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April 20, 2011

Muslim Televangelists and the Construction of Religious Authority in the Modern World: The Case of  
Zakir Naik

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## Abstract

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By Shehnaz Haqqani

The notion of religious authority in Muslim societies has been a subject of scholarly debate for centuries, and this includes the authority of popular preachers. It has been acknowledged that there is competition for authority among different groups of the ‘ulama, or scholars of Islam trained in traditional Islamic institutions and preachers. However, as of yet, no academic studies have addressed the phenomenon of a rising Indian preacher named Zakir Naik. This study aims to fill that gap by showing how Naik is able to gain authority among Sunni Muslims of South Asian background and by discussing the modern changes and tools that enable him to assert authority.

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Needless to add, I alone am responsible for all of the shortcomings of this study.

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## Introduction

“Let’s talk about logic,” Muslim televangelist Zakir Naik says to an atheist female who questions him about the validity of polygamy in today’s world.

The sister disagrees with the man having more than one wife.... After I give you the answer, you will be convinced, *insha’Allah*, God willing. The things which you don’t agree, you come on the microphone and tell me.... I’m just a student; I’ll try my level best with Allah’s help to try and reply.... Now, though the Vedas say you can marry more than one wife, the Christian Bible says, the Qur’an says. Now you don’t believe in all of them, no problem. Let’s talk about logic. Sister, do you know by nature, male and female are born in equal proportion? ... But if you ask any pediatrician, ... he will tell you that the female child can fight germs and diseases better than the male child.... So ... there are more females than the males.... Only in some countries, third-world countries like India, the female population is less than the male population, which you know why? Because of female infanticide....If you stop this evil practice, even in India, the female population will become more than the male population. In America alone, there are 7.8 million female more than male. In UK alone, there are 4 million female more than male; in Germany alone, there are 5 million female more than male. In Russia alone, there are 9 million female more than male.... Suppose, sister, suppose your sister happens to live in America, and the market is saturated; every man has found a woman for himself. Yet there will be 7.8 million females who will not find life partners. The only option remaining for them is... either marry a man who already has a wife, or become public property.... Sister, this [“public property”] is the most sophisticated word I can use; I cannot use a better word! In America, mistresses are common. You can have 10, 20, 30, no problem; 100 also! The law will not say anything.... And mistresses have no right, no honor; she is degraded.<sup>1</sup>

Zakir Naik is perhaps the most popular Muslim preacher in the Indian subcontinent today. A forty-five year-old medical doctor by training, he is appreciated deeply for his charisma and eloquence in addition to covering contemporary Muslim issues. He speaks to large audiences of Sunni Muslims and many non-Muslims, answering questions about Islam and Muslims,

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<sup>1</sup> “Atheist Girl Questioning Zakir Naik.” October 12, 2008. YouTube. Viewed April 3, 2011. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5jXaHvNhfs4&playnext=1&list=PL267985CFFD5C8E54>>.



responding to challenges posed to him by non-Muslims, clearing up misconceptions about Islam, and debating with influential non-Muslim figures.

The answer that Naik gives to the young woman above is representative of his approach to answering non-Muslims and Muslims alike. When supporting his claims, he draws on relevant examples with which his audience of primarily South Asian background is familiar, such as that of female infanticide; he makes reference to non-Islamic scriptures, such as the Vedas and the Bible, to validate a point; he displays modesty in answering, such as by insisting that he is merely on a student of Islam and, with God's mercy, will attempt to share his little knowledge with others; he thanks the questioner for her question, thereby illustrating his openness to thinking, reasoning, and questioning Islamic precepts; he speaks in a way that suggests that he supports women's rights, as can be noted in his opposition to the practice of female infanticide, which he terms "evil"; and he regularly juxtaposes the "American" or "western" way of life with the Islamic way of life to reinforce his belief that the former degrades women while the latter dignifies them.

This study takes Zakir Naik's case as an example of the role that preachers, particularly those who have not received traditional training in Islamic sciences, play in contemporary Muslim societies. Naik's example illustrates the conflict of authority that has been present in Islamic societies for centuries but particularly in post-colonial times. He is a socially accepted and supported authority, and he appears to play a larger role than do the *'ulama* (singular: *'alim*), Muslim scholars of law, theology, philosophy, and jurisprudence who are trained in traditional Islamic institutions and therefore are qualified to give opinions on Islamic subjects. Some questions that the study hopes to answer are: How is religious authority constructed in contemporary times? How and why has Zakir Naik been able to attain authority and gain the

support of his audience? What type of training is necessary for one to gain religious authority in contemporary times? What role do new media play in allowing one to establish authority in a globalized world?

This study is not concerned with determining the legitimacy or illegitimacy of Naik's position as a figure of authority. His authority has been bestowed upon him by his listeners and supporters, and it is the aim of this study to explore the reasons on account of which his followers have given him this authority, for his example demonstrates that there are alternative paths to attaining religious authority in the modern world.

In this study, I discuss Naik's role as a teacher and interpreter of Islam who appeals to a broad Sunni Muslim audience of South Asian background who are dispersed throughout the world. As a preacher, he has a stronger, more significant influence on the practices and beliefs of his audience than do the *'ulama* who have formally studied the religion. Focusing on Zakir Naik's example, I argue that, while the ways that contemporary popular preachers gain authority have roots in medieval times, their *modus operandi* has evolved noticeably in the last two centuries in part due to Western colonialism and the development of modern science. Despite their lack of formal traditional training in the Islamic sciences, a trait they share with many preachers of previous times, they are supported by certain Muslims because of their professional standing, their reliance on modern technology, and their use of modern concepts and terminology that appeal to their audiences. Zakir Naik is an excellent example of such preachers, for he has established himself as an accepted interpreter and teacher of Islam because he is a doctor of medicine, he utilizes modern media aptly, and he uses modern concepts such as women's rights, gender equality, and scientific discourses.

