were portrayed in this manner. Due to their leadership role in the Iranian Revolution, the Shi'a ulama have received an extensive amount of attention from Western scholars,³¹ and are considered serious contenders in political life. Despite their sociopolitical engagement, however, the Shi'a ulama continue to be depicted – like their Sunni counterparts – as rigid and intellectually backward. Nor am I suggesting that no studies whatsoever on the Sunni ulama were undertaken in the 1960s and early 1970s. Although a certain amount of research was conducted, much focused on the ulama of the nineteenth century³² (such as their activities during the Muhammad Ali period), and a significant amount of attention was paid to the reformist shaykh, Muhammad Abduh.³³ The ulama's activities in the twentieth century, however, received comparatively little attention.

Daniel Crecelius' article, "Non-ideological Responses of the Egyptian Ulama to Modernization" (1972), is an example of an influential work that dismissed the ulama as

²⁹ Eickelman, *Knowledge and Power in Morocco*, 13.

³⁰ Esposito, *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?*, 201.

³¹ Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam*, 1.

³² The prime work on the ulama in this period was a volume edited by Nikki R. Keddie, *Scholars, Saints, and Sufis: Muslim Religious Institutions in the Middle East since 1500* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972). Out of the ten articles dedicated to the ulama, only two focused on the twentieth century (Hamid Algar, "The Oppositional Role of the Ulama in Twentieth-Century Iran," and Aziz Ahmad, "Activism of the Ulama in Pakistan"), while the rest dealt with the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

³³ Gesink, 43.

having anything meaningful to contribute to contemporary intellectual and political life.³⁴ Crecelius argued that the ulama in the nineteenth century were incapable of presenting an ideological response to the modernizing reforms of Muhammad Ali – their only alternative thus being to delay and slowdown modernization programs while fighting desperately for self-preservation.³⁵ Indeed, the ultimate failure of the ulama to accommodate the challenges of modernity and their subsequent fall as key political brokers and economic players was representative of most narratives put forth by historians in this time.³⁶ According to Crecelius, not only were the ulama ideologically and intellectually bankrupt, but also – due to Muhammad Ali’s seizure of the *awqaf* and his use of force to silence opposition – had become co-opted by the regime. Moreover, Crecelius portrayed this ulama-state relationship as timeless, and thus remaining static from the Muhammad Ali era right through the twentieth century.³⁷ It is interesting to note the striking similarity between Manfred Halpern’s treatment of Islam and Daniel Crecelius’ portrayal of the ulama. Just as Halpern described Islam as a total and static “way of life” that had endured for over a millennium but was now being torn to shreds by the thorns of modernity (for which Islam was, according to Halpern, “almost entirely unprepared”),³⁸ Crecelius viewed the ulama and their institutions as having been isolated

³⁴ After completing his undergraduate training at Colorado College, Crecelius undertook graduate studies in Middle Eastern history at Princeton University, focusing on Ottoman Egypt. In 1964 he joined the History Department at California State University in Los Angeles. An assistant professor at the time of penning the article, Crecelius has since ascended the academic and administrative ranks to become Professor of History and department chair.

³⁵ Crecelius, “Nonideological Responses”, 185.

³⁶ Zeghal, “Religion and Politics in Egypt,” 373.

³⁷ Crecelius, “Nonideological Responses,” 184.

³⁸ Halpern, vii.

from any and all modernizing trends within Egyptian society, and thus they were either disappearing into the dustbin of history or being transformed wholesale.³⁹

The findings of this thesis, however, suggest that it is necessary to undertake a major rethinking of the ulama's political behavior and intellectual vitality not only within the contemporary Egyptian context, but also in other Muslim societies. Here I have argued that since the 1970s the boundaries have blurred significantly between the ulama and broader segments of Egyptian society, which has led the ulama to participate increasingly in dissent against the regime. Alongside moderate and militant Islamic activists, they have criticized and protested the policies of the Mubarak government, as well as the apologetic actions of high-ranking Azhari officials. The ulama are thus hardly allies of the state, nor have they been isolated from the currents of change and social transformation. On the contrary, their ranks have adapted consistently to new circumstances. Hence, the oft-repeated narrative of their timeless alliance with the state since the Muhammad Ali era does not hold to scrutiny. The ulama have also played an important role in Egyptian intellectual life, as illustrated, for example, by the prolific literary output of Ghazali, Qaradawi, and Shaarawi. Hence, the ulama in contemporary Muslim societies have hardly been static, "traditional", and defiant to modernization. Rather, their actions and discourses have been marked by complexity, diversity, and flexibility, and they have often articulated their arguments in different ways depending on the specific audiences and social contexts in question.⁴⁰ Indeed, they are not marginal players in the revival, but play an instrumental role, alongside lay activists and intellectuals, in the future of Islam within Muslim societies.

³⁹ Crecelius, "Nonideological Responses," 208.

⁴⁰ Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam*, 188-189.

