The Muslim Friday Khutba:
Veiled and Unveiled Themes

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Dr. Mazen Hashem is a fellow at the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding (ISPU). He obtained his Ph.D. from the University of California, Riverside, and teaches at the University of Southern California. He is a broadly trained sociologist whose fields of specialty are social theory and social change. His research falls within the areas of social movement, ethnic and minority relations, institutional analysis, and cultural sociology. His study of Muslim weekend students was a pioneering effort in understanding the children of immigrant Muslims. Additionally, he surveyed the attitudes of Muslims toward Islamic centers, and the results appeared in a monograph published by ISNA. In the area of institutional analysis, Dr. Hashem published two papers on the innovation patterns in American higher education. His interest in social movement and political sociology led him to publish in the Sociology of Religion and Arab Studies Quarterly. Recently Dr. Hashem's research went back to focus on Muslims of North America, studying the development of their institutions as well as the shifts in their public discourse, and he is working on a book on this topic. His latest research was a qualitative field study of Friday khutbas in Southern California, culminating in two journal papers in addition to a policy oriented monograph. Dr. Hashem is keen on synthesis, and his theorizing efforts weave cultural and structural factors.

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Introduction

The Friday noon prayer is a special Muslim congregational prayer that includes a short address called the *khutba*. No strict requirements or specific prayers are necessary for this address, and so its content can vary widely. For an outsider, the *khutba* sometimes sounds like a civic address and at other times like religious moral advice that is thin on rituals except for few religious expressions in Arabic.

This participant observation paper analyzed two years' worth of *khutbas* delivered in Southern California, covering almost all Islamic centers in Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, and San Bernardino counties. Data collection stretched from 2003 to 2006. To identify the locations of Islamic centers where *khutbas* are delivered, a list by CAIR complied was used as well as the online service of the Southern California Shura Council. Both Shi`i and Sunni mosques were covered. The San Diego area, which has approximately ten mosques, was not included in the study; nor was Santa Barbara, which has a single mosque. From the five remote mosques located between major cities, two were included (Palmdale and Temecula); those of Lancaster, Redland, Hemet, and Carlsbad were not. Also, *khutbas* delivered in university and college campuses were not included. This left fifty-five mosques from which *khutbas* where collected. As I failed to locate it, the small Muslim Chinese Mosque was the only one left out of the covered area. Although a special effort was made to trace new small and emerging mosques, there is the possibility that a few of them were missed. A total of 106 *khutbas* were analyzed.

The quest of this qualitative study was not to document the *khutbas*' themes, but to observe their proper contextualization. As with all texts, *khutbas* can be interpreted differently by an outside observer. But how can an outsider ascertain whether his/her understanding of the *khutba* really represents its actual discourse? Cognizant of this challenge, all efforts were made to suspend judgment and to follow the internal logic of the message. Following the established methods in qualitative research,[1] the investigator immersed himself in the process to the point of saturation. Therefore, the paper represents neither a critique nor a celebration of *khutbas*; rather, it is a quest for understanding and proper contextualization. It should be noted that the study did *not* focus on well-known *khatibs*, those who present a sophisticated message and are widely admired. Instead, the study surveyed a wide range of *khutbas* looking for the general patterns found within an average one.

1 See Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, eds. *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1994).

The Islamic Center of America in Dearborn, Michigan.

Furthermore, the study was conscious of the *khutba*-mosque nexus. As the mosque, its dominant ethnic group, and the neighborhood's socioeconomic level are all relevant to the process of interpretation, some mosques were visited once while others were visited several times. There were two main reasons for this. First, the study sought to cover all frequent *khatibs* in a specific mosque. In other words, if the mosque had one appointed *khatib* it was likely that the study was satisfied with one visit, provided that the genre of the *khutba* became apparent. For mosques with rotating *khatibs*, several visits were needed and usually done sequentially. Second, in the context of the *khutba*-mosque nexus multiple visits reveal the mosque's character, which serves as part of the context for which a researcher should account. An additional aspect related to this point is that the investigator, necessarily and advantageously, utilized his tacit knowledge of the subject, which helped economize the number of needed visits to certain mosques with which he was familiar and helped him interpret the *khutbas*.

Among the aspects that I cognitively maintained while observing was noting the tone of *khutba* delivery, the *khatib*'s command of English and Arabic, how he was dressed, and the mosque's physical aspect. These aspects, however, which helped in the overall understanding of the message, are not formally discussed in the paper.

It should be noted here that the observer's presence should not have had any impact on the phenomenon studied, for mosques are public and non-membership-based spaces. Customarily, Muslims attend the Friday congregational prayer in the mosque that best fits their schedule. Although there is a core of frequent attendees, there is also a considerable segment of itinerant attendees. When collecting data, I purposely sat at the back of the prayer area to have the widest possible view of the setting and the least proximity to the *khatib*. However, I was surely visible in one very small African-American mosque of nineteen attendees, including those in the women's section.

As one dimension of this study was to examine the presence or absence of politics in the *khutbas*, it was necessary to document political events. To do that, I used CNN online to record the previous week's major events. Three types of events fell within the purview of the study: (1) major events in the United States, ranging from Justice Sandra Day O'Connor's announced intent to retire, to proclaiming the Marriage Protection Initiative, and to the CIA search team head David Kay resigning because he thought there was no evidence that Iraq had stockpiled weapons of mass destruction (WMDs); (2) international events of potential Muslim interest, which ranged from Kofi Annan saying at the World International Form, held in Mumbai, that the war on terrorism has distracted the world from dealing with world poverty, to Asian bird flu spreading to seven countries (including China), the European space probe landing on Titan (Saturn's largest moon); and (3) major events that happened in Muslim countries, ranging from the stampede during the hajj season to the Abu Ghraib prison scandal and to Hamas defeating Fatah at the polls. Such events were

recorded to see if the *khutba* would address any of them either directly or indirectly.

The table below presents a basic description of the mosques and the observed *khutbas*. No formal criteria for determining the size of the mosque were used. Those that were apparently attended by less than 150 people were considered "small," those that were attended by 300 or more were considered "large," and those that fell in the middle were considered "medium."

Size of the Mosque	Number of Mosques	Number of Khutbas Attended
Small	33	58
Medium	14	27
Large	8	21
Sum	55	106

The mosques showed some regional clustering: nine were located in Los Angeles City (seven of them were African-American-majority mosques); seven in southwest Los Angeles; and eight in eastern Los Angeles, both of which are middle- to lower-middle-class areas. Four mosques were located in the foothills, and seven more were located in northwest Los Angeles County (viz., middle-class areas). The twelve mosques located in Orange County were divided between middle- and upper-middle-class mosques, while the eight mosques located in Riverside or San Bernardino counties represented a mixture of lower-middle- and middle-class mosques. Four *khutba* places[2] were Shi`i, one of which was an Iranian Islamic Center.

In terms of the attendees' dominant ethnicity, eleven were African-American mosques, five mosque were predominantly Arab (three of which were Shi`i), nine others were mixed (Arab attendees were quite visible), seven were predominantly South Asian, and eight were mixed (but with a visible South Asian presence). Nine of the total thirty-one ethnically mixed mosques were highly ethnically mixed.

Most of the *khatibs* were not imams or students of classical Islamic literature. Out of the eighty-four *khatibs* observed, only twenty-six were imams (plus four possible imams); the rest were engineers, physicians, businessmen, scientists, and other professionals. There were few elderly *khatibs*; most *khatibs* appeared to be in their 40s and 50s. Their appearance ranged from traditional dress (most, but not all, of the imams), to contemporary clothing plus a cap, to nice pants and shirt or a suit.

The paper starts by discussing the relative importance of the mosque and the *khutba* in the United States. The rest of the paper discusses the major themes appearing therein. Data show that preaching the basics of Islam was the dominant theme, while political issues were virtually absent. Although it was expected that gender issues would be widely discussed, this was not the case.

2 One of them holds regular *khutbas* in the community school.

The Khutba's Relative Importance

The mosque has long been seen as a symbol of Islam.[3] Historically speaking, the central mosque's *khutba* approximated the official stance of the ulama and the state; at critical conjunctures, however, *khutbas* represented the ulama's stance against the state. As the modern state became rooted in formal institutions, its importance declined significantly. The center of societal gravity also shifted from community settings (*Gemeinschaft*) to mass society (*Gesellschaft*), and cultural themes became highly aligned with urban settings and tightly connected with the media and other cultural production institutions. Nevertheless, a sort of organic community can never disappear: "All kinds of social co-existence that are familiar, comfortable and exclusive are to be understood as belonging to *Gemeinschaft.*"[4] That is also true for *khutbas*. While some of its elements are universal to all Muslims, the *khutba*, as in the case of any public religious message, necessarily reflects the community's value orientation.

Friday sermon at the Islamic Cultural Center on Manhattan's Upper East Side.

