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BOOK REVIEW

Review of Islamic Religious Authority in a Modern Age: Australian and Global Perspectives, by Shaheen Amid Whyte

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Abstract
This article reviews Shaheen Amid Whyte's Islamic Religious Authority in a Modern Age: Australian and Global Perspectives (Palgrave Macmillan, 2024), which examines how Islamic religious authority is constructed, transmitted, and contested within Australia's multicultural society. Drawing on interviews, surveys, and participant observation, and framed by Weber's typology of traditional, rational-legal, and charismatic authority, the book maps a fragmented yet dynamic landscape shaped by community diversity, post-9/11 security politics, media representation, and digital platforms. It identifies four coexisting forms of authority: traditional ulama, Muslim academics, collective bodies such as the Australian National Imams Council (ANIC), and self-constituted authority. Its survey findings expose a notable legitimacy gap for ANIC and strong community support for locally trained and domestically funded imams. The book's main strengths lie in its robust empirical grounding and its attention to internal heterogeneity among Australian Muslims. However, it offers limited comparison with other Western contexts and gives insufficient attention to women's voices, informal family networks, and intergenerational dynamics. Despite these limitations, it makes a valuable contribution to scholarship on the localization of Islam in secular-liberal societies and to understanding religious authority as networked, negotiated, and contested.

Keywords
Islamic religious authority; Australian Muslims; ulama; Muslim minorities; book review

Introduction

This comprehensive work provides a nuanced analysis of how Islamic religious authority is constructed, transmitted, and contested within Australia's multicultural landscape. The author meticulously examines both internal dynamics within the diverse Australian Muslim community and external influences such as post-9/11 security politics, media representation, and public discourse. Through a robust empirical methodology combining interviews, surveys, and participatory observation, this book presents a unique perspective on religious authority in contemporary Muslim diaspora communities.

The timing of this publication is particularly significant, marking a shift in Western scholarship away from integration and radicalization narratives toward a more sophisticated understanding of Muslim communities' internal dimensions. By employing a Weberian theoretical framework examining traditional, rational-legal, and charismatic forms of authority, the author effectively maps the fragmented yet dynamic landscape of Islamic religious authority in Australia.

Content Analysis

Chapter one establishes the conceptual foundation for understanding Islamic religious authority in Australia by analyzing its inherent complexity. The author explains how Islamic authority differs fundamentally from hierarchical structures like the Catholic Church, instead existing as a dispersed network particularly prominent in minority contexts. This fragmentation is strengthened by the diversity of Australian Muslim communities originating from over 183 countries and encompassing traditionalist, modernist, Salafi, Islamist, and progressive interpretations. The historical presence of Muslims in Australia since the 19th century through various migration waves has created a rich tapestry of Islamic traditions that raise profound questions about legitimate religious representation in a multicultural society.

The post-9/11 landscape has introduced additional challenges to the construction of religious authority among Australian Muslims. The author articulates how security politics, media representation, and government pressure have compelled Muslim leaders to address terrorism and religious reform, while Islamophobic narratives influence how religious authority is established and maintained. This socio-political environment coincides with generational shifts that encourage new engagement with both traditional and modern Islamic thought. Through an empirical methodology combining interviews, surveys, and participatory observation, this study reveals the emergence of new religious actors and changing patterns in the construction and contestation of Islamic authority.

Chapter two offers a thorough historical analysis of the ulama as traditional religious authorities, tracing their evolution from the post-prophetic period to contemporary times. The author meticulously documents how ulama initially established their authority as inheritors of prophetic knowledge (*waratha al-anbiya*) through their expertise in textual interpretation, then developed into a distinct social class through the institutionalization of Islamic education in madrasas by the 9th century. Unlike Christian priesthood, ulama gained legitimacy through scholarly expertise and community recognition rather than formal ordination, with their authority further consolidated through the four Sunni legal schools that granted them a central role in Islamic legal interpretation (*ijtihad*).