A Problem of Definition: The Ulama as a Social Group?

At the end of the first chapter, I defined an alim as anyone who was either a student or graduate from an educational institution run by al-Azhar, including the students and graduates of the advanced centers of learning, as well as the Azhari-administered secondary schools. Yet the evidence presented in the rest of the thesis points to several problems with this definition. As has been shown, an Azhari education in the post-Nasser period did not necessarily entail training in traditional understandings of Islamic studies, nor the broader fields of the humanities and liberal arts. Due to the construction of schools of engineering and medicine, a growing number of Azhari graduates were trained solely as engineers and physicians. Moreover, the Azhari secondary institutes offered certification in agriculture, industry, and commerce, allowing graduates of the secondary schools to gain admission into other colleges and universities. As this thesis has argued, the incorporation of such subjects as engineering, medicine, and the liberal arts into the Azhari curriculum played a critical role in enabling those students within traditional religious studies to be exposed to different forms of knowledge, and thus to acquire new vocabularies – an intellectual development that would have significant sociopolitical consequences. A further consequence was the production of a sizable number of graduates whose training was grounded exclusively in such fields as engineering and medicine. Hence, my earlier definition of the ulama does not hold in the contemporary Egyptian context.

Moreover, this thesis has shown that those who were trained in traditional religious studies nonetheless had educations and career paths that were highly fragmented. For example, although Shaykh Mahmud Mahallawi studied in the Faculty of *Shari'ah* at al-Azhar, he also received a diploma from the university's Faculty of Arabic

Language. His hybrid education had a direct impact on his career, as his training in Arabic allowed him to secure teaching posts in the secular state schools in Alexandria. Shaykh Salah Abu Ismail's education included not only certification from al-Azhar, but also a diploma from the Faculty of Teaching at Ain Shams University, enabling him to teach Arabic and Islamic studies in the state schools, and even work as a school inspector for the Ministry of Education. Abu Ismail is a compelling example of the hybridity that marks the career paths of many Egyptian ulama. In the mid-1970s he not only ran in legislative elections, but also won a seat in parliament, and from this seat became a major spokesperson for the application of the *Shari'ah* in public life. Even Shaykh al-Azhar Muhammad Syed Tantawi, despite having an education rooted in a traditional Azhari scheme, had a fragmented career path: before becoming the Mufti of Egypt, he had lectured in religious studies at Asyut University.

The Egyptian ulama have mixed and mingled so extensively with broader segments of society in the post-Nasser period that it has become questionable as to whether they can any longer be understood as a self-identifying, social group. Their presence within the ranks of the Brotherhood is a compelling example of such substantive interaction. Nearly every single alim mentioned in this thesis – Ghazali, Qaradawi, Kishk, Abu Ismail, and Mahallawi, to name a few – has at one point or another been a member of the Brotherhood. Moreover, the ulama were hardly marginal members of the movement, but stood at the forefront of the Brotherhood's activities. Shaykh Ghazali and Shaykh Abu Ismail are two case studies in point. Ghazali played a pioneering role in the reconstruction of the Brotherhood following the turbulent Nasser years, and – due to his prolific output of Islam-related literature since the late 1940s – became a towering

intellectual figure within the movement, as well as Egyptian society in general. Abu Ismail played a pivotal role in coordinating the Brotherhood's strategic moves within the parliament, and was the prime architect behind the alliance between the Brotherhood and the Liberal Party in the 1984 elections. Even those ulama who have not been as active in the Brotherhood – or are not members at all – have mixed significantly with broader segments of Egyptian society. For example, Qaradawi networked with Islamic activists and intellectuals based in the universities, mainstream newspapers, and the secular courts, and together they spawned a major intellectual trend within Egypt, *al-Wasatiyya* (the Middle Way). Even the militant Omar Abd al-Rahman, who refused outright to become a member of the moderate Brotherhood, collaborated extensively with lay Islamic activists and became the spiritual leader of such radical movements as *al-Jihad* and the *Jama'at al-Islamiyya*.

It is important to clarify that I am not arguing that the ulama have (yet again) become a socially fragmented group. Indeed, the ulama have historically almost always been comprised of diverse individuals from vastly different socioeconomic backgrounds. For example, the ulama in Egypt in the late 1700s and early 1800s were not only government officials, but also represented a fair share of commoners whose earnings were barely sufficient to take care of their own families, as well as poorer communities that could not even meet this expense and thus were desperately dependent on charities. Rather, what I am trying to say is that such extensive mixing in the late twentieth century – coupled with the rise of mass literacy and the subsequent fragmentation of religious authority – has larger consequences that call into question the very definition of the ulama. Indeed, the fact that so-called “laypeople” in Egypt have become religious

scholars by studying Islam outside the educational confines of al-Azhar has led to a major blurring of who exactly the word “ulama” refers to. Indeed, it has effectively collapsed the boundary between “lay” and “learned.”

