

## ON THE RENOVATION OF RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE: ANALYSIS OF CONCEPTS, AND INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL DISCIPLINES

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**Abstract:** This paper aims to clarify the meaning of ‘renovation of religious discourse’ through an analysis of the concept and some related concepts in general, and more specifically by defining the disciplines of this renovation and their importance in determining its meaning. The paper adopts the thesis that these disciplines play a pivotal role in determining the nature, meaning and possibilities of renovating religious discourse. To demonstrate this thesis, the paper distinguishes between internal disciplines and external disciplines. Internal disciplines lie within the religious text itself and in the hermeneutic circle between understanding parts of the text and understanding it as a whole, between understanding and pre-understanding, between the inside and the outside. In talking about external disciplines, the paper focuses mainly on the role of the ruling and/or hegemonic political and economic powers and authorities. The paper concludes that renovating religious discourse is a political and institutional issue rather than a purely religious one related to individuals, and that it is conditional on the state and (the reformation of) its political system, and the extent of its actual adoption of the concept of democracy, and the extent to which it protects freedoms, differences, and pluralism.

**Keywords:** Renovation in/of religious discourse; disciplines of renovation, ‘the hermeneutic circle’, religious reform, political reform.

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## Introduction

A distinction between the concepts of ‘religious discourse’ and ‘discourse of religion’ should be made, although religious discourse actually or supposedly seeks to identify itself with the discourse of religion, sometimes ignoring any distinction between them and claiming representation and conformity with it, as well as the exclusivity of this representation and the uniqueness of this conformity. The distinction between the two necessarily refers to the problematic distinction between religion and religiosity<sup>1</sup> or between ‘the first textual religion/Islam’ and ‘the later historical religion/Islam’.<sup>2</sup> The problematic feature of this distinction lies in the fact that religion is not determined ‘ultimately’ except through a certain religiosity, or through some interpretation and practice of its texts. Religious texts that include the discourse of religion are like any other text, they are similar to an orphan, and thus cannot alone determine their signification and meaning or the identity of those who adopt and use them, as Plato correctly states.<sup>3</sup> No religion seems to be able to exist only at the level of knowledge and practice, in isolation/independent from a religiosity or thought that contributes to defining its essence, foundations, principles, dimensions, uses, goals, or purposes. In this sense, religion is only a religion insofar as it is necessarily religiosity.

Despite the problematic character of the distinction between ‘religious discourse’ and ‘the discourse of religion’, there are several methodological and practical reasons/benefits that may justify maintaining and emphasizing this distinction.

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<sup>1</sup> For an argument against this duality, see, for example Ḥasan Aḥjij, “Mughāliḩat Thunā’iyyat al-Dīn/al-Tadayyun fi Daw’ Nazāriyyat al-Mumārāsa al-Mustalḩima min Falsafat Wittgenstein al-Muta’akhira” [“The religion/religiosity fallacy: In light of a theory of practice inspired by Wittgenstein’s later philosophy”], *Mominoun Without Borders*, 31 March 2015, accessed 14 June 2021, [shorturl.at/eET23](http://shorturl.at/eET23).

<sup>2</sup> See, for example Ṣādiq Jalāl al-‘Azm, “Islam and Secular Humanism,” in *Is Islam Secularizable? Challenging Political and Religious Taboos* (Berlin: Gerlach Press, 2014), 7-25.

<sup>3</sup> Plato wrote: “when they [speeches] have been once written down they are tumbled about anywhere among those who may or may not understand them, and know not to whom they should reply, to whom not: and, if they are maltreated or abused, they have no parent to protect them; and they cannot protect or defend themselves.” Plato, *The Dialogues of Plato. Vol. I, Phaedrus*, 3rd edition, trans. Benjamin Jowett (London: Oxford University Press, 1892), 275/485.

Firstly, a distinction allows for the possibility of preserving the holiness or sanctity of religion, the specificity/particularity of its texts or discourse, and differentiating it from the unholiness or non-sanctity of discourses based on it and which explain or interpret it. This specificity/particularity often takes the name of holiness, which in this context refers to the normative judgment represented in its entitlement to be glorified, venerated, and infallible from error, evil, and ugliness, on the one hand, and to its eternal and trans-historical continuity, on the other hand. There is a common assumption or belief among the ‘religious’ in the oneness of religion or its discourse, i.e. it does not change or alter, does not increase or decrease, does not deviate or diverge from the ‘orthodox, right way’. However, religious discourse is necessarily multiple, plural and variant, and without the theoretical and/or the practical possibility of such multiplicity, plurality and variation, there is no possibility or legitimacy to speak of any renovation of, or even in, religious discourse. Emphasizing the pluralism immanent in religiosity and religious discourses may legitimize plausible doubts around the concept of consensus considered as a source of Islamic *shari‘a*.<sup>4</sup>

Secondly, the distinction between the discourse of religion and religious discourse seems so ‘intuitive’ that it needs no consideration. However, highlighting this distinction is of great importance as long as there is a religious discourse that ignores its necessary differentiation from the discourse of religion, claiming that it is the discourse of religion itself and/or that it is the only discourse identical with it.

In this respect, the Foucauldian stress on the close link between discourse and power should be considered,<sup>5</sup> because this link appears particularly strong and important in religious discourses. Given that the discourse of religion has theoretical and practical authority over religious believers, the claim of the exclusive conformity of a religious

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<sup>4</sup> For more details on the theoretical and practical problematics associated with this concept, and some contemporary positions on it, see Ḥamdī Zwīb, “al-Ijmā‘ fī al-Fikr al-Gharbī al-Mu‘āṣir,” *Mominoun Without Borders*, March 6, 2017, accessed June 14, 2021, [shorturl.at/iyzVW](http://shorturl.at/iyzVW); “Tajdīd al-Nazar fī al-Ijmā‘ ‘Aṣlan min ‘Uṣūl al-Fiqh fī al-Fiqh al-Islāmī al-Ḥadīth,” *Mominoun Without Borders*, March 24, 2018, accessed June 14, 2021, [shorturl.at/ivOQ5](http://shorturl.at/ivOQ5).

<sup>5</sup> For more details on this link, see Joseph Rouse, “Power/Knowledge,” in Gary Gutting (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 92-114.

discourse with the discourse of religion itself involves, intentionally or unintentionally, a quest to possess that power, in the Weberian sense of the word, and to dominate this power.<sup>6</sup>

Thirdly, the aforementioned distinction allows for the renovation of religious discourse, without necessarily considering that renovation or novel religious discourse is a deviation from or contradiction with the fixed and unchanging religion. As previously mentioned, this distinction is a foundation for the possibility and legitimacy of the renovation of religious discourse, on the one hand, and the possibility and legitimacy of any renovation in it, on the other. Given the religious viewpoint that (the discourse of) religion is one, it should be emphasized that the oneness of religion does not mean its meanings are unilateral or one-sided. On the contrary, the religious texts are rich in potential meanings and could be the subject of multiple understandings, interpretations and applications that take different historical forms and contents of Muslim religiosity. No religiosity can completely exhaust religion, not only because the human nature of religiosity cannot encompass all meanings and possibilities in religious texts, but also because religiosity is always linked to special historical contexts that consciously and intentionally or unintentionally affect and have an impact on it.