The pattern of attending the Friday prayer and listening to the *khutba* differs between Muslim-majority countries and other countries. The potential of attending this particular prayer in capitalist democracies where Muslims are a minority should be lower for the following reasons: (1) there are fewer communal pressures to attending this event in societies that celebrate

3 For a classic treatment of the mosque's centrality, see Patrick D. Gaffney, *The Prophet's Pulpit: Islamic Preaching in Contemporary Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994). Online: http://ark.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/ft6vl9plOf!, accessed 1 Feb. 2004.

4 Ferdinand Tönnies, *Community and Civil Society*, ed. J. Harris, trans. Jose Harris and Margaret Hollis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 18.

Islamic centers, such as Brighter Horizons, Dallas, TX offers students enjoyment in an Islamic milieu.

the individual's autonomy[5]; (2) identities in western democracies are largely connected to one's profession, giving communal concerns a lower priority[6]; and (3) there are practical obstacles in terms of distance, time, and the employer's possible disagreeable attitude.[7] Thus, it is safe to say that among the Muslims living in the United States and Europe, only the more committed ones hear the *khutba*.

Yet in societies where Muslims are a minority, other factors encourage such attendance. First, as a significant number of Muslims are of immigrant background,[8] mosques and Islamic centers stand as identity anchors. The mosque, just as any other religious institution, functions as a space for belonging as immigrants negotiate their identities in their adopted society. This is also true for indigenous African-American Muslims as they celebrate their sense of historical continuity and relish in this space of comfort. For American-born Muslims of immigrant background, the mosque also serves as a nexus between two cultural realms.

Second, Islamic centers frequently have an economic function. Immigrant communities usually form a niche, if not an enclave, and their members utilize ethnic networks to pursue their

5 A vast old and new literature points to this idea. From the classics, Simmel's account characterizes the ambiguity of individuals' identities in modern social life and its relationship to social structure. The urban setting and the money economy, both of which encourage the atomization of identity, give rise to the metropolis "blasé attitude" and promotes personal subjectivity. See Georg Simmel, *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, trans. and ed. Kurt H. Wolff , The Free Press, 1987). Fischer notes that urban friendships are more likely to involve just friendship and are relatively dispersed and relatively specialized Claude S. Fischer, *The Urban Experience* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), 137-41.

6 On the strength of demands different communities afford, see Rosabeth Moss Kanter's classical *Commitment and Community: Communes and Utopias in Sociological Perspective* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972). The heated debate that occurred a decade ago over the decline of social capital in the United States generally points to the problem of social connectedness in modern societies. Putnam famously exposed the decline in participation in a wide range of public institutions, from PTAs to labor unions; even the amount of time spent on personal socialization declined. See Robert Putnam, "Tuning In, Tuning Out: The Strange Disappearance of Social Capital in America," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 28 (1995): 664-83. For a sample of those who argue that interconnectedness in modernity has just been transformed, as opposed to disappeared, see Donald Reitzes, "Communities Lost: Another Look at Six Classical Theorists," *Research in Community Sociology* 2 (1992): 13-37.

7 Generally speaking, and in contrast to contemporary societies, the very structure of older communities was more conducive to behavior concerned with others. To what degree such behavior was benevolent is another matter. Wuthnow notes that "[c]aring for others was neither altruistic nor egoistic; it was mutually beneficial…The moral logic of caring for others was thus deeply embedded in the realities of community life." See Robert Wuthnow, *Poor Richard Principle: Rediscovering the American Dream through the Moral Dimensions of Work, Business, and Money* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 266.

8 According to Pew Research Center, 65 percent of all Muslims in the United States are foreign born. See its *Muslim Americans: Middle Class and Mostly Mainstream*. Pew Research Center (2007).

entrepreneurial activities.[9] Third, even for those who are not religiously inclined, the mosque's social activities represent communal ground. As people participate in one or more of its activities, they become familiar with its general discourse, including the *khutbas*, which is transmitted through informal interactions. Specifically, weekend and full-time Islamic schools that are connected to mosques boost their importance[10].

Khutbas may have an importance above and beyond their constituency. Given the absence of a formal religious institutional authority within Islam, less formal facets assume considerable significance. The *khutbas* are neither irrelevant to the wider Muslim community nor represent its official statements; rather, they contribute to the construction of sites of deliberation. Indeed, a form of public deliberation takes place in social gatherings as the attendees, both those who are impressed and those who are disappointed, reflect upon the message. Furthermore, with the expansion of global media, *khutbas* beyond the national boundaries are now available and reaching a new segment of virtual attendees (mostly women).

In Muslim-majority countries, *khutbas* are usually broadcast live, either by radio or television, from a designated mosque chosen by the government. A few years ago, those broadcast from Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Pakistan, and Iran became accessible to Muslims in Europe and North America. The television and the Internet, following the previous example of the radio, are increasingly becoming sources of receiving religious messages. Such messages are scrutinized by authorities and follow the dictates of the market.[11]

Overall, we can say that the *khutba* represents one important facet of public discourse for Muslims, regardless of where it is given. However, attending the Friday prayer and listening to it hit different chords when we compare the environment: Muslim-majority, Muslim-minority, and especially if they are a tiny minority, as is the case in the United States. Given the sense of being a Muslim by default in Muslim-majority countries, the drive behind attendance should be more habitual and ceremonial. The avoidance of embarrassment,

“The khutbas are neither irrelevant to the wider Muslim community nor represent its official statements; rather, they contribute to the construction of sites of deliberation.”

9 Alejandro Portes. “Economic Sociology and the Sociology of Immigration: A Conceptual Overview,” A. Portes ed. *The Economic Sociology of Immigration: Essays on Networks, Ethnicity and Entrepreneurship* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1995).

10 Around half of schools are mosque connected. See Karen Keyworth. “Islamic Schools of America: Data-Based Profiles.” In *Educating the Muslims of America*, eds. Yvonne Y. Haddad, Farid Senzai, and Jane I. Smith. (Oxford University Press, 2009).

11 For example, the program of the TV preacher Amr Khalid was advertised as a special feature on ART, an Arabic satellite TV channel.

especially in small or isolated locales, could be another motivating factor. Attending Friday prayer in Muslim-majority societies is often part of the social rhythm and is not necessarily restricted to the seriously committed. In contrast, in Muslim-minority countries attending the Friday prayer and its *khutba* hits a personal-communal chord, for it represents an opportunity to actualize an identity, one that is a bit estranged in a fast-paced world, and to rekindle a rusted soul. In addition, it could present an opportunity to reminisce about the "old days," especially for immigrants. In addition, converts could be considered "identity migrants" looking for a new pasture for their adopted strangeness.

In sum, we can assert that the mosque and its Friday message are relevant to American Muslims. The paper now discusses the genres of the themes discovered in the *khutbas*. Most *khutbas*, not to mention the larger part of any *khutba*, were usually devoted to basic Islamic concepts. Political themes were almost absent, even when recent events provided a pretext for discussing politics. Lastly gender issues, while not frequent, were often mentioned as a tangential, as opposed to a main, topic.

Reminding Muslims about the Basics

If the mosque is central to the lives of many Muslims, then an inquiry into the delivered message is justified. As we will see, the degree to which *khutbas* stay close to Islamic texts and do not venture much into the texts' possible horizons is quite striking. In fact most *khutbas*, and the larger part of any *khutba*, are typically geared toward preaching what Muslims already know.

The very idea of surrendering to Allah, as basic as it is to Muslims, is stressed in almost all *khutbas*. For example, in one address the *khatib* reminds attendees about the famous *hadith*: "Oh Allah, I submit myself to You, I turn my face toward You, I entrust all of my affairs to You, and I lean my back on You out of love, awe, and out of prayer to You. Oh Allah, there is no shelter, there is no protector … expect You. I believe in the book You sent, You revealed; I believe in all of the Prophets You sent." Obviously the point here is not to persuade, but to remind. Indeed, the *khutba*'s very function is to remind, because "reminding benefits the believers," as the Quran says.[12]

In one *khutba* dealing with Prophet Ibrahim, the *khatib* noted that the Qur'an calls him "the *khalil* (friend) of Allah" and was quick to point out that there is no equality in such a relationship. This Southeast Asian *khatib*, who had had some classical training, was eager to make this point even though it is already obvious to Muslims. Cautioning about such basics of belief appeared to be more prevalent[13] among non-Arab and non-South Asian *khatibs*, especially if they had been trained in Saudi academies. Another *khatib* talked about God's bounties, for which we should be thankful, and stated that Muslims should not confuse the "medium" with the "source." He remarked that even if the immediate source of the bounties was your efforts or your employer's initiative, all of them ultimately come from Allah. Sometimes the *khutba* does not rise above the following: Islam is great, it is great because of its principles, reminding Muslims of those principles guarantees that Muslims will continue to adhere to them, and continuous adherence to Islam's principles delivers the person to heaven (in one version) and brings success in another.