The chapter effectively charts the challenges to ulama authority through various historical periods, including their complex relationships with political powers from the caliphates to modern nation-states, where institutions like Turkey's Diyanet and Egypt's Al-Azhar represent state control over religious authority. The author persuasively argues that colonialism, modernization, and globalization have precipitated a crisis in traditional ulama authority by dismantling the *waqf* system that ensured their independence, introducing secular education systems, and enabling the rise of competing religious voices through Islamist, reformist, and Salafi movements. The chapter concludes by examining how Muslims in Western contexts, including Australia, are developing new authority structures that blend traditional Islamic scholarship with Western education, though these efforts face challenges from secular individualism and the democratizing effects of digital media on religious interpretation.

Chapter three examines Islamic leadership structures in Australia, highlighting the tensions inherent in mosque governance. Most imams, recruited from overseas, struggle to navigate Australian

social contexts while mosque committees wield significant control over their roles, creating leadership conflicts. This chapter reveals how imams often function more as community leaders than primary religious authorities.

The author analyzes key organizations shaping Australian Islamic authority, including the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils (AFIC, established 1964) and the Australian National Imams Council (ANIC, formed 2006). These institutions face challenges of internal conflict, legitimacy, and inclusivity—particularly regarding women and sectarian minorities. The chapter also addresses how digital platforms have transformed religious knowledge transmission while raising concerns about content oversight in Australia's fragmented religious landscape.

Chapter four presents compelling empirical findings on who Australian Muslims consider religious authorities. Survey data reveals that 70% of respondents trust imams/sheikhs and academics, with 35.6% specifically choosing imams/sheikhs (19.3% preferring local imams and 16.3% overseas imams) and 34.3% choosing Muslim academics in Islamic studies. The remaining respondents seek religious knowledge from family/friends/elders (11%), Muslim community leaders (6%), and other sources (13%). This data confirms a direct correlation between scholarly knowledge and perceived authority within the Australian Muslim community.

Regarding knowledge-seeking platforms, survey results indicate that respondents utilize various media with books (22.5%), websites (21%), sermons (15%), and community-based Islamic classes (14.5%) as primary sources. On average, each respondent accesses three different platforms, demonstrating that Australian Muslims employ multidimensional approaches in their search for religious knowledge. The study also compares its findings with Halim Rane et al.'s (2020) research which shows different results, where the main sources of influence are the Quran (82.5%), hadith (66.4%), and scholarly books (41.2%)—differences that might stem from the questions asked ("influential sources" versus "platforms").

The discussion about ambiguity in the use of religious titles (imam, sheikh, alim) and debates about whether Muslim academics can be considered ulama reflects the dynamics of authority contestation alive within the diverse Australian Muslim community.

Chapter five examines collective religious authorities in Australia, focusing primarily on ANIC. Established in 2006 following controversies surrounding Sheikh Hilaly, ANIC adopted a Weberian rational-legal authority model with structured leadership under a Grand Mufti. Despite having six state-based imam councils and bodies like the Halal Authority, ANIC struggles with significant legitimacy issues.

Survey data reveals a notable legitimacy gap—while 76% of respondents recognize ANIC's existence, only 39% consider it a legitimate peak body. The organization faces criticism for lacking transparency, female representation, and inclusion of non-Sunni Muslim groups. Despite ANIC's establishment of a Fatwa Council in 2020 and its political advocacy work, concerns persist about its methodology and selective engagement with global Muslim issues.

Chapter six explores how Islamic religious authority in Australia operates across diverse platforms. While mosques remain central religious spaces, their leadership often resides with committees rather than imams. Religious scholars increasingly utilize social media platforms—websites, podcasts, and blogs—to disseminate Islamic teachings, though they simultaneously warn about misinformation risks. Organizations like United Muslims Australia demonstrate how religious approaches are being combined with social services and education, expanding authority beyond traditional mosque settings.