### **Renovation of Religious Discourse or in Religious Discourse?**

To understand the (importance of the) distinction between the concepts of ‘renovation *in* discourse’ and ‘renovation *of* discourse’, it should be emphasized that discourse embodies an interdependent whole. While the renovation of religious discourse necessarily includes a renovation in that discourse, this does not necessarily lead to a renovation of the discourse as a whole. Renovation in the discourse may be limited to dealing with separate and partial issues that are not united by a single holistic vision, and such renovation does not lead to the production of a novel whole. In principle, it is not rare, in fact, or impossible, for renovation in discourse to result in

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<sup>6</sup> In contrast to the Gadamerian concept of authority free from any compulsion and based on voluntary recognition of it, the Weberian concept of power refers to domination or the imposition of the will of one party on one or more other parties. See Max Weber, *Basic Concepts in Sociology*, trans. H. P. Secher (New York: Citadel Press, 1962), 117-118; Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd edition, rev. and trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London/New York: Continuum, 2004), 278-285.

this discourse looking old or older rather than renovating its content, or to lead to the reproduction of an ancient discourse without great or actual novelty in content. It is possible that when renovation in discourse is selective and partial—that is, without renovating the discourse as a whole—this can lead to the production of an inconsistent discourse in which (some of) its parts, visions, foundations and ends are at odds. In such cases, what is renovated, added, modified, or suspended conflicts, to some degree, with (some of) what is kept and preserved, and with (some of) the ancient foundations of discourse and its ‘spirit’, so to speak. Renovation in discourse may be limited to a change in this or that religious judgment or fatwa, without addressing the foundations and the perspectives on which the ancient ruling is based. In such cases, renovation in the discourse does not lead to the production of a novel discourse, but rather leads, most likely, to the reproduction of an ancient one, with less coherence and harmony between its components.

In the present context, drawing a distinction between ‘the renovation of words’ and ‘the renovation of concepts’ is useful. The need to replace ancient words with new words is common. For example, the use of the word *al-nikāḥ* has become unacceptable to many, because its general meaning refers not only to marriage, but also to sex/sexual intercourse. There is, for example, *nikāḥ al-mahārīʿ*, i.e., incest/prohibited sexual intercourse between close relatives, and *nikāḥ al-yad*, i.e., hand sex/masturbation. Moreover, this appears clearly in the way that Mālikis and Ḥanafis define marriage. According to Malikis, marriage is “a fact in the contract, a metaphor for intercourse”, while Ḥanafis refer to marriage as “a fact in the intercourse, a metaphor for contract”. *Al-nikāḥ* denotes intercourse, the intercourse that a man has with a woman, and this denotation is literal and/or metaphorical. In this sense, *al-nikāḥ* and intercourse refer to a one-sided and unreciprocated act, with one active party (the man) and one passive party (the women), rather than a reciprocal act, as marriage and sex are supposed or ‘should’ be, ‘in principle’. For this reason and others, many people are reluctant to use the word *al-nikāḥ* in contemporary contexts due to its extreme masculinism and ‘crude’ sexual character. The word *al-ḡawāj* which refers, verbally and idiomatically, to two parties without a (clear) normative hierarchy between them, and without sex being necessarily the focal or axis of their relationship, is preferred. Even if the lexical and idiomatic

meaning of the word *nikāḥ* does not refer ‘originally’ and/or necessarily to ‘sexual intercourse’, the pragmatic and common meaning often includes that reference.

The replacement of the word *al-nikāḥ* with *al-zawāj* is meaningless, if the meaning is retained in the new word and/or in other associated words, such as *al-waḥ*, which refers to one-sided intercourse. This relates not only to words, but also to concepts and meanings organized in networks of interconnected elements that make up a systematic whole.

Renovation of the discourse does not occur when only a word or concept within this system is changed. It does not occur without changing the meanings of words, without changing other related words and concepts, and/or without a comprehensive, radical or major change in the perspective of that system or its normative and cognitive perspective foundations, principles and its purposes. For instance, the issues relevant to marriage are associated with the status of women and their legal, moral, and principled equality in general with men. These issues are closely related to the principle of equality between all human beings, away from concepts of slavery, servitude, and regardless of whether women are religious or not, Muslim or non-Muslim, white or black, Arab or non-Arab...etc.

The transition/shift from the word *al-nikāḥ* to another word, such as *al-zawāj*, should be accompanied by (comprehensive) conceptual changes in other relevant concepts, in order to achieve a partial, but fundamental and radical, renovation of religious discourse.

The renovation of a discourse is not just a renovation in the discourse, but a renovation of the discourse itself as a whole. It must be pointed out that distinguishing ‘renovation of religious discourse’ from ‘renovation in religious discourse’ and stressing that this renovation must be comprehensive and radical for genuine renovation, can raise many reservations. These fears are that a comprehensive and radical change may lead, consciously and intentionally or unconsciously and unintentionally, to abandoning ‘the constants of religion’. Such reservations should be taken into serious consideration, and their reasonableness and justifications should be discussed in detail, in principle, and on a case-by-case basis.

## **Renovating Religious Discourse between the Two Poles of Radical Difference and (quasi-) Total Imitation of Tradition**

Renovation may oscillate between two poles, and it should avoid being located at one of them, so that the discourse is truly renovated and/or religious. In the following, I will try to construct these two poles as Weberian ‘ideal types’<sup>7</sup>, without claiming the complete actual existence of either of them.

The first pole is represented in novel discourse that seems to differ radically and almost completely from other religious discourses, and from what appears to be the discourse of religion. Furthermore, this novel discourse is not concerned with proving it is based on religious texts, and by making a serious argument in favor of the novel or renovated discourse. While not taking other religious discourses, their objections, arguments, and counter-arguments, etc. into account, renovation at this pole does not seek to justify itself religiously, theoretically/cognitively and practically/morally and politically. Therefore, given its radical (quasi) complete difference, and its indifference towards justifying itself on reasonable arguments, it is common for novel discourse to appear ‘non-religious’ in the first place. Moreover, suspicions grow about the religiosity of this discourse when it is caused by external political and ideological pressures that adopt a negative image, not only of (all) religious discourses but also of the discourse or teachings of the religion itself. This type of discourse appears to be an attempt to ‘polish the religion’ and is sometimes directed at non-Muslims for political goals, with the purpose of changing and improving the distorted image of religion/Islam, etc. However, this discourse is not accepted by many because it neither presents nor attempts to present, anything that allows its claims to be taken seriously.

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<sup>7</sup> In explaining what an ideal type is, Max Weber wrote: “It is obtained by means of a one-sided accentuation of one or a number of viewpoints and through the synthesis of a great many diffuse and discrete individual phenomena (more present in one place, fewer in another, and occasionally completely absent) which are in conformity with one-sided accentuated viewpoints into an internally consistent mental image. In its conceptual purity, this image cannot be found anywhere in reality. It is a utopia, and the task of the historian then becomes that of establishing, in each individual case, how close reality is to it, or how distant from, that ideal image ....” Max Weber, “Objectivity in Social Science and Social Policy,” in Hans Henrik Brun and Sam Whimster (eds.), *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*, trans. Hans Henrik Brun (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), 125.