As a result of this remarkable historical development, the word “ulama” has become highly ambiguous in its social usage not only within contemporary Egyptian society, but also other parts of the Muslim world. Recall, for example, that in 1992 twelve professors from al-Azhar and twelve professors from Cairo University came together in a united front called *an-Nadwat al-Ulama* (The Ulama’s Conference) and released a statement demanding that the Mubarak regime ban Faraj Foda’s party, *Hizb al-Mustaqbal*. A similar blurring of definitions can also be observed in other parts of the Muslim world. For example, in Indonesia the *Nahdatul Ulama* – an Islamic organization that claims to represent the interests of the ulama and has become a formidable force in national politics – includes in its membership not only ulama in the traditional sense of the word, but also intellectuals, as well as laypeople based in both rural and urban areas.⁴¹ This is not to imply, however, that the word ulama has become vague in each and every part of the Muslim world. For example, there remains a strong sense of ulama identity in Morocco, which is largely due to the sheer power and national influence exercised by the highly organized “League of Moroccan Ulama” – an association that has no real equivalent in Egypt.⁴²

⁴¹ Ibid, 187.

⁴² Gaffney, *The Prophet’s Pulpit*, 39.

The Historic Heritage: The Islamic Intellectual Tradition

It may be useful to move away from understanding the ulama as a social group marked by an educational affiliation to a specific mosque-university, and instead to start thinking about the ulama as an informal intellectual community united in its members' engagement of a single (albeit diverse and deeply contested) Islamic intellectual tradition. This historic tradition is conventionally defined as comprising the statements made by the Prophet (*hadith*) as narrated by his companions – and the various ways of authenticating these statements based on their respective chains of narration⁴³ – in addition of course to the Qur'an. But what I am referring to here is a much larger and complex body: by the historic Islamic intellectual tradition, I mean the whole corpus of literature and works composed on Islam by Muslims over the past fourteen centuries, the vast majority of which have been authored (at least before the twentieth century) by the ulama in the traditional sense of the word. These works did not exist in isolation, but rather, as has been discussed in the first chapter, cited and footnoted each other, and are thus connected in complex ways. It is for precisely this reason – the larger unity of such diverse scholarly writings coupled with the various hierarchies of power implicated in their production – that Talal Asad has referred to Islam as a “discursive tradition” that connects past and present.⁴⁴ As the first chapter has shown, the Qur'anic commentary (*tafsir*) was one of the most enduring facets of this intellectual tradition. It defined the scholarly culture of the ulama, playing a key role in consolidating their identity and reinforcing their authority as the interpreters of the sacred text. Indeed, Muhammad Qasim Zaman has even gone as far

⁴³ Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam*, 3.

⁴⁴ Talal Asad, as cited in Starrett, 7.

as to write that the Qur'anic commentary constituted the most prestigious mode of discourse within the Islamic intellectual tradition.⁴⁵

It is important to emphasize that this tradition was not frozen in time, nor was it uncontested from within the ranks of the ulama. The challenges of modernity over the past two centuries have created the need for individuals grounded in the Islamic intellectual heritage to revamp select aspects of this tradition.⁴⁶ As the most prominent group grounded in such texts, the ulama have played a key role in this reformist endeavor. The Islamic intellectual tradition has thus been in a constant state of flux, and – especially in the modern period – was “a tradition that had to be constantly imagined, reconstructed, argued over, defended, and modified” by the ulama.⁴⁷ Moreover, those who criticized the Islamic tradition as having become stagnant had nonetheless to voice their concerns through the very medium of this intellectual heritage. For example, in calling for *ijtihad* (independent critical reasoning) in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Muhammad Abduh and his disciple Rashid Rida cited the thirteenth-century jurist Ibn Taymiyya's usage of *ijtihad*, and, in doing so, invoked a millennium-old intellectual heritage.⁴⁸ Even the ways in which the ulama wrote Qur'anic commentary underwent profound changes. For example, Shaykh al-Azhar Mahmud Shaltut (1958-1963) encouraged the writing of shorter, thematic commentary (*tafsir mawdu'i*), which involved collecting all the Qur'anic verses on a given subject and then systematically comparing them to one another – the purpose being to provide an accessible, practical

⁴⁵ Muhammad Q. Zaman, “Tradition and Authority in Deobandi Madrasas of South Asia,” in *Schooling Islam: The Culture and Politics of Modern Muslim Education*, eds. Robert W. Hefner and Muhammad Q. Zaman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 64.

⁴⁶ Zebiri, 180.

⁴⁷ Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam*, 10.

