Asserting Religious Text in the Modern World: Muslim Friday *Khutbahs*

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Abstract

The *khutbah* delivered each Friday in mosques represents an important facet of the Muslims' religious imagination. Islam, being an ultra-scriptural religion, requires that those who deliver this sermon, the *khatib*, engage in a wide range of creative handling of texts. The *khutbah* stands as concentric circles of belonging to a text-rooted religion and to the continuous realignment of those texts when addressing social reality; the *khatib* stands as an interpreter of lived experiences as well as a maker and shaper of such experiences. The quest of relevance in the *khutbah* is counterbalanced by the quest for authenticity. This discourse analysis study, which analyzes two years' worth of *khutbahs* delivered in Southern California, focuses on three interrelated dimensions of *khutbahs*: how certain texts assert their authority, the different approaches to contextualizing the text, and how texts are reinterpreted in the face of the challenges of modernity.

Introduction

The *khutbah* is the address given during the Friday noon congregational prayer delivered in mosques.[1] The *khatib* (the speaker) naturally invokes religious texts that authenticate its Islamic character. As religious texts are open to interpretation and convey different shades of meaning, this article analyzes *khutbahs* in terms of how Islamic texts are invoked and contextualized. Specifically, it points to a dual foci: the *khutbah*'s quest for authenticity by staying close to tradition and connecting such tradition to something unfolding in the present. Indeed, authenticity has to be mobilized to become rele-

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vant; otherwise, the text would be perceived as barren even if it were immanent. Thus this article inquires about the specific ways in which texts are contextualized so that they will stay relevant to the audience's impinging social reality. Obviously, the act of contextualization differs significantly depending upon the *khatib*'s Islamic sensibility and orientation. It also demonstrates how the images of modernity intermingle with the religious imagination. Lastly, the issue of reforming the Islamic message, a kind of public, non-academic renewal, will be discussed.

The article analyzed two years worth of Friday *khutbahs* delivered in Southern California. Data collection stretched from 2003 to 2006 and covered all Sunni and Shi`i mosques in that region; *khutbahs* on university and college campuses were not included. The unique parts of the 106 collected *khutbahs* were transcribed for citation and full analysis. Despite this collection's wide coverage, statistical representation was not sought.[2] As an observer, I analyzed the *khutbahs* in the spirit of sympathetic criticism. Although it is easy to debunk *khutbahs* and *khatibs*, in my view that is neither fair nor constructive. Out of respect for the *khatibs* and their role,[3] I consciously abstained from using language that deconstructs authority and annihilates wholeness. But as I was keen to be critical, I identified modernity's traps and how they bear on the *khutbah*.[4]

Ultimate Textual Authority

The effectiveness of a public address hinges on at least two conditions: style and authority.[5] As an ultra-scriptural religion, authority in Islam lies squarely in the Qur'an and the Sunnah. Muslims believe that the Qur'an is the revealed book of God and represents the immutable reference that encompasses all creedal principles and moral values of Islam as well as some general rules of conduct. The Sunnah is the "way" of Prophet Muhammad, meaning the actual application and elaboration of the Qur'an. Although Muslim groups handle these two sources differently, it is widely accepted that they form the base of Islam.[6]

The Sunnah can be further divided into hadith (the collection of the Prophet's sayings and reported actions) and *sirah* (the stories and events connected with his life). Compared to the Qur'an, the hadith literature is more specific and attends to details of personal behavior and day-to-day community affairs. While the terms *Sunnah* and *hadith* are often used interchangeably, the former reflects an orientation more than specific prescriptions whereas the latter enjoys a high level of authority, especially in the

Sunni tradition. But not all hadiths are equally regarded, however, for some of them are considered unauthentic or semi-authentic depending on the strength of their chain of narration. Therefore, while the Sunnah has a complete binding authority as a whole, single items from it (e.g., a hadith or a story from the *sirah*) could be challenged on the ground of its authenticity (but not its authority). Invoking historical circumstances represents the major factor behind the Sunnah's divergent interpretations. Moreover, the scope and method of contextualization define the position along the continuum of literalism-constructionism orientations in Islamic thinking.[7]

As Muslim scholars (ulama) in classical Islamic subjects have written on both of these prime sources, their commentaries also carry high legitimacy. Given that their lives, style, and logic are rooted in the history of those subjects, any disagreement over what is "Islamic" necessarily invokes the corpus of writings of prior as well as contemporary ulama. Moreover, practically speaking, three kinds of authoritative texts are available to *khatibs*: the Qur'an, Sunnah, and the works of ulama, although they have different levels of referentiality. All *khatibs* draw on these texts in their own manner in order to add their own effort to making the text speak to the audience's current realities. Therefore it can be said that the process of *khutbah* preparation involves a dual interpretation: an interpretation of the text itself and the interpretation of the lived reality addressed by the text.

The ultimate centeredness of Islamic texts appears vividly in an interesting incident. The *khatib*, a non-Arabic-speaking person of impressive demeanor and dressed in a *jalabiya* and a white cap, was delivering a *khutbah* in his exceptionally strong voice and citing the Qur'an in both Arabic and English. When he came to a verse that contains a difficult Arabic word – *yanzaghannaka* (7:200) – he stumbled the first time and then tried to pronounce it correctly. Failing to do so, someone from the audience corrected him three times and then let it go. The *khatib* continued the *khutbah* normally with no major embarrassment, for it is God's *kalam*, which should be recited correctly without exception.

Searching for Anchors

It is remarkable that *khatibs* try to stay close to a normative Islamic base and invoke texts that they assume support what they are saying. Since most of them are community activists, they surely have plenty of ideas about what Muslims living in the United States should do. They work hard to show that their ideas are not simply personal understandings of what should be done;

rather, they are keen to show that their ideas are supported by the Qur'an, the hadith, the *sirah*, and the works of the ulama.

