



Why We Need '*Ulamā*': Islamic Knowledge in a Secular Age

USAAMA AL-AZAMI

YAQVEEN™
INSTITUTE FOR ISLAMIC RESEARCH

Author Biography

Dr. Usaama al-Azami is Departmental Lecturer in Contemporary Islamic Studies at the University of Oxford. He began pursuing Islamic studies formally in 2002. He subsequently enrolled at Oxford University, completing his BA in Arabic and Islamic Studies in 2008. From 2005 onwards, he attended regular classes at Al-Salam Institute with Shaykh Mohammad Akram Nadwi, from whom he narrates numerous classical works including the *Hidaya* of al-Marghinani and the *Sahih* of al-Bukhari. Over the years Dr Usaama has been able to study with, and/or obtain *ijazat* from a number of scholars. They include Shaykhs Ahmad ‘Ali Lajpuri, ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Kattani, Yusuf al-Qaradawi, Yunus Jaunpuri, Muhammad Rabi’, ‘Abd al-Wahhab al-Turayri, ‘Abd-Allah al-Judai’ (without *ijaza*), Muhammad al-Yaqoubi, Muhammad ibn ‘Abd-Allah Al Rashid, Nizam Ya‘qubi, Jihad Brown (without *ijaza*), and Muhammad Ziyad al-Tukla. From 2010-2015, Dr. Usaama was based at Princeton University’s Department of Near Eastern Studies, where he completed an MA and later a PhD on contemporary Islamic political thought. He is the author of *Islam and the Arab Revolutions: The Ulama Between Democracy and Autocracy* (OUP 2022).

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Introduction

Why do Muslims need to refer to scholars? If God has revealed guidance through his Prophet ﷺ in the form of the Qur’an and Sunnah, and if modern technology allows us to access these sources of guidance with ease, why must our relationship with God be mediated by such fallible human beings? Can Muslims depend on books and/or websites to arrive at their own judgments on religious issues? Can they reflect directly on the Qur’an and the Sunnah (Prophetic example)? If it turns out that we must at times depend on scholarly expertise, how can we know whether a scholar is reliable or not? What if some of the scholars we hold in high esteem as moral exemplars turn out to be the opposite of exemplary? If Muslims esteem their scholars so much, but then some prominent scholars turn out to exhibit serious moral failings in their personal and/or political dealings, does that not create the circumstances for serious crises of faith or religious disillusionment? What about women—can they become scholars, and if so, why do there seem to be so few of them?

These are some of the questions I address in this article. My aim is to illustrate not only the necessity of relying on authentic Islamic scholarship, but also that such a recognition of religious authority does not entirely absolve Muslims from exercising their own moral judgment in cases of doubt. Muslims from every era have recognized the importance of scholarship in explaining how the Qur’an and the Sunnah, first revealed in an Arabian context nearly fifteen centuries ago, should apply to Muslims in subsequent eras.

Yet socio-cultural transformations in Europe that coincided with the industrial revolution and colonialism have globalized the ideas of a small sliver of the human population, and in the process rendered the ‘*ulamā*’ irrelevant in many people’s eyes today. The causes of this shift in perspective are multifaceted. Some, caught in the embrace of secular ideologies, do not understand why Muslims need to remain wedded to their tradition. They wonder why Muslims cannot simply embrace secularism and recognize their cultural heritage as a matter of the past available for occasional inspiration. Others, who have maintained a deeper commitment to

God’s revelation, might ask: “If I have the infallible Qur’an and Sunnah at my fingertips through Google, why do I need to pay attention to fallible ‘*ulamā*’?” Still others argue that Islam cannot be known by anyone but those who have received formal authorization (*ijāza*) to transmit Islamic knowledge as part of a chain of authorities (*sanad*): “These are the true ‘*ulamā*,’” they declare, “and no one may interpret the Qur’an and Sunnah apart from them.”

The present article reflects on the role that the ‘*ulamā*’ play in society, both today and in the past. It considers this role in both Muslim minority and majority contexts. In addressing this topic, I will reference the Qur’an, Sunnah, and past scholars’ works. A short article like this one cannot hope to exhaustively address the issues under discussion—ones deserving of multiple articles by many authors. But I hope that by the end of the article, the reader will come to recognize the urgent need for a balanced approach that respects scholarly authority without absolving the average Muslim of moral responsibility in their personal and social lives. Throughout the article, I will consider what role scholarship ought to play in the life of modern Muslims living in a world in which many advocate for a secular public sphere.

The article will conclude by recognizing that the collective obligation of producing scholars adequate to our needs is simply not being fulfilled in the modern West, and arguably, in much of the modern world. This calls for a recognition that producing scholars is not the job of scholars alone, but the Muslim *umma* as a whole. The frequent failure of our scholars to persuasively articulate the role Islam should play in the modern world is, in fact, a failure of all Muslims, one we must take seriously and make an effort to reverse.

The need for ‘*ulamā*’

The Prophet ﷺ once rebuked certain Companions of his who had advised a wounded man to undertake the ritual bath (*ghusl*) after a nocturnal emission while they were traveling. The man had asked if he could perform dry ablutions

(*tayammum*) instead of a full ritual bath, but his fellow travelers insisted that he should perform *ghusl*. He did so and subsequently died, presumably from infection and/or exposure—the hadith does not specify. The Prophet ﷺ was so angered by the people who insisted that he bathe that he castigated them saying: “They killed him. May God kill them!” The harshness of this rebuke does not negate the Prophet’s merciful nature. Indeed, its rarity only underlines the severity of the sin committed by those he was criticizing.

As Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya notes, this was the severity of the Prophet’s prayer against “a group of people who gave a *fatwa* without knowledge,” leading to the death of the questioner.¹ The episode reminds us of the gravity of *fatwa*-giving, a notion that is repeatedly conveyed in the Islamic scholarly tradition. The remainder of the hadith reports the Prophet’s advice with respect to the sorts of scenarios faced by these travelers. After condemning those who had given their *fatwa* without any knowledge, the Prophet ﷺ added: “Could they not ask when they did not know? The cure for ignorance is asking.”²

Islam as a lived practice is grounded in the Qur’an and Sunnah. The Qur’an is a richly textured revelation that cannot be understood in many of its finer details without recourse to the Prophetic Sunnah, and both contain texts that are possible to interpret in myriad ways.³ The same is true for any text that is valued by a community. Consider the United States Constitution. At 4,543 words, it is considerably shorter in length than this article. Yet the US has developed an enormous judicial infrastructure, as well as innumerable legal institutions ranging from firms to schools, to train legal scholars and practitioners in the interpretation and implementation of the norms laid down by this document—a document that

¹ Ibn al-Qayyim is cited in this *fatwa* discussing the hadith:

<https://www.islamweb.net/ar/fatwa/288472/شرح-حديث-صاحب-الشجرة>. For the original, see Ibn al-Qayyim, *I‘lām al-muwaqqi‘in ‘an Rabb al-‘Ālamīn*, ed. Mashhūr Āl Salmān (Jeddah: Dār Ibn Jawzī, 1423), 3:529.

² See Abū Dāwūd, *al-Sunan*, Kitāb al-ṭahāra, Bāb fī al-majrūh yatayammam, <https://sunnah.com/abudawud:336>. According to the contemporary hadith scholar, Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī (d. 1420/1999), what I have cited from the report is *ḥasan*, i.e., sound.