⁴⁸ Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, and Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 220.

guide for Muslims by enabling them to undertake a more meaningful reading of the text.⁴⁹ The organization of such thematic commentary was radically different from the way in which Qur’anic literature was composed historically, as conventional readings were of a linear nature, beginning with the first verse and working straight through the text to the last. A few ulama even called for a radical revamping of the entire Islamic intellectual tradition. The Indian alim Wahid ad-Din Khan is a compelling example: he argued that many of the rulings within the Islamic intellectual tradition were formed in a time when Muslims were politically dominant – thus addressing the needs of that particular place and period – and therefore no longer hold legitimacy and social relevance because the contemporary global context is significantly different.⁵⁰

“Lay” Islam and the Tradition: A Necessary Engagement

Although “lay” Islamic activists and intellectuals have undoubtedly been highly critical of the ulama, it is important to acknowledge that they have nonetheless engaged, in some form or another, the Islamic intellectual tradition. Western scholarship on “lay” Islam has tended to portray Islamic activists and intellectuals as rejecting the millennium-old heritage wholesale. Yet in reality the relationship between so-called “laypeople” and the Islamic intellectual tradition has been much more nuanced. As has already been noted in this thesis, lay Islamic intellectuals have consistently engaged the most important facet of this intellectual heritage: the Qur’anic commentary. Recall, for example, that the prime works of the two best known “lay” Islamic intellectuals – Pakistan’s Abul A’la Mawdudi and Egypt’s Sayyid Qutb – were multivolume Qur’anic commentaries. Although

⁴⁹ Zebiri, 151-152.

⁵⁰ Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam*, 183.

Mawdudi and Qutb were very critical of the ulama, it would be grossly inaccurate to portray them as dismissing Islam's scholarly tradition altogether: Qutb openly acknowledged that there was much to learn from the works of the ulama in the classical and medieval period, and Mawdudi spoke highly of the intellectual richness of Islamic civilization.⁵¹ Paradoxically, even those who have categorically rejected the Islamic intellectual heritage have only been able to do so by manipulating this very tradition. A telling example is the fact that at the same time that militant Islamic activists have written of the ulama as co-opted and the Islamic intellectual tradition as out-dated, they continue to cite the opinions of the medieval jurist Ibn Taymiyya in order to legitimize their own radical oppositional activities.⁵²

It is crucial to note that this engagement with the tradition is not a mere coincidence, nor a matter of choice, but rather an inescapable reality when studying and thinking about Islam. Even those who wish to bypass the intellectual heritage of the medieval and classical period altogether, and instead focus on the time of the Prophet exclusively, would have to engage the historic tradition. This pioneering period is viewed by the overwhelming majority of Muslims as normative, and thus a time when foundational beliefs, practices, and precedents were established.⁵³ Yet a student wishing to study this period would have to consult works composed primarily by the ulama, such

⁵¹ Ibid, 9.

⁵² Born in modern day Turkey, Ahmad Ibn Taymiyyah (1263-1328) became notorious for his puritanical views and came in constant conflict with the rest of the ulama. His highly literal readings of the Qur'an represented such a radical departure from established interpretive practices that it led to his imprisonment. He was also extremely hostile to Sufi practices, such as saint veneration and pilgrimages to shrines. Hence, it is hardly surprising that he would become a favorite point of reference for radical Islamic activists, particularly in his emphasis on literal readings of the sacred text.

⁵³ Esposito and Voll, 39.

as the historical writings of Abu Ja'far at-Tabari.⁵⁴ Even those Muslims who do not view the early community of the Prophet as a normative entity, and instead look toward the Qur'anic verses as the sole source of authority, would still have to resort to a prime facet of this intellectual heritage: the classical Qur'anic commentaries. In order to ascertain the historical context of a given revelation (*al-asbaab an-nuzuul*, or the Occasions of Revelation) – a key method used by Islamic modernists seeking to draw larger moral principles from the Qur'an – as well as understand the complex grammatical construction of the verses, the reader would have to consult the Qur'anic commentaries of such celebrated ulama as Ibn Kathir, at-Tabari, as-Suyuti, and al-Baydawi.⁵⁵

The Muslim modernist Fazlur Rahman is a compelling example of a scholar of Islam who was trained in the “secular” universities and yet called for a constructive engagement with the Islamic intellectual tradition.⁵⁶ Rahman was highly critical of the contemporary ulama, and criticized them severely for having stagnated in intellectual thought and conceptual rigor. Rahman called for the modernization of Islamic learning,

⁵⁴ Abu Ja'far Muhammad Ibn Jarir at-Tabari (838-923) was born in modern day Iran. He traveled far and wide in his journey of knowledge, and his destinations of study included Rayy and Baghdad, as well as cities in Egypt, Palestine, and Syria. His major historical text – “History of the Prophets and Kings” (more popularly known as *Tarikh at-Tabari*, or Tabari's History) – covered both the pre-Islamic period and the first three centuries of Islam.