Furthermore, it is noticeable that the overwhelming majority of *khatibs* stay away, or at least try to, from pure motivational stories that are not prominent in the traditions. There is an abundance of pietism in the corpus of early Muslim literature, especially in the work of Sufis. It is quite puzzling why *khatibs* do not draw on this material, for it is very effective at capturing the audience's attention. Several factors appear to be responsible. First, such literature might not be accessible due to the fact that popular English-language books in Islamic bookstores tend to focus on expounding the basics of Islam; only recently have the themes become more diverse and deeply intellectual. Second, the *khatib*'s educational background might be a factor. Since most of them have at least some higher educational experience in the United States,[8] the systematic nature of such learning should have a spillover effect on their general thinking. Furthermore, most *khatibs* are self-taught and the general type of reasoning they utilized in pursuing higher education will influence their understanding of religious texts. Fully aware that the Qur'an and Sunnah are Islam's ultimate sources, *khatibs*, most of whom lead professional lives, are keen to use textual supports to support their ideas. The one exception to the rule is narrating stylized statements or biographies of notable devout men (and sometimes women) of the past. These represent favorite citations, since they carry both the legitimacy of history and the brevity of well-stated wisdom.

One *khutbah* on optimism illustrates the desperate search for textual anchors. Although couching his discussion in rather modern terms, the *khatib* managed to find a reference from the Muslim heritage. Defining optimism as finding something positive in any situation, he cited a saying from Sufyan al-Thawri, a notable Tabi`i[9] that "Allah created Hellfire to keep people away from troubles or to let them do good things. So there will be something positive even in that." This kind of chasing after a text, even if it does not really apply, is frequently encountered. Needless to say, this strategy does not look beyond finding any semblance of a connection between the idea in the speaker's head and the text referenced.

Selectivity in invoking textual supports is a well-known phenomenon in religious circles. Depending on the *khatib*'s orientation, he would be more exposed to one type of text than the other. A Sufi-oriented *khatib* naturally has more familiarity with the stories of devout people, while a Salafi-oriented *khatib* would of course invoke a hadith or a statement from a prominent hadith scholar. Therefore it was no surprise when a *khatib* who talked about

apostasy referenced Ibn Taymiyya. Obviously, the selectiveness of textual supports is not as critical as the *khatib*'s commentary on such statements. The act of contextualizing the text falls on his shoulders and thus defines the *khutbah*'s character.

Contextualizing Texts

Historically, Muslims have devised various approaches to interpreting the Qur'an and Sunnah. In fact, an entire field of scholarly argumentation devoted to this undertaking eventually appeared in Islamic literature. A specialized classical Islamic field, *usul al-fiqh*, developed along with it in order to organize the process of handling texts dealing with religious directives as regards determining the relative weight given to their sources, reconciling different textual supports, and establishing the rules of textual derivation.[10] Since most *khatibs* are self-taught, one would not expect them to delve into such specialized matters. The degree to which they violate the principles of *usūl* is an interesting subject for analysis, but one that is beyond the scope of this article.

Nevertheless, it is important here to inquire about how different Islamic texts are used and contextualized. In this regard, a three-layer textual hierarchy could be conceptualized: the Qur'an, hadith (the first branch of Sunnah), and *sirah* (the second branch of Sunnah). The following scheme clarifies how *khatibs* deal with Islamic texts. First, the Qur'an usually serves as the foundation of the *khutbah*'s topic and guiding conceptual overture; however, sometimes a hadith can serve this purpose. Second, several hadiths are often cited to lend extra support to the argument. Third, the *sirah* is used as an elaborative device to highlight the applicability of Islamic teachings. In citing each of these three sources, material from the commentaries are brought forth to assure the audience that the *khatib*'s specific contextualization of the text is legitimate and to add more interesting details to the subject.

Although the work of the ulama is considered authoritative, citing it is not as common as one would expect. *Khatibs* may discuss *fiqhi* issues, but they typically do not discuss how the ulama handled such issues. This can be attributed to few practical reasons. First, the corpus of their work is less accessible to the average *khatib*, given the recent availability of online sources of Islamic texts. It is much easier to search the Qur'an and hadith online than to search for the religious scholars' comments. Second, their writings are often complex as they involve linguistic and legal argumenta-

tion; plowing through them would be a burden for most volunteer *khatibs*, who have to prepare for the *khutbah* within the time constraints of their professional careers. Third, elaborating on the scholars' work does not fit well into a thirty-minute address. Fourth, their debates bestow legitimacy but generally lack the elements of motivation.

Thus such citations are usually restricted to direct and short remarks on their texts. Of course, given that these citations highly buttress the legitimacy of the argument being offered, sometimes a *khatib* will say "the ulama say…" to assure the audience that his reflection is both authentic and plausible. The *sirah* is used most comfortably in *khutbahs*. As a narrative of a historical record, it serves as a simple tool of elaboration since the story speaks for itself. Not only is it cited in *khutbahs*, but frequently other stories from the lives of early Muslims are also narrated in order to give life to the ideas presented.

Here, it may be added that the issue of contextualizing texts is related to contextualizing *fiqh*, the corpus of the ulama's writings that apply the Shari`ah's principles to form rules for proper conduct in both the Muslim's personal and collective life. Therefore, *fiqh* represents a shorthand version of the proper conduct for Muslims today. But since they were writing in response to own their time and place, *fiqh* itself needs to be contextualized when used in *khutbahs*. One should note that the ulama were more conscious of being constrained by their time and space than many of today's *khatibs*. Furthermore, unfortunately, the terms *fiqh* and *shari`ah* are often treated as synonyms, with the latter inaccurately referring to Islamic law.[11]

Two examples demonstrate the wide latitude enjoyed by *khatibs* in contextualizing their chosen texts.[12] One *khatib*, while narrating the familiar of how Umar accepted Islam, chose to emphasize a rather novel point: Umar began calling people to Islam by publicly announcing his conversion. The *khatib* then remarked that all Muslims in the United States should make *da`wah*. Although the meaning of this term was initially left open, it gradually became more specific: "Do something. Take care of the Islamicity of your kids." What is interesting here is the ease with which a historical text was concretely connected to the lived reality of Muslims in the United States. The *khatib*'s logic went like this: Umar lived in a non-Muslim society, and we American Muslims live in a non-Muslim society. Therefore we should do what he did. This extrapolation was based on what the *khatib* had in mind: the importance of activism and protecting the community's new seeds.