³ Jonathan Brown has demonstrated how some modern attempts at interpreting the Qur’an without reference to extra-Qur’anic sources on the part of the so-called “Qur’an Only” movement illustrate the implausibility of such efforts succeeding. See Jonathan A. C. Brown, *Misquoting Muhammad: The Challenges and Choices of Interpreting the Prophet’s Legacy* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2014), 200–206 *passim*.

governs the running of the most powerful nation on earth today. Similarly, the Qur'an and the teachings of the Prophet ﷺ have served as guides for one of the most important civilizations in human history, one that flourished as a spiritual, intellectual, economic and geopolitical superpower for much of the past thousand years.

In this context, it is quite obvious that scholarly expertise needs to be developed to properly understand how the Qur'an and Sunnah should guide the Muslim *umma* through its worldly existence. While the necessity of scholarly expertise may seem obvious at the level of high politics and intellectual debate, one might ask how the average Muslim is, or ought to be, affected by the ruminations of the '*ulamā*' over the sacred revelation preserved in the Qur'an and Sunnah. Here, too, the constitutional analogy may be of some use. The wider legal structures that impinge on all citizens are built upon the basis of the US Constitution as well as the local constitutions of each of the country's 50 states. These laws directly shape people's lives. Everybody recognizes the need to stay on the right side of the law. It is not only that the consequences of not doing so may be serious, but also that we generally believe this to be the right thing to do. Once again, this requires learning what the law is, and this is usually done by using sources produced by scholars of the law.

Essentially, given the interdependent nature of human social existence, it is not possible for human societies to thrive without a degree of specialization. This allows for people to develop expertise in individual areas which others do not have the opportunity to develop for themselves. We all depend on specialists in every aspect of our lives, whether in medicine, engineering, economics, or beyond. This is true for scholars too, of course. Scholars need to rely on specialists for access to the resources they need to survive, whether they are the doctors who vaccinate them, the engineers who design their houses and cars, or the public servants who manage the towns and cities in which they reside. Just as we all need these experts to provide us the amenities we need to live fruitful lives, the lay Muslim needs '*ulamā*' to access the wisdom of the Qur'an and Sunnah. If human affairs require

specialist knowledge, the 'ulamā' can be viewed as specialists regarding the Divine revelation that directs us concerning how we must live our lives.

To be clear, lay Muslims are encouraged to deepen their understanding of the *dīn*, and some of them should indeed pursue specialization in the 'ulūm Shar'iyya or Sharia sciences; such expertise is particularly lacking among Muslims in the West. However, those who do not specialize in these sciences must defer to the experts. Similarly, Muslims can benefit from reading the texts of the Qur'an and Sunnah for themselves, and we live in a time when these texts have become readily accessible. Yet, if Muslims experience any confusion about how to understand these texts, they need the 'ulamā' for clarification. In this regard, the 'ulamā' often cite a verse from Sūrat al-Naḥl 16:43 which reads: "Ask the people of knowledge if you do not know." As the Andalusian exegete al-Qurṭubī (d. 671/1273) notes, the scholars agree that this verse refers to the need for laypeople (*al-āmma*) to follow their 'ulamā'.⁴

The vast majority of the world's Muslims are not able to understand the language of the Qur'an and Sunnah without the aid of translation. These translations are ultimately undertaken by scholars who are qualified enough to understand the Arabic of first/seventh century Arabia and convey its meaning to readers and listeners living nearly a millennium and a half after the epoch of revelation. As Jonathan A. C. Brown argues in his masterful work *Misquoting Muhammad*, efforts to understand the Qur'an without the aid of the interpretive exertions of the 'ulamā' are doomed to failure. To understand the powerful language of the Qur'an, the Companions of the Prophet ﷺ would at times resort to pre-Islamic poetry that could authoritatively elucidate the meaning of some of the Qur'an's elegant literary word choices. Brown notes how misguided efforts by certain modernist Muslims to marginalize extra-Qur'anic sources of religious authority, such as the hadith, are self-defeating when they themselves clearly need to resort to the

⁴ Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi' li-aḥkām al-Qur'ān*, ed. 'Abdullāh ibn 'Abd al-Muḥsin al-Turkī et al. (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risāla, 1427/2006), 14:179, https://archive.org/details/waq73651/14_73664/page/n178/mode/2up?view=theater.

extra-Qur’anic scholarly work of Arabic lexicographers to determine the meanings of certain words in the Sacred Text.⁵

Interpreting a single letter

This is true down to individual letters in the Qur’an. For just one example, we can take the verse on *wuḍū’* in the Qur’an, namely al-Mā’ida 5:6, which contains a phrase that is typically translated as “wipe your heads.” This translation papers over a complication in the original Arabic, namely how one is to understand the letter *bā’* in the Arabic phrase: *wa’msahū bi-ru’ūsikum*. This single letter has become a locus of considerable discussion, resulting in several different opinions among the scholars as to how much of the head needs to be wiped. The grammarians note that the letter *bā’* has fourteen different meanings.⁶ The jurists therefore disagree whether the “wiping” demanded in the verse refers to wiping the whole head, or only part of it. If the whole, is the wiping invalidated by a single hair being missed? On the other hand, if it’s only a part, is wiping valid if only a single hair is wiped? The jurists have adopted a range of positions between these two extremes. Now extend this problem to the rest of the Qur’an’s 6,000 or so verses, and then to the tens of thousands of hadith reports attributed to the Prophet ﷺ, and one can come to understand how challenging arriving at the correct interpretation—i.e., the one that truly exemplifies the divine intent—can be.

For some readers, such a debate might seem “academic” in the worst sense of that term. God presumably does not expect humans to be needlessly preoccupied with arguments over such minute details in His Sacred Text. Some scholars from the

⁵ Brown, *Misquoting Muhammad*, 200–206 passim.

⁶ This anonymous pair of couplets is occasionally cited by scholars as highlighting the various senses of the letter *bā’*:

تعد لصوقا واستعن بتسبيب
وبدل صحابا قابلوك بالاستعلا
وزد بعضهم إن جاوز الظرف غاية
يمينا تحز للبا معانيها كلا

For a discussion of the fourteen senses that can be derived from them, see:
<https://borsacenter.mosw3a.com/f6/%2A-2%-الفوائد-حرف-الباء-A-9454.html>.

past have indeed talked about the perils of pointless pedantry, much of it potentially driven by egotistical point scoring.⁷

Yet interpretative disagreements of the sort presented above do not seem minimal or irrelevant to the scholars in question. The same could be said for many verses that *Ahl al-Sunna* may hold to be correctly understood in a particular way, but which misguided people past and present may wish to twist in other directions. Allah ﷻ, as the All-Knowing Creator, is fully aware of the nature of language and the necessity of interpreting a text like the Qur'an for human beings. If we feel the need to problematize the preoccupation of Islamic jurists with such "irrelevant" details, we would do well to recognize that modern states expend vast sums of money to establish gargantuan institutions to engage in the interpretation of their laws.