⁵⁵ Zebiri, 132. Nearly all of these commentaries are readily available and are referenced on a regular basis by Muslims. Abd Allah Ibn Umar al-Baydawi (d. 1286) was born in Persia and became a noted judge. Although he would author many intellectual works, al-Baydawi's primary contribution to Qur'anic commentary would be a book titled “The Secrets of Revelation and the Secrets of Interpretation.” Ismail Ibn Kathir (1273-1301) was born in modern day Syria. After studying under Ibn Taymiyya, Ibn Kathir would go on to author a major Qur'anic commentary, *Tafsir ibn Kathir*, which made extensive use of *hadith* literature to interpret the verses. This work in many ways built upon the much earlier and pioneering Qur'anic commentary of at-Tabari, *Tafsir at-Tabari*. Abu al-Fadl as-Suyuti (1445-1505) was born in Cairo. Of his many writings – as-Suyuti's works numbered in the hundreds – his *Tafsir al-Jalalayn* (which he coauthored with his teacher) became a Qur'anic commentary of particular note.

⁵⁶ Fazlur Rahman (1919-1988) was born in what is now modern day Pakistan. Although his father was an alim of the Deobandi tradition, Rahman studied Islam outside of traditional understandings of religious learning: upon completing Arabic studies at Punjab University, he pursued graduate work at Oxford University, focussing on the writings of Ibn Sina. He would go on to assume teaching positions at McGill University, and, in 1969, accepted a professorship at the University of Chicago, where he was based for the remainder of his career.

which could be undertaken by differentiating between normative Islam – as embodied by the Qur’an and the teachings of the Prophet – and historical Islam,⁵⁷ and thus avoiding any elevation and uncritical acceptance of the scholarly learning of the ulama.⁵⁸ Yet Rahman did not dismiss the intellectual heritage of Islam. On the contrary, he argued that a sustained engagement must be undertaken with the various intellectual strands that evolved historically within Islam⁵⁹ – a tradition that “could boast of a thousand original personalities, highly synthetic and creative figures in the various fields of the vast Islamic civilization”⁶⁰ – in order for a meaningful modernization of Islamic learning to take place. Indeed, Rahman understood that any reading of Islam could not be undertaken without approaching this intellectual heritage in some form or another. For example, he acknowledged that any reading of the Qur’an that integrated the complex social and historical contexts of revelation must inevitably include the works of the Prophet’s biographers, the early historians of Islam, the *hadith* collectors, and the classical Qur’anic commentators.⁶¹ Rahman thus called for an active engagement with the intellectual heritage, but a study that was critical and treated this tradition as historical and not normative, leaving the Qur’an alone as the ultimate judge.⁶²

⁵⁷ Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: The Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 141.

⁵⁸ As has been discussed, it is historically imprecise to separate the compilation of the sayings and actions of the Prophet from historical Islam: the formation of the *hadith* literature is part and parcel of Islam’s historical evolution.

⁵⁹ Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam*, 9.

⁶⁰ Rahman, 71.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, 143.

⁶² *Ibid*, 147.

Redefining the Contemporary Ulama

Given the above discussion, I will redefine the contemporary alim as any believing Muslim who is undertaking a sustained study (critically or otherwise) of the historic Islamic intellectual tradition. This definition thus includes not only those who lie within traditional understandings of the ulama – in the context of Egypt, the Azharis – but also scholars based in Islamic Studies and other disciplinary departments and faculties within the so-called “secular” colleges and universities, among others. It is important to note that calling for a redefinition of the ulama is hardly a radical proposition, as what it has historically meant to be an alim has never been fixed and static. As the first chapter has shown, the identity of the ulama over the past two centuries transformed significantly as a highly fluid *ijaza* system based on continuous travel and intense, individual mentoring was replaced by a rigid certification program based in a specific location for a set period of time. New emerging contexts in the late twentieth century, in turn, necessitate fresh redefinition. As a result of the rise of mass literacy, new groups of Muslims – such as women – have also studied Islam in educational spaces that lie outside of such historic centers of learning as al-Azhar. Although the readings of such so-called “laypeople” have been characterized by hybridity and constitute highly fragmented intellectual products that draw in complex ways from multiple pools of knowledge, all of these new religious scholars have nonetheless had to engage the Islamic intellectual heritage in some form or another, for as Fazlur Rahman reminds us, “it is historic Islam that gives continuity to the intellectual and spiritual being of the community.”⁶³

It is also worthwhile noting that although many Azharis have vested interests in not accepting these new religious scholars as ulama, there are other Azharis that believe

⁶³ Ibid, 146.

that interpretive authority is open to other Muslims as well. For example, in his 2004 keynote speech at the inaugural conference of the International Alliance of the Ulama (an organization that seeks to bring together Muslims that are undertaking a serious and sustained study of Islam from around the world), Shaykh Yusuf al-Qaradawi defined the ulama as follows:

graduates of shari'a faculties and departments of Islamic studies, as well as everyone who has a [serious] interest in the shari'a sciences and Islamic culture and is productive as a scholar.⁶⁴

Hence, the refined definition of the ulama in this chapter is not an isolated conclusion, nor a radical initiative, as similar understandings have even begun to prop up among some of the most influential members of the Azhari-trained ulama.