Another *khutbah* included many references to *taqwa* (God-consciousness) and not being among the *munafiqun* (the hypocrites). The *khatib* went

into detail on the fate awaiting the hypocrites on the Day of Judgment (57:13-15). The *khutbah* did not differentiate between *nifaq* in *`aqidah* (hypocrisy in matters related to the core belief) and social hypocrisy. In the Qur'an, *nifaq* (usually translated as hypocrisy) deals with those who claim to have joined Islam but actually conspire against it. In hadith, however, the term is used mainly in the context of social hypocrisy. Yet the *khatib* mixed the two genres of meanings, citing Qur'anic verses and juxtaposing them with social life. He specifically mentioned those who do not pray *fajr* are guilty of *nifaq*. Again, since this young *khatib* was disappointed with the relaxed attitude toward the daily prayers and the tendency of some to miss them or not observe them at the prescribed time, he managed to present a specific contextualization that served his purpose, regardless of the validity of such contextualization.

Generally speaking, a standard way that *khatibs* contextualize texts is to cite a text and then make a direct connection with a modern life reality without any interface. In other words, the connection to be made is either taken for granted or left to the audience to figure out. For example, the topic of one *khutbah* was on achieving balance between the demands of the Hereafter and this life. After noting that Islam does not advocate a monastic lifestyle, the *khatib* mentioned the famous hadith about the three men who inquired about the Prophet's acts of worship and, when told, were not impressed. They rationalized their response by saying that since he is the Prophet, all of his sins had been forgiven. Each one of them swore on an issue of extreme devotion. When Prophet Muhammad heard about this, he told them: "I pray at night and I sleep, I fast some days and I do not fast some other days, and I get married. Whoever disdains my Sunnah and way of life is not from my community."

The *khatib* did not elaborate on the range of implications for modern life that can be drawn from this text; rather, he left them open. Later on he enumerated three worldly benefits of *taqwa*, defined as the strict observance of God's commands, by invoking a rather utilitarian logic: through *taqwa* (1) God will open the door of "*barakat*" (blessed bounties) from heaven and Earth; (2) God gives Muslims a way out of difficulties … for example, an employer will be accommodating and allow the employee to attend the Friday prayer or will not object if a female employee wears hijab; (3) through *istighfar* (seeking God's forgiveness), the person receives some material perks. Conscious that the third point might sound like an exaggeration, the *khatib* was quick to say that there is a textual proof (*dalil*) for it: Noah's prayer, which contains the words: "Ask forgiveness from your Lord,

for He is Oft-Forgiving. He will send rain to you in abundance, give you increase in wealth and sons, and provide you with gardens and rivers" (71:10-12). The *khatib* further supported his point by noting that Hasan al-Basri, an icon of behavioral Sufism, cited these verses on the benefit of seeking forgiveness. Obviously, there is a wide gulf between what the verse points to and what the *khatib* conveyed. Nevertheless, the audience was assured that his idea was supported.

Furthermore, logical contradictions in the way texts were cited in the *khutbah* as a whole are apparent. Earlier on, the *khatib* had noted that obsessing over one's material life is not Islamic. Later on, though, he asserted that non-material *istighfar* brings material benefits. This mode of minimalist contextualizing is an approach specifically preferred by *fiqh*-minded *khatibs*. For such people, the act of contextualizing is achieved simply by finding a text that some scholar had invoked and then pasting it on modern reality. Tension in contextualizing the text is naturally more prominent in *khutbahs* delivered by Salafis. While the text's centrality is a feature of many religions, the strong gravity of Islamic texts cannot be better exposed than in a Salafi *khutbah*, for such an orientation by definition gives the letter of the text high priority. The following example gives a very good illustration of the game of text-incident matching.

The *khatib*, a known Salafi, reports that he was answering *fiqh* questions on the web. The questioner claimed that "women [were] always the problem, the roots of the problems from day one. That was [a question from a] Muslim! So I have to explain; NO [i.e., that is not correct], *na`ūdhu billah min dhalik* [we seek refuge in Allah from such a thing]." The *khatib* brought an *ayah* to support his argument: "Allah did not say to us 'Hawwa, she did eat from the tree.' No. Allah (S) said, *wa huwa asdaq al-qa'ilūn* [and He is the most truthful articulators] that it was Adam who disobeyed Allah and was led astray. It is actually not the mistake of women," the *khatib* asserted. Furthermore, since the Qur'an states that both of them ate from the tree, he was quick to note that "we should not think [ask] who did [it] first [or] how." He then cited another text to reject the logical possibility of one starting to eat before the other, because that would assign blame to a gender that was not explicitly pronounced by the Qur'an: "Allah said Adam … and we keep going [that is, we do not ask who started eating first]. We believe this is an *amr ghayb* [a matter beyond human knowledge]; we haven't been there."

Again, the text here was the ultimate judge and was invoked to point to the strongest category of unknowablity, *al-ghayb*, a special category that the

Qur'an assigns to matters beyond human knowledge, issues that human beings may know about only if God chooses to provide that knowledge to them. One of the most cited example of *al-ghayb* is the *ruh*, the spiritual dimension bestowed upon human beings by Allah to make them beyond-biology creatures. What is interesting here is that the *khatib* invoked this belief category on a gender-related issue that can be rationally argued, which is very consistent with Salafi logic. In this way, he used a highly potent Islamic category to undercut complaints about his "liberal" stance on the sensitive issue of gender.

Despite the rigidity of the serial method of citing texts, this strategy can develop into a complex chess game of advancing one text over the other in order to preserve an imagined order that is stubbornly upheld despite a disappointing reality. Ironically, at the end of the day literalism is forced to acknowledge social reality and tries to face it in its own way in what may be labeled a "complex simplicity." But by the time literalism discovers the weight of the Muslims' lived reality, a new reality has come to the fore to challenge the literalist reading once again.