The chapter examines tensions between traditional and emerging forms of religious authority. Muslim academics at universities contribute to Islamic discourse through research and teaching, though debates persist about whether they hold equivalent authority to traditional ulama. Many imams engage in social advocacy and interfaith work, viewing community involvement as an Islamic obligation rather than merely religious employment. Programs like "National Open Mosque Day" represent efforts to counter Islamophobia through public education and community outreach, revealing how religious authority increasingly encompasses social engagement in Australia's multicultural society.

Chapter seven examines the localization of Islamic authority in Australia through imam recruitment, training, and funding amidst post-9/11 security politics. The author reveals the tensions in Australia's approach to Islam, where government policies promote "moderate" interpretations aligned with "Australian values" while simultaneously subjecting Muslim communities to security monitoring. Despite 62.7% of respondents acknowledging benefits from foreign-trained imams, an overwhelming 90% support local imam training programs that better reflect Australian Muslim realities, highlighting a significant gap between community aspirations and available educational infrastructure.

The chapter critically analyzes the funding sources for imams and their political implications. Survey findings reveal that Australian Muslims strongly prefer domestic funding channels (70.1% combined), with specific preferences for local Muslim communities (28.1%), Australian government (21.3%), domestic donations and grants (20.9%), and self-funding (15.8%). Overseas funding was the least preferred option (12.4%), despite significant financial support from countries like Turkey and Saudi Arabia. Some participants suggested innovative funding approaches through sustainable business models, citing examples like the Paris mosque which generates revenue through an attached restaurant. The author illustrates how imams navigate complex political pressures, as exemplified by media criticism of ANIC's Grand Mufti for insufficiently condemning terrorist attacks. The chapter concludes by emphasizing the urgent need for developing local educational pathways that combine classical Islamic training with Australian sociopolitical understanding—a hybrid approach currently hindered by institutional and financial limitations.

Chapter eight synthesizes findings on Islamic religious authority in Australia, identifying four distinct forms that coexist within Muslim communities. Traditional ulama remain important, though distinctions persist between prayer leaders (imams) and Islamic scholars (alim) with deeper jurisprudential expertise. Muslim academics increasingly gain recognition for articulating Islam in contemporary language, while self-constituted authority emerges as Australian Muslims seek religious guidance through self-study via digital platforms or from family and community networks rather than formal institutions. The chapter also addresses concerns about unqualified individuals using charisma to claim religious authority without scholarly foundations.

The concluding chapter frames this diversity as reflecting democratic contestation within Australian Muslim communities, where religious pluralism enables individuals to choose their preferred religious authorities. The author identifies ongoing challenges including pressure to "domesticate" Islam to align with dominant national values and the media-perpetuated binary of "good Muslims" versus "bad Muslims." The book concludes by suggesting future research directions including women's roles in religious authority, connections between Australian ulama and transnational Islamic movements, and comparative analysis with Muslim communities in other Western nations to better understand religious authority dynamics in diaspora contexts.

Strengths of the Book

The primary strength of this book lies in its robust empirical approach, combining in-depth interviews with imams, academics, and Muslim educators, alongside surveys of the broader Australian Muslim community. The data presented provides a concrete, nuanced picture of Muslim attitudes, preferences, and practices related to religious authority, distinguishing it from purely theoretical studies on Islamic leadership.

The analytical framework utilizing Weberian theory on authority proves highly effective in mapping the complex landscape of religious authority. The author successfully demonstrates how the three forms of authority—traditional (based on historical heritage), rational-legal (based on formal institutions), and charismatic (based on personality)—operate simultaneously and sometimes contradictorily within the Australian Muslim community, creating a multidimensional understanding of authority construction.

This book also succeeds in depicting internal nuances within the Australian Muslim community, avoiding broad generalizations that often become weaknesses in studies about Muslim minorities. The detailed discussion on ethnic, sectarian, and generational dynamics in the construction of religious authority enriches our understanding of Muslim community heterogeneity in Western contexts.