In the United States, for example, the judiciary is one of three equal branches of the federal government. When the federal and state judiciaries are considered together, they boast a body of roughly 32,000 judges.⁸ These figures are dwarfed by the numbers of licensed, active lawyers in the US. In a recent survey by the American Bar Association, there were roughly 1.3 million lawyers practicing in the country.⁹ This is to say nothing of the vast supporting infrastructure of paralegals and other non-legally trained personnel, upon whose legal literacy these institutions depend to properly function. This also does not include the considerable educational and research infrastructure necessary to maintain a steady flow of newly-trained lawyers, as well as to host spaces where legal intellectuals can reflect on complex problems outside of the high-pressure environments of litigation and the offering of costly legal services. The job of these hundreds of thousands of people is to interpret codified texts to inform clients or litigants of their legal rights and obligations with reference to said texts.

⁷ The influential fifth/eleventh century scholar, Abū Hāmid al-Ghazzālī, is among numerous scholars throughout Islamic history who have warned against this pitfall of scholarship.

⁸ See: "FAQs: Judges in the United States," Institute for the Advancement of the American Legal System, University of Denver, June 12, 2014, <https://iaals.du.edu/publications/faqs-judges-united-states>.

⁹ "New ABA data reveals rise in number of US lawyers, 15 percent increase since 2008," American Bar Association, May 11, 2018, https://www.americanbar.org/news/abanews/aba-news-archives/2018/05/new_aba_data_reveals/.

This is because the laws in any system are based on language, and language is inherently ambiguous when it comes to problems as complex as governance, social organization, and dispute resolution. In a sense, the feeling of many modern people (and even some modern Muslims) that religious experts should not need to be consulted on religious practice, whereas experts should be consulted on secular law, reflects the acceptance of secularism as a norm that governs modern legal culture. For non-Muslims, who often will not have any religious reference to speak of on legal questions, this may seem entirely reasonable. For Muslims to think so, however, reflects their absorption, even if unwittingly, of a legal culture that is at odds with the Islamic one that they view themselves as part of. This is because Islam, as it has been understood by Islamic scholars for basically its entire history, mandates certain behaviors in ways that may reasonably be referred to as laws in the English language.

Although the modern usage of law is often intimately associated with the state and there is an expectation that contravening the law will result in worldly sanction, what is commonly referred to as Islamic law does not always operate according to these assumptions. Many of its injunctions and prohibitions, such as the prohibition of backbiting, do not have scripturally-grounded sanctions attached. They are, effectively, moral guidelines backed by metaphysical commitments—a belief in the threat of otherworldly punishment. If one believes that God has revealed a law through His Speech in the form of the Qur'an, and that He has mandated Muslims to live in accordance with that law, with consequent reward or punishment in the next life, these are pretty compelling reasons to adhere to the norms He has laid out in revelation, even if most laws remain without specific forms of divinely designated this-worldly punishment. As many scholars have observed, Islamic law actually gave rise to an extraordinarily long-lasting and effective set of institutions that helped govern Muslim societies for centuries in ways that resulted in remarkable prosperity and cultural efflorescence.¹⁰

¹⁰ See, for example, the works of the non-Muslim scholars Wael Hallaq, *The Impossible State: Islam, Politics, and Modernity's Moral Predicament* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013) and Noah Feldman, *The Fall and Rise of the Islamic State* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

Historical roles of the ‘*ulamā*’

Over the course of Islamic history, the ‘*ulamā*’ played a crucial role in providing the legal, spiritual, and normative basis for the major institutions that constituted Muslim societies. It is not surprising, therefore, that their labors appear to have been highly valued by these societies, sometimes with unintended problematic consequences. One example may be found in comments made by one of the most influential scholars in Islamic history, Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazzālī (d. 505/1111).¹¹ It is profoundly ironic for contemporary Muslims that in one of the most important and influential spiritual texts of Islamic civilization, the *Iḥyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn* [*The Revival of the Religious Sciences*], Ghazzālī complains at the outset that Muslims have been abandoning the study of medicine for Islamic legal studies (*fiqh*) because of how prestigious the latter had become. Ghazzālī’s discussion of this issue is found in the first of the *Iḥyā’*’s forty “books.” In the “Book of Knowledge,” he states:

How many regions’ only physician is a non-Muslim, whose testimony is not even admissible with respect to other doctors in relation to *fiqh* rulings. Yet we see no one taking up the study of medicine, but we see them dispute over the study of *fiqh*, and in particular in contentious matters and polemics while the region is full of jurists who occupy themselves with rulings and respond to events as they unfold. I wish I knew how the jurists of religion could sanction this involvement in a communal obligation (*farḍ kifāya*) that others have already taken responsibility for, while they abandon another communal obligation which no Muslims have undertaken [i.e., the study of medicine].

Is there any other reason for this than the fact that medicine does not facilitate access to being entrusted with the management of financial endowments (*awqāf*), the inheritance of estates (*waṣāyā*), and control over the wealth of orphans; or to assume offices in the judiciary or government,

¹¹ Regarding this great scholar’s *nisba*, Frank Griffel argues that historically there has been disagreement as to whether or not it comes from a wool spinner (*ghazzāl*) or a place (Ghazāla). He writes, “the most talented Arab historians of this period— Ibn Khallikān, al-Dhahabī, and al-Ṣafadī —understood that the matter could not be settled and remained uncommitted.” See his, “Al-Ghazālī or al-Ghazzālī? On a Lively Debate Among Ayyūbid and Mamlūk Historians in Damascus.”” I wish to thank an anonymous reviewer for directing my attention to this reference.

and to gain advancement over one’s peers as well as the power to overcome one’s enemies?¹²

Ghazzālī’s lamentations over the lack of medical studies in the Muslim community are illustrative of both the socially prestigious role of the ‘*ulamā*’ in his time and the starkly contrasting circumstances that Muslims find themselves in today. In the contemporary Muslim world, as well as among Muslims in the West, Muslims have generally been socialized (one could say brainwashed) into thinking of medicine as one of the most prestigious career paths they could choose. It is typically the first choice for our best and brightest. It usually ensures financial security if not abundance. The pursuit of Islamic learning in our own time generally entails the polar opposite result. A typical graduate from an Islamic seminary in the Muslim world or in the West can currently expect little by way of social prestige and plenty of financial insecurity. Why is this?

The answer is structural—how we as societies choose to order our priorities and incentivize certain career choices while disincentivizing others. What do we wish people to do in greater numbers than they otherwise would; what do we discourage people from doing? In general, a society will promote arenas it views as productive and helpful to achieving its aims. Modern societies incentivize a raft of career paths for young people by paying higher salaries for them and encouraging competition among entrants to those fields. In North America, much of Europe, and most Muslim countries, medicine is definitely one of these fields. At first glance, medicine seems like a field that would command high salaries and prestige in any societal context. After all, what society doesn’t have sick people? People will typically spare no expense to recover from an illness that could significantly impair their quality of life or indeed bring an end to their lives altogether.

Yet, Ghazzālī’s somewhat tangential comment in the *Iḥyā*’ indicates that Muslim societies were so wealthy that they could simply outsource their medical needs to non-Muslims while still being able to spare vast resources for incentivizing a

¹² I have modified the translation of Kenneth Honerkamp. See Ghazzālī and Kenneth Lee Honerkamp, *Kitāb al-‘ilm, The Book of Knowledge: Book 1 of the Iḥyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn, The Revival of the Religious Sciences* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2015), 54. For the original, see Ghazzālī, *Iḥyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn* (Jeddah: Dār al-Minhāj, 2011) 1:81–82.

majority of their best and brightest to study Islamic law. Ghazzālī's complaint, however, isn't about the health risks resulting from this state of affairs—nothing in what he writes indicates that outsourcing this vital skill to non-Muslims caused any significant health problems in the Muslim societies of his day. Rather, his complaint was about something far deeper—an issue at the heart of his life's work—namely his concern that the '*ulamā*' had lost their sense of working for Allah ﷻ and not for the sake of worldly gain. This is precisely the sort of problem that a relatively powerful and self-confident Islamic society might have. Such a society is one that has fallen into a spiritual decadence that undermines the otherworldly success of the community's moral guides, and thus also threatens its effectiveness as a moral exemplar. In other words, Ghazzālī is right to think of his society as experiencing a moral crisis.