In Chapter One, I discuss preaching in the Muslim world, the conflict of authority between preachers and Muslim scholars in medieval times, and the problem of religious authority in general. In Chapter Two, I present a biography of Zakir Naik and introduce other prominent contemporary Muslim preachers, such as Khaled Amr of Egypt and Ahmed Deedat of South Africa, to confirm that Naik's case is not unique to, or an idiosyncrasy of, Islam in South Asian. In Chapter Three, I discuss Zakir Naik's presentation as a preacher by surveying his audience's opinion of Naik and making observations on how Naik appeals to them. Since I note that these reasons include his debates on modern concepts, such as gender equality and scientific discourses, I provide a feminist critique of Naik's interpretation of women's rights, and, using scientific sources, I provide a critique of his lectures on scientific miracles in the Qur'an and women's rights in Islam. In Chapter Four, I highlight the role of new media in allowing Naik to become a socially successful and influential authority on Islam. Since modern media play a vital role in the propagation of Islam, particularly in the West, I also delve into a discussion on what Gary Bunt has termed "Virtual Islam," or Islam online. I conclude that Zakir Naik is granted religious authority because of three of his main qualities: his social training and profession as a medical doctor, his effective use of new media, and his involvement in scientific discourses of modern culture, including issues of equality.

## Chapter 1: Preaching in the Muslim World

In this study, a preacher is a Muslim male who teaches Islam to the community, or the “common people,” who were, in pre-modern times, referred to as “the ruled,” without being affiliated with any particular institution. Preachers have a close connection with lay people with whom they are in contact. They therefore speak in a language and use rhetoric that their listeners and followers can comprehend. The alternative to a preacher are the *‘ulama*, Muslim scholars trained in traditional Islamic institutions; in pre-modern times as well as today, to a large extent, they often work closely with the rulers or the state and with other *‘ulama* more than with the community. The *‘ulama* who are the main rivals of preachers have been, and continue to be, the *fuqahā’*, or jurists. Importantly, while the preachers discussed in this study lack training from traditional Islamic institutions, not all preachers do so.

Preaching is neither unique nor new to Islam. Much literature is available on the role of preachers in early and medieval Islam in addition to contemporary times. Richard Antoun, for instance, studies Muslim preachers in the modern world, with a focus on their role in community, their strategies in establishing themselves, and the content of their Friday sermons, or *khutba*.<sup>2</sup> Antoun explains that in the early Islamic period, there were many different types of preachers, not just the *khatib*, who gives the *khutba*, or Friday sermon; they also included the *wa`iz* (“admonisher”), the *mudhakkir* (“reminder” of Judgment Day), and *qass* (the “teller” of religious stories).<sup>3</sup> Noting that preachers no longer bear a close association with the State, Antoun also shows that they continue sharing some important roles with preachers from previous centuries; among them is their concern, expressed through their sermons, for the problems and policies of

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Antoun, *Muslim Preacher in the Modern World: A Jordanian Case Study in Comparative Perspective* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989).

<sup>3</sup> Antoun, 69.

their fellow-Muslims in the Islamic community.<sup>4</sup> Today's preachers, however, act as prayer leaders (*imams*), "warners," "reminders," "admonishers," and "story-tellers" all at once.<sup>5</sup> Not all preachers in pre-modern times lacked training in Islamic sciences from traditional Islamic institutions, as Ibn al-Jawzi's example shows: he was a '*alim* "hired by the caliph to preach 'orthodox' (Sunni) Islam to the masses."<sup>6</sup> Ibn al-Jawzi (d. 597/1200) was among the '*ulama* who heavily criticized preachers as they gained a wider audience. The critics' fear was that the preachers were teaching a distorted interpretation of Islam to their audiences, because they were not trained, and therefore not qualified to teach Islam and demand authority, while the '*ulama* had the training to instruct others in Islam but were not as popular with the common people.<sup>7</sup> Preaching played an important role in "the articulation and diffusion of Islam in the first Islamic centuries;"<sup>8</sup> preachers were the main channel through which the common people were, and still are, instructed in Islam. Their audience does not include, according to Berkey, "people who engaged in rigorous course of study of the religious science under the supervision of one or more scholars."<sup>9</sup> Rather, they are those who understand the language and rhetoric of the preachers.

Today, it appears that criticism towards preachers from the '*ulama* is no longer as prevalent, although it does occur occasionally, as will be shown below. In the medieval Islamic times, some jurists, such as Ibn al-Jawzi, believed that God had sent prophets to prohibit the people from committing evil and enjoining them to commit good; the '*ulama* were "distinguished by their learning (*ilm*); and preachers were assigned to exhort the common

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<sup>4</sup> Antoun, 71.

<sup>5</sup> Antoun, 71.

<sup>6</sup> Antoun, 70.

<sup>7</sup> Jonathan Berkey, *Popular Preaching and Religious Authority in the Medieval Islamic Near East* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001), 26.

<sup>8</sup> Berkey, *Popular Preaching*, 23.

<sup>9</sup> I Berkey, *Popular Preaching*, 23.

people.<sup>10</sup> Ibn al-Jawzi seems to have implied that the preacher's role is the most important among the three: "The preacher is like the trainer of animals, who educates them, reforms them, and refines them."<sup>11</sup> This may be because the way the people understand and practice Islam is left to the preachers, who must understand the psyche of their audiences well enough to know how to attract them and gain their support.