The fact that no exact specific prayers are required for the Friday address makes dwelling on the basics more puzzling. Why do *khatibs* stay close to the texts' evident meanings? One potential answer is that they see themselves simply as a means to remind "forgetful" humans. Generally,

12 See Qur'an 51:55, 6:70, and 14:5.

13 Since the study does not cover at once every *khutba* at *all* mosques, it would be misleading here to cite numbers on the *khutbas* that cautioned about mixing up beliefs.

> **Situating the khutba within the contours of the Islamic belief system, therefore, enables us to appreciate why the impulse to remind is dominant. The Islamic belief in the dual capacity of humans to do good or evil makes the duty of reminding a logical one.**

religiously observant people believe in the efficacy of awakening the goodness that God placed within each person. Islam teaches that humanity is by definition forgetful, which obliges all Muslims to remind each other of its principles. Moreover, the Qur'an teaches that human desires represent the "lower life" and that people commonly indulge in it,[14] thereby forgetting the more important duties of managing one's life with justice.[15] *Shaytan* (the Devil) whispers to people in an attempt to distract them from doing righteous acts.[16] Situating the *khutba* within the contours of the Islamic belief system, therefore, enables us to appreciate why the impulse to remind is dominant. The Islamic belief in the dual capacity of humans to do good or evil makes the duty of reminding a logical one.

Another reason, albeit an indirect one, is the Muslims' strong belief in the value of their unadulterated religious texts. As these were preserved due to fortunate historical circumstances, they would naturally be eager to avoid attaching frills to them. In this context, the *khatibs* see themselves as *transferees* of knowledge rather than as God-inspired agents. As entrusted message deliverers, it is better to be cautious. Likewise, the attendees expect the *khatib* to anchor his ideas with references to the Quran, the Sunnah, and to the corpus of classical Islamic literature. Even a completely Sufi *khutba* focused on "softening the heart" will bring carefully selected textual support from the tradition, leaving the more inspirational and spiritual drifts to special motivational sessions. In other words, the Muslim tradition contains an expectation of a little *`alim* in every *khatib*—a little scholar in Islamic literature. The knowledge-motivation nexus comes into play here.

Practically speaking, there are two kinds of *khatibs* in terms of professional Islamic knowledge: those who are not trained imams and have no Shari`a degree(s) and those who do.[17] Most *khatibs* are not formally trained, and so careful not to make a major error that would trigger a correction from audience after the *khutba*. Making continuous errors or bringing textually unsubstantiated ideas might cause a *khatib* to be barred from preaching, thereby destroying his constructed self-image. On the other hand, those with a Shari`a degree(s) who can speak with some authority

14 See Qur'an 3:14, 6:36, 18:45, 29:64, and 57:20.

15 See Qur'an 1:177.

16 It should be noted that the word "devil" does not adequately capture the meaning of the term *shaytan*. In the Islamic frame of mind, *shaytan* has no power over the believers (see Qur'an 16:99). *Shaytan* simply "whispers" its bad thoughts and feelings into weak humans.

17 The Shari`ah is the overall organizing moral and practical principles within the Islamic outlook. Although sometimes erroneously translated as "Islamic law," such a definition might be more appropriate to the Islamic term, *fiqh*. Yet even *fiqh* does not qualify the legal description, for it is not connected to the state and there is no attached mechanism of enforcement. *Fiqh* is the corpus of the ulama's understandings of social, economic, political, as well as personal conduct based on what they understood from the Qur'an and Sunnah (the tradition of Prophet Muhammad). Therefore, *fiqh* might be described as the ulama's socio-legal accounts as exist on the books.

are eager to stay within the confines of parochial subjects because this is the type of knowledge in which they were trained.[18] Relying on an ancient legacy of textual commentaries carries with it a mixed blessing—it endows one with authoritativeness as much as it poses a challenge. The proper historicizing of Islam's legacy is a complex process beyond the ability of most *khatibs*.[19]

Even if the *khatib* has reached a sophisticated level, he needs to adapt his half-hour message to the widely mixed congregation that tends to have markedly different experiences. This makes such customizing even harder. . The *khutba,* therefore, should simultaneously forego the potentiality of addressing issues effectively and "float" its meanings. That is, the general message becomes a set of floating concepts held in reserve that are ready to be applied in further situations that might be encountered in one's daily life. In this way, the *khutba* functions as a dormant (but generative) message that can be cognitively brought to the surface at a later date. Below is one example.

In a *khutba* that focused on how people reject the truth because of their egos, the *khatib* brought the example of Abu Talib, the Prophet's uncle, who never accepted Islam despite his nephew's pleas. Describing his attitude, the *khatib* said: "He knew everything about Islam, he knew everything about his nephew...," but he had in his mind the Quraysh asking him: "Are you going to leave the *deen* [religion] of your grandfathers and ancestors? So what prevented him was that ego, was that arrogance from accepting the truth…" The *khatib* did not build much on the message and made no connection to current society, commercialism, secularism, or contemporary practices that, from a religious point of view, are considered deviations. However, the metaphor of the egoistic rejection of the truth stays floating in the minds of the attendees to influence their behavior or behavioral assessment in concrete settings. Similarly, in the numerous references that good Muslims should thank Allah for His blessings, rarely was there any mention of what those blessings mean in contemporary life. Interestingly, when they were identified it was the material life that was invoked—that we, Muslims in the United States, live in relative comfort compared to our brethren in Pakistan and elsewhere.

Of course we cannot rule out the possibility that the *khatibs*' relative incompetence let them resign themselves to a low level of sophistication. The Muslim community does not lack sophisticated people who represent potential *khatibs*; rather, the informal communal selection process naturally bypasses some high-end *khatibs* because of the expectation of watered-down content. Any *khatib* faces the dilemma of losing some of the audience if he delivers a "too rational" discourse at the expense of one with spiritual and "heart-cleansing" content. Indeed, this also explains why some people drive a long distance to listen to those *khatibs* who have become popular. Those who have the right mix of classical Islamic knowledge and the ability to make it relevant to the lives of

18 Historically, few schools of *fiqh* developed in Muslim societies, and the state picked one of these schools and made it the legal reference. More nuanced issues were left to the muftis to tease out, taking into consideration the circumstances at hand. *Qadi*s stood along with muftis in the sense that they had to deal directly with the problems at hand and take the specific context into consideration. Both officials, although constrained by the Shair`ah's internal logic, were very much tied to the state and its power as well as its remuneration.

19 According to the Bagby et al. study (pg. 50), in the United States 70% of imams who are mosque leaders are volunteers compared to 31% of imams who are not mosques leaders. Nineteen percent of the first group imams (those who are mosque leaders) have Islamic education at the university BA degree or a higher, compared to 56% of the second group (pg. 51). Note that these numbers are about imams, who, nevertheless, are most likely to be *khatibs*.

Muslims in the US command the most respect.

The discourse is destined to hit the middle ground, neither banal nor sophisticated, whereas the higher discourse is necessarily left to the mosque's weekend lectures or other settings. Yet regardless of the discourse's depth, listening to the Islamic basics from without and in a public setting asserts a group identity, that of simply being Muslim. This is at once a vague and vivid group identity, for it is not connected to concrete social categories and does not erect established boundaries. *Khatibs* belong to different ethnic and racial groups, and the topic of universal brotherhood/sisterhood and transcending groupness is a staple message even if the attendees live largely within group boundaries. Indeed, *khutbas* steer clear of celebrating ethnic or national uniqueness to such a degree that they often miss out on reflecting upon specific worthwhile Muslim experiences. Despite the fact that the Islamic center itself might actually be run according to the ethnic sensibilities of its majority attendees, the message is guarded so that it will not follow this same path.

Focusing on Muslimness instead of Muslim groups, the *khutba* gives life to a process of enlivening various metacultural precepts, such as being a good person deep in your heart because God looks at one's inner self and not one's outer self, as a frequently *khutba*-cited *hadith* says. It includes the precept that accumulating enough good deeds to pass the exam on the Day of Judgment should be the Muslims' priority. Leading a virtuous life is the point of religion, helping others is the vindication of the true faith, and family responsibility should take priority. Patience, perseverance, and contentment are marks of the believers. A lot of worship helps keep the person on the straight path. Curing the heart from diseases (e.g., jealousy, revengefulness, and so on), are conditions for entering Heaven in the eternal life, the real life. Such religiosity precepts that continually show up in *khutbas* are not exact items that can be compiled in a catalogue. Rather, they represent metacultural precepts and are not exactly religious instructions. They are religious commandments that, having already been culturally interpreted, call for fixed moral boundaries but allow for flexible contextualization. They form a specifically Muslim template of the good life and celebrate upright Islamic conduct, although Muslims see them a commonsense human recipe "like ABC."

"The topic of universal brotherhood/sisterhood and transcending groupness is a staple message even if the attendees live largely within group boundaries."