However, modern Muslims are experiencing a different, and arguably a significantly more acute, kind of moral crisis. It is not one that arises in the main from the fact that the '*ulamā*' have been corrupted by pursuit of the *dunyā*, although poverty can create its own kind of corruption. Rather, it arises from the fact that the '*ulamā*' have been corrupted by their loss of social standing and attendant moral authority. As we can glimpse from Ghazzālī's passage above, being a jurist in the fifth Islamic century (i.e., the eleventh CE century) placed one at the pinnacle of the social order. As well as populating the judiciary and government posts, Islamic jurists were consulted on financial issues of every kind. Ghazzālī is only mentioning in passing some of the matters that would have drawn the '*ulamā*' into prestigious social roles. Legal study in Islamic society sat atop the educational hierarchy for good reason—Islamic norms, ethics, and laws formed the foundation of premodern Islamic societies. Islam informed every aspect of public life in the way that secular and liberal values do in the modern West. The historical role the '*ulamā*' played was only eroded over the course of the colonial period by a Eurocentric, secular conception of modernity imposed on the Muslim world.

Muslims and the modern 'cultural revolution'

The deterioration of flourishing Islamic societies into the decrepit states found in large swathes of the modern Muslim world reflects a complex transformation that has taken several hundred years. One important component of this transmutation has been the secularization of these regions through the establishment of the modern nation-state. This was realized through a painful rupture involving colonial subjugation, mass transfers of wealth to colonial powers, and often brutal repression grounded in a racist liberal-colonial ideology that understood the “civilizing” of barbaric non-European peoples as the role of Western imperialism. The last 250 or so years have uprooted the variegated and largely decentralized legal orders of Muslim societies that were generally underpinned by an Islamic ethos. The changes wrought over this period affected not only the social, political, and legal practices of Muslim societies, they also resulted in the adoption by many Muslim elites of the values that their colonial masters brought to them.

By our own day in the mid-fifteenth/early twenty-first century, these values have been so deeply internalized (some might say sedimented) in the minds of many Muslims that other ways of seeing the world, such as one in which the Sharia plays a central role in organizing a Muslim society, seem unnatural, contrived, “medieval,” regressive, and a host of other highly problematic epithets. Secularism has become such an unstated norm of our times that many recoil at the suggestion of an alternative vision of social organization. This is deeply ironic from a Muslim perspective for at least two reasons. Firstly, the centers of intellectual reflection on the foundations of Western thought, the universities, increasingly recognize the considerable contingency of contemporary Western ideas. The certainty in the foundations for one's knowledge established by Descartes, and the general confidence in the primacy of reason that characterized the Enlightenment and facilitated the liberal-colonial project, has now given way to a deeply divided academy and wider society increasingly consumed by identity politics and the culture wars.

This trend appears, in the academic humanities in particular, to have given rise to a range of mutually incomprehensible schools of thought. Of course, there are scholars who remain optimistic about the overall coherence of contemporary thought in the West. Those still committed to the Enlightenment have not yet come to recognize the intellectual provincialism of a project that only survives today as a neo-colonial endeavor upheld by a combination of brute force and intellectual sophistry; yet the relativist alternatives that litter the postmodern landscape seem far too easily to devolve into incoherence, and crucially for wider society, meaninglessness. Or perhaps, more charitably, meaning is invested deeply in what these thought-systems will themselves acknowledge are socially constructed identities with little more basis than the discourses that have generated them in the past few decades, grounded in the seductive ideas of self-identifying nihilists like Michel Foucault.

Where and how can reliable scholars be found?

This context further underlines the need for divine guidance in what many find to be profoundly confusing times. If we recognize that scholarly authority is vitally important, a natural concomitant question is where can we find reliable scholars and how does the layperson judge that reliability? This is a question that has at once been made easier and more complicated by the proliferation of communication technologies, most notably the internet. For the average layperson, there is no shortage of claimants to scholarship whose work is accessible online. As with any kind of specialist knowledge, credible scholars of Islam tend to be those recognized by other scholars as authoritative. It is a function of reputation. Yet, this potentially compounds the problem, since these other scholars also need to be recognized by others. Ultimately, reliable scholars within any arena of expertise will be marked in certain ways. For example, if they are a graduate of a major Islamic seminary in a Muslim-majority country—such as al-Azhar and its various branches, Deoband, al-Imām Muḥammad ibn Sa‘ūd University in Riyadh, the International Islamic University of Malaysia, Madīna University, Nadwat al-‘Ulamā’, the Pesantren system in Indonesia, Qarawiyyin, Saharanpur, and the

like—they can be expected to have a good grasp of the Islamic scholarly tradition. But in addition to these centers of learning, increasingly, Western Islamic institutions are emerging that, as they mature, can be expected to train scholars of a comparable caliber to those trained in the Muslim-majority world.¹³ In time, it may not be necessary to study outside of the West for a scholar to be recognized as a serious ‘*ālim* or mufti, although it does not appear to me that we are quite there yet.

Having this level of formal training is an extremely important aspect of assessing an individual as a scholar in Islam, but it is hardly sufficient. As the great Indian scholar Abū al-Ḥasan ‘Alī al-Nadwī (d. 1420/1999) used to tell the graduating class at Nadwat al-‘Ulāmā’, “You now have the tools to become ‘*ulamā*’.” The implication was that if these graduating students were to dedicate their lives to scholarship and devotional worship, they could aspire to reach that rank. This is an important dimension of Islamic scholarship to bear in mind, especially given the relative weakness of modern Islamic centers of learning when compared to the institutions that lead the world in education such as Harvard or Oxford. In the modernized curriculum of institutions like al-Azhar, the typical graduate will have undertaken the final three years of high school education (*thānawīyya*) which provides a rigorous introduction to the Sharia sciences, followed by a four-year “bachelor’s degree” in a narrower specialization of Islamic subjects.

In Western institutions, we do not typically describe bachelor’s degree holders as scholars, but a graduate from an Islamic institute is often referred to as an ‘*ālim* or Islamic scholar. This should give us pause. The reality is that proper Islamic scholarship arises from a lifetime of research and experience, and so while we should expect scholars to have graduated from a major institution of religious learning, we should also expect much more than that. In the West, for example, a doctorate is often the distinguishing mark of a scholar, and this standard is

¹³ I have elsewhere discussed the limitations of relying on *ijazas* to assess the reliability of scholars. For that discussion, see: Usaama al-Azami, “Traditional Islam, Ideology, Immigrant Muslims, and Grievance Culture: A Review of *Travelling Home: Essays on Islam in Europe* by Abdal Hakim Murad,” *Muslim Matters*, 05/02/2021, available at: <https://muslimmatters.org/2021/02/05/traditional-islam-ideology-immigrant-muslims-and-grievance-culture-a-review-of-travelling-home-essays-on-islam-in-europe-by-abdal-hakim-murad/>.

increasingly being adopted within the Muslim world as well. Once again, these are all conventions, and they have their pros and cons. For example, a doctorate in Islamic studies from a Western university is in no way an indication that an individual is an ‘*ālim*, because Islamic studies at Western universities overwhelmingly continues to be taught in a secular register—it is usually approached from the perspective of intellectual history. When it comes to Islamic scholarship in the Muslim world, by contrast, the elaborate postgraduate teaching and research infrastructure that is widely available in the West, alongside the postdoctoral career opportunities that render feasible the emergence of tens of thousands of scholars on a regular basis in Western academia, are lacking in the Muslim world for reasons of economic limitation, but also social and governmental disinterest, if not negligence. Such problems are larger than can be addressed in the current article, but deserve much greater reflection on the part of contemporary Muslims.