The second extreme pole that the renovation of religious discourse should avoid claims that the predecessors have left nothing for the successors: all we have to do is follow and imitate our predecessors, adopt their knowledge and teachings, reproduce and apply their ancient discourse itself, and follow its guidance in our contemporary world.

Not far from this pole, we find those whose vision of the renovation of religious discourse is limited to a renovation of some small details and formalities, with an excessive emphasis on the necessity of continuing (one of) the ancient religious discourses. Those who adopt this perspective often view any attempt to renovate with suspicion, as an explicit invitation to deviate from the ‘right path’ that is eternally predetermined by their great predecessors and ancestors.

In addition to these two poles, and partly regardless of them, the renovation of religious discourse can break excessively with the past by adopting a completely novel discourse, and claiming implicitly or explicitly that all others were mistaken in their understandings and interpretations of this discourse on a particular issue. This exaggeration is typical, for example, when people say that religious texts in general and/or the Qur’ān in particular, does not permit slavery or servitude, nor polygamy or ‘for the male, what is equal to the share of two females’ in inheritance, nor for a man to have the right to lightly beat his wife, etc. Most importantly, such radical renovation and its novel interpretation lack credibility because they implicitly claim the error of all previous Islamic understandings and interpretations. If the Islam presented by novel interpretations is different from the Islam of the Messenger, the Companions, the Followers, and the Followers of the Followers ... etc., and if all the aforementioned were wrong in their understanding of the sacred texts, then it will be difficult for most Muslims to see it as Islamic discourse.

### **Regarding the Disciplines or Limits of the Renovation of Religious Discourse**

It is essential to consider the disciplines for renovating religious discourse as they play a major role in determining the meaning and nature of renovation. The main task of these disciplines is to prevent religious renovation slipping into the realm of the two poles

mentioned: (1) in the first pole, a renovation is not considered religious; and (2) in the second pole, a renovation is religious, but does not include any genuine change. Against this background, it is argued that these disciplines or limits are the main determinant of the meaning or nature of the renovation of religious discourse. To this end, a distinction between internal and external disciplines or limits are also drawn.

### **1. Internal Disciplines for the Renovation of Religious Discourse**

Internal disciplines lie in the constitutive texts of religion, which carry a variety of potential meanings, and renovation should be based on the meanings present explicitly or implicitly in these texts. Inspired by the titles of two books by Umberto Eco—"The Open Work", "The Limits of Interpretations"<sup>8</sup>—it can be said that these texts are works that are, in principle, open to multiple and infinite interpretations, without this implying that every interpretation is correct, acceptable and plausible. There are 'limits' to interpretations imposed by the subject or text itself being interpreted. The renovation of religious text can move and search for its possibilities in the space that exists between the text's openness to an infinite hermeneutic pluralism, in principle, and the imposition of some limits to this pluralism.

As a written discourse, the text—religious or non-religious—does not present itself as an accomplished whole but requires the contribution of the reader to clarify, complete, and materialize its features, dimensions, and meanings.<sup>9</sup> In principle, it is always possible to (re)build a text, by (re)arranging its elements and changing the perspective concerning (some of) its priorities, values, foundations, principles, or objectives. The renovation of religious discourse means the (re)production of a novel construction from the same old elements, but in such a way that they acquire a novel meaning, or are seen with a novel and different vision, within the framework, or from a perspective of a novel whole.

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<sup>8</sup> Umberto Eco, *Les limites de l'interprétation*, trans. Myriem Bouzaher (Paris: Grasset & Fasquelle, 1992); *L'œuvre ouverte*, trans. Chantal Roux De Bézieux (Paris: Éd. du Seuil, 1965).

<sup>9</sup> Ricoeur wrote: "Si la signification objective est autre chose que l'intention subjective de l'auteur, elle peut être construite de multiples façons. Le problème de la compréhension." Paul Ricoeur, *Du texte à l'action. Essais d'herméneutique*, t. 2 (Paris: Éd. du Seuil, 1986), 199-201.

In the process of understanding or interpreting any text, there is a so-called hermeneutic circle that can take two basic forms: the dialectics between the whole/totality of the text and its constitutive parts, and the dialectics between understanding and pre-understanding. When we read a text, we do not add up partial meanings of words, sentences and paragraphs with one another in order to understand it as a whole, but rather have some anticipation, conjecture, or expectation of the whole text, in the process of understanding any of its parts. Moreover, understanding the whole text is achieved through understanding its parts, but understanding the parts is only reached through understanding that whole. When we gain some comprehensive understanding of the text, many changes occur in our understanding of its parts.

The hermeneutical circle could also be explained by the relationship between the process of our understanding the text and our pre-understanding in general. The reader does not come to the text without having a general pre-understanding of many of the words and ideas related to it. This pre-understanding directs our understanding of the text, and the process of our understanding of the text may enrich, modify, reinforce or correct our pre-understanding. This dialectical process (may) lead to a novel understanding that becomes a pre-understanding partly and relatively directing the subsequent processes of our understanding, and that enters into a dialectical relationship with it, producing a novel understanding that is partly and relatively different from the pre-understanding. The overall understanding may relate to a certain issue, such as marriage, or to a more general and comprehensive issue, such as the relationship between a man and a woman, or to an even more general and comprehensive issue, such as the relationship of a (Muslim) person with any other human being. All of these previous totalities are directly or indirectly related to other totalities, and they can exchange influence with them in the process of understanding. All of these totalities may be linked to a more comprehensive vision of 'the spirit of the text', its foundations, principles, goals, or purposes, on which it is built and at the same time contribute to its construction. According to al-Shāḥibī or Ibn 'Āshūr,<sup>10</sup> it is possible to

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<sup>10</sup> Ibrāhīm Ibn Mūsā Abū Ishāq al-Shāḥibī, *The Reconciliation of the Fundamentals of Islamic Law*, trans. Imran Ahsan Khan Nyazee (Reading: Garnet Publishing, 2011); Muḥammad al-Ṭāhir Ibn 'Āshūr, *Treatise on Maqāsid al-Shari'ah*, trans. Muḥammad

talk about ‘the purposes of Sharia’ as a basis for seeing parts of the religious text from a total and fundamental perspective. However, it should be stressed that the renovation of the religious/Islamic discourse should pay special attention to this holistic and comprehensive vision, so that it adopts some or all of its elements, such as justice, while (thinking of) adding novel holistic elements, such as (individual) freedoms, dignity, and the principled human or moral equality between all human beings, in particular.

The understanding of a religious text often encounters obstacles in the form of what appear as contradictions between its elements or meanings. The renovation of religious discourse requires understanding the text from a hermeneutical, not a deconstructive, perspective. The deconstructive reading assumes the text necessarily includes contradictions between its ideas or meanings. From a deconstructive/Derridean point of view, the most important deconstructive contradiction, in this regard, is between the declared intention of the author and (some of) the meanings of their text.<sup>11</sup> On the contrary, the hermeneutical interpretation is based on the assumption of the harmony of the different meanings of the text, and on the search for this harmony as much as possible.<sup>12</sup> Without such harmony, the totality of the text crumbles and its meanings disintegrate. In addition, this partly and relatively coherent totality of

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el-Tāhir el-Misāwī (London and Washington: The International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2006).

