

In Search of the True Political Position of the 'Ulama

An Analysis of the Aims and
Perspectives of the Chronicles of
Abd al-Rahman al-Jabarti (1753-1825)

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3 The 'ulama

By birth and training al-Jabarti was an *'alim* (pl. *'ulama*), a Muslim scribe. In Sunnism – and in the Ottoman Empire the majority of the believers were Sunnis – the *'ulama* were regarded as the guardians, transmitters and interpreters of religious knowledge, of Islamic doctrine and law. The term also embraces those who fulfil religious functions in the community that require a certain level of expertise in religious and judicial issues, such as judges and preachers, the imams of mosques etc., if they had received the required education and training. Although the *'ulama* were progressively constituted as such by the study of *fiqh* (jurisprudence, i.e. the science which deals with the observance of rituals, the principles of the Five Pillars and social legislation), their essential characteristic was the knowledge of *hadith* (traditions relating to the deeds and utterances of the Prophet as recounted by his Companions). Over the centuries the *'ulama* evolved as a distinct group of educated religious leaders. The practice of wandering in search of knowledge facilitated contacts among students of the diverse regions of the Muslim world and contributed to a consciousness of identity among scholars and to the standardization of knowledge and of its transmission. Numerous major scholars were also engaged in the composition of poetry, or produced works of *adab*. In addition, universal and local histories, on classes or generations of scholars – vital aids to the study of tradition – were often written by *'ulama*.

Socially, the *'ulama* occupied a middle position between the ruling elite and its subjects. They had firm roots among the common people, by descent and through their position as leaders in the sufi orders. For this reason there was a tendency by the people to look to them – and for the *'ulama* to look upon themselves – as the people's spokesmen and agents in relation to the rulers, especially if these were of foreign descent. On the other hand, their social position and relations with the rulers often gave them the status of a wealthy, privileged elite. This duality in their position often caused a division along class lines within the *'ulama* itself.

A ruler's policy towards the religious leaders was largely determined by his own interests and objectives. In theory, church and state in Islam were one. In practice, the two spheres of politics and the religious establishment each had their own functions and areas of competence, but since they needed each other, they formed an uneasy partnership, with the politicians holding the upper hand, to preside over Islamic society. Vulnerable regimes invariably protected

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'Ulama'

Muhammad Qasim Zaman

The Arabic term *'ulamā'* (sing., *'alim*) refers to Muslim scholars specializing in the Islamic religious sciences. A number of other terms are often used to characterize the particular focus of a scholar's work, among them *muhaddith* (concerned with the study of the hadith reports attributed to the Prophet Muhammad), *mufasssir* (an exegete of the Qur'an), and *faqih* and *mufti* (a scholar of Islamic law and a jurisconsult, respectively). The term "ulama" usually is understood to encompass these somewhat narrower categories. The boundaries between "religious" and "secular" learning were less clearly delineated in premodern Islam than they have been in the modern world, and those recognized as 'ulama' sometimes made significant contributions to fields of knowledge lying well beyond the aforementioned areas. Further, the same person might well be a scholar of Islamic law, a theologian, a philosopher, and a Sufi. In modern times some "new religious intellectuals"—that is, people who are educated not at institutions of traditional Islamic learning but rather at Western or Westernized colleges and universities and who are active contributors to religious discourse—have sometimes claimed that they, too, should be considered as 'ulama'. As the Sudanese Islamist Hasan al-Turabi (b. 1932), who received a doctorate in law from the Sorbonne, put it, "Because all knowledge is divine and religious, a chemist, an engineer, an economist, or a jurist are all ulama." Despite occasionally blurred boundaries, the term "ulama" is usually understood as those who claim religious authority on the basis of their grounding in the Islamic religious sciences. This chapter focuses on such traditionally educated religious scholars.

The 'Ulama' in Medieval History

The origins of the 'ulama' are to be traced to those figures of the first generations of Islam who had come to be seen by their contemporaries and successors as especially knowledgeable in matters relating to the Qur'an, as sources of information on the life and teachings of the Prophet Muhammad, and as jurists. By the early eighth century, scholarly circles had begun to emerge in several major Islamic towns in Arabia, Syria, Iraq, and elsewhere. Statements attributed to the Prophet and to his

Companions also began to be collected with much vigor during the second century of Islam (roughly the eighth century), though it would take many generations of scholarly contestation before the authority of hadith reports attributed to the Prophet Muhammad (as distinguished from statements ascribed to his Companions and other early Muslims or the evolving juridical discourses of particular scholarly circles) would be recognized as a source of legal norms second to the Qur'an.

Many prominent scholars of early Islam worked under the patronage of the rulers. One notable example is Muhammad b. Shihab al-Zuhri (d. 742), who served several Umayyad caliphs and was instructed by the caliph 'Umar b. 'Abd al-'Aziz (r. 717–20) to collect normative traditions (*sunan*, best understood here, as Wael Hallaq has observed, as reports relating to the teachings and practices not just of the Prophet but also of other early figures). Another example is Muhammad b. Ishaq (d. 767), the author of an early biography of the Prophet, which he composed at the behest of the second Abbasid caliph Mansur (r. 754–75) as part of a larger history of the world. Abu Yusuf (d. 798), a founding figure in the history of the Hanafi *madhhab*, or school of law (named after his teacher, Abu Hanifa [d. 767]), served as an influential judge in Baghdad and wrote a treatise on taxation for the Abbasid caliph Harun al-Rashid (r. 786–809). Medieval biographical dictionaries are replete with instances of scholars visiting caliphs and other notables, receiving their gifts, and benefiting in sundry other ways from royal patronage.

Yet the emergence of religious scholars also represented a multifaceted challenge to the ruling elite. For one thing, many scholars were willing to lend their support to trends and movements hostile to the political establishment. This was the case especially with those who came to be allied with various Shi'i groups in the late Umayyad and early Abbasid period. But even those not so allied were sometimes opposed to particular policies adopted by the caliphs and their officials, from unjust taxation to the failure to conform to the ideals and norms as they were being articulated in these scholarly circles. Quite apart from specific instances of scholarly disaffection, the fact that the scholars had come to represent an increasingly independent locus of authority in Muslim society was a cause of much apprehension on the part of the ruling elite. It was independent in the sense that, unlike the judges appointed by the state, the scholars did not need authorization from the caliph to do their work, for example, responding to people's queries on matters of law, interpreting the Qur'an, collecting hadith reports, and engaging in theological debates. From the mid-eighth century onward, the scholars also began defining the position of the caliph in such a way that it lacked any privileged authority in religious as opposed to political matters.

The most serious challenge to the increasing influence of the 'ulama', as represented by the scholars of hadith, came from the Abbasid caliph Ma'mun (r. 813–33). Toward the end of his reign he instituted an "inquisition" (the *mihna*), requiring the scholars to affirm the "createdness" of the Qur'an. Though ostensibly intended to guard the cardinal Islamic doctrine of the oneness of God against any coeternal competitors, hence the caliph's insistence that the Qur'an be regarded as the created rather than uncreated (and, by implication, eternal) word of God, this