Illusive Relevance

Some *khutbahs* are highly detached from the audience's life realities and focus solely on the arguments and polemics found in classical commentaries. For example, one pre-hajj *khutbah* discussed Prophet Ibrahim's life and delved into various arcane argumentations as regards some of its details; another one focused on God's existence by means of semi-logical arguments. Other *khatibs* cited long stories, reciting them in Arabic followed by a complete or partial translation, and then drawing a few lessons. It seems that they were, in effect, saying: "Here is a relevant story, and you listeners can extract some more lessons from it." While this could indicate his inability to clarify the connections he was trying to make with their lives, it nevertheless allows the attendees to extract the lessons as they wish.[13]

The undetermined quality of the message should be more problematic for young American-born Muslims. Given that their school training encourages addressing specific problems, it is no wonder that they tend to perceive the messages contained in many *khutbahs* as empty rhetoric.[14] Indeed, *khutbahs* delivered by American-born Muslims, regardless of whether or not they were African American, tended to stress concrete meanings and ready-for-application messages.

Engaging in wishful thinking is another aspect of some *khutbahs*. Obviously, identifying what constitutes wishful thinking comes into question here, given that the one of the most common aims of religious and literary messages is to transcend a discouraging reality and inspire a leap of faith that cannot be fairly accounted for by rationalist analysis. But when the *khutbah* addresses a concrete project or action, the illusive relevance of cited texts becomes apparent. For example, one immigrant *khatib* stressed the importance of young children memorizing the Qur'an by saying that since Allah has preserved it intact and made it easy to memorize, there is no excuse not to bring them to the center's school to receive an Islamic education. Aware of the fact that it is not easy for parents to bring their children to the mosque several times a week, he noted that "we live in comfort in this country, and Allah will ask us more" on the Day of Judgment. Another *khatib* engaged the audience in an emotional plea to support a new Qur'an teaching program. He guaranteed that the students of this non-Arab community would, with God's blessing, be speaking Arabic in only three months. A *khatib*, whose newly remodeled mosque had siphoned off significant financial resources, chastised the audience because nothing had happened yet with his three suggested projects, one of which was a youth center. Giving *fi sabil Allah* was enough of a principle to warrant that his projects should take priority.

What is interesting is that text referencing in such *khutbahs* can be implied without a direct citation. For example, talking about Prophet Ibrahim's life implicitly brings to people's minds the Qur'an's various references to him. The verses that call on people to contemplate the Qur'an will necessarily be invoked in the listeners' minds when the *khatib* talks about a Qur'an memorization program for children. Illusive relevance is demonstrated by pointing to texts in the context of concrete projects, although the texts do not directly relate to the matter. Yet the veiled reference to texts makes them appear as if they are completely relevant.

Fractal Reform

It is rather striking that many *khatibs* leave open the implications of the texts they cite, a practice that leaves ample space for attendees to fill-in-the-gaps and thereby complete what has been said. This is evident when mosque attendees hang around chatting after the *khutbah*. Frequently they rehash what was said while adding their own take on it and attributing it to the *khatib*. Sometimes people are unsatisfied with how the subject was cov-

ered. Since *khatibs* usually support their arguments with Islamic texts, those who are dissatisfied scramble to find a text to counter his argument. When they cannot find one, they resort to "Islamic commonsense" notions that might be based on some cultural norms that are themselves derivations and approximations of Islamic injunctions in a certain context. In this way, *khutbahs* construct a space for deliberation on the text's practical meanings and implications.

Eventually, Islamic reform takes place in the consciousness of people and in living rooms. I contend that *khutbahs*, conceptualized as Muslim public discourse on Islam, fail to fix one meaning or one implication of a given text.[15] The *khutbah* discourse merely illuminates it, increases its radiance, and provides an opportunity for individuals to interact with its message based on their own circumstances. The glow fades quickly, leaving behind emotive-cognitive inactive remnants that become part of a religious repertoire, piled on each other as meshed layers of textual memories. Texts that were illuminated in *khutbahs* and reconciled within the people's life experiences stir the remnants of previous *khutbahs* and then settle to form another layer. Obviously, such layers of implications and life-interpreted texts intersect differently in the minds of different people. They become rather sophisticated social perspectives with some individuals, and superficial views with others. In time, the texts and the reflections upon them form mental images and taken-for-granted ideas that become normalized in the sociocultural space within which Muslims live. And there exactly lies practiced Islam, and there exists continuous and leaderless Islamic renewal by the laity/common people. Islamic renewal is not simply done in books, despite all of the books that engage in the renewal of some concepts.

Contemporary Islamic discourse is not completely formed in *khutbahs*, despite all of the *khutbah*'s assumed authority, for it is a diffused and contested authority. It might be more accurate to say that the discourse propagated in mosques might actually serve to elicit counter-responses in the audience's consciousness and that the more parochial the meanings conveyed in a *khutbah* are, the more counter-meanings are latently created. Only under certain social conditions do parochial meanings implode into a pathological state. The generic Islamic meanings usually invoked in *khutbahs* are later on converted into Muslim meanings situated within specific contexts and life realities.

As *khatibs* have diverse religious persuasions, some of them naturally are more willing than others to venture beyond the classical-era pronouncements of Islamic literature. It should be noted that the labels "conservative"

and "liberal" are not as meaningful in the Islamic context. If reform is defined in terms of bringing something new, even if it collides with tradition, then probably few *khatibs* would qualify the term. But if reform is defined as renewal, as bringing something fresh and examining the text so that it speaks to new realities, then all *khatibs* engage in reform. I choose to call this kind of public, non-scholarly dealing with texts fractal reform because, given that it has no exact shape or definite goal, no one formula can capture it. This type of reform does not identify itself as such, although it subconsciously espouses it. It is an act without a named actor, an actor without a specified act. And this is what makes the end product seem so muddled – although it does have reformative elements, it only produces a dissimilar replica of the target of reform. This "fuzzy" product then infiltrates the consciousness of Muslims like a welcomed rumor, for the people to whom Islam is dear are desperately waiting for a gut renewal. In this sense Islamic reform is always there, a slow and gradual renewal that occupies space but has no geography, traverses time but has no history, and speaks in a familiar language that has no author.