<sup>11</sup> Derrida presented his deconstructive view of the concept of ‘the text’ in more than one text. Among the most important of these Texts: Jacques Derrida, “La pharmacie de Platon,” in *La dissémination* (Paris: Éd. du Seuil, 1986), 71-72; *De la grammatologie* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1967), 227-230.

<sup>12</sup> This assumption has been held through almost all of hermeneutics, from the hermeneutics of the Enlightenment, with Georg-Friedrich Meier and Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, to the hermeneutics of Gadamer and Ricoeur, the most prominent in the second half of the twentieth century. It has appeared in various forms, but it has always been stressed that it is, or should be, immanent to all hermeneutics, and that, as a ‘principle of equity’, it is “the first principle of general hermeneutics”, “the spirit of all hermeneutics”. In the most important book of hermeneutics in the twentieth century, Gadamer speaks of this assumption or principle, as a “fore-conception of completeness” or a “fore-conception of perfect consistency.” Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 294. There is a detailed study of the principle of hermeneutic equity in Jean Greisch, “L’âme de l’herméneutique’: le principe d’équité,” in *Le cogito herménéutique. L’herméneutique philosophique et l’héritage cartésien* (Paris: Éd. du Vrin, 2000), 75–99.

meanings is necessary for understanding the parts of the religious text in general, and for the religious discourse to be not only a discourse, but also religious.

In the present context, it should be emphasized that the hermeneutic circle in question is, in principle, a descriptive one, speaking of what is, and not a normative one that (only) speaks of what ought to be. This circle is present in every reading and interpretation, since every reading or interpretation of the parts is necessarily and consciously or unconsciously based on a certain conception of a totality. The transition from the descriptive/non-normative meaning of the hermeneutic circle to the normative meaning occurs when we argue for or against a totality, and/or establish a normative hierarchy. There is no room for a complete resolution of the conflict or difference between these arguments and interpretations, and the proof of the complete and absolute validity of an argument at the expense of another argument. On this basis, what should prevail, in this regard, is the logic of probabilities and the methodology of convergence of evidence/index.<sup>13</sup>

## **2. Disciplines for Renovating Religious Discourse between the Inside and the Outside**

Religious discourse is not a spontaneous and automatic result of the religious text. It is a product of a positive interaction or dialectics between the text and its contents, the possibilities of its meanings, its construction and its limits, on the one hand, and its reader or interpreter, the conditions of their time, its horizons and possibilities...etc., on the other.

This means that the internal disciplines of renovation are intertwined and entangled with its external disciplines, and that their separation is only theoretical, partial and relative. Let us take the question of knowledge in order to clarify this overlap between the two. Contrary to the claims of those who believe there are 'scientific marvels in the Qur'ān'<sup>14</sup>, and who try to prove that the Qur'ān

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<sup>13</sup> Ricœur, *Du texte à l'action*, 201.

<sup>14</sup> There are tens or hundreds of books that attempt to prove and demonstrate that the Qur'ān contains scientific miracles and marvels. Among these is *Scientific Miracles in the Qur'an and Sunnah*, written by Prof. Dr. 'Abd Allah b. 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Muṣliḥ and Dr. 'Abd al-Jawād al-Sāwī. Ten Ph.D. holders also participated in this work as well as Shaykh 'Abd al-Majīd al-Zindānī. This book is distinguished from most others dealing with the same subject in that it talks about the scientific miracles in

includes some or all contemporary proven scientific knowledge, the Qur'ān does not include such knowledge, and this should not be expected or 'required' of it. Even if it includes some of this knowledge, the reader or interpreter of the Qur'ān is unable to extract it directly from this reading, as they need to be previously aware of it. For example, regardless of whether or not the Qur'ān includes the claim that the Earth is round and/or revolves around the sun, Muslims in general in the Middle Ages were unable to discover this issue or to know it through their reading of the Qur'ān or other religious texts. It follows that those who believe the Qur'ān includes such knowledge had to wait for subsequent scientific discoveries to possess that knowledge.<sup>15</sup>

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the Qur'ān and the Sunnah together and was authored by a relatively large number of those holding the highest academic degrees. In addition, it states being "University Teaching Curriculum" issued by the Commission International for Scientific Miracles in the Qur'ān and Sunnah, Jeddah, 1429 AH. The book adopts the thesis of the existence of scientific miracles in the Qur'ān and Sunnah in "embryology and anatomy", "biology", "animal world", "meteorology and astronomy," "earth sciences," "sea sciences," "preventive medicine", "foods, drinks, and banned behaviors" and "nutrition and medication."

<sup>15</sup> The biggest problem in this regard may lie in the insistence of some religious people that the Qur'ān should be relied on in order to oppose or object the proven scientific knowledge of their time. Among them we find those who insist, for example, that the earth is flat and not spherical, and that the sun revolves around the earth, and not the other way around. Muḥammad b. Ṣāliḥ al-'Uthaymīn, for example, sometimes suspends judgment on the issue of the Earth's rotation around the sun, because he does not find anything in the Qur'ān and Sunna to prove it (see Liqā' (34 min 70) Kūrawiyyat al-Ard wa-Dawarānihā – al-Ṣāliḥ Ibn al-'Uthaymīn - Mashrū' Kibar al-'Ulama', [Meeting (34 of 70) The Sphericity of the Earth and its Rotation - Sheikh Ibn 'Uthaymīn - The Senior Scholars Project], *Sheikh Muhammad bin Salih al-Uthaymeen's YouTube website*, September 5, 2016, accessed June 14, 2021, [shorturl.at/ghwG1](http://shorturl.at/ghwG1)). Notwithstanding, he asserts, at another time, the spherical shape of the Earth and the rotation of the sun around it, based on the Qur'ān. See the text and the audio recording in: "Silsilat Fatāwā Nūr 'alā al-Darb, al-Sharḥ Raqam 90" ["Noor on the Path Fatwas Series, Condition No. 90"], *the official website of Sheikh Muhammad bin Salih al-Uthaymin*, accessed June 14, 2021, [shorturl.at/xGHO4](http://shorturl.at/xGHO4). The same can be said of Ibn Bāz, who declared that the earth does not revolve around the sun, and went further when issuing a fatwa stressing that those who say the sun does not move are infidels, because in this statement there is a violation of what is expressly stated in the Qur'ān. He issued a fatwa to kill anyone/any Muslim who does not repent after offering him to do so, and for his money at that time to be "a booty for the Muslims house of money." See 'Abd al-'Azīz bin Bāz, *al-Adilla al-Naqliyya wa al-Hissiyya 'alā Imkān al-Su'ūd ilā al-Kawākib wa*

This example shows that the supposed knowledge contained within religious discourses is limited to the scientific knowledge prevalent at the time. Non-specialists who are trying to produce or renovate religious discourse are not expected to provide scientific knowledge in astronomy and medicine, for example, but they are expected to adhere to the limits of their knowledge, and adjust their interpretations and judgments to that knowledge, away from the desire to rush to assert the existence of Islamic economics<sup>16</sup>, for example. The religious person may include a vision of the necessity of modesty in clothing in their religious discourse, but should avoid the ease of linking the phenomenon of the ‘harassment of women’ to what they consider the indecency of their clothes. Although this causal link is, for several reasons, dominant and desired by many religious people,<sup>17</sup> such knowledge and assertion should be based on