While warning against falling for *Shaytan*'s tricks, one *khatib* said:

> "He does not want to see you follow the advice of Allah and be successful. He wants to see you follow his whispering and be a failure, and be in the fire with him… [lowering his voice and bringing examples on social vices] … and you listen. You listen and you forget what Allah (S) said. Why? Because now you

> got emotional. The *Shaytan* starts working with your emotions, what you want, your desires. You want to prove to this guy that you are better than he is and all these other wrong things that the *Shaytan* did in the beginning of the time. That is why he is the *Shaytan:* because his emotions got the better of him when Prophet Adam was put before him. His feeling…how he felt about this got in the way of his intellect. Don't let your emotions and feelings get in the way of your intellect. You cannot follow the advices of Allah based on your emotions. Allah (S) said so many times *afala ta'qiloon* [Have you no sense?] He wants you to use the *aql* [mind and thinking] that He gave you to follow the advice that He put in his book so that you can be successful; it's like ABC."

Islamic teachings, this African-American *khatib* assured, are both simple and rational. How American-compatible they are, he wished to say. Similarly, the immigrant *khatib* went out of his way to stress the nobility of Prophet Muhammad's teachings. Reading from a paper in his handwriting, the *khatib* proclaimed:

> "He [Prophet Muhammad] taught *tawhid*, the oneness of God (S); piety and *taqwa*; good deeds; respect; and honor of the parents…; care of relatives; patience, *sabr*; care of relatives… truthfulness, fulfillment of obligations; trustworthiness; justice; mercy; restraint of anger; …forgiveness; cooperation; excellent work…; striving; dignity….; brotherhood…unity… moderation; humility; containment; chastity; charity; reliance on Allah; and giving the message of Allah; and so on. And he forbade idolatry, that not to worship but Allah …; injustice, hypocrisy; corruption; transgression…; adultery; homosexuality; no false witnesses; embezzlement; cheating in weight or measurement; lying; falsehood – he forbade these – treachery; suspicion, slaying; backbiting; gossip; jealousy, stinginess; wastefulness; disputes and quarrel, and so on. There is nothing good that he did not teach, and there is nothing bad that he did not forbid."

This impressive list of nouns stressed the universality of Islam's message and that its values are so paramount that they are beyond doubt. The arguments that the *khatibs* offer, probably true for all religionists, are engulfed by the religion's internal teachings and do not necessarily bring external criteria.

Muslims bow their head in prayer at a mosque.

Sufi elements are also present in Muslim thinking about Islam. This presence differs markedly among groups, social classes, and national contexts. It can be safely said that Sufi themes have experienced continuous eclipse since the days of decolonization and the quest for a more modern order. The so-called "Islamic awakening" did not resurrect Sufi traditions; rather, and to a considerable extent, it espoused a discourse that highlights the rational elements in the traditions and their amenability to fit in with modern circumstances. Since the 1980s, a *salafi* strand has entered the Islamic discourse, a strand that flatly rejects Sufi expressions. Nevertheless, a Sufi motif in current Islamic

expressions is evident, partly due to its historical presence and its utility for preaching.

Here we can distinguish between two implied meanings of Sufism in the minds of Muslims: a *tariqa* (a Sufi order with its own motif) and Sufism in the sense of emotional religiosity. If we use Sufism in the second sense, as an emphasis on humility, cleansing the heart from ill feelings, empathizing with the poor and the destitute, and stressing people's helplessness compared to the omnipresence of God, then such pietism is highly present in all *khutbas*.

Explaining the Absence of the Political

Historically speaking, *khutbas* in Muslim societies have often been used to rally people in times of social and political urgency. We cannot deny some modern relevance to this traditional public forum.[20] Yet developments in law enforcement methods and the expansion of the state bureaucracy have dramatically lessened its political importance. The watchful eyes of authoritarian regimes in Muslim-majority countries successfully control the *khutbas* by utilizing a multiplicity of measures. Mosques used to be part of a charitable trust (*waqf*), an established institution in Muslim history; modern governments raided these public trusts and incorporated them within a ministry. The trusts' proceeds used to pay for the mosque's functionaries (e.g., the muezzin, the imam, the *khatib*, and the caretaker); all of them are now government employees. Some countries have independent mosques that do not fall under the government's purview. Nevertheless, national security agencies carefully watch them and their *khutbas*.

Under such circumstances, delivering the *khutba* becomes a balancing art: the *khatib* has to walk a fine line between commenting on a reality that falls short of Islamic ideals while ensuring that his critique cannot be considered a political message, even if the subject is not clearly political and even if he does not criticize the government outright. Those who do not practice self-censorship are typically removed from their positions and, if necessary, imprisoned. In the United States and after 9/11, the *khatibs* also had to walk this fine line lest their message be misunderstood by the audience or misinterpreted by law enforcement agencies.

“The *khatib* has to walk a fine line between commenting on a reality that falls short of Islamic ideals while ensuring that his critique cannot be considered a political message, even if the subject is not clearly political and even if he does not criticize the government outright.”

This absence of talking about political events or referring to politics, however, cannot be explained only by such fears, for there are reasons internal to the logic of

20 Asghar, Fathi. “The Islamic Pulpit as a Medium of Political Commincation.” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 20:2, 163-172.

preaching that sideline the political. The following examples illustrate how political events fare, how they are contextualized, and to what end they are used in the *khutba*.

In 2006, the vicious bombing of a major Iraqi Shi`i site, the Samara mosque that houses the tombs of Imams Askari and al-Hadi, caused considerable damage and destroyed the mosque's golden dome. Massive demonstrations ensued, including some Shi`i-instigated violence against Sunni mosques and sporadic killings. A strict curfew was imposed on Baghdad. Furthermore, the Mahdi Army of the hawkish Shi`i cleric Muqtada al-Sadr jumped into protecting the holy cites. Despite all of these horrific events, the *khutba* (that I attended) the very first Friday after the event did not mention such strife; rather, its topic was humility in claiming faithfulness. From personal contacts, and to the horror of Shi`is, I am not aware of many *khutbas* in other Sunni mosques that mentioned the event.

Ignoring such events is not by any means a tacit approval of political violence. Rather, it represents a measure of disconnectedness from reality and a reflection of the conventional belief that reminding people of Islamic standards of behavior is what is really needed in our turbulent times. After all, social strife, economic stagnation, and political conflict are all the consequences of "straying away from Allah and not closely following His commandments," as the popular Muslim saying goes.

Some *khutbas* do mention political events, but usually from a special angle. The second week of November 2004 was full with events: A new CIA report indicated that there were no WMDs in Iraq after 1991; kidnapers in Iraq freed two female Italian charity workers; three bombs blasted Taba, Egypt, killing thirty-one tourists; pressure was put on Syria to withdraw from Lebanon; Iranian ex-president Khatami visited Syria; and the medicine Celebrex came under question. None of these events showed up in the *khutba*. Instead the *khatib*, a first-generation Pakistani immigrant, briefly noted the bombing of a Shi`i mosque in Pakistan. The concern was not so much about ethnic conflict or politics, properly understood, but rather about Islam's reputation. He asked how can we blame others for stereotyping Muslims as violent "if we give them the material to do so"?

Another *khutba* strongly criticized those who were killing policemen in Iraq in the name of Islam (this was at the very beginning of such a practice). Interestingly, the *khatib* noted that those policemen needed jobs to feed their families. There are further indications that ignoring the sectarian violence in Iraq is not simply insensitivity toward Shi`ahs—the late Shi`i reprisal against Sunnis was not mentioned either. In the minds of the *khatibs*, such incidents are politicking and therefore below the dignified level of discourse that one expects in a *khutba.*

Examining a neutral event that has political implications brings further support to the perceived irrelevance of politics to *khutbas*. In the first Friday following the 2006 stampede at Mina during the hajj season, three hundred people lost their lives. The *khatib*'s comment on this event consisted of one sentence: "May Allah (S) include those who died as *shahids* [martyrs] as was promised, and give speedy recovery for those who were injured…, and bring blessings through them to us and to the entire world, *inshaallah*." The priority in his mind was not the empirical improvement of the flow of people and organizing traffic; rather, it was that those who died go to heaven and that we who are living can get extra rewards.

Another example of the total lack of interest in politics was vivid in a *khutba* that dwelt on the importance of keeping one's prayers. This week corresponded with political events of high

> **Purely political themes are non-existent in *khutbas*, both in terms of commenting on specific policies or pointing to larger national issues.**

significance: China's Premier Hu Jintao ended his visit to Washington State (and Bill Gates), headed to Washington DC, and then set off to visit oil producers Saudi Arabia and Nigeria, as well as Morocco. This itinerary was interpreted as a diplomatic slap-in-the-face to the American administration. This week also marked the twentieth anniversary of Chernobyl disaster, a subject that dominated media reports. Furthermore, during this week Nepal's king announced the reauthorization of the seven-party opposition coalition to take over executive power after two weeks of massive demonstrations. Nothing related to any of these events was mentioned in the *khutba*.