The above challenges notwithstanding, individual Islamic scholars can often be recognized by both systems if they have a combination of training in an Islamic institute and a doctorate in Islamic studies at a more secular institution. A number of the ‘*ulamā*’ prominent in the public sphere in the West enjoy such an intellectual pedigree.

But as well as serving as authoritative interpreters of divine guidance, another dimension of the ‘*ulamā*’s importance lies less in their juristic prowess, and more in their authority as practitioners and upholders of a particular way of being in the world. An Islamic scholar is indeed meant to be an inheritor of the Prophet’s knowledge, but additionally is meant to perform some other prophetic tasks. Notably, a true scholar is supposed to uphold the highest standards of behavior exemplified by the Prophet ﷺ. To be clear, a sound Sunni understanding of Islam precludes the possibility of claiming to inherit any of the Prophet’s direct access to revelation. Such a view would border on the blasphemous. But the ‘*ulamā*’ are expected to uphold Islamic norms in their own personal behavior. The Qur’an describes the Prophet ﷺ as being an exemplar for all Muslims: “The

Messenger of God is an excellent model for those of you who place your hope in God and the Last Day and remember Him often.”¹⁴

This divine appointment of the Prophet ﷺ as an exemplar surely reflects the divine recognition of humanity's need for guides from among themselves. Allah says elsewhere in the Qur'an:

The only thing that kept these people from believing, when guidance came to them, was that they said, “How could God have sent a human being as a messenger?” Say, “If there were angels tranquilly walking about on the earth, We would have sent them an angel from Heaven as a messenger.”¹⁵

In-person access to scholars is the ideal, both for their knowledge and for their moral example. However, in the unfortunate case that one does not have access to such scholars but does know Arabic, there are fantastic *fatwa* banks online that can be used by Arabic readers (and some even by English readers). One of the most prolific (Islamweb.net) also has a *fatwa* as to whether a layperson may accept *fatwas* from online websites.¹⁶ Its answer is predictably positive. However, the *fatwa* stresses the importance of verifying the source of any *fatwa*, and consequently refers to Islamweb.net's “About Us” page, which reveals that the institution is funded by Qatar's Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs. The Qatari affiliation of such a website means that one might need to be circumspect about *fatwas* that discuss Qatar, given the relative limits of free political expression in much of the Middle East. The same would apply to *fatwas* issued by the Egyptian Dār al-Iftā', the official *fatwa*-issuing body of Egypt, when it comes to *fatwas* against political opponents of the state. In this connection, it is worth citing Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328), who reportedly declared: “Everyone has a share of *ijtihād* to perform, and the *ijtihād* of the layperson (‘āmmī) is to choose who to

¹⁴ Qur'an 33:21.

¹⁵ Qur'an 17:94–95.

¹⁶ See “*Hukm akhdh al-fatwā min al-mawāqī‘ al-iliktrūniyya ma‘a ‘adam al-‘ilm bi-l-muftīn fī-hā*,” *Islamweb.net*, January 1, 2013, <https://www.islamweb.net/ar/fatwa/195005/حكم-أخذ-الفتوى-من-المواقع-الإلكترونية-مع-عدم-العلم-بالمفتين-فيها-ومدى-أهليتهم-للفتوى>.

follow.”¹⁷ For example, under the iron grip of the secularizing Saudi Crown Prince, Muhammad b. Salman, Saudi *fatwa* bodies' pronouncements on politically sensitive questions must be read with considerable caution. I would argue that this can be true of even Western scholars who might align themselves with Islamophobic regimes in the West, or authoritarian regimes in the Muslim world.¹⁸

Where are the female scholars (‘*ālimāt*)?

In theory, Islamic scholarship is not the preserve of men alone. In practice, this is another realm in which Muslim communities need to reassess their priorities. There are very few female ‘*ālimāt* relative to male ‘*ulamā*’. In part this may be due to what has already been discussed—the lack of social prestige in Islamic scholarship. Another cause is the lack of training opportunities for female ‘*ulamā*’. Anecdotally speaking, this lack appears to be widespread. Many scholars I know who have studied or taught in female-only Islamic institutes, both in the Muslim majority world and the West, have lamented the poor quality of teaching at these institutions when compared to the quality of training they received at Western universities. Such scholars have suggested that such institutions clearly do not intend to produce serious scholars. This naturally needs to change. There are good reasons for the Muslim *umma* to value the training of female scholars who can undertake the all-important task of serving as role models for women *and* men. The seeking of knowledge is, of course, a general obligation, and the Prophet's wife and Mother of the Believers ‘Ā’isha (may Allah be pleased with her), was a noted scholar, jurist, and *muftiya*. Indeed, the noted Damascene Ḥanbalī jurist, Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 751/1350), was just one of the many scholars who praised her as a prolific issuer of *fatwas*.¹⁹

¹⁷ This is cited by the contemporary Mauritanian scholar, Muḥammad al-Ḥasan Wuld al-Dadaw (b. 1383/1963), in his oral commentary on al-Juwaynī's *al-Waraqāt fī uṣūl al-fiqh*. For a transcribed version of these lectures, see <https://ketabonline.com/ar/books/5804/read?part=5&page=124&index=3272575/3272592/3272594>. I have been unable to locate this precise quotation in his works after a non-exhaustive search.

¹⁸ There are unfortunate cases of Islamic scholars supporting French anti-headscarf legislation or supporting authoritarian regimes in the Middle East in their attempts at crushing Islamically-oriented democratic movements. I discuss some of these examples in my book, *Islam and the Arab Revolutions: The Ulama Between Democracy and Autocracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022).

¹⁹ See Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, *I'lām al-muwaqqi'īn 'an Rabb al-'Ālamīn* (Riyadh: Dār Ibn al-Jawzī, 1423[2002–2003]), 2:18,

Nor was she exceptional in Islamic history. As my own teacher Shaykh Muhammad Akram Nadwi has illustrated in his 40-volume encyclopedia of female hadith scholars, there were thousands upon thousands of women from across Islamic history who served as scholars of hadith. For her part, our Mother ‘Ā’isha praised the women of Medina for their desire to gain a deep understanding of their religion. As recorded in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, she stated: “How excellent are the women of the *Anṣār*: their shyness did not prevent them from gaining a deep understanding of their *dīn*.”²⁰ In our own day, women are afforded the opportunity to gain higher education in a host of fields, but rarely are they afforded the opportunity to study the Sharia sciences at an advanced level. As noted, this is likely a function of the weak infrastructure for Sharia training throughout the *umma*, and a general strengthening of that infrastructure is desperately needed for both genders. This will hopefully begin to redress the fairly extreme shortage of female experts in the Sharia sciences who have graduated from Islamic institutes.