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*‘alā Jarayan al-Shams wa al-Qamar wa Sukun al-Arḍ*, 2nd edition (Riyadh: Maktabat al-Riyaḍ al-Ḥadītha, 1982), 23. It is necessary to point out that the phenomenon of denying the sphericity of the Earth or its rotation around the sun is present in most and probably all countries of the world, but there is an important peculiarity in the case of *Liqa’* (34 min 70) Kūrawiyyat al-Arḍ wa Dawarānihā – al-Ṣāliḥ bin al-‘Uthaymīn and Ibn Bāz. These two sheikhs held important official, academic, religious and institutional positions in their country, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Ibn Bāz was a Saudi judge and jurist, the director of the Islamic University in Medina, the Grand Muftī of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the president of the Saudi Council of Senior Scholars, the president of the Department of Scholarly Research and *Iftā’*, the head of the founding council of the Muslim World League, and the president of the Islamic *Fiqh* Council, and he received the King Faisal Prize for Service to Islam in 1982 (in the same year the second edition of the book mentioned, which included the fatwa, was issued). In addition, the opinions of such sheikhs are sometimes associated with excommunicating those who disagree with them. This is what Ibn Bāz did, as mentioned. This puts the lives of their opponents or the people who hold different opinions from theirs in real danger. Nevertheless, there are those who believe that such sheikhs are the renovators of this age!

<sup>16</sup> Concerning the arguments for an Islamic economics, see “Taṭawwur ‘Ilm al-Iqtisād al-Islāmī wa Dawr Markaz Abḥath al-Iqtisād al-Islāmī fih,” a paper submitted by the Markaz Abḥath al-Iqtisād al-Islāmī at King Abdulaziz University, 1996. For a critical view of Islamic economics, see: Muḥammad ‘Amīr Nāshir al-Nī‘am, “(al-Iqtisād al-Islāmī) Mutashbbi‘an bimā lam Yu‘ī,” *Syria TV website*, May 29, 2020, accessed June 14, [shorturl.at/nov15](http://shorturl.at/nov15).

<sup>17</sup> (Sheikh) ‘Abd-Allah Rushdī is one of the most prominent religious/Islamic figures who find it easy to make this causal link between what women wear and their exposure to harassment. He sees woman who wear ‘obscene outfits’ as “partners in the crime” and that “it is not normal for a girl to go out in sleepwear

specialized studies in sociology and psychology, for instance. These studies may show that harassment is more common in conservative environments than in non-conservative environments, and occurs equally to those dressed modestly and immodestly.<sup>18</sup>

The teachings included in the texts of religion, in terms of what is *ḥarām* (banned), *ḥalāl* (allowed), or permitted, are limited, leaving the widest scope for what has been termed the area of legislative void or general interests.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, most of what can be found in religious texts concerning these issues and interests are directives and general values that leave much space for deliberation, disagreement and diligence in opinion and the implementation of reason and free thought based on the general values mentioned while taking into account the interests of people and the possibilities and necessities of

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clothes and then complain of harassment [...]” See “‘Abd-Allah Rushdī Yuthīr Jadalan ḥawl Ṣilat Malābis al-Mar’at bi al-Taḥarrush al-Jinsī fī Miṣr [Abdullah Rushdī raises controversy over the link between “women’s clothing” and sexual harassment in Egypt,]” *BBC News Arabic*, July 7, 2021, accessed June 14, 2021, [shorturl.at/blqAK](https://www.bbc.com/news/arabic-58111111). Intentionally or unintentionally, it is obvious that Rushdī is busy with how to ‘silence’ the victims of harassment (those who dress inappropriately from his point of view), by describing the harassment as normal, and the victims complaints of harassment as abnormal. The question of “How to Silence a Victim?” is the title of a chapter in a book dealing with this issue, see: Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey, *She Said: Breaking the Sexual Harassment Story That Helped Ignite a Movement* (New York: Penguin Press, 2019), 41-66.

<sup>18</sup> The testimonies of victims from various studies show that most, or almost all, women in Egypt are subject to sexual harassment, meaning that harassment (can) happen to women in Egypt, where he resides, regardless of whether they are wearing “sleepwear clothes” or not. For more statistics and details on this topic, see: Neil Sadler, “Myths, Masterplots and Sexual Harassment,” *The Journal of North African Studies* 24, no. 2 (2019), 247-270. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629387.2017.1419872>; Susana Galan, “Action-Oriented Responses to Sexual Harassment in Egypt: The Cases of HarassMap and WenDo,” *Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies* 13, no. 1 (March 2017), 154-167. <https://doi.org/10.1215/15525864-3728767>; Nicole Sunday Grove, “The Cartographic Ambiguities of HarassMap: Crowdmapping Security and Sexual Violence in Egypt,” *Security Dialogue* 45, no. 4 (August 2015), 345-364.

<sup>19</sup> There are many texts on the ‘zone of legislative emptiness’, and the most recent, comprehensive and important is: Haidar Hobu-Allah, *Shumul al-Shari’a: Buḥuth fī Mādīyyat al-Marj’iyya al-Qānūniyya bayn al-‘Aql wa al-Wahy* (Beirut: Dār Rawāfīd, 2018). It can be argued that it is not uncommon for such interests to be so constrained in most religious discourses and approaches that the empty area becomes totally full.

reality. Therefore, religious discourse can swing and oscillate between two main attitudes toward this spacious area and interests.

On the one hand, religious discourse may seek to fill up this void area with firm judgments that include detailed criteria for what people should (not) do in this area. Thus, religious discourse works to expand and extend religion, to include all the details and dimensions of human life, it would appear. For example, there is talk of Islamic physics, Islamic economics, and Islamic sociology, or that the political system in the state should be in this Islamic form or that Islamic content ...etc. Accordingly, through such renovation of religious discourse, everything belongs to the circle of *ḥalāl* and *ḥarām*, to one degree or another; because religion, represented by religious discourse, provides us, directly or indirectly, with rulings that show its detailed and decisive vision, regarding all matters of our world.

On the other hand, the renovation of religious discourse may respect the limits that religion has set for itself, maintaining the area of legislative void, while confining itself only to instructing people in 'worldly matters' by introducing some general religious values, goals, or purposes, without imposing a specific religious obligation they must adhere to or follow in relation to these matters. This trend emphasizes the aforementioned distinction between discourse of religion and religious discourse, and the non-sanctity of religious discourse, in general, and in the area of the legislative void, in particular. This is because this discourse is just an opinion that can be taken into account, thought about, and appreciated, without transforming it into an opinion or ruling in the religion itself, and filling the area of the legislative void with human legislation and judgments with mandatory religious, divine, sacred authority.

### **3. External Disciplines of the Renovation of Religious Discourse**

The consideration of the possibility of renovating religious discourse, and the necessity of this renovation, does not stem from a curiosity in finding new meanings in religious texts, and the practice of interpretation without a purpose and a need. Renovation is generally related to the belief that dominant religious discourses are outdated and are no longer commensurate with present facts, and with the values and interests of Muslim people. Based on this belief, doubts grow as to the consistency of these religious discourses with

some perspective on the values of religion and the meanings of its texts. Although the renovation of religious discourse necessarily requires the de-sanctification of past or current religious discourses, it does not require the demonization, belittling and devaluing of all other religious discourses. Any difference, even radical and comprehensive, from other religious discourses, should consider that such discourses are closely related to their era and its conditions, needs, horizons, values, questions, and cognitive, moral and political capabilities. Hence, the renovation of religious discourse should be more preoccupied with producing new religious discourse, rather than arguing against or remaking false ancient religious discourses produced by good or unrighteous predecessors.