The following *khutbah* on dreams illustrates this concept in an unusual way. For many, this topic brings to mind conventional *khatibs* who narrate stories that mix scattered historical records with popular legends add some touches of their own to satisfy their listeners' imagination. Learned Muslims, as well as some ulama, criticize this style of preaching. To a considerable extent, this style of "Islamic reminders" has declined significantly due to the Salafi current of the last three decades, a trend that highlights the importance of citing authentic texts. Another factor, more potent than the Salafi trend, is the audience's higher level of education. The *khutbahs* in some poor and rural areas, as well as Sufi preaching, still lean heavily on stories loaded with mythical images and reasoning that could infringe on the laws of nature. The topic of dreams might not be thought of as the best choice for Muslims living in twenty-first-century America, not least because it brings back memories of *khutbahs* that are often laughed at by the educated public. This particular *khutbah*, however, pointed to an underlying logic of renewal in a surprising way.

The *khatib*, who holds an M.B.A., started by drawing parallels between sleep and death. After citing Qur'an 39:42, which points to such a parallel, he stated that this "complex" verse cannot be easily understood. From there, he branched off into talking about dreams and, after citing several related opinions of the ulama, stressed that there is no one correct interpretation for any dream. He spent the rest of the *khutbah* discussing several textual sup-

ports. For example, he cited a story of two men who came to Muhammad ibn Sirin (d. 728/29), author of the celebrated dream interpretation books *Ta`bir al-Ru'yah al-Saghir* and *Tafsir al-Ahlam al-Kabir* to learn what their dreams of hearing the *adhan* meant. The *khatib* provided several details, among them the fact that the first man was known to be a serious believer, while the other one was known to be corrupt. Ibn Sirin interpreted the first man's dream as a sign that he will make hajj, while he told the second man that his dream indicated that he was a thief. He based his interpretations on the occurrence of *adhan* in two contexts in the Qur'an. In the first instance, a derivative this word is found in 22:27, which orders Abraham to call upon the people to make hajj. He based his interpretation for the second man on 12:70, which deals with Joseph's story. Joseph's brothers were accused of being thieves, and a palace functionary "announced" something to that effect (the verse uses the verbal form of *adhan* in reference to the act of announcing).

The *khatib* continued on the topic of dreams and eventually mentioned a hadith (reported by al-Bukhari, according to him, but which I failed to find) in which a man asked Prophet Muhammad to interpret the following dream: He had seen a cloud raining honey and butter, three ropes between the ground and the sky, and three men trying to climb the ropes with different rates of success. Abu Bakr (d. 634), who was sitting next to the Prophet, volunteered his interpretation. Prophet Muhammad told him that "you were on target on some issues, and you missed some others." Abu Bakr insisted that the Prophet tell him the correct interpretation, but he refused. The *khatib* convincingly emphasized that even a person of Abu Bakr's stature could misinterpret a dream: "Interpreting dreams is a science, a fatwa," he said.[16] As he was wrapping up, he quoted the hadith that if a person sees a dream to his liking, then let him take it as glad tidings; if the dream is about what he does not like, then let him not tell anybody because it will not harm him. Near the end, he remarked that dreams are sometimes just reflections of what goes on in the mind. For example, he related a dream that he had had a few days earlier: He saw himself worrying about being late for the airport; he woke up and was not really late. The *khatib* noted another hadith that advises the person who has a bad dream to change his bodily position and roll to the other side. The *khatib* reiterated then that "interpreting dreams is a science, a fatwa."

How do we account for such a *khutbah*? It might be well judged as an exercise in enigmatic thinking. Upon closer inspection, however, it shows that the speaker had sought to offer a demystified, rationalized, and specu-

lative status of it as regards dream interpretation. After the prayer was over, I shook his hand and noted the nature of the topic. He quickly (and disapprovingly) informed me that since the Internet now contains websites that will interpret a submitted dream for a fee, and that even though he objects to the traditional style of preaching that invokes myths, he purposely chose this topic to both assert and recast the tradition. The *khatib*, a volunteer (as opposed to licensed) imam and not a member of the ulama, was keen to talk to the average person and "correct" some of the misunderstandings of Islam's teachings. Wearing a nice shirt and pants and fashionable glasses, he looked like an ordinary person. Yet he felt personally responsible for raising the audience's level of understanding.

Although he could not claim the authority of an *`alim*, he nevertheless delivered the *khutbah* in an empathetic tone, speaking authoritatively and reading hadiths from note cards. This type of address neither demolishes nor accepts public myths; rather, it tries to reduce the mythic content in people's minds while keeping the unknown open. It urges Muslims to drop that which does not correspond to authentic traditions, but does not tie itself up in exhaustive authentication of the tradition. Thus the tradition lives, but only as a reinvented tradition. Continuity has been maintained, but it is a renewed continuity that has dipped in the past while remaining conscious of the contemporary and the modern.

The Modernist Impulse: Showing Relevance

The relative disconnect of some *khutbahs* with the attendees' lives is countered by a fixated interest in modernity. Although I consider the secularization thesis to be futile,[17] this does not mean that modernity has no bearing on the *khutbahs*. The issue here is not whether modernity impacts them, but rather how it impacts them. There is a difference between the Protestantization of the message and the tangential flirting with modernity. Evidence clearly shows that modernization, in the sense of philosophical secularization, is not taking place in the *khutbahs*. In fact, it shows up mainly in the metaphors used, which nevertheless affect the conveyed meaning.[18] Modern images seep into the text's presentation in order to make it sound more logical, but they are not presented as an alternative non-religious interpretation. The very logical explanation, which is not logic-driven but logic-empowered, remains subject to the larger religious framework of understanding. Modernist elements show up in three modes: presenting ideas informed with or responsive to modern sensibilities, referring to modern achievements fused

with a projected religious image, and adopting a modernist idea and "clothing it with an aura" of religious fact.