Weaknesses and Criticism

Despite being rich with empirical data, this book lacks substantial comparative analysis with Muslim minority communities in other Western countries. Comparisons with European, North American, or New Zealand contexts would have enriched understanding of how local factors influence the construction of religious authority. As stated in the literature, religious authority is shaped not only by religious tradition but also by the legal, social, and political frameworks of the country where Muslim communities reside.[1]

The book tends to focus heavily on formal aspects of religious authority such as imams and Islamic organizations, with relatively less attention to informal forms of authority such as family influence and social networks in the transmission of religious knowledge. Yet, research shows that in diaspora contexts, the family often becomes the primary site of religious socialization, especially for second and third generations.[2]

Another significant limitation is the insufficient representation of women's voices in the analysis of religious authority. Although the author acknowledges the absence of women in organizations like ANIC, this book does not provide adequate exploration of how Muslim women might form and access religious authority through alternative channels such as women's study groups or social activism. Muslim women in the West often create alternative spaces to express religious authority outside formal male-dominated institutions.[3]

Additionally, there is minimal discussion about intergenerational dynamics in the construction of religious authority. Research on Muslim communities in Western countries shows that young Muslim

[1] Asif Mohiuddin, "Religious Authority in Islam: Resilient Patterns of Evolution From the Formative Period to Contemporary Times," in *Navigating Religious Authority in Muslim Societies* (Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland, 2023), 117–63, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-44825-6_4.
[2] Ishak M. Ghatas, "Muslim Diasporas: An Examination of the Issues of the Second and Third Generation Muslims in Europe," *Transformation* 40, no. 2 (2023): 156–68, https://doi.org/10.1177/02653788231161338.
[3] Jeanette S. Jouili, "Muslim Women's Religious and Social Activism in Western Europe," in *The Oxford Handbook of Islam and Women* (Oxford University Press, 2023), 503–18, https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190638771.013.17.

generations often challenge traditional religious authority by developing personalized Islam.[4] This book does not sufficiently explore how third-generation Australian Muslims might negotiate religious authority differently from first and second generations.

Book Contributions

The significant contribution of this book is its detailed portrayal of the process of localizing Islam in the context of secular-liberal society. Through empirical analysis, this book shows how the Australian Muslim community negotiates between loyalty to religious tradition and adaptation to the local socio-political context. This study enriches the literature on "European Islam" or "Western Islam" by adding the previously under-documented Australian dimension.

This book also provides an important methodological contribution by combining sociological and anthropological approaches in Islamic studies. The empirical approach used—combining interviews, surveys, and observation—offers a replicable model for contemporary Islamic studies in other locations.

Theoretically, this book expands the understanding of religious authority in minority contexts by demonstrating that authority is not only hierarchical or centralized but can also be networked, negotiated, and contested. This aligns with developments in contemporary religious authority theory that emphasize the fluid and contextual nature of authority in the digital and global era.

Conclusion and Suggestions for Future Research

Overall, this book provides a valuable contribution to understanding the dynamics of Islamic religious authority in the context of Muslim minority societies. Through rich empirical analysis, the book demonstrates how religious authority is constructed, debated, and transformed through complex interactions between religious traditions, socio-political contexts, and internal community dynamics.

For future research, several areas merit further exploration: First, comparative studies between Muslim religious authority in various diaspora contexts to understand how local and transnational factors interact. Second, more in-depth investigation into the role of women in shaping and negotiating religious authority outside formal institutions. Third, longitudinal analysis of changing perceptions and practices of religious authority across generations of Australian Muslims. Fourth, exploration of the impact of digital technology and globalization on the democratization of Islamic religious authority.

By addressing these limitations, future research will enrich our understanding of how religious authority continues to evolve in Muslim minority communities, and how local and global factors interact in shaping contemporary Islam in pluralistic societies. This book establishes a solid foundation upon which such future studies can build.

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