Again, politically implicated notions that appear in *khutbas* are converted into social concerns. One *khatib*'s reaction to the Danish newspaper affair is highly illustrative. At the beginning of the *khutba*, he cited the well-known Qur'anic verse that Prophet Muhammad has been sent as a blessing to humanity. This *khatib,* whose English-language was limited, said the following:

> And it hurts you to see some of the world making fun of Prophet Muhammad because they are ignorant. It is OK to say the rejection [that is, it is ok for Muslims to disagree], but it is not OK to burn embassies and kill people for that because I want you to understand what happened in the world. Most of Europe is not religious society; it is secular…. It is OK not to buy from them, but to go outside and burn their embassies, this behavior is not right. Can we exchange it in this newspaper or any in the whole world [i.e., can we have an alternative course of action such as], to have agreement to tell them about Muhammad (P) instead of burn their flag or whatever and alienate them and push them to the corners [Arabic informal words]. It is OK to demonstrate to show them, but it is not OK to harm anybody of them or to harm their embassies; it comes back negative [Arabic informal word]. You have to have a dialog to bring your viewpoint to them. This world can't go by violence; it has to go and meet and dialog. This is [what] most our *ulama* say about what happened. We are hurted, but in the same time we have to manage to gain from what happened. These cartoon things is not gonna change from the Prophet (P). Allah (S) choose this man for mankind, and Allah (S) said in the Quran that they will do that [i.e., slander the Prophet]. But be patient, [Arabic words]. Be an example to the western people here. This society is good to all of us, and we have to show them goodness of Muslims.

What is impressive about such a statement is that it comes from a layman. The *khatib,* a Palestinian immigrant, works as the caretaker of this small mosque. Such a combination of qualities might be considered prefect for producing an alienated message, but it did not. At the end of the *khutba*, he held in his hand a copy of Michael Hart's *The 100: A Ranking of the Most Influential Persons in History*, noted that the author had placed Prophet Muhammad first, and commented: "So don't worry about these. Conduct yourself in good manner; have a dialog; no violence. This is the way

to go, because we don't want to alienate the good people…" Again, the average person's concern is Islam's reputation and image, not political efficacy. If there is any politics in the *khatibs*' minds, it is the politics of persuasion: internal persuasion, preaching to the choir.

Purely political themes are non-existent in *khutbas*, both in terms of commenting on specific policies or pointing to larger national issues. The word *khilafa* (rule under Islamic authority) was mentioned only in one *khutba* and in the context of *hijra* (Prophet Muhammad's flight from Makkah to Madinah). After only one interjected sentence, however, the *khatib* started justifying the importance of an Islamic order: it allows for true *ibada* (worship) that has *ikhlas* (sincerity, purity): "The worship of Allah (S) is established upon sincerity and worshiping Allah by Himself… in secret and in public." The *khatib* did note that Islam is not simply a collection of ritual acts of *ibada:* "Islam is peace and tranquility and submission to Allah everywhere, whether it is in our personal lives, in our families, in the society, in the government, in the world." Thus even when politics in terms of governance are alluded to, the overall framework is that of good conduct, piety, and sincerity.

When there is a reference to governance, rare as it is, it represents an attempt to project a self-assured historical image of Muslims living happily with dignity uncorrupted by politics. For example, in a *khutba* about thankfulness, the *khatib* brought up the following story of an exchange between an *alim* counseling an Umayyad caliph. The *alim* asked: "If you needed a cup of water very badly, what [would] you give for it?" The caliph replied: "I will give half of my kingdom." The *alim* asked: "And if you wanted to urinate badly, what would you give?" The answer was also: "Half of my kingdom." The *alim* then asked: "What is the point, then, of clinging to a kingdom that is not worth a cup of water?" In other words, in this address about thankfulness the *khatib* invokes two acclaimed historical images: that of the *alim* and the prosperous Umayyad era. The political content of the reference is that once there had been knowledgeable, pious individuals with the authority and courage to advise rulers and remind them not to become absorbed in material possessions and political power.

In summary, pure political themes are virtually absent from *khutbas*. Some references to political events show up every once in a while, but for religious (not political) ends. The purpose of citing political happenings is geared toward buttressing the validity of old texts in our modern times and underlining the importance of personal purity. Obviously I cannot establish the evidence on the absence of political themes in a statistical sense, for I had no access to all of the *khutbas* of all of the mosques to undertake such a statistical affirmation. Nevertheless, the experiential evidence on this point is overwhelming, and it was so (with few exceptions) before the horrific event of 9/11.[21]

21 Maher Hathout, a major public figure in Southern California, is the only *khatib* who every once in a while comments on American foreign policy. However, it is a rational critique that you might read in the editorial of a major newspaper. African-American *khatibs* may refer to policies related to racial discrimination, although seldom they do that.

Gender: The Semi-Veiled Subject

It was quite surprising to find that the subject of gender did not show up in many *khutbas*, given that gender issues occupy modern thinking in all walks of life, including economics and equal pay for equal work, politics and women's participation, and morality and sexual behavior. Probably every contemporary society, whether conservative or liberal, is involved in this discussion. American society is no exception; on the contrary, it exhibits a quite sharp polarization as regards gender-related issues. Religion exerts a significant influence, as it aspires to ideal roles for men and women. Among religions Islam is also no exception, as it clearly elevates a collection of ideals related to gender, many of which deal with family life as a collectivity. Out of the hundred and six collected *khutbas*, only fourteen touched on gender and only two took it as a central theme.

It should be noted that the term *gender*, in the sense of the social construction of sexual identities, is not part of the prevailing Islamic thinking. To the contrary and similar to other religious traditions, Islam speaks of roles attached in one way or another to each sex. Muslim talk sometimes expresses gender as fixed roles and sometimes as predispositions and tendencies. I will be using *gender* in a generic sense to avoid confusing sex with sexual desire.

> **"Properly understood, the *Shari`ah* stands as a comprehensive body of generative principles and directives that reflect Islam's moral outlook, social philosophy, and legal precepts. It is not the *Shari`ah* principles that really raise questions about gender; rather, it is the *fiqh* (the corpus of jurisprudential writings) that try to apply *Shari`ah* principles in a specific time and space."**

The mention of gender is necessarily connected to observing Shari`ah directives in private and communal affairs. The term Shari`ah is uncritically invoked by both Muslims and non-Muslims. Outside the Islamic realm, it is often mentioned as an archaic religious system of laws that are anti-modern and manipulated by male clerics. Muslim radicals confirm this image by reducing Shari'ah to a few rigid social attitudes that they are ready to defend aggressively. Yet, properly understood, the Shari`ah stands as a comprehensive body of generative principles and directives that reflect Islam's moral outlook, social philosophy, and legal precepts. It is not the Shari`ah principles that really raise questions about gender; rather, it is the *fiqh* (the corpus of jurisprudential writings) that try to apply Shari`ah principles in a specific time and space. Obviously the application of abstract principles is a creative act, and it is sometimes done creatively and sometimes not. Besides the media's uniform framing, selectiveness, and subliminal interest in exoticizing, most of what it tells us about Muslim pronouncements related to gender issues falls under one of two categories: (1) social conventions aired by Muslims and at odds with modern sensibilities or (2) a non-creative use of outmoded *fiqh* in a manner disconnected from reality.

As far as the *khutba* is concerned, gender is invoked in three ways: (1) tangentially as part of the Islamic social order, (2) as a part of pointed didactic preaching, or (3) as an attempt to contextualize it within the American context. As we will see, handling this issue differs significantly among *khatibs*. Below is an exposition on the context in which gender was invoked and how it was discussed.

> **"Gender is often mentioned as part of the portrayal of a desired moral lifestyle."**

Gender Relations as part of the Islamic social order

Gender is often mentioned as part of the portrayal of a desired moral lifestyle. For example, one *khatib* who was talking about strengthening the Muslim community noted that it is advantageous for Muslims to live close to each other in one locality. In such a situation, he stated, Muslim residents can elect a mayor who will understand their communal needs and Muslim women would not have problems wearing the *hijab* in public.[22] The *khatib* spent significant time speaking about the virtue of being patient and interacting with people in a courteous manner, including those who do not observe Muslim attire and behavioral norms when they come to the mosque.

Another *khutba* stressed the importance of living a virtuous Muslim life typified by straightforward behavior. The *khatib* reminded his audience of the importance of not telling lies or engaging in gossiping, fulfilling promises, and testifying when it is required to determine the truth. He continued: "We have to purify ourselves from any sign of hypocrisy. We have to purify ourselves, my brothers, from any root of nationalism or any other *ism* that Islam prohibits!" No further explanation was offered. At the end of this address, the *khatib* mentioned gender as one aspect of behavior that needs to be brought into accord with Islamic moral rules. He noted

22 *Hijab*, as the term is customarily used, denotes modesty requirements in women's clothing, including covering the hair.

that, unfortunately, mistreating wives is found among Muslims. Furthermore, and here he asked people to correct him if he was mistaken, he said that he had heard that in some Muslim countries abortions were preformed if the ultrasound test showed the fetus to be female. This is infanticide, the *khatib* exclaimed, which Islam strongly condemns.