Modernity's impact does not have to be direct or to enter the pure figurative images that religion brings, for its themes exhibit themselves in more subtle and acceptable ways by interacting with the text. For example, in reflecting on the etiquette of communicating with Prophet Muhammad in *Sūrat al-Ḥujurat*, the *khatib* related that God is not happy with those who invade "your privacy, bothering you in your room, in your family. Knock the door; [make] an appointment." These are not simply modern references, but specifically American ones. Again, it is an intermingling with modernity and its images rather than a full acceptance of its assumptions. Although the larger framework was that of respecting prophets, he used yet another modern image: "You do not call Bush by his first name, regardless of his policies; you say President Bush." Another illustrative *khutbah* discussed Prophet Moses and Pharaoh. The *khatib* noted that Moses' mother was given a "bonus" as she suckled the baby; the Pharaoh gave her a "salary," "a stipend."

We can also trace how modern realities impinge on *khutbahs* through the use of informal language and phrases. An American-born imam was comfortable with saying "Allah is still in the business of forgiveness," a choice of words that is not often encountered in *khutbahs*. Another American-born *khatib* noted that angels are creatures who have no choice, like "dogs and birds, etc." Regardless of the rendering's accuracy, the use of "dog" highlights the Americaness of the style employed, for an immigrant *khatib* would never use that particular word. The *khatib* continued to relay the conversation between God and the angels, as the latter objected to God sending Adam to Earth. Conscious of using informal language at the edge of propriety, he was quick to say "of course, I am paraphrasing" what the angels said. Along the same lines, another *khatib* repeatedly interjected vernacular Egyptian words to make what he was saying more appealing to his mostly Arab immigrant audience. This *khatib* was an imam with some knowledge of the classics, and using the vernacular was purely instrumental; his sentences were complete and comprehensible without such references.

Khutbahs are full of juxtapositions between simple modern-life realities and the past. At times, however, such attempts go beyond drawing parallels that try to reduce the gap between distant realities, the modern and the religious. Some *khutbahs* engage in an ontological fusing between two realities. Shortly before Valentine's Day, an immigrant *khatib* was completely at ease

with talking about this occasion and encouraging husbands to be romantic with their wives. The connection to tradition was straightforward for him: He related how Prophet Muhammad was a gentleman and kind to `A'isha. This Friday also coincided with the new *hijri* lunar year, and the *khatib* spoke of "New Year resolutions." For him, personal etiquette took priority over the larger lessons of the hijra that *khutbahs* usually cover. Furthermore, one could not help but notice his sense of elation as he bridged old traditions with modern realities. Afterwards, he told me how proud he was of delivering a progressive message that is suitable for Muslims in America and Muslims in the twenty-first century. This attitude can be labeled as "progressive conventionalism."

A different mode in which modernity appears is magnificently demonstrated in a *khutbah* on the *isra'* and *mi`raj* (the Prophet's night journey and ascension to heaven). In this storytelling *khutbah*, the *khatib* went into many details about this reported blissful event in which Prophet Muhammad traveled to Jerusalem, ascended to heaven,[19] and came back to his bed all in the same night. In retelling this event, he stated:

> Buraq means the animal that carried *rasul Allah* from Makkha to Jerusalem. By the way, it is not the same animal that took him from the Earth to heaven. There was another tool, another machine, called *mi`raj*. He is not an animal; he is not a living thing. It's a machine that is made by Allah (S). And if you want to imagine something, it is just like the electrical elevator with ten floors. The first seven go to the seventh heaven, the eighth goes to *sidrat al-muntaha*, the ninth goes to the place of records, the tenth goes to the throne of Allah (S). You don't have to imagine the picture, but I wanted you to understand how it is.

This statement offers an impressive insight on how the images of modernity intermingle with religious imagination. In the tradition, Buraq is not an animal, but an angel who carried Prophet Muhammad, and this Buraq "puts its next step where its sight reaches."

This picture could invoke an image of an angel in the shape of a horse or something similar. Yet after automobiles became common, the image of Buraq in the *khatib*'s mind logically became that of an animal, and thus his description ignored this being's heavenly nature. Surely, if the *khatib* were asked directly if it were an angel he would respond in the affirmative. Nevertheless, immersed in the images of modern transportation coupled with his quest to impress the audience, the *khatib* transformed, either wittingly or unwittingly, Buraq's image from that of a heavenly being to that of a being

that stands in competition with modern transportation. This shift in image reaches its deepest levels when describing the *mi`raj*. After emphasizing that the means used in *mi`raj* was "not a living thing," he stated that a machine was used; however, he followed this with some words equivalent to a waiver: "It's a machine made by Allah (S)."[20]

In a sense, the *khatib* is saying: "Look, it is a machine, but do not think it is one with which we are familiar; rather, it is of a different quality." Such an unconscious maneuvering in invoking Buraq's image is further illustrated in his metaphor of the elevator, noting that it was an "electric elevator." Nevertheless, he quickly said that "you don't have to imagine the picture," hinting that the description is his personal way of rendering the story and making it understandable. It should be noted, however, that he was totally reserved when mentioning similar extra-empirical questions. In describing what Prophet Muhammad saw when he reached the highest level, he was careful to note that Allah cannot be seen and that "we do not want to transgress the boundaries" of what is proper (viz., the *`aqidah*).

It is important to note that rational modernity in this *khutbah* was appropriated to the religious, but that the validity claims were endorsed by the religious, not the rational. This example depicts the second mode in which modernity is present in *khutbahs*: "modernity religious simulation." The following two examples, a *khutbah* on optimism and one on spousal relationship, characterize the third mode of "dancing" with modernity.