Zakir Naik's case is comparable to those of Christian televangelists, zealous Christian preachers who spread the message of Christianity using the television and other new media. The Greek word *evangelos* means "bringing good news," and "that is what Christian clergy and lay missionaries have traditionally seen themselves as doing as they have preached the 'good news' of the Gospel of Jesus Christ."<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Muslim televangelists attract large groups of audiences by preaching Islam, or "the good news," on television. A televangelist, then, is someone who appears on television, or on another modern medium, to preach his faith. Throughout this study, however, I will use the terms "televangelist" and "preacher" interchangeably.

### **1.1: Religious Authority in Islam**

Throughout this study, the term *authority* means religious interpretive authority, or textual authority. In understanding this, the reader must bear in mind three forms of authority: the authority that Zakir Naik asserts, the authority that his audiences give him or allow him to establish, and the authority that he denies women (discussed in Chapter Three). The first two forms of authority are intricately connected, since I assert that the fact that Naik is considered an

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<sup>10</sup> Berkey, *Popular Preaching*, 23-24.

<sup>11</sup> Berkey, *Popular Preaching*, 23-24.

<sup>12</sup> Daniel A. Stout, *Encyclopedia of Religion, Communication, and Media* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 423.

authority by his followers is more important than that he establishes himself as one. By religious authority, I also mean a source to whom others turn for information, clarification, and opinions on Islamic matters; this definition becomes relevant in the discussion of women's authority in Chapter Three. Throughout the rest of the study, the question is also raised of who has the authority to interpret Islamic scriptures, particularly the Qur'an and *hadiths*, and give legal advice to Muslims.

As Devin Stewart points out, the person who holds religious authority is the one "to whom one turns for advice, to whom one resorts or refers for help or consultation when faced with a difficult problem."<sup>13</sup> Naik exemplifies this definition fittingly: his followers view him as someone who can answer any question on any topic, and his answers hold a high value for them. For instance, women call him and ask him about their husbands' conversion to a different branch or form of Islam (e.g., Sufism) and whether their marriage is still Islamically valid,<sup>14</sup> and he is invited regularly to talk shows to speak on current issues in India and the rest of the world; often, other Indian celebrities are present also, including Shahrukh Khan, the famous Indian actor.<sup>15</sup> This suggests that Naik's opinions are at least as important as those of respected celebrities, whom fans often strive to emulate them. The more authority one has, then, the more one is able to issue opinions, as indicated by the invitations that Naik receives to speak on various topics in talk shows.

A preacher's authority is suggestive of a prophetic role in the community: God sent Prophet Muhammad as a guide to humankind, and Muhammad was unarguably an authority.

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<sup>13</sup> Devin J. Stewart, "Authority and Orthodoxy in Islam." *American Oriental Society*, Raleigh, April 1993, 22.

<sup>14</sup> "Dr. Zakir Naik – Question Regarding Sufis." November 28, 2008. YouTube. Last viewed April 3, 2011. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uFy4q2ZQIU0>>.

<sup>15</sup> "1. Dr. Zakir Naik, Shahrukh Khan, Soha Ali Khan on NDTV with Barkha Dutt." March 7, 2010. YouTube. Last viewed April 3, 2011. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zyh9jP3FbV8&feature=related>>.

This is not to suggest that Zakir Naik is a prophet in the Qur’anic sense— only that he is a representative of the prophet and his teachings and is a guide to his followers. Although the claim that Naik represents the Prophet may be refuted by Sufi scholars—because to represent the Prophet is to represent God, which is an onerous task and requires one to “internalize God’s goodness and morality within oneself”<sup>16</sup>—his active involvement on the ground, preaching Islam, rectifying those ideals of Islam that he believes are misrepresented or misunderstood, and transmitting God’s message arguably makes him a representative of the Prophet.

Importantly, the Qur’an’s command for Muslims to obey not only God and the Prophet but also “those with authority among you” (4:59) raises the obvious question of which authority the verse intends. In completion, it reads: “O ye who believe! Obey Allah, and obey the messenger and those of you who are in authority; and if ye have a dispute concerning any matter, refer it to Allah and the messenger if ye are (in truth) believers in Allah and the Last Day. That is better and more seemly in the end.” Stewart argues that, since verse 4:59 was revealed originally in reference to a military expedition, the Arabic phrase *ulu l-amri minkum*, or “those of you who are in authority,” refers to the commander of said expedition.<sup>17</sup> This is not the only interpretation of the verse, however, and often, the proposed interpretations of the verse “reflect some claims to religious authority on the part of a contemporary group.”<sup>18</sup> In other words, its interpretation may help justify the authority of a certain group in question, including Zakir Naik’s case: If Naik is an authority, then, according to the Qur’an, he must be obeyed, and disobedience to him may be a sin.

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<sup>16</sup> Kugle, *Rebel Between Spirit and Law*, 15.

<sup>17</sup> Stewart, “Authority and Orthodoxy in Islam,” 25.

<sup>18</sup> Stewart, “Authority and Orthodoxy in Islam,” 25.