Another *khatib* relayed the story of a doubtful Muslim woman. Women are the most oppressed creatures of Allah, she said, because they give birth and are weaker than men. The *khatib* responded by saying that this type of mentality is the result of two things: (1) a lack of knowledge and (2) "the lack of *zikr* of Allah, the love of Allah." The woman would not have said such things if she had proper knowledge of the Shari`ah, the *khatib* noted.

In a Shi`i mosque, the *khatib* started his address by reciting Qur'anic versus describing the uncivilized behavior of the Bedouins, who used to call Prophet Muhammad in a loud voice: "O you who believe! Be not forward in the presence of Allah and His messenger and keep your duty to Allah. Lo! Allah is Hearer, Knower. O you who believe! Lift not up your voices above the voice of the Prophet, nor shout when speaking to him as you shout one to another, lest your works be rendered vain while you perceive not. Lo! They who subdue their voices in the presence of the messenger of Allah, those are they whose hearts Allah have proven unto righteousness. Theirs will be forgiveness and immense reward. Lo! Those who call you from behind the private apartments, most of them have no sense.[23]"

Establishing the idea that civility in conduct and respect are Islamic principles, the *khatib* tried to show the relevance of this to the lives of people today. But before doing so, he wove in a historical account of a special woman. Stating that this particular Friday concurred with the birthday of Fatima, Imam Ali's daughter, he reminded the audience that Fatima had many titles (e.g., Aqeela [intelligent, wise, and mature in her intellectual capacity]) because of her importance. She also had many "names," just like her mother: al-Zahara, al-Batool, al-Tahira, al-Sideeqa, and Sayyidat al-Alameen (the lady of the all ladies of the world)."

Everyone should account for the occasion, the *khatib* said, and a person's mindfulness of the dignity of the day should be reflected in his or her actual behavior. For example, coming to the mosque for the Friday prayer, the most important prayer, wearing some bright pink item of clothing would not be appropriate. Also, a woman should not come "with heavy makeup." As just mentioned, the *khatib* stressed the feature of *aql* (wisdom, rationality, or thinking capacity) in Fatima, making such qualities a model for all Muslims: "We [are] *aqeels*; [an] *aqeel* [is one] who has more mind [i.e., more wisdom and reasoning capacity] than that of the others. Those who are intelligent… would

23 Quran 49:1-4

not do such thing"; i.e., would not dress improperly and would not call dignified personalities in an impolite manner. Citing the verses again, the *khatib* remarked that "those who are calling of you [i.e., Prophet Muhammad] want to ask you a question…, from outside of the chapters, outside of your privacy, bothering you in your room, in your family… [have no sense, citing the verse in Arabic]. Knock at the door; make an appointment."

The pervious sentence switches the address from historical figures (Prophet Muhammad in this case) to contemporary situations, a common feature in *khutbas* that is certainly confusing for someone who is not familiar with such a conversational style. Juxtaposing the verse's implications with American etiquette and sensibilities is noteworthy. We should respect the prophets, the *khatib* said. We do not say Isa (Prophet Jesus); rather, "we say Isa *alayhi assalam*" (may God's peace be with him). You do not call Bush by his first name, "regardless of his policies"; you say "President Bush."

This *khutba* clearly demonstrates how the gender issue shows up only as an element in the web of Muslim behavioral ideals: proper dress, the proper way of addressing prophets and dignitaries, and respecting people's privacy. Moreover, such qualities are not simply ritualistic requirements; rather, they represent expectations from a person who is *aqeel* (wise and considerate).

Two observed *khutbas* mentioned homosexuality, one by an older *khatib* and one by a young *khatib*. In the first one, the *khatib* made pointed criticisms about being complacent with such a deviant lifestyle. However, this issue was not the topic of the *khutba,* which focused on the experience of Prophet Ibrahim as a model of a person who upholds his belief despite the enmity he faces from his own people. Initially, only one man followed Ibrahim, the *khatib* noted: Prophet Lot. Prophet Lot was then appointed to face people "who commit one of the worst shameful deeds in the history of mankind—sodomy." The *khatib* exclaimed that this issue is reappearing in our contemporary society and that those who sympathize with it "want to compel" others to accept their practices. God sent Lot to the "San Francisco of that time" to teach people the right way of living. Lot did not threaten those people, the *khatib* stressed; rather, he told them that God would forgive them if they repented. Consumed with lust, however, they brought the punishment upon themselves.

The other *khutba* discussed homosexuality in the context of searching for the truth. Humility is required in this endeavor, the *khatib* noted, and the attitude toward homosexuality is one example. Homosexuality is condemned by the three religions (he did not name them); yet, some people argue today, based on arbitrary ideas that come into their minds, that it is okay. The reason behind homosexuality in the aforementioned *khutba,* lust, was here replaced with an error in judgment. Logically connected, the *khatib* noted, is the issue of consensual sex. Both are examples of a cognitive malaise that denies the dire consequences of such a lifestyle. The Qur'an invites us to use our minds, "Do you not reason?", and thus only arrogant minds fall into such practices.

Didactic Preaching

Gender was invoked in the last section within a larger social context and with some focus on life in the United States. In this section we see two undercurrents that appear in didactic preaching that expresses disappointment with the practices of Muslims: a sharp criticism of the lack of commitment to proper Islamic etiquette and a literalist approach to reading Islamic texts in reference to gender.

The African-American *khatib* was enthusiastically engaged in what can be described as "repetitious preaching," stressing the importance of following the teachings of the Qur'an and the authentic Sunnah and of molding behavior along the Prophet's example. Verifying the authenticity of what is claimed to be authentic is crucial, he warned, and anyone who claims that something is Islamic has to bring support from the Qur'an and the *hadith.*[24] The *khatib* followed this by brining examples of frills that are added to religion, listing some insignificant actions that he found objectionable. He then pointed to objectionable personal behaviors among men and women. For men, it was not growing a beard but shaving like Jews and Christians. For women, it was a prolonged chastising about not dressing in a covering garment and wearing tight pants and shirts. All such behaviors are indications of a lax commitment: "But people don't listen," the *khatib* complained. Some of today's imams shy away from telling people what they should do, he noted. For their part, imams are entrusted with teaching the tradition, and what they say is not merely their own opinions. Since there are no priests in Islam, a person is "either an imam or not." The *khatib* was stressing imamship as the authoritative reference, which is firmly anchored in authentic texts open to all believers.

Another address by a literalist Arab *khatib* powerfully demonstrates the tensions in applying a text to living reality. Citing a *hadith* or a Qur'anic verse for each idea of his arguments, the *khatib* was demonstrating women's high position in Islam. Then he visited the verses that talk about Adam and Eve before life on Earth. In a confident tone and broken English, he asserted that "Allah gives the responsibility to the man; he is actually the one who been in charge. Allah did not say Hawa [i.e., did not say that Eve is responsible for the fall]; no, He said Adam, *fa assa rabbahu fa ghawa*—he disobeyed Allah." Men are always in charge, the *khatib* continued, suggesting that this social arrangement is an undisputable fact of life, desirable and good, and sanctioned by religion. He specifically noted that the source of the problem was in the impulse that led Adam to disobey one of God's commandments.

The *khatib* then digressed to discussing the issue of not allowing women to attend the mosque: "Who will take out this right?" he exclaimed. Is it "because of some thinking we have? We can't." For him this "right" was sanctioned by a text, and no one has the right to take it away. Furthermore, doing so would be an innovation based on our modern thinking and is therefore unacceptable. Then, and in rather a stunning manner, he criticized the separation between the sexes in the mosque, following it with this comment: "And I hope, I hope if I am still alive to see [a] *masjid* that will be open…" That is, a mosque that has no barrier or structural separation between the two groups, as he explained. Knowing that such an idea might not go well with some of the audience, he challenged them: "That might take somebody [unintelligible] their heads [i.e., make some people nod their heads with disapproval saying] ah, ah: men and women together! Well, let me tell you [that] Muhammad's (S) *masjid*… was open." Period. Ironically, the sharp preaching and literalism ended up asserting a gender space sanctioned by the texts.

Varied Contextualization

24 *Hadith* is the collection of Prophet Muhammad's sayings, and next to Quran it represents the second authentic source of Islam.

“The man, being the protector obliged to provide for the family, is a staple in the Islamic discourse, although the extent of providing and the meaning of protection vary widely.”

In contrast to the foregoing approach of overconfident preaching closely aligned with texts, the following *khutbas* sought to present reflections on Islamic texts—supposedly informed reflections and not simply personal passing ideas. The *khutbas* invoked gender issues by trying to make connections between Islamic texts and Muslim life in the United States. Expectedly, the *khatib*'s age and the members' social class play a role in such contextualization.

The subject of gender popped-up in the address of an older *khatib* in the context of mentioning other prophets, including Abraham and his wives. The *khatib* noted that a whole Qur'anic chapter is about *nisa'*, "about the relationship between men and women."[25] Mutual respect comes when the couple thinks that Allah is watching them, the *khatib* asserted. There was a conflict between Hagar and Sarah, but they eventually "adjusted" to the situation!