The *khutbah* on optimism, prefaced by the connection between optimism and practicing Islam, began with: "Brothers and sisters, my *khutbah* will discuss some of the tricks and justifications we give ourselves for not working, for not doing what we are supposed to do, to serve the cause of Allah (S); [unintelligible word] we should exercise optimism, *al-ijabiyah*, that the Muslim should have. And the optimism means that to see the positive in every situation, that no matter how difficult the situation is, there can always be a positive in it." He then digressed by citing a quote from the Islamic heritage and fitting it into the subject in an odd way, an act that sought to add some legitimacy to his rather contemporary subject. The *khatib* went on: "And this is an attitude, *subhan Allah*, that governs the way we see, we should see the whole world. And the *ijabiyah*, the optimism, to be an optimist, means first to believe in Allah *subhanahu wa ta`ala*. This is the basis of having that optimistic attitude." Again, making this direct connection between the core belief in Allah and optimism is a way of introducing a subject, within modernist parameters, and justifying it by making an untenable connection with the Islamic heritage.

Switching back to a modern framework, he said: "The second thing is to believe in oneself, and the third thing is to belief in other people; to believe in them and what they can do … So we are talking about being an optimist. It does not mean being a pacifist, just waiting for things to happen, but we try to change things to the best. And after that, whatever the results come we accept that from Allah (S)." After a tangential story and considering blaming others for one's shortcomings as the antithesis of optimism, the *khatib* remarked that "the optimist always is not afraid of learning new things …, like new technology, new thing; it does not scare him." So far, the concepts of individualism, personal achievement, and catching up with the modern era are clear elements in his account of "Islamic" optimism.

The *khatib* continued using modernity-laden concepts: "Another thing is that do not put down your own achievements. Give yourself some credit. If you do something good do not play down. *Wallahi* this is worth nothing [i.e., do not say to yourself that what you did was worth nothing]." This is an astounding statement, since it is contrary to common Islamic preaching and most popular writings on Islam. However, the *khatib* provides some qualifications for this idea: "I am not saying being arrogant. But at the same time recognizing the fact that you can make a difference, and this will help you actually resolve any problem. It will help you pursue that same approach into doing something [good] later on. If you do something good, praise yourself in a way and thank Allah *subhanahu wa ta`ala*." Again, we see how the concept of personal achievement has been dressed in an Islamic cloth. After this, he mentioned that

> [a]nother thing is not to imitate others. Be yourself. Though I am not saying that you have to reinvent everything … But each one of us has something to contribute. That is being an optimist is that you should imitate your own individuality, your own uniqueness, so to speak. And I am not saying in an arrogant way, but saying as a unique building block that can add to the building; add something new to it.

What is specifically notable here is that he invokes no hadiths on the matter, nor does he talk about *tawakkul* (trust in God), which is a pivotal theme in Islamic texts.

The other modernist-centered *khutbah* enumerated six points for reducing marital discord: respecting and forgiving each other, listening to each other, supporting each other, protecting our homes from wickedness, establishing a common goal in the home, and worshiping Allah together. Most of his talk involved giving details and examples of these six points. The resem-

blance to a six-step workshop for a happy marriage was clear, and in all likelihood the *khatib* had probably consulted a popular booklet on the subject. The main difference between his advice given and what one would hear in a secular setting was found in the examples. On protecting homes from wickedness, he gave the example of avoiding *haram* images such those on the Internet; *haram* here substitutes for harmful in the secular version. Worshiping Allah together is probably the inversion (or conversion) of having a fun time together in the secular version. Two additional notes are appropriate here. Although he stated that "there is no culture of worship" in today's households, he did not critique the modern lifestyle. Moreover, he did not mention that worshiping Allah together as a lifestyle counters the modern one; rather, it is just another lifestyle. Second, the *khatib* did not start from an Islamic framework and then adapt some modern elements to it.

The final words indicated that, at least in this *khutbah*, a modernist framework was filled with Islamic allusions, not the other way around:

> I have homework for you tonight … for the married brothers and sisters … If anything you can take from this *khutbah*, make a promise to yourself between you and Allah that you will do something different with your family tonight. Throw it out and say "I love you" … [his voice tone changes from a serious to a casual one] … If she is surprised [that] you said it, then you are not doing a good job. If she [unintelligible] says *ma sha'Allah* [cynically expressing that she is not impressed] … try something else, try some flowers.

Not only was the style of delivery modern, but so was the content. Furthermore, although little textual support was given in this *khutbah*, its Islamic texture was partially preserved by using such key Islamic terms as *haram* and *ma sha'Allah*.

It is interesting to note that the *khatibs* in these two last examples are relatively young and considered to be among this country's emerging Muslim leaders. The first *khatib* is an immigrant; the other is American-born. Both of them are active and deliver many speeches. Ironically, this type of discourse could be considered "fundamentalist," although it is also purely modern.

Conclusion

The analysis of *khutbahs* in Southern California clearly demonstrates how texts stay as an above-reality message and yet gracefully descend to a reality that cannot be ignored. Traces of American circumstances in which the *khatib* and his audience are immersed are highly visible. In fact, satisfaction with

the *khutbah* largely depends on the convergence of lived realities of both parties, more than on its content. In order to stay relevant, *khatibs* clearly engage in a conscious selection of texts and in contextualizing them in a way to fit with modernity, even if it is, at times, far-fetched. The observed *khutbahs*, which can hardly be judged as high-quality addresses, show a significant lack of Islamic knowledge and English-language ability. Contradictions can be easily detected in the addresses' logic, and the messages are frequently poorly developed. Nevertheless, they achieve their goal of delivering a straightforward message of Islam – a message that stresses the basics of belief, reminds the audience of its moral mandates, encourages believers to straighten out their behavior, motivates them to perform virtuous deeds, and gives the attendees the sense of fulfilling a required act of worship that helps them remain good Muslims.