As Stewart observes, the Qur'an holds an ambiguous position on the Prophet's role as a figure of authority: Qur'anic verses, such as 4:59 ("and if you conflict over a matter, then refer it to God and the Messenger") "[make] it clear that the Prophet Muhammad was to serve as a reference for his community, and, indeed, the ultimate or highest reference within the community."<sup>19</sup> Yet, other Qur'anic verses (e.g., "The Messenger has no other charge than to convey the message plainly" (24:54)) suggest that that the Prophet had no special status or powers and was an ordinary human being.<sup>20</sup> The former point, however, negates the popular claim among Muslims that there is no clergy in Islam (discussed below in detail). Khaled Abou el Fadl (b. 1963) writes that Prophet Muhammad's "link to the Divine Will was all that was necessary for the community to understand itself, its role in society, and the purpose of its existence."<sup>21</sup> The link Abou el Fadl refers to is the religious figure who serves as a connection between God and humanity. The *'ulama* are one example of such a connection, as are preachers. Abou El Fadl insists, though, that only God, God's book, and the Prophet (Muhammad) count as the real authorities in Islam;<sup>22</sup> the rest, including preachers and the *'ulama* who may be a link between God and humanity, do not have any authority over God's text.

No matter how much one simplifies Islam and claims that all a Muslim needs to read in order to understand Islam are the Qur'an and *hadiths*, the recorded teachings and practices of the Prophet, it is impossible to circumvent the ambiguity often present in the two sources. Since the text is interpreted by a reader and represented by the interpreter, there arises "inevitable tension

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<sup>19</sup> Stewart, "Authority and Orthodoxy in Islam," 25.

<sup>20</sup> Stewart, "Authority and Orthodoxy in Islam," 25.

<sup>21</sup> Khaled Abou El Fadl, *Authoritative and the Authoritarian in Islamic Discourses: A Contemporary Case Study* (Austin: Dar Taiba, 1997), 4.

<sup>22</sup> Khaled Abou El Fadl, *Authoritative and the Authoritarian*, 23.

between the text and its representative.”<sup>23</sup> Abou El Fadl clarifies that the problem of authority “is not so much the lack of institutional framework to channel the authority of the text ... [but rather] developing the conceptual framework from which the text is approached, constructed and presented.”<sup>24</sup> For him, there is the “authoritative” and the “authoritarian.” He defines the former as “principles, texts or discourses that are considered binding or dispositive of an issue or a set of issues in a person’s life.”<sup>25</sup> He writes that it is when one presents or communicates one’s vision of the authoritative to others that one “runs the risk of transforming that vision into an authoritarian discourse.”<sup>26</sup> In simpler terms, “authoritative” refers to the text in question and “authoritarian” to the reader. Abou el Fadl’s concern, thus, is with who holds the authority to interpret the text and why. Although he mentions that unqualified individuals seem to have gained authority over Islamic texts, interpreting them and teaching them without being trained to do so, he does not give much attention to preachers, who seem to hold the power to interpret Islam today in much of the Muslim world.

Abou el Fad argues that Islam does not support the idea of one person’s holding a position of authority (whom he refers to as the “soldier of God”) because there is no “Church” or clergy in Islam,<sup>27</sup> a claim with which Stewart disagrees. Stewart contests that the intention of the original source of the assertion that there is no clergy in Islam is “to stress that [the] authority must depend on God and remain strictly subordinate to Him.”<sup>28</sup> The argument is thus a misinterpretation of the condition that the people in authority rely strictly on God and not

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<sup>23</sup> Abou El Fadl, *Authoritative and the Authoritarian*, 34.

<sup>24</sup> Abou El Fadl, *Authoritative and the Authoritarian* 33.

<sup>25</sup> Abou El Fadl, *Authoritative and the Authoritarian*, 33.

<sup>26</sup> Abou El Fadl, *Authoritative and the Authoritarian*, 33.

<sup>27</sup> Khaled Abou El Fadl, *Speaking in God’s Name: Islamic Law, Authority, and Women* (Oxford: OneWorld, 2008), 9.

<sup>28</sup> Abou El Fadl, *Speaking in God’s Name*, 9.

intentionally misrepresent or misinterpret God’s message. The Qur’an makes it explicitly clear, nonetheless, that the Prophet must be obeyed (3:132 and 24:52) and even that “he who obeys the Messenger has obeyed God” (4:80). The last verse also adds, “but those who turn away, we have not sent you over them as a guardian,” which implies that the alternative to people who obey the Prophet are those who turn away from him completely. Hence, disobedience to the Prophet—that is, not accepting his authority—is akin to rejecting him.

To understand the nature of Naik’s authority is, it is important to consider the different forms of legitimate authority that Max Weber, the German sociologist and social economist, outlines. He argues that there are three forms of legitimate authority: legal authority, traditional authority, and charismatic authority.<sup>29</sup> Legal authority, he explains, is based on rational grounds, “on a belief in the ‘legality’ of patterns of normative rules and the right of those elevated to authority;” traditional authority rests on “an established belief in the sanctity of immemorial traditions”; and charismatic authority is based on “devotion to the specific and exceptional sanctity, heroism or exemplary character of an individual person, and of the normative patterns or order revealed or ordained by him.”<sup>30</sup> Applying these forms of authority to this study, Zakir Naik’s authority is closest to charismatic authority, although all three might be involved. His authority is legal in that he has won the confidence of the people who have bestowed authority on him, and states —India and most other countries involved—allow him to continue preaching. He also has traditional authority because, as mentioned earlier, Muslim preachers, despite the criticism they have received from the ‘*ulama*, have served as a group of authority throughout Islamic history.

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<sup>29</sup> Max Weber and Talcott Parsons, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization* (New York: Free Press, 1997), 328.

<sup>30</sup> Weber and Parsons, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, 328.