Now, some Muslim couples have troubles: "We are not excluded from this phenomenon," the *khatib* remarked. Problems occur when the relationship has no reverence to Allah but to what "I get from it." In the United States, "everybody lives by himself." In Muslim countries, women have neighbors and relatives to support them. Husbands should recognize this fact. Here we find the immigrant *khatib* mindful of how the social context puts different pressures on family life and aware of the lack of a longed-for communal connectedness.

The *khatib* continued and moved closer to personal issues: "The man should show that she is a very important person in his life… To provide and protect her is the man's job. Of course, do not ignore her…" The man, being the protector obliged to provide for the family, is a staple in the Islamic discourse, although the extent of providing and the meaning of protection vary widely.

The *khatib* then went back to living reality in which the lack of community and connections to relatives encourages the surfacing of marital problems. When trying to solve those problems, he noted, we should not depend on what "I" think or what "you" think. Rather, we should follow what Allah and the Prophet have "instructed us, commanded us." We live in an environment full of demands, and this causes problems between spouses. Therefore, the most important guarantee against marital discord is "*taqwa in arham*" (being mindful of God in matters related to relatives). He continued: "You and I can make all the laws we want, but would they be fair?" Only Islam gives us the right balance as regards the obligations assigned to men and women. We "should recognize that our sisters are special because they are deprived from many things. They live an isolated life… children." Against such awareness from husbands, wives should appreciate the chivalry of their men: "Similarly, sisters should understand that the husband is an honest man, a leader."

In a lower-middle-class mosque, the *khutba* was dedicated to the male-female relationship. From

25 The *khatib* is referring to the *surah* (a chapter) in the Quran that is titled "Women," which has several segments that deals with the subject of family relations.

the outset, the *khatib* reminded his audience that Allah created the two sexes "as partners in life; He did not create them as master and slave." The reference to this master-slave relationship by the non-African-American *khatib* is indicative. It is our duty to learn from the model, Prophet Muhammad, and to recognize "how to get respect to each other, how to get honor to each other." Although the implied meanings of honor and respect intersect as vocabulary words, one is picked from the Muslim social milieu and the other from the American milieu; one is more comprehensive but vague, while the other is more specific but narrow. Addressing the American reality, the *khatib* comfortably combined the two words in his statement.

Asserting a common religious view, he then connected gender to marriage: "Men and women marry, and now they are husbands and wives," not simply men and women. If they do not behave properly, "they are destroying their children… destroying the community… destroying human society." The rest of the *khutba* stressed the importance of good conduct: "We have a great responsibility, especially in this country where we are a minority." Instilling values in the family is a top responsibility, and the tranquility of marriage that the Qur'an describes will come only if we follow the commandments of Islam.

Interestingly, we can detect in the last two *khutbas*, delivered by older immigrants, the overlapping shades of the home country and the new country. There are the stronger communal bonds "back there" and too many demands of modern life "here." Being a minority is a specific concern, as it makes the Muslims visible and open to hasty criticism. Overcoming such hurdles is assured by leading a family lifestyle enlightened by the ideal of Islamic conduct.

One *khutba* delivered in a solidly middle-class mosque was dedicated to the husband-wife relationship. Specifically, *the khatib* tried to analyze the Qur'anic verse that deals with *nushuz* on the part of both spouses. There is no agreement among commentators on what *nushuz* actually means, but all agree that it implies a rejectionist attitude toward the other spouse.

The *khatib* noted that some men act as the ultimate boss, an "authoritarian despot, whatever he says the whole family should, you know… patriarch like that, you know… They should include their wives. This is *nushuz* on the part of a man." When men act in such a manner it constitutes *nushuz*. Immediately after that, the *khatib* said: "*Nushuz* on the part of women has different dimensions but has the same meaning": when the wife "doesn't care about the family," is always busy gossiping with her circle of friends, badmouthing her husband, and encouraging other women to get a divorce. Obviously, the *khatib* made the meaning of *nushuz* very different depending on the identity of the person: one relates to style of authority and the other relates to neglecting the family.

He interpreted the rest of the verse as: "Men are to be the guardians about their women, to

> **"Is the infrequent reference to gender because Muslims are quite comfortable with their lifestyle and therefore the issue does not surface as much, or is it because the subject is still highly controversial?"**

take care of them." This is so because of the issue of capability: husbands are not as involved in taking care of their children. Then the *khatib* visited the Qur'anic description of female believers as *qanitat*. He rejected the claim that this term means that women should be obedient; rather, it means that they should be "harmonious" in their relationships with their husbands and not criticize them on silly daily matters. He gave several examples.

Clearly, this *khutba* was addressing concerns about marriage frictions in a middle-class context. Women here were more empowered, although there was a single focus on the extra responsibility of caring for children. Manipulative behavior was criticized for both genders, while the image of a cordial relationship furnished the background.

In contrast to the previous *khutbas* delivered by older men, the subject of love was prominent in the following address by a middle-aged immigrant *khatib*. It appeared after a long reminder about several Islamic virtues: repentance, being a role model, avoiding arrogance, and recognizing that life on Earth requires patience. The *khatib* then spent considerable time on the virtue of love: "We should also love one another. We should love our brothers, sisters, neighbors, wives, children, friends, and follow countrymen, whoever lives in this Earth." Furthermore, the love of the environment, animals, and plants appeared several times. Toward the end of this *khutba,* which was delivered in early February, the *khatib* stated: "We should also set a New Year resolution to be extra kind to our husbands or wives. We should not have a Valentine one day out of the year. Everyday of your life should be a Valentine's Day. No matter how small a gift you have, you should give it [to your wife]. Even a smile." Mothers contribute a lot of services that make homes livable, the *khatib* noted, and "as a token of love and gratitude we should also make it a habit to bring home a gift to his [sic] wife."

Of course, the *khatib* was sure to support his ideas with Islamic texts. The mention of love was intermixed with references to Prophet Muhammad's behavior and reminders of the following Quranic verse: "And forget not kindness among yourselves,"[26] reading it in Arabic and then commenting

with the following: "Don't forget favors between you and your wife, between you and your friend, between you and your neighbor." He reminded the audience with an oft-cited verse, reading it in Arabic: "And among His Signs is this, that He created for you mates from among yourselves that you may dwell in tranquility with them, and He has put love and mercy between your hearts,"[27] and then commented: "Allah (S) put in us this gift of love and mercy… and we should not abuse or neglect this gift. Instead, we should hold on this gift and add to it by treating and respecting our wives or our husbands."

> **"The mention of love was intermixed with references to Prophet Muhammad's behavior and reminders of the following Quranic verse: 'And forget not kindness among yourselves.'"**

Interestingly, although Valentine's Day was mentioned, the *khutba* contextualized its meaning strictly within the institution of marriage. Furthermore, love was invoked not simply as a romantic relationship between two individuals, but rather as a Sufi love that encompasses all creatures, including non-humans.

The second *khutba,* delivered by a young American-born *khatib,* started off by remarking that divorce is becoming a problem in the Muslim community and that he personally knows friends who have gone through it. We cannot deny that our community has this problem, he stated, and we cannot brush aside the fact that domestic violence also occurs. He then enumerated six pieces of marriage advice: "Number one: respecting and forgiving each other…Number two: listening to each other… Number three: supporting each other… Number four: protecting our homes from wickedness… Number five: establishing a common goal for the home… Number six: worshiping Allah together." The *khatib* followed each item with some more details. For the third item, he brought the example of avoiding "*haram* images, such those on the Internet."[28] Regarding the sixth item, he told the audience that people today are too engaged in daily affairs and that "there is no culture of worship" in today's households.

By the end of the address, the *khatib* switched back from general religious preaching to specific recommendations: "I have homework for you tonight… for the married brothers and sisters… If [there is] anything you can take from this *khutba*, make a promise to yourself, between you and Allah, that you will do something different with your family tonight. Throw [sic] it up and say 'I love you.' If she is surprised when you say it, then you are not doing a good job. If she is [unimpressed and cynically] says *mashaallah*… try something else, try some flowers."

It is interesting to note here that gender attitudes became one of the major subjects that demarcate the so-called East and West, each finding this area the most problematic in the lives of the other camp. American Muslims represent an interesting case, as they bridge those two imagined worlds.

27 Quran 30:21.

28 The term *haram* is a widely used term in Muslim cultures. When translated into English the term "prohibited" or "sinful" is frequently used. However, this is a poor rendering. As it is customarily used among Muslims, it carries no legal implications. Furthermore, it is often used to describe any morally bankrupt behavior, from stealing to being hard-hearted. Although the concept is rooted in Shari'ah outlook, the term has much plasticity in customary use.

One would have expected gender to appear more often in the *khutbas*. Is the infrequent reference to gender because Muslims are quite comfortable with their lifestyle and therefore the issue does not surface as much, or is it because the subject is still highly controversial? The confidence that Muslims have in their "moderate" lifestyle surely encourages their treatment of the subject to turn toward that of restoring balance.