It is not rare for religious discourse to appear incapable of, and an obstacle to, renovation, despite the urgent need for such renovation. In this respect, the responsibility for this incapability should not be exaggerated. In fact, the renovation of religious discourse is not subject to the will of those able to do so. Rather, it is subject to the will of the dominant political forces that control, directly or indirectly, the possibilities of that renovation, and direct it to what they see as consistent with their interests and values in hegemony and control of the state and society.

The history of Muslims is replete with examples of the decisive role of dominant political forces in the processes of renovation in/of religious discourse. If we take the issue of slavery, for example, we find that this phenomenon remained acceptable and permissible, in theory and in practice, for many centuries, during which it was not questioned, criticized or doubted.<sup>20</sup> The prohibition of slavery began in the Arab and Islamic world in general in the second half of the twentieth century.<sup>21</sup> In 1981, Mauritania was the last country, in the (Arab and Islamic) world, to officially abolish slavery, despite the fact that the French had “prohibited slavery there in 1905 when they occupied it”.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, it seems it is still practiced in Mauritania,

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<sup>20</sup> For multiple perspectives and a historical view of the issue of slavery in the Islamic world(s), see Mary Ann Fay (ed.), *Slavery in the Islamic World: Its Characteristics and Commonality* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

<sup>21</sup> Tunisia can be specifically excluded because it was a pioneer in the prohibition of slavery in the (Arab and Islamic) world, with its decision to abolish slavery issued on January 23, 1846.

<sup>22</sup> Muḥammad Ibrāhīm Ibdāḥ, *Asyād al-Riq: Ḥaqā'iq bayn al-Talfiq wa-al-Tawthiq* (‘Ammān: Dār al-Jinān, 2016), 276.

to one degree or another, to this day.<sup>23</sup> In most cases, the decision to abolish slavery was not the result of the (mere) interaction of Muslims with their sacred texts. Nor did these decisions come from the (mere) self-awareness of Muslims or the forces they are governed by in terms of the inhumanity of the practice of slavery, and it being in contradiction to the most basic principles of morality in the contemporary world. Rather, they were, to a large degree, the result of international pressure, to which ruling authorities found it necessary to submit. The belief prevails among (most) contemporary Muslims that slavery contradicts the spirit of Islam, and that its abolition is fully consistent with this spirit, despite the fact that this abolition was often not strongly or basically related to how consistent the practice is with the alleged or actual spirit in any way.<sup>24</sup>

The religious/political reforms that have been taking place in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in the last few years provide another example of the decisive role that dominant political forces can play in the renovation in/of religious discourse. This renovation became suddenly “one of the priorities of the political authority in the Kingdom”<sup>25</sup>, and the Kingdom declared itself exemplary in the renovation of religious discourse, combating extremism and spreading moderation.<sup>26</sup> Much of what was forbidden in the religious discourse previously supported by politics, became religiously and politically permissible, allowable and even promoted or encouraged. For example, a partial and radical change has occurred in the religious and political discourse that prohibited women from driving cars and visiting cinemas, mixed concerts and sport stadiums. Once novel directives were issued by the ruling political authority, most ‘religious men/clergy’ turned on themselves, issuing *fatwas* that assert the

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<sup>23</sup> Cf. Katherine Ann Wiley, *Work, Social Status, and Gender in Post-Slavery Mauritania* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018), 6.

<sup>24</sup> Murray Gordon, *Slavery in the Arab World* (New York: New Amsterdam Books, 1989), 8.

<sup>25</sup> This is as stated by Abd al-Laṭīf bin ‘Abd al-‘Azīz Āl al-Sheikh, see “Wazīr al-Islāmiyyat: Tajdīd al-Khiṭāb al-Dīnī min Awlawiyyāt al-Sa‘ūdiyya [The Minister of Islamic: Renewing religious discourse is a priority for Saudi Arabia,]” *al-Watan*, January 28, 2020, accessed June 14, 2021, [shorturl.at/bcovL](https://shorturl.at/bcovL).

<sup>26</sup> This was confirmed by the Secretary-General of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, Dr. Yūsif bin Aḥmad al-‘Uthaymīn, “al-Duktūr al-‘Uthaymīn: al-Mamlaka Itakhadhat Khutuwāt Jarī’a wa Sannat Siyāsāt Hāzima fī al-Taṣādī li-Khiṭāb al-Taṭaruf,” Saudi Press Agency, March 4, 2021, accessed June 14, 2021, [shorturl.at/bcovL](https://shorturl.at/bcovL).

religious legitimacy and legality of these changes and their complete consistency with ‘true religion’ and/or with the ‘desire of society’. Until then they were used to say the exact opposite or otherwise.<sup>27</sup> In this previous opposition they relied on religious texts and discourse in general, and supposed medical and scientific information, to justify the prohibition or impermissibility of women drivers, for example.<sup>28</sup>

A brief study or examination of the history of the Islamicate world(s) shows that the clergy were more often ruled over than they were rulers, occupying the space left to them by political authorities, who would not hesitate to suppress, imprison and kill them if they found their ideas and teachings contradictory to their own interests and directives/teachings.<sup>29</sup> In the contemporary Islamicate world(s), there is an ‘official Islam’ that is supported or promoted by the ruling political authority, and is completely and directly or partially and indirectly, subject to it. Recent ‘renovation in/of religious discourse’ in Saudi Arabia illustrates that even when there is an alliance between politicians and religious leaders, the final and most important word is given to politicians. This alliance also appears in the central role of political authorities in spreading Salafism/Wahhabism among

<sup>27</sup> This includes many sheikhs/clergies, the Council of Senior Scholars, the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia, ‘Abd al-‘Azīz Āl al-Sheikh, the current Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia Muḥammad bin Salmān ‘Āl Su‘ūd etc. See: ‘Abd-al-Raḥmān Abū al-‘Ilā, “Qiyādat al-Mar’a Lil-Sayyāra bi-al-Su‘ūdiyya.. hīna Yusbiḥu al-Ḥarām Ḥalālan,” *al Jaʿeera Net*, September 27, 2017, accessed June 14, 2021, shorturl.at/hntF9.

<sup>28</sup> Saudi Sheikh Ṣāleḥ bin Sa’d al-Lḥaydān (a member of the Union of Arab Historians, a member of the International Psychiatric Association, and a legal advisor in the Saudi Ministry of Justice), insisted that women driving cars negatively affects their ovaries, pelvis and their ability to give birth, although he admitted that his opinion is not based on any scientific research. He even demanded from those who oppose him to prove that it does not have the aforementioned effect! See “Barnāmij Yā-halā?” *YouTube*, September 29, 2013, accessed June 14, 2021, shorturl.at/oBN34.