With authority also often comes power, which this study defines as one's ability to influence others and to convince them of one's authority. Many scholars define power as one's ability to make others do what one wants them to do, or to make them obey.<sup>31</sup> For Max Weber, *power* "refers to every possibility within a social relationship of imposing one's own will, even against opposition, without regard to the basis for this possibility."<sup>32</sup> This definition, however, does not fit Zakir Naik's case, because it assumes that all individuals in power command obedience. In Zakir Naik's case, it may not be appropriate to assert that he demands his followers' obedience, but it may be argued him. I argue that he has power over them only in that he is able to influence them and to convince them that he is right. Weber understands this to be a form of obedience, too, however: "In the case of charismatic authority, it is the charismatically qualified leader as such who is obeyed by virtue of personal trust in him and his revelation, his heroism or his exemplary qualities so far as they fall within the scope of the individual's belief in his charisma."<sup>33</sup> Hence, Zakir Naik is not obeyed in that there is fear of him in the minds' and hearts' of his followers, or that he forces them to believe him, but in that they respect him and trust him to teach them the real meaning of God's word.

Being a person of authority enables one to exercise power over those who accept him as an authority, whether consciously or subconsciously. Zakir Naik's supporters and fans understandably might not wish to see him as someone who exercises power over them, but rather simply as someone who teaches them the correct way of learning, practicing, and teaching Islam.

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<sup>31</sup> See Henry L. Tischler, *Introduction to Sociology* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth-Thomson Learning, 2010), 344.

<sup>32</sup> Max Weber, "Foundations of Social Theory" in *Max Weber – Selections in Translation*, ed. W.G. Runciman (London: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 38.

<sup>33</sup> Weber and Parsons, *Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, 328.

However, by allowing him to teach them Islam, which many Muslims define as “a way of life,”<sup>34</sup> his followers give him power over themselves, because he essentially defines Islam for them, albeit he insists that it is not he who defines Islam; God has already defined it and made it clear to those willing to understand His religion. His only role, he assures his followers, is to remind Muslims of what their duties to God are. Naik indirectly assumes authority and presents himself as one to the public, but one tactic he uses in claiming it is actually to deny that he is coming up with any answers from his own opinion, stressing, rather, that he is simply conveying to others the truth about Islam. He makes this claim to authority by answering questions in simple and quick terms, debating non-Muslims, and encouraging others to question Islam, and he is socially successful, since a large number of Muslims accept his claim.

## 1.2: Previous Scholarship

Besides the works discussed above, other scholarship concerned with the conflict of religious authority in Muslim societies includes Vincent Cornell’s *Realm of the Saint: Power and Authority in Moroccan Sufism*.<sup>35</sup> Cornell addresses the conflict, the “doctrinal disputes,” between Sufis and legists.<sup>36</sup> On the one hand, the community had the ‘*ulama*, who include the *fuqaha*, or specialists in legal reasoning, to claim deep knowledge of Islam, and on the other hand, there were the Sufis, who claimed divinely inspired knowledge and were often criticized by the ‘*ulama* for “exceeding established norms.”<sup>37</sup> Mystics exceeded these norms by seeking to transcend the limits set by the normative consensus and aspired “to a higher level where questions of belief and

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<sup>34</sup> Virginia Gray Henry-Blakemore, “Introduction: Daily Life in Islam” in *Voices of Islam: Voices of Life: Family, Home, and Society*, ed. Vincent Cornell (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2007), xvii.

<sup>35</sup> See Scott Kugle, *Realm of the Saint: Power and Authority in Moroccan Sufism* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998).

<sup>36</sup> Kugle, *Realm of the Saint*, 66.

<sup>37</sup> Kugle, *Realm of the Saint*, 66.

practice were posed differently.”<sup>38</sup> Their praxis of Islam was not accepted, then, by traditional scholars of Islam because they did not adhere to the standards of the legists, whom consensus had confirmed as the guardians of faith.<sup>39</sup> Since one had to follow standard Islam in order to be acknowledged as a legitimate authority, the mystics’ authority could not be viewed as legitimate because they did not follow normative Islam. Scott Kugle’s *Rebel Between Spirit and Law* addresses a similar issue and seeks to reconcile the distinction between jurists and Sufis by providing the example of Ahmad Zarruq, who was both a jurist and a Sufi, albeit considered a rebel against traditional Islam by other Muslim scholars of his time.<sup>40</sup>

Devin Stewart’s “Authority and Orthodoxy in Islam,” quoted above, outlines the different forms of authority that have existed in various contexts in the history of Islamic societies, and that these forms of authority have been in potential, if not inherent, conflict based on various definitions of the phrase *ulu al-amr*. Al-Tabari (d. 923), for instance, opines that it refers to the rulers, the scholars, companions of the Prophet in general, and Abu Bakr and ‘Umar in particular.<sup>41</sup> According to 10<sup>th</sup>-century Twelver Shiite Ibn Abi Zaynab al-Nu’mani, however, the phrase refers to the Imams specifically. Sunnis, claimed al-Qadi Nu’man (d. 974), believe that *ulu al-amr* are the legal scholars and commanders of military detachments, which means princes or kings in general.<sup>42</sup> Yet al-Khatib al-Baghdadi maintained that they are jurists, while al-Qurtubi held they are both rulers and scholars, but legal scholars in particular.<sup>43</sup> The Sufi al-Qushayri interpreted it to mean either the ruler or the Sufi master. This discussion illustrates the difficulty

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<sup>38</sup> Kugle, *Realm of the Saint*, 66.

<sup>39</sup> Kugle, *Realm of the Saint*, 67.