Conclusions

The pervasiveness of modernization theory in the 1950s and 1960s had a major impact on Western scholarship on the contemporary Middle East. The Eurocentric tendencies of modernization theory – such as its founding Enlightenment principle that political development necessitated the separation of religion and politics – significantly skewed the ability of scholars to write critically the history of the region, and in particular the role of religion and the ulama in Muslim societies. Such ideological undercurrents led to Islam being portrayed as not only socially and politically bankrupt, but violently reactionary. A classic example is the work of Manfred Halpern, who described Islam as an unchanging, total system being ripped apart by the rational trappings of modernity, and characterized Islamic movements as being violent and totalitarian. Islam was thus

⁶⁴ Muhammad Q. Zaman, "Epilogue: Competing Conceptions of Religious Education," in *Schooling Islam: The Culture and Politics of Modern Muslim Education*, eds. Robert W. Hefner and Muhammad Q. Zaman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 263-264.

written into modern history as a spent force and a dying remnant of the past. Daniel Lerner's *The Passing of Traditional Society* was one of the most important works that employed a modernization theory framework, and was cited widely by scholars and policy analysts alike. Lerner argued that modernity was primarily a psychological "state of mind" and that the path of political development emblazoned by the West constituted the only legitimate mode of modernization.

The rise of Islam as a political force in the late twentieth century, however, forced analysts and scholars to reconsider the relevance of religion in the sociopolitical life of contemporary Muslim societies. The persuasive power of Islam in the Middle East, and Egypt in particular, undermined the foundational secular premises of modernization theory. Although much attention was now paid to political Islam, however, the scholarship centered almost completely on laypeople. Relative deprivation theory played a key role in garnering this disproportionate emphasis on the professionals, and basically allowed Western scholars to come to terms with the new sociopolitical relevance of Islam without conceding any meaningful role to Islam as a dynamic and vibrant religious tradition. Indeed, this new scholarship on contemporary Islam represented a pattern of continuity from the era of modernization theory: the emphasis on professionals was heavily influenced by the fact that they were schooled in and operated out of explicitly modern spaces, such as the universities and hospitals. The ulama thus received (yet again) the short end of the scholarly stick, and were portrayed as passive, in decline, and having been co-opted by the state. A classic example of such literature is the work of Daniel Crecelius, who portrayed the ulama as being intellectually bankrupt and incapable of providing an ideological response to Muhammad Ali's modernization reforms, and

subsequently becoming entrapped in a timeless alliance with the regime. The findings of this thesis, however, suggest that it is necessary to undertake a major rethinking of the complex roles of the ulama in contemporary Muslim societies, and Egypt in particular. The ulama's extensive interaction with lay Islamic activists and their participation in protest against the state, as well as their intellectual vigor and literary productivity, run counter to the oft-repeated narrative of their decline and co-option by the status quo. As this thesis has meticulously documented, the ulama have played an instrumental role, next to lay activists and intellectuals, in the Islamic revival.

The findings of this thesis not only suggest that it is necessary to reconsider the role of the ulama in the religious revival, but also – and perhaps more profoundly – to rethink the very definition of the contemporary ulama. An Azhari schooling in the post-Nasser period did not necessarily entail training in traditional understandings of Islamic studies, or even the humanities, as a sizable number of graduates were now trained solely as physicians and engineers. Moreover, even those Azharis who were schooled primarily in traditional understandings of religious studies and the humanities had an education, as well as a career path, that was marked by hybridity. That the ulama in Egypt have mixed so extensively with broader segments of society in the post-Nasser period – such as their involvement in the Brotherhood – begs the question as to whether we can any longer refer to the contemporary ulama as a self-identifying, social group. This question has far more profound implications than simply the suggestion that the ulama have, once again, become a highly fragmented social group, for the rise of mass literacy and the subsequent fragmentation of interpretive authority has resulted in many Muslims becoming religious

scholars outside of the educational confines of al-Azhar. Hence, the very validity and relevance of the term “ulama” is called into question.

Rather than viewing the ulama as a social group – graduates of a single educational complex – it is more useful to think of them as a broader intellectual community of believing Muslims who are undertaking a serious, sustained study of Islam, and are thus engaging (critically or otherwise) some aspect of the historic Islamic intellectual tradition. This heritage refers to the corpus of scholarly work composed on Islam by Muslims over the past fourteen centuries, the vast majority of which has been authored by the ulama in the traditional sense of the word. It should be added that this intellectual tradition has hardly been static or uncontested, but has “had to be constantly imagined, reconstructed, argued over, defended, and modified”, especially in meeting the complex challenges of the modern era. For example, Qur’anic commentary – arguably the most important facet of this tradition – has recently undergone profound changes in approach and organization. Although lay Islamic intellectuals and activists have undoubtedly been critical of the ulama, they have nonetheless engaged key aspects of this intellectual heritage. For example, not only did Mawdudi and Qutb write multivolume Qur’anic commentaries, but also lauded the intellectual achievements and contributions of the medieval ulama, and argued that there was much to learn from this period. Because Islam’s intellectual heritage stretches back to the time of the Prophet, Muslims have no choice but to engage this tradition in some form or another. The Islamic modernist Fazlur Rahman understood this reality, and thus called for a sustained (though highly critical) engagement with Islam’s rich intellectual heritage in order to reconcile Islam and modernity. Hence, a refined definition of the ulama in the late twentieth century must

include not only those schooled within such “Islamic” institutions as al-Azhar, but any believing Muslim undertaking a sustained study of the faith and thus, by default, engaging the historic intellectual tradition. The boundaries between “lay” and “learned” have indeed collapsed in contemporary Islam.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Archival Sources