<sup>29</sup> The relationship between clergy and politicians in power in Arab and Islamic history is complex and multidimensional. It may be said, on one hand, that politicians have almost always been in a stronger position than the clergy, and are able to, relatively, control their actions and, when necessary, to shut them up. Islamic history has not witnessed clerics accessing power (in the manner of the *vilāyat-i faqīh* currently in Iran) except in rare cases. On the other hand, the relationship of political power with clerics ranged from inclusion to exclusion, according to the strength and weakness of the state and multiple factors. For more on this, see chapters five and six of Jean-Philippe Platteau, *Islam Instrumentalized: Religion and Politics in Historical Perspective* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 159-263.

contemporary Muslims in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and in various countries of the Islamicate and non-Islamicate world(s). To understand the extent of this role, we can apply the singular causal imputation approach, as formulated by Max Weber and Raymond Aron.<sup>30</sup> In this we imagine, in the first stage, that the Wahhabi mission did not receive any support from the Saudi state. In the second stage, we attempt to determine the result of this absence of support. We then compare these potential results with the actual result of the support received. It should be noted that talk about the renovation of religious discourse usually targets, initially, the dominant and prevalent religious discourse, without denying the existence of other discourses that involve real renovation, to one degree or another, but do not have the political and economic support necessary for their dissemination and success.

In fact, the Arab or Islamicate world(s) has renovating individuals, for example, Malik bin Nabi, Fadl Rahman Malik, and Mahmoud Muhammad Taha, and thus does not lack innovative and renovating discourses. However, given that such discourses are often not adopted by the state and its legal, educational and media institutions...etc., it is necessary to stress that a consideration of the renovation of Islamic discourse should focus on prevalent and dominant discourse(s). Even when a state adopts a renovated religious discourse regarding, for example, the necessity to respect 'the other' and the virtue of tolerance among human beings, this discourse seems to lack credibility due to a lack in confidence in the tyrannical political regimes that claim to adopt it or the belief that this discourse is merely political propaganda with other aims. How can one believe that a political system allows a certain freedom while simultaneously arresting those who defend that freedom? How can one believe a regime seeks to spread the value of tolerance, when it does not tolerate any opposition to it? On this basis, it can be said that (most of) the dominant religious discourses in the Arab and Islamicate world(s) oscillate between an official discourse that is actually and practically anti-renovation, and an institutional and societal discourse that is accepted by the state and its tyrannical ruling

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<sup>30</sup> Cf. Max Weber, *Essais sur la théorie de la science*, trans. Julien Freud (Paris: Éd. du Plon, 1965), 215-323; Raymond Aron, *Introduction à la philosophie de l'histoire. Essai sur les limites de l'objectivité historique* (1938), 2nd edition, rev. Sylvie Mesure (Paris: Éd. du Gallimard, 1986), 195-330.

authorities, to one degree or another, and an Islamist discourse that is, par excellence, hostile to renovation in/of religious discourse and to the existing political system, at the same time.

The enormous political influence in the prevailing religious discourse, and in its actual or alleged renovating processes, make it a political issue par excellence, without denying that it is a religious issue. The renovation of Islamic discourse requires that it adapts to the enormous changes that have occurred since its birth. Islam was born in a tribal environment and then integrated into and adapted to the world of empires—where the empire has no borders, the ruler is a sultan, and the state/empire is named after him or his family or tribe. The current era is characterized by the existence of the nation-state with borders and sovereignty, with the possibility of being related to the concept of the homeland, and the related concepts of citizenship, the rule of law, (individual) freedoms and democracy, etc. Without Islamic religious discourse adopting these concepts, theoretically and practically, and abandoning the concepts of ‘the abode of Islam/peace’, ‘the abode of unbelief/ war’, ‘protected people/ *ahl al-dhimma*’, and similar or related concepts, ‘Islam’ will probably remain, partially and relatively, a vehicle for tyrannical forces. ‘Islam’ will also be one of the justifications for tyranny and injustice practiced against Muslims in ‘Islamicate countries’. Moreover, religious discourse will remain alienated from its world, striving to turn back the clock and return the present and Muslims to the past, instead of showing the extent to which that past includes progressive elements that allow Islam and contemporary Muslims to coexist with the requirements of the present and with the foreseeable and unknown future.

The relationship of the Islamic religious institution with the state and its institutions and political authorities seems very complex and problematic, particularly when considering that Islamic religion, according to its general and popular understanding, does not include a central religious authority like the papal authority in Catholic Christianity. Against this background, the following questions can be posed: To what extent should the state interfere in religious affairs in general, and in the process of renewing religious discourse in particular? Does it make sense to talk about an official religion/Islam in the state (without it necessarily being the religion of the state)? The historical and contemporary reality shows the dominance/hegemony of ruling authorities, their institutions and forces, over religious

affairs, and that the process of religious renovation is often subject to that hegemony. From this perspective, it seems there is no (great) possibility of any renovation of/in religious discourse without the existence of political and economic forces and interests that embrace this renovation and strongly support it. It is difficult to imagine the possibility of a (positive) renovation of religious discourse under the rule of (non-democratic) forces whose (actual or imagined) interests are in conflict with that renovation, in the context of the absence of 'the state of citizenship and the law' and associated concepts and facts.

In a nutshell, it seems that the positive renovation of religious discourse is conditional, on the one hand, on it seeking adaptation and positive interaction with contemporary real-world developments represented primarily in the nation-state and cognitive, moral and political changes/developments in general, and on the other, on the extent of compatibility between (seeking to achieve) this renovation and the orientations of the political and economic forces and their interests.

### **The Paradox of Anticipating the Results of Renovation and the Possibilities of Dealing with this Paradox**

The debate over the renovation of religious discourse sometimes includes a paradox that should be taken very seriously. It lies in the fact that talking about the renovation of religious discourse usually anticipates the actual occurrence of that renovation and its possible or potential results by determining (almost) all, and even the details, of those results/outcomes. It is not uncommon to say that the renovation of religious discourse should lead to the adoption or non-adoption of this or that value and to (in-) consistency with this legal, moral, or political system or that. This anticipation represents a paradox, because it empties the renovating process of its content, and actually makes it not conducive to renovation, as much as it adopts a renovation imposed on it from 'outside', its features and contents pre-established by other parties. In such cases, this process resembles the directive of Jamal Pasha al-Saffah' in the play *al-Ghoul* by Mamdouh Adwan, concerning one of the detained persons in his prisons: "they should judge him and then execute him".<sup>31</sup> This is similar to the

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<sup>31</sup> Mamdūh 'Idwān, *al-Ghūl* (Damascus: Manshūrāt Ittihād al-Kutāb al-‘Arab, 1996), 103.

request from those who seek to contribute to the renovation of religious discourse to carry out this process, and then, “at the end of it,” adopt a (religious) discourse, prepared in advance, regardless of what the process may lead to.

Imposing renovation with this mechanism risks it losing credibility and acceptance among large segments of those religiously concerned/Muslims, because they can see that it is coercion from outside the duality of religion and religiosity, rather than being as a result of it. However, the aforementioned coercion can be justified, at least in part, by saying that leaving the matter of religion to religious institutions and actors, and not intervening in the process of renovation, may or will likely lead to the continuation of the old religious discourse, with or without ‘cosmetic surgery’ or formalistic change to it, or to the production of a new religious discourse, to one degree or another, on a par with the old discourse, or perhaps worse than it, from a renovation perspective. The new discourse is not necessarily better than the old one, and the change does not mean development or evolution, nor does it always lead to progress.