<sup>40</sup> Scott Kugle, *Rebel Between Spirit and Law: Ahmad Zarruq, Sainthood, and Authority in Islam* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006).

<sup>41</sup> Stewart, “Authority and Orthodoxy in Islam,” 26.

<sup>42</sup> Stewart, “Authority and Orthodoxy in Islam,” 26.

<sup>43</sup> Stewart, “Authority and Orthodoxy in Islam,” 26.

of defining what an authority is; it also clearly defines the problem that is pertinent to this study: “that a number of different groups, each with its own claim to authority ... were competing for the same space,”<sup>44</sup> and the most important claimants to authority, according to a survey of Islamic history, Stewart writes, are the caliphs, monarchs, jurists, theologians, *hadith* experts, philosophers, and mystics.<sup>45</sup> One group that does not appear to be competing for authority in Stewart’s text, however, is preachers, the focus of this study. Stewart acknowledges this in his study and notes that the list he has provided is not comprehensive.

Whereas different groups of the ‘*ulama*, particularly jurists, and other authorities, such as Sufis, have struggled to gain authority in previous eras in Muslim communities, one of today’s main conflicts appears to be between preachers and the ‘*ulama* in general, but *muftis* in particular. With the advance of technology, preachers seem to be more popular and socially successful with lay Muslims. The other authorities mentioned above certainly have an important role to play in today’s world; as Muhammad Qasim Zaman shows, the ‘*ulama* continue playing a vital role in the Muslim world both politically and socially, despite the challenges and consequences of modernity and globalization.<sup>46</sup> The focus of this study, however, is the role of preachers, particularly Zakir Naik, the ways he has obtained authority, and what it suggests about religious authority in Islam.

### **1.3: Contemporary Changes in the Islamic World**

In medieval times, Muslim scholars were required to complete a legal education in one of the four recognized *madhhabs* and were granted licenses by master jurists as qualified legal

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<sup>44</sup> Stewart, “Authority and Orthodoxy in Islam,” 25.

<sup>45</sup> Stewart, “Authority and Orthodoxy in Islam,” 31.

<sup>46</sup> Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam: Custodians of Change* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2002).

scholars.<sup>47</sup> Not only did this license grant them the permission to teach, but it also granted them a position of religious authority and the authorization to “voice recognized opinions on religious topics.”<sup>48</sup> This form of license was called *ijazat al-tadris wa'l-ifta'*, “the license to teach law and grant legal *responsa*.”<sup>49</sup> Once a scholar had a license, he had the authority to issue legal opinions and teach law. George Makdisi (d. 2002) likens this process of attaining religious authority to a doctorate of law,<sup>50</sup> because the license was evidence of their ability to engage in independent legal research and interpretation. In his article “Doctorate of Islamic Law in Mamluk Egypt and Syria,” Stewart lists the number of Islamic historians who disagree with Makdisi (including Jonathan Berkey, Daphne Ephrat, and Michael Chamberlain), arguing that no formal system of degrees ever developed in pre-modern Islamic education, that the certificate was not an institutional degree but was issued to the student by his teacher.<sup>51</sup> Stewart reconciles the differences among these scholars by clarifying that what “Berkey and Chamberlain have to say is not inaccurate with regard to certificates of transmission, but they are not address thereby the license Makdisi intends.”<sup>52</sup> The disagreement, it appears, is a result of not identifying which type of *ijazah* is being discussed, for there were many types of *ijazahs*. An *ijazah* may have granted the recipient the qualification to transmit *hadith* or other text, or to teach law and issue legal opinions.<sup>53</sup> Despite the formality or informality of the method discussed, it is clear that certain standards were defined to ensure that the students and future scholars possessed the necessary

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<sup>47</sup> Devin Stewart, *Islamic Legal Orthodoxy: Twelver Shiite Responses to the Sunni Legal System* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1998), 1.

<sup>48</sup> Stewart, *Islamic Legal Orthodoxy*, 1.

<sup>49</sup> Stewart, *Islamic Legal Orthodoxy*, 27.

<sup>50</sup> George Makdisi, *The Rise of Colleges* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1981).

<sup>51</sup> Devin Stewart, “Doctorate of Islamic Law in Mamluk Egypt and Syria” in *Law and Education in Medieval Islam*, eds. Joseph Lowry, Devin Stewart, and Shawkat Toorawa. E.J.W. Gibb Memorial Trust, 2004.

<sup>52</sup> Stewart, “Doctorate of Islamic Law,” 52.

<sup>53</sup> Stewart, “Doctorate of Islamic Law,” 52.



intellectual qualifications before he could engage in issuing legal opinions or teaching any specific topics in religion.

While the organization of method of the transfer of knowledge discussed above, whether formal or informal, is clear, it is not unlikely that there were some who did not adhere to this formal procedure. They include the preachers discussed above. Although preachers do not directly issue legal opinions or teach law to other Muslims, they are involved indirectly in their followers' practice of Islam and their understanding of Islamic law. Naik is frequently asked, for example, about interest,<sup>54</sup> inheritance,<sup>55</sup> and apostasy,<sup>56</sup> all of which are legal concerns. Amr Khaled, another preacher discussed in this study, has written that "Taking off the *hijab* is the biggest sin, the biggest sin, the biggest sin, the biggest sin. It's the biggest sin, because you would be encouraging other women to do the same."<sup>57</sup> Such statements are false in that there is no consensus that taking off the *hijab* is "the biggest sin" a woman may commit and is in fact contrary to the Qur'an, which declares *shirk*, joining partners with God, as the biggest sin; but they have serious implications for the practical lives of the Muslims who abide by them. However, while neither Zakir Naik nor Amr Khaled claims to be issuing *fatwas*, their opinions and responses to all questions bear a significant value for their followers, such that their teachings represent Islamic legal rulings for their followers. Their listeners begin to practice Islam the way these preachers tell them to do so, whether or not it is justified by Islamic sources.