Endnotes

1. For a classic study of Friday sermons in a Muslim country, see Patrick D. Gaffney, *The Prophet's Pulpit: Islamic Preaching in Contemporary Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994). Online at http://ark.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/ft6vl9pl0f, accessed 2/1/2004.
2. Compared to quantitative studies, representativeness is not expected in qualitative research. Cases are examined to grasp meanings, and observation continues until the point of saturation. See Daniel F. Chambliss and Russell K. Schutt, *Making Sense of the Social World: Methods of Investigation* (New York: Pine Forge, 2009).
3. In this way, the ethical dimension of the research was maintained. Howard Becker famously argued that it is the responsibility of sociologists to raise the concerns of subordinate groups. Along this line, I considered myself responsible for not stereotyping Muslim practices that have already been stereotyped. See Robert M. Emerson, "Ethical and Political Issues in Field Research," *Contemporary Field Research: A Collection of Readings* (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 1983).
4. It could be said that the *khutbah* represents an embodiment of Islamic meanings that try to address the collective subjectivities of Friday attendees. In this respect, *khutbahs* come close to narratives. Narrative analysis considers the narrative as a metaphor, a genre, or a discourse (Colette Daiute and Cynthia Lightfoot, eds., *Narrative Analysis: Studying the Development of Individuals in Society* [Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2004]). Discourse analysis could be considered as an extreme form of narrative analysis in which "macrotextual analysis sees the verbalization and representation of society and groups through words … This approach views texts as symbolic action, or means to frame a situation, define it, grant it meaning, and mobilize appropri-

ate responses to it." (Peter K. Manning and Betsy Cullum-Swan, "Narrative, Content, and Semiotic Analysis," in *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, eds. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2004), 463-77.

5. For an interesting focus on African-American preaching, see Lyndrey A. Niles, "Communication and the Afro-American," *Journal of Black Studies* 15 (1984): 41-52.
6. While such a generic definition applies to Sunni and Shi`i branches, it obviously does not apply to offshoot Muslim *firaq*, since compromising such referentiality is often the basis of being considered an offshoot. The Shi`i concept of Sunnah involves a special focus on the Ahl al-Bayt as the embodiment of Prophet Muhammad's example. Furthermore, the concept of imam (in small letters, not to be confused with the Twelve Imams) assumes a special importance in the Shi`i branch. Nevertheless, the imam inherits – but does not supplant – the Prophet's responsibilities. I am fully aware of the theological arguments in this matter; however, sociologically speaking, the Shi`i imam is an exaggerated version of a Sunni *`alim*, whose practical role is to articulate normative Islamic conduct for followers. On the convergence of the Shi`is and the Sunnis on the centrality of the Qur`an and the Sunnah, note, for example, that the Qur`an, the Sunnah, consensus, and analogy are considered sources of legislation among the four main Sunni schools. The Shi`i Ja`fari school substitutes the imam's opinion for analogy. Such differences are largely technical rather substantive. Auda reminds us that all *fuqaha'*, practically speaking, utilized *istihsan* although they formally disagreed on considering it a valid source of legislation. See Jasser Auda, *Maqasid Al-Shari`ah as Philosophy of Islamic Law: A Systems Approach* (London: The International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2008).
7. For a fuller discussion of this point, see Mazen Hashem, "Contemporary Islamic Activism: The Shade of Praxis," *Sociology of Religion* 67 (2006): 23-41.
8. See Ihsan Bagby, Paul M. Perl, and Bryan T. Froehle, *The Mosque in America: A National Portrait* (Washington, DC: Council on American-Islamic Relations, 2001).
9. The Followers belong to the generation following the Prophet's Companions and were taught by them.
10. See Ahmad Al-Raysuni, *Imam al-Shatibi's Theory of the Higher Objectives and Intents of Islamic Law* (Herndon, VA: The International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2006).
11. For the definition of Shari`ah, see Nimat Hafez Barazangi, *Women's Identity and the Qur'an: A New Reading* (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 2004), 6; G Krämer, "Islamist Notions of Democracy," *Middle East Report* 183, "Political Islam" (July-August 1993): 2-8; and Louay Safi, "Islamic Law and Society," *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 7 (1990): 177-91.

12. For a discussion of the preacher's role in interpreting religious texts, see William O. Avery and A. Roger Gobbel, "The Word of God and the Words of the Preacher," *Review of Religious Research* 22 (1980): 41-53. The authors note that the mere use of Biblical language is customarily interpreted as being the Work of God and that if a special relationship between the preacher and the laity exists, it augments accepting the message as original.
13. Avery and Gobbel also assert that the laity are active interpreters.
14. Howden's study found that education has no significant impact on the sermon's effect. But in the cultural gap between young American-born Muslims and immigrant preachers, it should have an impact. See William D. Howden, "'Good Sermon, Preacher': The Effects of Age, Sex, and Education on Hearer Response to Preaching," *Review of Religious Research* 31 (1989): 196-207.
15. The versatility of the Qur'an and the Sunnah allows a range of meanings to arise, although such meanings defy arbitrariness and form a constellation that shares a center.
16. Here, the term science is a translation of the Arabic term *`ilm*, which does not denote rationality as much as it does systematic knowledge. Fatwa means a nonbinding religio-legal opinion handed down by an Islamic scholar.
17. See James A. Beckford and Thomas Luckmann, eds., *The Changing Face of Religion* (London: Sage, 1989).
18. Some authors suggest that Protestantization, or partial Protestantization, is taking place among Muslims. See Michaelle Browers and Charles Kurzman, eds., *An Islamic Reformation?* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2004).
19. Discussing the old controversy of whether this event was about the spirit alone or the spirit and the body together is beyond the scope of this paper. What is relevant to this paper, however, is the mental images that this event impresses upon the minds of Muslims and how the *khatib* presents them.
20. Although I am not aware of any author who brings machines into the story of the *mi`raj*, this kind of rendering is similar to once-popular Egyptian Mustafa Mahmoud's scientific take on Qur'anic metaphors. It also has a trace of Muhammad al-Ghazali's early writings on the *sirah*, in which he mentioned electricity when talking about the *isra`*. Yet, one could comfortably say that the *khatib* extended al-Ghazali's words beyond what the latter meant.