The National Archives of the United Kingdom, London, Public Record Office (PRO) FO 371/661, letter from Sir Eldon Gorst to Sir Edward Grey, 20 February 1909.

Unpublished Sources

Gesink, Indira Falk. *Beyond Modernisms: Opposition and Negotiation in the Azhar Reform Debate in Egypt, 1870-1911*. Washington University, 2000.

Secondary Sources

Abdalla, Ahmed. *The Student Movement and National Politics in Egypt: 1923-1973*. London: Al-Saqi Books, 1985.

Abdo, Geneive. *No God But God: Egypt and the Triumph of Islam*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Abduh, Muhammad. *The Theology of Unity*. London: Allen and Unwin, 1966.

Adams, Charles. *Islam and Modernism in Egypt: A Study of the Modern Reform Movement Inaugurated by Muhammad Abduh*. New York: Russell & Russell, 1968.

Al-Awadi, Hesham. *In Pursuit of Legitimacy: The Muslim Brotherhood and Mubarak, 1982-2000*. London: Tauris Academic Studies, 2004.

Asad, Talal. *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, and Modernity*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003.

Asad, Talal. *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993.

Ayubi, Nazih. *Political Islam: Religion and Politics in the Arab World*. London: Routledge, 1991.

Baker, Raymond W. *Egypt's Uncertain Revolution under Nasser and Sadat*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978.

Barracrough, Steven. "Al-Azhar: Between the Government and the Islamists" *Middle East Journal* 52 (1998), 236-249.

Bianchi, Robert. *Unruly Corporatism: Associational Life in Twentieth-Century Egypt*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1989.

- Brunner, Rainer. *Islamic Ecumenism in the Twentieth Century: The Azhar and Shiism Between Rapprochement and Restraint*. Leiden: Brill, 2004.
- Bulliet, Richard W. *The Case for Islamo-Christian Civilization*. New York: Columbia University Press: 2004.
- Cole, Juan R.I. *Colonialism and Revolution in the Middle East: Social and Cultural Origins of Egypt's 'Urabi Movement*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993.
- Commins, David. "Hasan al-Banna (1906-1949)." In *Pioneers of Islamic Revival*, ed. Ali Rahnama. London: Zed Books Ltd, 1994.
- Crecelius, Daniel. "Al-Azhar in the Revolution" *Middle East Journal* 20 (1966), 31-49.
- Crecelius, Daniel. "Nonideological Responses of the Egyptian Ulama to Modernization." In *Scholars, Saints, and Sufis: Muslim Religious Institutions in the Middle East since 1500*, ed. Nikki R. Keddie. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972.
- Dodge, Bayard. *Al-Azhar: A Millennium of Muslim Learning*. Washington, D.C.: Middle East Institute, 1961.
- Eccel, Chris A. *Egypt, Islam, and Social Change: al-Azhar in Conflict and Accommodation*. Berlin: Klaus Schwarz, 1984.
- Eickelman, Dale F. "Communication and Control in the Middle East: Publication and Its Discontents." In *New Media in the Muslim World: The Emerging Public Sphere*, eds. Dale F. Eickelman and Jon W. Anderson. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003.
- Eickelman, Dale F. *Knowledge and Power in Morocco: The Education of a Twentieth Century Notable*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985.
- Eickelman, Dale F. and James Piscatori. *Muslim Politics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996.
- Eickelman, Dale F and Jon W. Anderson. "Redefining Muslim Publics." In *New Media in the Muslim World: The Emerging Public Sphere*, eds. Dale F. Eickelman and Jon W. Anderson. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003.
- Esposito, John L. *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?* New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.
- Esposito, John L. ed. *Voices of Resurgent Islam*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1983.
- Esposito, John L. and John O. Voll. *Islam and Democracy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.
- Fahmy, Khaled. *All the Pashas' Men: Mehmed Ali, his Army and the Making of Modern Egypt*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