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<sup>54</sup> "What Islam say[s] about Interest/Usury? Dr. Zakir Naik." November 24, 2009. YouTube. Viewed April 1, 2011. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xx1tmncJfEI>>.

<sup>55</sup> "Islamic laws of inheritance." July 20, 2009. YouTube. Viewed April 1, 2011. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rOp7FAMcMp8>>.

<sup>56</sup> "Dr. Zakir Naik about Apostasy in Islam." January 17, 2011. YouTube. Viewed April 1, 2011. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A1RGPBE12ZA>>.

<sup>57</sup> Amr Khaled, "Hijab." LUMS Religious Society. August 12, 2010. Retrieved March 25, 2011. <[http://www.religionatlums.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=48:hijab&catid=2:categorygeneral](http://www.religionatlums.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=48:hijab&catid=2:categorygeneral)>.

Changes in the modern world, particularly those related to technology, make it difficult, if not impossible, for a Muslim to know exactly which sources are authentic enough for her or him to rely upon. The internet is full of websites about Islam, each one claiming to use the Qur'an and authentic *hadiths* for information on Islam. As will be discussed in Chapter Four, however, they often provide conflicting rulings on specific topics in Islam; more importantly, not all sites list the authority who is behind the rulings.

### **Conclusion**

The definition of religious authority has never been constant throughout Islamic history. Different groups of authorities have competed for the same space, and preachers have been among them. Although Zakir Naik is not qualified traditionally to issue opinions on Islamic matters, he has established authority among South Asian Muslims, and many factors have allowed him to gain the popularity and authority he holds today. Among those factors are responses to technological changes and scientific advancements.

## **Chapter 2: Zakir Naik and Other Preachers**

This chapter discusses Zakir Naik's life and his influences. It also offers a comparative study of Naik and other contemporary preachers to show that he is not unique in his standing. It must be mentioned that very little information is available on Zakir Naik's social and religious backgrounds, particularly his childhood and early education, including some important dates throughout his lifetime (e.g., when he finished medical school). Almost all of what is on hand is written either by his supporters or his opponents, and it is therefore difficult to encounter objective perspectives on him. As a result of the lack of academic material on Naik, I was compelled to rely primarily on online Muslim discussions, forums, and blogs about him.

### **2.1: Zakir Naik's Biography**

Currently based in Mumbai, India, Zakir Abdul Karim Naik was born on October 18<sup>th</sup> 1965 in Mumbai. He attended St. Peter's High School in said city and advanced to Topiwala National Medical College, which is affiliated with the University of Mumbai, for medical school. He practiced medicine temporarily, but had been influenced by Ahmed Deedat (d. 2005) during medical school and eventually decided to follow the latter's footsteps to become a proselytizer in 1991. He is now a full-time preacher and gives lectures on Islam and other world religions to audiences of over five hundred people worldwide.

Naik is married to Farhat Naik, who holds a Master's in Philosophy; it is not reported where and when she obtained her degree. She is the president of the Ladies' Wing sector of Zakir Naik's Islamic Research Foundation, a registered non-profit organization in India founded by Naik in 1991 and chaired by his brother, Dr. Mohammad Naik. Zakir Naik has three daughters and one son, all of whom make regular appearance at Naik's lectures. His fifteen-year-

old son, Fariq, appears to be following his father's footsteps, having memorized the Qur'an and delivering lectures on Islam internationally. Naik's daughter Rushda performs Islamic songs on Islamic TV stations.

Zakir Naik's publications comprise videos, books, and lectures published as articles. His articles include "Most Common Questions Asked by Non-Muslims," "Most Common Questions Asked by Non-Muslims Who Have Some Knowledge of Islam," "Common Questions Asked by Hindus about Islam," "Common Questions Asked by Christian Missionaries against Islam," and "Queries on Islam," all published in 2006. His films include "Universal Brotherhood" (2002), "The Concept of God in Hinduism and Islam in the Light of Sacred Scriptures," "The Concept of God in Major Religions," "Is the Quran God's Word?" "Shari'ah: Barbaric or Perfect?," "Why the West is Coming to Islam," "Similarities between Islam and Christianity," "Women's Rights in Islam," and "Qur'an and Modern Science: Conflict or Conciliation?" Some of the books he has authored are: *Non-Muslim[s'] Common Questions about Islam*, *The Concept of God in Major Religions*, and *The Qur'an & Modern Science: Compatible or Incompatible?* Although never formally trained in Islam, Naik's website lists his fields of interest as "studies in comparative religion, medicine, humanitarian, social, moral, and educational and economics welfare activities."<sup>58</sup> His other accomplishments include the debates he has held with renowned non-Muslims, such as Dr. William Campbell, a Christian missionary and medical doctor from Philadelphia. Perhaps his most popular debate to date is "The Qur'an and the Bible in Light of Science," which took place on December 7<sup>th</sup> 2005 between Naik and Campbell.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> "Islamic Research Foundation – Bio Data." Retrieved April 1, 2011.

<[http://irf.net/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=120&Itemid=74](http://irf.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=120&Itemid=74)>.