The *khutba* discourse on gender largely subscribes to the idea that men and women are differently endowed, which calls for assigning different priorities to them. Within such a framework, problems are conceived to arise from being inconsiderate and from not fulfilling one's role. Therefore, it is consistent that invoking gender-related issues in *khutbas* is part of discussing the Shari`ah's moral directives and part of larger communal concerns. To what degree such attitudes are prevalent among the younger generation of American-born Muslims is worthy of investigation.[29]

29 Many media reports and academic articles indicate that the younger American-born Muslims differ in their social attitudes from their parents; yet I am not aware of a comprehensive and systematic study on this subject. For a general treatment on the negligence of the needs of young Muslims, see Jeffery Lang, *Losing My Religion: A Call for Help*. (Indianapolis: IN, Amana Publications, 2004).

Conclusion

Within the context of an open book and the duty of "reminding the faithful," the *khutbas*' emphasis on core beliefs and the repetition of what the audience already knows can be explained. Many *khutbas* mention basic beliefs, such as the oneness of God, the ultimate Creator and Sustainer. Furthermore, a good part of any *khutba*, almost regardless of its topic, dwells on reminding the audience about proper Islamic behavior and that doing good deeds is what constitutes a true Muslim.

This research discussed the relative absence of politics from *khutbas* and how that when this subject does appear, it is coupled with moral conduct as opposed to governance or politics *per se*. In addition, the rest of the Muslim *ummah* does not usually get more than a wish-you-well ritualistic mention. Lastly, gender issues, considered by some to be a wedge issue among Muslims in the West, were invoked during *khutbas*, but only infrequently. Furthermore, how they were treated differed significantly depending upon the audience's social class and the *khatib*'s personal qualities, including how he deals with Islamic texts. Overall, the *khutbas* mainly focus on the Muslims' practical life as it unfolds in the United States, seeking religious guidance toward refined conduct.

Policy Recommendations

This study of *khutbas* in Southern California confirms the view of many Muslim attendees—some *khutbas* are reasonably good, but many are lacking and need major improvements. We can comfortably say that many *khutbas* suffer from one or more of the following shortcomings: (1) many of them lack relevance to the people's lives, especially those belonging to the younger generation; (2) some *khatibs* show a clear lack of sophisticated Islamic knowledge; (3) some *khatibs* lack basic public speaking skills; and (4) the limited English proficiency of some *khatibs* adds to the problem.

The challenge to any policy recommendation is that it be in sync with the milieu of those who would carry out such recommendations. Therefore, recognizing the nature of the *khutba* should be at the cornerstone of any recommendation, and the above discussion of *khutbas* should have made clear two points: (1) the informality of the *khatib* position and (2) the relative informality of the message.

Islam has no clerical system, although the ulama command a high level of respect and, sometimes, authority. Similarly, there is no formal process of ordination that a *khatib* needs to go through. Thus most of them are self-made, just ordinary people with some Islamic knowledge; many of them are not imams or community leaders. The concept of imamship itself is fluid. An imam is likely to have gone through some formal study of classical Islamic subjects, such as Qur'anic commentaries and *fiqh*. In many instances, however, becoming an imam (or a *shaykh*) is an ascribed status based on capturing the attention of many people who are impressed by a person's knowledge and/or ability to guide others. Therefore, the imam is a community leader who has some knowledge of the Islamic classics. The ulama, on the other hand, are specialized scholars who could garner much eminence and respect but usually do not command, at least not directly. It should be noted that the foregoing description is more applicable for Sunni Muslims. Again, any recommendation should be mindful of the open nature of the *khatib* position.

The message's informality relates to the above point. What the *khatib* says has two interesting qualities: (1) his *khutba* approximates a civic discourse more than a religious ceremony and (2) it has no predetermined weight. As I argued elsewhere,[30] some aspects of the message are mundane and

30 Mazen Hashem, "The Ummah in the Khutba: A Religious Sermon or a Civil Discourse?" Forthcoming, *The Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*.

thus open to personal interpretations by the receiver. Furthermore, the *khatib*'s pronouncements are not taken as absolutely authoritative and thus are subject to significant challenge. As Islam is a highly scriptural religion, Muslims feel empowered to challenge the *khatib*'s interpretation of the texts.[31]

The above discussion is meant to emphasize that within the Islamic context a centralized regulatory system for the *khutba* is not conceivable. Some Muslim governments have tried such an approach; it largely failed. While it might have succeeded in suppressing unwanted messages, it delegitimized appointed *khatibs* and, by default, gave credence to alternative voices. Some European countries tried such an approach (France, in particular), and we cannot say that it was a success.

Improving the *khutba* needs to be driven from within the community of *khatibs*. It is expected that the professionalization of *khatibs* by itself, however, would not solve the problem. As most of the interesting *khutbas* are usually delivered by non-trained imams, a closed system of professionalization could stifle the emergence of good *khatibs*. Moreover, since there are not enough trained *khatibs*, the need for volunteers and self-made *khatibs* is expected to continue.

Taking the above into consideration, the following general suggestions are made:

1. Fostering a sense of responsibility among *khatibs*, matched by a sense of entitlement among the audience to a decent *khutba.* Some evaluative feedback mechanisms could help, perhaps a *nasiha* [advice]-to-the-*khatib* system of feedback. This could be as simple as a blog administered by a committee, such as the *shura* councils (consultative councils) in several larger cities. Also, specific feedback could be channeled through anonymous emails administered by the same body.

2. Rotating *khatibs* among mosques exposes the audience to different messages and styles and can be easily implemented. Although this practice already occurs in many mosques, it could be expanded. The mosque board might opt to adopt such a policy. This might be crucial in mosques where the *khatib* is also the imam, so that the attendees would not be limited to one voice all the time.

3. Creating a monthly reminder forum (*tathkira*) in which *khatibs* can share worthwhile ideas. An Internet-based application might be a good vehicle for such an undertaking.

4. The above-mentioned forum could also be used to deliver a specific suggestion, such as a call for a *khutba* on domestic violence (such an attempt was made recently, but it lacked synchronization).

5. Creating a record of critical subjects occupying the minds of American Muslims. *Khatibs* could gather a few major frequently asked questions and suggest some answers. This might work better if the submissions are brief. An online database that grows over time could be created to list the submitted answers. An editorial committee would have to review the submissions and suggest some modifications.

31 For more detailed discussion on this point, see Mazen Hashem, "Asserting Religious Text in the Modern World: Muslim Friday Khutbas." Forthcoming *The Muslim World*, 2010.

6. Creating a compendium of exemplary *khutbas*. Individual imams could submit and share with others the outlines (not the actual *khutbas*) of what they consider to be an excellent *khutba*. This enables the sharing of knowledge while leaving a space for innovative thinking by other *khatibs*.

7. Creating an online reference on how to deal with problematic terms. It is well-known that word-to-word translations from one language into another do not relay the original meaning; in fact, they often relay a distorted meaning. Therefore, it is critical that *khatibs* develop a language that transmits some critical concepts with accuracy beyond simple dictionary-based translations.

8. The level of English language mastery was limited in some *khutbas*. There is a need to make a reasonable level of English ability a taken-for-granted expectation on behalf of the audience. The Fiqh Council of North America could take up the matter and decide whether this could be considered a requirement for the validity of a *khutba*.

9. There is a need to develop a "*Kahtib* Code of Ethics." This complex issue is, however, beyond the scope of this report. Some *khatibs* are imams and participate in the *mosque*'s decision-making process; others are freelancers who are not engaged in any management issue. Regardless of his formal position, there should be guidelines that protect *khatibs*' intuitive thinking as well as to not let the message overcome the proper decision-making process of the mosque The following are suggested minimum standards for a *khutba* to meet:
    - Verify the authenticity of the provided information.
    - Elaborate the message in a way that is appropriate to the khutba's solemnity.
    - Maintain a tone of hope, even when commenting on shortcomings.
    - Be sensitive to the diversity of audience as regards age, ethnicity, and gender.
    - Avoid using the message in a way that short-circuits the mosque's decision-making process. If the board comes to a decision with which the khatib concurs, he can publicize the decision (with its approval). If this is not the case, he can avoid mentioning it in the khutba; however, he cannot discredit it. He can state his personal views after the khutba in the spirit of "Allah knows best."
    - Avoid promoting divisiveness. Some communal disagreements are bound to occur every once in a while. The only acceptable khutba message in such cases is one of togetherness, even when the khatib has a specific viewpoint. His own viewpoint could be shared in non-khutba settings.
    - Refrain from using the public pulpit for personal matters or what might be interpreted as a conflict of interest. (It is assumed that imams have no decision-making privilege on financial issues).

10. It should be noted that the North American Imam Federation conducts well-attended meetings. ISNA also has a program that focuses on religious leadership. There is, however, a need for coordination between those associations and Islamic educational programs, such as the Zaytuna Institute and Cordoba University (part of The Graduate School of Islamic Social Sciences).

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