- Gaffney, Patrick D. "The Changing Voices of Islam: Professional Preachers in Contemporary Egypt" *The Muslim World* 81 (1991), 27-48.
- Gaffney, Patrick D. *The Prophet's Pulpit: Islamic Preaching in Contemporary Egypt*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994.
- Gilsenan, Michael. *Recognizing Islam: Religion and Society in the Modern Middle East*. London: I.B. Tauris, 1993.
- Haddad, Yvonne. "Muhammad Abduh: Pioneer of Islamic Reform." In *Pioneers of Islamic Revival*, ed. Ali Rahnema. London: Zed Books Ltd, 1994.
- Halpern, Manfred. *The Politics of Social Change in the Middle East and North Africa*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963.
- Hanna, Nelly ed. *The State and its Servants: Administration in Egypt from Ottoman Times to the Present*. Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1995.
- Hatina, Meir. "Historical Legacy and the Challenge of Modernity in the Middle East: The Case of al-Azhar in Egypt" *The Muslim World* 93 (2003), 51-68.
- Hodgson, Marshall G.S. *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization Vol. 2*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974.
- Hourani, Albert. *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age: 1798-1939*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.
- Husayn, Taha. *The Days*. Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1997.
- Ibrahim, Saad Eddin, "Anatomy of Egypt's Militant Islamic Groups: Methodological Note and Preliminary Findings." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 12 (1980): 423-453.
- Jankowski, James. *Egypt: A Short History*. Oxford: Oneworld, 2000.
- Jankowski, James. *Nasser's Egypt, Arab Nationalism, and the United Arab Republic*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002.
- Kepel, Gilles. *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam*. Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard University Press, 2002.
- Kepel, Gilles. *The Prophet and Pharaoh: Muslim Extremism in Egypt*. London: Al-Saqi Books, 1985.
- Lerner, Daniel. *The Passing of Traditional Society: Modernizing the Middle East*. London: Free Press, 1958.
- Lia, Brynjar. *The Society of the Muslim Brothers in Egypt: The Rise of an Islamic Mass Movement, 1928-1942*. Reading: Ithaca Press, 1998.
- Lockman, Zachary. *Contending Visions of the Middle East: The History and Politics of Orientalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

- Marsot, Afaf Lutfi A. "The Political and Economic Functions of the Ulama in the 18th Century" *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 16 (1973), 130-154.
- Messick, Brinkley. *The Calligraphic State: Textual Domination and History in a Muslim Society*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.
- Metcalf, Barbara D. *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860-1900*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982.
- Mitchell, Richard P. *The Society of the Muslim Brothers*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.
- Mitchell, Timothy. *Colonising Egypt*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988.
- Moustafa, Tamir. "Conflict and Cooperation between the State and Religious Institutions in Contemporary Egypt" *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 32 (2000), 3-22.
- Owen, Roger. *The Middle East in the World Economy: 1800-1914*. London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 1993.
- Rahman, Fazlur. *Islam and Modernity: The Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982.
- Rahnema, Ali ed. *Pioneers of Islamic Revival*. London: Zed Books, 1994.
- Reid, Donald M. *Cairo University and the Making of Modern Egypt*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.
- Roy, Olivier. *The Failure of Political Islam*. Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard University Press, 1994.
- Skovgaard-Peterson, Jakob. *Defining Islam for the Egyptian State: Muftis and Fatwas of the Dar al-Ifta*. Leiden: Brill, 1997.
- Starrett, Gregory. *Putting Islam to Work: Education, Politics, and Religious Transformation in Egypt*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.
- Tambiah, Stanley Jeyaraja. *Magic, Science, Religion, and the Scope of Rationality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.
- Tipps, Dean C., "Modernization Theory and the Comparative Study of Societies: A Critical Perspective" *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 15 (1973), 199-226.
- Waterbury, John. *The Egypt of Nasser and Sadat: The Political Economy of Two Regimes*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983.

- Zaman, Muhammad Qasim. "Epilogue: Competing Conceptions of Religious Education." In *Schooling Islam: The Culture and Politics of Modern Muslim Education*, eds. Robert W. Hefner and Muhammad Qasim Zaman. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007.
- Zaman, Muhammad Qasim. *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam: Custodians of Change*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002.
- Zaman, Muhammad Qasim. "Tradition and Authority in Deobandi Madrasas of South Asia." In *Schooling Islam: The Culture and Politics of Modern Muslim Education*, eds. Robert W. Hefner and Muhammad Qasim Zaman. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007.
- Zebiri, Kate. *Mahmud Shaltut and Islamic Modernism*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993.
- Zeghal, Malika. *Gardiens de l'Islam. Les oulémas d'al-Azhar dans l'Egypt contemporaine*. Paris: Presses de Sciences Politiques, 1996.
- Zeghal, Malika. "Religion and Politics in Egypt: The Ulema of al-Azhar, Radical Islam, and the State (1952-94)" *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 31 (1999), 371-399.
- Zeghal, Malika. "The "Recentring" of Religious Knowledge and Discourse: The Case of al-Azhar in Twentieth-Century Egypt." In *Schooling Islam: The Culture and Politics of Modern Muslim Education*, eds. Robert W. Hefner and Muhammad Qasim Zaman. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007.