The training of female scholars has many additional benefits, of course, not all of which can be explored in this paper. For instance, female Islamic scholars are likely to become mothers who will necessarily be educators of the children they raise. While men also have a responsibility to educate their children, particularly when they grow older, fathers’ Islamic legal responsibility to provide financially for their families means their direct involvement in education is typically less frequent and less extensive than is the case for mothers.²¹ Hence, in terms of raw

<https://archive.org/details/ILMULMUWEOQINanRabbiLlemn06IbnQajjimElDewzije/I%27L%C4%80MU-L-MUWEOQI%27%C4%AAAN%20%27an%20rabbi-l-%27%C4%81lem%C4%ABn%20%2002%20%20%20-%20%20%20Ibn%20Qajjim%20el-D%C5%BEewzije/page/n17/mode/2up?view=theater>.

²⁰ See al-Bukhari, *al-Jami’ al-Sahih, kitab al-‘ilm, bab al-haya’ fi al-‘ilm*. This report is transmitted without a full chain of narrators (i.e., it is *mu‘allaq*) in *Sahih al-Bukhari*, but is reported elsewhere with full chains deemed reliable. For one such example found in *Sahih Muslim*, see <https://sunnah.com/muslim:332c>.

²¹ Even if there are cases where both spouses work—an increasing reality in neoliberal societies—the Sharia obligation for husbands to provide financially for their families sets the tone of gender roles in ways that are often at odds with contemporary Western norms and/or aspirations. This is not to say that individual spouses cannot renegotiate how such Sharia obligations are upheld in practice, nor that there is no latitude in the interpretation of such norms in ways that remain faithful to the scriptural sources, a reality that is reflected in the various ways in which Islamic scholars have interpreted spousal obligations over the course of the past fourteen hundred years. For an excellent illustration of some of that variety, see Marion Holmes Katz, *Wives and Work: Islamic Law and Ethics Before Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022). It is clear from the Qur’an and Sunnah, however, that the obligation of men to provide for their families is a mainstay of marriage in Islam. The fact that systemic

numbers, Islamic educational institutions arguably ought to prioritize women's opportunities over those of men. And while not all mothers need to be trained to become authoritative '*ulamā*', it has always been the practice of the Muslim *umma* in its periods of strength to provide women the opportunity to become '*ālimāt*' alongside the '*ulamā*' who dedicate their lives to such endeavors. Once again, significant efforts need to be directed to changing the prevailing practices within our communities. Given the neglect that we as an *umma* have shown to Islamic education in general, such a reorientation needs to take place across the board. Only then can we hope for the emergence of scholars who address the needs of the *umma*, be they male or female.

What if the '*ulamā*' get things wrong?

Unlike the Prophet ﷺ, no scholar can expect to receive revelation that corrects them if they make mistakes. Thus, the expectations Muslims have of their '*ulamā*' must be tempered by this realism. This must be practiced on at least three levels. Firstly, notwithstanding the immense respect due to the '*ulamā*', Muslims must not put them on pedestals that place them beyond error or correction. Secondly, Muslims must be forgiving of the mistakes of our all-too-human '*ulamā*', in cases where they have made clear mistakes but have demonstrated that they have seen the error of their ways. Thirdly, we must recognize that the '*ulamā*' may differ among themselves on what Islam calls for with respect to a given situation, so what one person may consider an error, may simply reflect the considered judgment of a scholar.

The earliest '*ulamā*' of our community were keenly aware that they were human beings who could make mistakes rather than prophets divinely protected from error. It is narrated from a number of early Muslims, including the great Medinan

wage suppression of the middle classes over the decades has made this impracticable in many cases illustrates how Islamic norms may be difficult to uphold in civilizational contexts in which Muslims are disempowered and unable to shape policy and social mores in accordance with their values. This does not undermine, in principle, the normativity of Prophetic guidance. But it does highlight the necessity of flexibility in practicing the Sharia in adverse conditions, as well as the importance of self-consciously cultivating Sharia-confirming sensibilities in contexts in which actual conditions preclude those subjectivities from being formed through normal social practice.

imam and eponymous founder of a school of law Mālik ibn Anas (d. 189/795), that: “We may accept or reject statements from everyone, except the Prophet ﷺ.”²² In other words, while we unconditionally accept everything the Prophet ﷺ taught us, given his capacity as God’s Messenger, such unconditional acceptance is not extended to anyone else. All other views are to be evaluated as sound or otherwise relative to their conformity to the teachings of the Prophet ﷺ. If a scholar emerges who exercises their scholarly judgment (*ijtihād*) and arrives at a problematic conclusion—arguing, for example, that wine or pork may be consumed by Muslims without qualification—their followers may not follow them, since such rulings are known as a matter of necessity (*ma lūm min al-dīn bi’l-ḍarūra*) to be forbidden, in these instances, in the Qur’an.

This has become all the more important in our own times because of the weakening of institutions of Islamic religious authority, particularly in the wake of colonialism and the collapse of a properly constituted Islamic caliphate. The process has been acute in some contexts, and more gradual in others, but we can all recognize that the ‘*ulamā*’ do not have a great deal of social or political authority in most contemporary Muslim societies. This marks a dramatic change in fortunes compared to the historic reality in which the ‘*ulamā*’ could make or break rulers, including the caliph. Even in the most recent iteration of the caliphate, under the Ottomans (r. 1517/923-1924/1341), the ‘*ulamā*’ repeatedly exercised their power to remove a caliph and replace him with a more suitable candidate.²³ This cannot be dreamt of in any Muslim polity today. This degree of authority was recognized in Islamic scholarship from the earliest times and through the centuries, as exemplified by the following statement from Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya:

The correct position is that rulers (*umarā*) are only to be obeyed inasmuch as they issue commands that are in accord with scholarship (*ilm*). Consequently, [the obligation] to obey them follows from [the obligation] to obey the scholars (*ulama*). For obedience is only to be rendered in those

²² For the attribution of the report to early authorities, see <https://al-maktaba.org/book/31615/19878>.

²³ Samy A. Ayoub, *Law, Empire, and the Sultan: Ottoman Imperial Authority and Late Hanafi Jurisprudence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 22. Ayoub is drawing on the work of Recep Şentürk. See Şentürk, “Between Traditional and New Forms of Authority in Modern Islam,” in *Tradition and Modernity: Christian and Muslim Perspectives*, ed. David Marshall (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2013), 45–56, 45.

matters which are known to be right (*ma'rūf*) and what is obligated by scholarship (*ilm*). So just as obeying '*ulama*' follows from obeying the Messenger ﷺ, similarly obeying rulers follows from obeying the '*ulama*'. Since the practice of Islam can only be fully realized through two groups of people: the scholars and the rulers; and since all people are their followers, worldly flourishing is only attainable through the flourishing of these two groups, and its corruption is through their corruption. As 'Abdullāh ibn al-Mubārak (d. 181/797) and other forebears (*salaf*) have said: There are two types of people who, if they flourish, the people will flourish, and if they are depraved, the people will be depraved. He was asked: "Who are they?" He replied: "The rulers and the '*ulama*'." ²⁴