As is the case of the renovation of religious discourse in general, this renovation may oscillate between two main poles. On the one hand, there is renovation that stems from the desire and will of (some) Muslims, institutions and individuals, in which Muslims decide the convenient/appropriate form and content of their religious discourse. Whether this is a new and renewed religious discourse, seen as keeping pace with the developments of the time and interacting with them in a positive and balanced way, or an old religious discourse that is adhered to despite its outdated content and inconsistency, from the point of view of many, with the developments of contemporary reality. On the other hand, there is renovation imposed on (most) Muslims from outside by an external (political) authority that determines the nature and content of renovation, its basic contents, and maybe even its form and details.

Each of the poles mentioned has its advantages and disadvantages, and the ‘most appropriate solution’ may be, in most cases at least, to combine these two poles and reconcile them in a way that makes their contradiction a complementarity, without each one being excluded by the other. Possible complementarity is based on the thesis that the ‘desired’ renovation of religious discourse cannot take place without being preceded, or at least accompanied by, a

positive political change in the Islamicate state, its institutions and its interaction with its citizens. This change includes the establishment of ‘a state of citizenship and law’, and the building of a democratic political system that adopts that state and its principles and values. Moreover, it works to grant the largest possible number of freedoms to all individuals, communities and civil institutions that emerge from it within the framework of respecting the principles of citizenship and democracy, including justice, human rights and equality among all citizens. Such a state can make a significant contribution to stimulating the processes of the renovation of religious discourse and to directing it, in general and indirectly, through its various institutions: educational, media, legislation, laws etc. On the other hand, a free and open public sphere may allow everyone concerned and/or affected by the matter to contribute, as much as possible and willingly/voluntarily, to the processes of renovating religious discourse, and to the open discussion in the public sphere of all issues related to religious and other public affairs. These processes, and that discussion, should be conditioned on their respect for the fundamental freedoms of each individual, away from pressures and attempts to impose religious or non-religious guardianship by any other party, and they should be also conditioned or controlled by principles of citizenship and just laws that are based on moral and legal equality of all individuals.

### **Concluding Remarks**

To conclude, the thesis of the ‘proposed solution’ can be condensed into the following six intertwined and complementary points.

*Firstly*, the unfeasibility or limitation of the thesis that states that reform or renovation of religious discourse is the possible and/or necessary way or condition to achieve political reform that seeks democracy should be stressed.<sup>32</sup> Religious discourse should not be held (mainly) responsible for situations that have been produced and/or worked on by internal and external, political and economic forces and interests. Political and economic reform is a condition of religious reform or renovation, not the other way around. At best, it is

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<sup>32</sup> I have previously discussed this issue, or ‘illusion’, in Housamedden Darwīsh, “‘Islam is the Problem’: in the Delusion of ‘the Priority of Religious Reform,’” *Qalamūn Magazine* 11 (March 2020), 379-389.

possible to imagine the possibility of parallel and complementary reforms in the three areas mentioned.

*Secondly*, it is necessary to recognize and/or highlight that it is unlikely for any reform or renovation of religious discourse to happen within the framework of an authoritarian regime that is practically anti-democratic in its principles, freedoms and values, and which seek to repress any theoretical or practical orientation towards it. Relying on tyranny/despotism in the production of the discourse/reality of freedom, equality and justice seems contradictory in theory, and unjustified in practice, according to modern and contemporary Islamic and Arab history. Even those cases that may be considered, partially and relatively, as exceptions, such as Turkey and Tunisia, have their drawbacks and, by being exceptions, prove the 'rule' rather than deny it.

*Thirdly*, it is worth noting that the renovation of religious discourse is not a merely religious issue related to individuals. It is rather a political and institutional issue related to the state, its institutions, its political system and its orientations more than to religion and religiosity, in terms of texts, beliefs and practices. There are a (large) number of 'individual' religious discourses that renovate and call for renovation, but their individuality, i.e., emanating from individuals and not institutions (the state), makes their presence and influence necessarily limited. Speaking of renovation does not merely aim to produce a new religious discourse, but rather aims specifically and precisely to produce a new religious discourse with an important and effective presence and influence.

*Fourthly*, proceeding from the close, multi-dimensional relationships between the renovation of religious discourse and the state, the issue of the renovation of Islamic discourse is no longer related to Islamic discourse in general (or only), but it is more related to Islamic discourse in each country separately. The (attempt to renovate) religious discourse should take the concrete reality of the state in which it takes place into consideration, and from this comes the reasonableness/plausibility of talk about Malaysian Islam, Saudi Islam, Turkish Islam or Islamic discourse. Taking the specifics or particularities of the situation in each country separately does not mean atomizing Islam, dismembering it, and negating or canceling any common denominators or close relationships between them. Rather, it means that an agreement on the basics of belief necessarily

accompanies great differences in interpretation and application, according to the different conditions, knowledge, perspectives, and peculiarities of Muslims in each individual country. Any general modernization/renovation of religious/Islamic discourse that does not consider these differences, and/or does not make room for them, would 'probably' fall short of fulfilling its 'desired' role<sup>33</sup>.

The four aspects mentioned above underline the meanings of the renovation of religious discourse, and the close connection of these meanings, or renovation, with its internal and external disciplines. The hermeneutic circle is the cornerstone in this regard. Based on this concept, one should not be limited to talking about the nature of religious texts, their contents, the possibilities of their meanings and the interpretations of those meanings. Rather, one should also, and in the first place, focus on the innovating party, its values and interests, and on the textual/intellectual and value as a whole that it builds, upon which its understanding and interpretations are built, and the political and economic interests and forces that support it, promote it, and serve it.

*Fifthly*, renovation means originality/authenticity, not fundamentalism. Originality/authenticity should include a novelty that is compatible with the present and interacts positively with modernity and its potential prospects, not a fundamentalism that seeks to go back and revive an old/ancient origin. The originality/authenticity of renovation requires that it does not come about via authority but by free conviction and voluntary recognition, and not to be an authoritarian authority trying to impose its will on other parties, because it does not see itself as a mere party, but rather the party to which others must voluntarily/compulsorily adhere.

On the *sixth* and final point, the centerpiece of any renovation of religious/Islamic discourse, and its most important and decisive basis, are the moral and political issues related to the relationship with 'the other'. This other, and difference to it, can take numerous and varied forms and contents. The central question in this regard is: To what extent does this renovation include a principled and explicit acceptance of this other, and an acknowledgment of human equality

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<sup>33</sup> It is necessary to stress that this paper focuses on the renovation of Islamic discourse in Arab and Islamicate countries. In order to understand the renovation of this discourse in other situation, the specifics of those contexts must be taken into account.

with it, in the moral sense of equality? Renovation is not related (in the first place) to beliefs or acts of worship such as prayer and fasting, as much as is related to moral and practical issues. For sure, there is a close bond between the two. However, the most central, decisive and important subject that renovation should deal with and be based on is principled moral and human equality, between the religious and the non-religious, between the believer and the non-believer, between a Muslim and a non-Muslim, between people belonging to different Islamic sects or denominations, between men and women, between Arab and non-Arab, between the rich and the poor, between the ruler and the ruled, between the left and the right and between the ordinary people and the elites etc. This subject matter is the primary criterion by which renovation can be evaluated and judged.

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