Why was such a position of authority important? As our own times illustrate, the removal of the '*ulamā*' has been part and parcel of the removal of Islam as a normative force in society more generally. It is true that in much of the Muslim world today, one can find relatively vibrant '*ulamā*' institutions that have been cultivating scholarship in the Islamic sciences (*al-'ulūm al-Shar'iyya*). But without structural foundations propping up an Islamic socio-cultural matrix backed by political power, and indeed, forming the basis of such power, these phenomena remain brittle and may easily be uprooted, as the hegemonic secular norms of our time demand. This is why, as a matter of long-standing consensus in Sunni Islam, it is an obligation for the political authorities to uphold Islamic norms. ²⁵

In many Muslim countries, '*ulamā*' institutions have been gravely compromised by the rise of the nation-state. States like Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) offer particularly striking examples of governments that have succeeded in bringing significant sections of their '*ulamā*' classes under state control. In such contexts, as Jonathan A. C. Brown has suggested, one should be extremely wary of taking as authoritative the pronouncements of the '*ulamā*' in political matters, which are likely to be compromised by their political

²⁴ Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, *I'lām al-muwaqqi'īn 'an Rabb al-'ālamīn*, eds. Mashhūr Āl Salmān and Abū 'Umar Aḥmad (Dammam: Dār Ibn al-Jawzī, 1423), 2:16.

²⁵ For a discussion of this issue, see Ovamir Anjum, "Who Wants the Caliphate?," Yaqeen Institute, October 19, 2019, available at: <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/read/paper/who-wants-the-caliphate>.

subordination.²⁶ This is not to say that these scholars' *fatwas* on how to conduct one's prayers need to be rejected. In such cases, the average layperson can generally assume that they are faithfully passing on *fiqh* rulings. Where issues become more political, however, such as their support for the oppression of dictators, or their legitimization of normalizing relations with Israel while it is engaged in a colonial occupation which periodically rains down missiles on the largely defenseless peoples of Palestine, such 'ulamā' should be avoided as sources of guidance in these arenas.²⁷

One might ask whether or not such behavior on the part of some 'ulamā' undermines the credibility of the 'ulamā' as a whole. The earlier part of this article established that the 'ulamā' are indispensable to gaining a sound understanding of our *dīn*, especially in periods of "ummatic" transition like today. Some people will undoubtedly feel a sense of disillusionment at the emergence of politically compromised 'ulamā'. It is natural for humans to feel suspicious of groups regarding whom they hear negative reports, and it is also unfortunately common for human beings to generalize such reports when they have little direct experience of the group reported on. Indeed, one could argue that this is how Islamophobia operates globally.

Yet, as I contend in a book that looks at the way some 'ulamā' have engaged in the politics of the Arab revolutions and their aftermath over the past decade or so, while there are 'ulamā' who have been compromised by their associations with oppressive regimes today, it makes little sense to generalize about the vast majority of 'ulamā'. Most either stay away from the contentious realm of politics given the risks of opposition, or else vocally criticize the problematic stances of the relatively miniscule number of 'ulamā' who have thrown in their lot with authoritarian regimes.²⁸ This is not to say that the prominence granted by states to such "'ulamā' of the sultan," as they are sometimes called, is not a problem. This situation needs to be rectified through a process of political reform in which these

²⁶ Jonathan Brown, "Keeping Our Eye on the Ball: The Problem with the UAE Summit," MuslimMatters, December 17, 2018, <https://muslimmatters.org/2018/12/17/keeping-our-eye-on-the-ball-the-problem-with-the-uae-summit/>.

²⁷ Sadly, this has happened in several instances. I note one case in my book.

²⁸ Al-Azami, *Islam and the Arab Revolutions*.

states are, through proper Islamic means, transformed into states with accountable governments—a process in which leading ‘*ulamā*’ would have historically played a crucial role.

Infallible sources, fallible humans

In contrast with the opinions of fallible human beings, be they learned or otherwise, Muslims recognize the Qur’an and Sunnah as infallible sources of guidance.²⁹ This is to say that Muslims, despite not having infallible knowledge of every interpretive possibility of every verse and hadith in the Qur’an, can know the broad contours of belief and practice mandated by these sources. More generally, Sunnis agree that any opinion found to be mainstream in the four *madhhabs* could be legitimately followed without controversy. On finer details of interpretation, such as which of the ways of wiping one’s head was intended by Allah in the Qur’an, or even that He intended only a single interpretation, we cannot claim certitude. All we can claim is certainty around more general facts. In the case just noted, for example, we can claim with certainty, according to the ‘*ulamā*’, that Qur’an 5:6 requires us to wipe our heads in some manner during *wuḍū’*, though we cannot be more specific than that.

Historically, the broad contours of belief and practice just referred to have formed the basis of an Islamic civilizational project.³⁰ Other civilizational projects, like those of the West, similarly are characterized by immense disagreements on the finer details of their ventures. We see these disagreements played out on a daily basis in social, political, and cultural controversies. They are debated and analyzed

²⁹ The Sunnah, to be counted as such, must be soundly transmitted, an arena that is the realm of legitimate disagreement among specialists with respect to individual reports.

³⁰ This is an important counter to the tiresome refrain that the Sharia cannot be known since there are so many different interpretations. This is a red herring. Every system that forms the basis for a legal culture or a civilization develops mechanisms for resolving disputes wherein differences of opinion lead to intractable social problems. This is why Sharia-based rule of law systems established courts, and as the legal maxim has it, “the ruling of a judge eliminates difference of opinion.” The supposed claims of the indeterminacy of the Sharia naturally apply *a fortiori* to systems that are built entirely on the contingent, socially constructed practices found in post-Enlightenment Europe.

to no end at universities, for example. Yet, these disagreements are largely set aside when existential political or ideological threats need to be confronted.

The fact that ‘*ulamā*’ are meant to be authoritative reference points for the lay Muslim who may find themselves confused on the “Islamic perspective” on a particular question does not negate the fact that the ‘*ulamā*’ are themselves fallible human beings.³¹ This is a point that bears repeating given how commonly human beings tend to place absolute trust in other humans when it comes to spiritual matters. ‘*Ulamā*’ are as fallible as any other kind of specialist. The specialized knowledge of a financial advisor or engineer does not preclude the possibility that they may make mistakes, even major ones. A doctor or lawyer may suffer from forgetfulness or not act with the best of intentions, despite their oaths to do no harm or to uphold the law. They are, after all, human beings, and hence there must be mechanisms in place for accountability and the redressing of wrongs. For medical or fiduciary negligence, for example, there are regulations that allow for restitution in modern legal systems. This is often less readily available in cases now sometimes referred to as “spiritual abuse,” for example.³² In the absence of such mechanisms for redress, vigilance is called for, and Muslim communities are obligated to find ways to balance reverence for their religious specialists with a recognition that they are sometimes all too human in their frailty.

On the other hand, in many of our communities in the modern world, the problem is not one of undue reverence, but no reverence at all. There is a desperate need for Muslims to take religious training seriously, to grant it social recognition and prestige such that it attracts talented minds able to develop the levels of expertise

³¹ I use the phrase “the Islamic perspective” for the sentence to flow better. Of course not all issues have a single Islamic perspective. In fact, aside from core components of belief understood in general terms, there are typically multiple Islamic perspectives on a given issue, as indicated above when discussing how to wipe one’s head during *wuḍū’*.

³² The term “spiritual abuse” has been used in a number of ways in public discourse. In mainstream Western uses, it sometimes implies that religious traditions and figures are especially susceptible to these forms of abuse, although the examples mentioned above, and the fact that some of these cases have been highlighted in the context of the #MeToo movement, illustrates that there are wider trends in society for which the term is a specifically religious analogue. Islamic scholars like Dr. Rania Awaad and Shaykh Rami Nsour use the term in the more careful sense that I am appealing to here. For a discussion, see: Rami Nsour, “My Reflections on Spiritual Abuse,” *Journal of Islamic Faith and Practice* 4:1, (2022), available at: <https://journals.iupui.edu/index.php/JIFP/article/view/26552>.

we need in our communities locally, nationally, and transnationally. As already highlighted, modern Muslims have woefully neglected their religious duty to develop the kind of religious expertise in our communities that will help address the questions that people have on a whole range of contemporary issues. A concerted communal effort is required to develop robust institutions that can produce the scholarly knowledge necessary to address the sorts of issues we face as a community. Every member of the community has a role to play in this process.

This entails recognizing and respecting Islamic knowledge as an enterprise to which would-be scholars are able and willing to dedicate their education and subsequent careers. Too often in our communities, those who have dedicated their lives to Islamic learning are looked down upon as failures who could not make it in more prestigious fields. This in turn contributes to a vicious cycle in which the education of future ‘*ulamā*’ becomes the preserve of less capable students, while the most talented end up in “secular” fields like medicine and law. These tendencies are, taking into account local variation, true on an *umma*-wide scale, and their consequences over the last several generations have included the diminution of many Muslims’ commitment to their own religious tradition as well as the emergence of an ‘*ulamā*’ class that is too often unable to bear the burdens of the challenges facing the *umma*.

“Heirs of the prophets”

It is well-nigh impossible to discuss the role of the ‘*ulamā*’ without referencing the Prophet’s luminous hadith regarding the pursuit of sacred knowledge. Reported in multiple collections of hadith, as well as in the popular *Riyāḍ al-Ṣāliḥīn* collection of Yaḥyā ibn Sharaf al-Nawawī (d. 676/1277), this hadith comprises a central pillar in our understanding of who the ‘*ulamā*’ are and the enormous moral burden they must bear. According to this report, the Prophet ﷺ said:

Whoever travels a path on which he seeks knowledge, Allah makes a path to Paradise easy for him. Indeed, the angels lower their wings in approval of the one seeking knowledge. The inhabitants of the heavens and the earth and

even the fish in the depths of the sea seek forgiveness for him. The superiority of the scholar over the worshiper is like the superiority of the moon over the stars. Indeed, the scholars are the heirs of the prophets, and the prophets do not leave behind dinars or dirhams, but rather knowledge. So, whoever acquires it has indeed acquired a bounteous share.³³

What this hadith conveys in broad terms is the immense virtue of pursuing sacred knowledge, and the great rank of those who acquire it for the right reasons. The fact that intentions are all-important is strikingly illustrated in another hadith that serves as a dire warning for those who would pursue the sacred knowledge of our *dīn* for worldly reasons. In a longer hadith that is also found in *Riyāḍ al-Ṣāliḥīn*, the Prophet ﷺ speaks of a scene on the Day of Resurrection. He states:

A man who had acquired and imparted knowledge and read the Qur'an will be brought forward. Allah will remind him of the favors He had bestowed upon him and the man will acknowledge them. Then He will ask him: “What did you do to express gratitude for these favors?” The man will reply: “I acquired knowledge and taught it, and read the Qur'an for Your sake.” Allah will say to him: “You have lied. You acquired knowledge so that people might call you a learned man, and you read the Qur'an so that they might call you a reciter, and they have done so.” A command will then be issued, and he will be dragged on his face and thrown into Hell.³⁴

The role of the heirs of the prophets is clearly not to be taken lightly. With the right intention, pursuing knowledge is the most virtuous of acts; but with wayward intentions, one may be destined for Hellfire—May Allah ﷻ protect us. This key reality notwithstanding, the ‘*ulamā*’ remain indispensable to a proper understanding of Islam.

³³ This hadith appears in multiple canonical collections including those of al-Tirmidhī, Abū Dāwūd, Ibn Mājah, and the *Musnad* of Aḥmad. For a comprehensive attribution of the hadith to these sources and a discussion of the strength of the report, see Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, 36:46–48, https://archive.org/details/musnadahmed/ahmd_36/page/n45/mode/2up?view=theater. The modern editors of the *Musnad* consider the hadith to be *ḥasan li-ghayrihī*, owing to some weakness in several of its versions that do not ultimately undermine its legitimate use in religious practice. For the report as preserved in al-Nawawī’s *Riyāḍ al-Ṣāliḥīn*, see <https://sunnah.com/riyadussalihin:1388>. On an entirely unrelated note, the lack of gender inclusive language in my translation is a reflection of the inevitably gendered nature of the Arabic language. To avoid anachronism, I do not use gender inclusive language when translating this and other premodern texts in this article.

³⁴ To read the full report in al-Nawawī’s *Riyad al-Salihin*, which draws it from *Sahih Muslim*, indicating its authenticity, see <https://sunnah.com/riyadussalihin:1617>.

Conclusion

In this article, I set out to explain what role the '*ulamā*' are meant to play in facilitating the vibrant spiritual life of the Muslim *umma*. I attempted to answer a collection of concerns about whether the '*ulamā*' continue to have any relevance in the present day. I hope to have demonstrated that the answer to these concerns is unequivocally in the affirmative. The '*ulamā*' are heirs to the Prophet ﷺ in offering guidance to Muslims regarding how they can best adhere to the Qur'an and Sunnah. Muslims have historically recognized how and why the '*ulamā*' serve this crucial social and spiritual role in their communities. Yet, this understanding has been challenged by the systematic collapse of Islamic civilizational infrastructure in recent centuries. This ummatic condition provides the crucial context in which questions about the relevance of the '*ulamā*' arose in the first place.

Muslims as a community must come to recognize the importance of institution-building that directly caters to the training and development of '*ulamā*'. Rebuilding the Islamic infrastructure that once served this purpose is key to restoring the authority of the '*ulamā*'. This same infrastructure must also serve to produce female '*ulamā*' who can bring unique perspectives and also serve as role models of learning and piety for the *umma* as the Qur'an states of Maryam ('*alayhā al-salām*') and the wife of Pharaoh.³⁵ There also needs to be a recognition that the '*ulamā*' are fallible human beings, and that no Muslim is ever absolved of individual responsibility before Allah.

It is my hope that the foregoing reflections have conveyed the challenging balancing act that modern Muslims have to collectively engage in to begin to rectify their spiritual condition. They simultaneously need to respect their '*ulamā*' as beacons of guidance while being aware of their current weakness as a social class and their potential human frailty as individuals. Furthermore, Muslim

³⁵ Qur'an 66:11-12.

communities need to extend their respect to these “heirs of the prophets” despite having spent generations diminishing their social value. Rather than persist in their long-standing, systematic neglect of Islamic learning, modern Muslims need to recognize Islam as a discursive framework for understanding the world around them in a way that conforms with the divine revelation received by the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ as guidance for humanity in all subsequent ages. In other words, we need a new revival of the religious sciences for our times. This is an urgent communal obligation that the *umma* has failed to uphold, potentially placing the global Muslim community in a state of sin until it is fulfilled. The only question that remains is whether the *umma* is willing to give this important task the attention it deserves.