<sup>59</sup> "The Qur'an and the Bible in the Light of Science? (Dr. Campbell's OP ST – 1of 4." February 24, 2007. YouTube. Viewed March 25, 2011. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fw3do0TLv6o>

Naik is the founder and president of Islamic Research Foundation (IRF), “a registered non-profit public charitable trust” based in Mumbai, India.<sup>60</sup> Established in February 1991, the organization “promotes Islamic Da’wah - the proper presentation, understanding and appreciation of Islam, as well as removing misconceptions about Islam - amongst less aware Muslims and non-Muslims.”<sup>61</sup> It utilizes modern technology to reach “millions of people worldwide through international satellite T.V. channels, cable T.V. networks, internet and the print media.”<sup>62</sup> Naik is also the director of Peace TV and QTV, Islamic TV channels. It is unclear where these channels are based and how they are funded, other than through customers’ and other supporters’ donations. Whereas one source informs that Q-TV is “a channel run by the UAE-based private television consortium ARY,”<sup>63</sup> another claims that Naik “operates the channel from Great Britain.”<sup>64</sup> Peace TV, Naik asserts, “is not just another Islamic TV channel. Nor will it promote any particular Islamic sect or dogma.”<sup>65</sup> His objective is to clarify “Islamic viewpoints and ... misconceptions about Islam, using the Qur’an, authentic Hadith and other religious Scriptures as a basis, in conjunction with reason, logic and scientific facts.”<sup>66</sup> He fulfills this objective by appearing on television to give lectures on Islam and answer questions, often citing Qur’anic verses, *hadith* reports, and non-Muslim Holy Scriptures by heart. He also relies on scientific knowledge and reason to explain certain Islamic injunctions, especially when

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<sup>60</sup> Islamic Research Foundation. Home Page. Retrieved April 1, 2011. <<http://irf.net/>>.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ulrike Freitag and Achim Von Oppen, *Translocality: The Study of Globalising Processes from a Southern Perspective* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 201), 332.

<sup>64</sup> Salah Uddin Shoaib Choudhury, “Band of Fanatics: The Zakir Naik Show.” February 18, 2009. Blitz. Retrieved March 25, 2011. <<http://www.weeklyblitz.net/180/band-of-fanatics-the-zakir-naik-show>>.

<sup>65</sup> Zakir Naik, “Why Peace TV?” 2009. Retrieved September 25<sup>th</sup> 2010.

<[http://www.irf.net/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=153&Itemid=165](http://www.irf.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=153&Itemid=165)>.

<sup>66</sup> “Islamic Research Foundation –Dr. Zakir Naik – Introduction.” Retrieved April 1, 2011.

<[http://www.irf.net/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=22&Itemid=54](http://www.irf.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=22&Itemid=54)>.

in discussions with non-Muslims. This adds to his authority, external to the Quran, and is a part of his technique to appeal to his audience, as will be shown later.

According to Naik's website, he has been recognized as an influential Muslim leader throughout the world. George Washington University listed him in "The 500 Most Influential Muslims in the World" (without ranking); *The Indian Express* listed him among the 100 Most Powerful Indians of 2010.<sup>67</sup> The newspaper reports that:

The evangelist, who wears suits and ties and preaches Islam in English, is a powerful orator. His sermons on Peace TV-English boast of a viewership of 100 million. The channel is aired in more than 125 countries and was launched in North America last year. Last year, he launched Peace TV Urdu, which has 50 million viewers. In the last 14 years, Naik has given 1,300 public talks, including 100 in 2009.... Naik's 10-day "peace conference" last November in Mumbai was attended by a million people. His lecture at the same conference was attended by around 2 lakh, including former Malaysian deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim.<sup>68</sup>

The reasons listed for his acknowledgement are the same ones that have allowed him to gain popularity and religious authority throughout the subcontinent as well. This is not to claim that Naik has influenced all Muslims of the region and that he has not received any critical remarks from Muslims. On the contrary, responses to his influence and preaching vary. It is difficult to determine exactly which groups of people (e.g., feminists, progressive Muslims, Salafis) adhere to his teachings and which ones avoid and criticize him. However, with the wide range of material available on Naik on the Internet, it is important to take them into consideration for this study to offer a wider perspective on Muslims' opinion of him.

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid. Retrieved April 1, 2011. <[http://irf.net/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=165%3Abiodata-dr-zakir-naik&catid=57%3Aorators-international&Itemid=174](http://irf.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=165%3Abiodata-dr-zakir-naik&catid=57%3Aorators-international&Itemid=174)>.

<sup>68</sup> "The Most Powerful Indians in 2010," *The Indian Express*. February 5, 2010. Retrieved March 19, 2011. <<http://www.indianexpress.com/news/the-most-powerful-indians-in-2010-no.-8190/575690/4>>.

Rebuttals to Zakir Naik come from a variety of Muslim groups, including Shiites and Sunnis. In fact, one source claims that Naik is “the most hated public figure of today,” adding that it is “the Muslims and Islamic clerics who hate [him] the most.” The reasons this blog cites for critique are as follows: Vegetarian Muslims do not support Naik because he “justifies non-vegetarianism as a scientific Islamic trait”; “Muslims” do not like him because he “has a soft corner for Osama bin Laden” and “admires him because he has terrorized America”; “many devout Muslims” take their dress very seriously and “hate” Naik for appearing to be a conservative but wearing non-Islamic attire: a suit and a tie; Sufis do not support him because he condemns their practice of Islam; Shiites oppose him because he admires Yazid, who, according to Islamic history, was responsible for killing Husayn, the grandson of the Prophet and the second Shiite Imam; progressive Muslims do not like him because he claims that, since Muslims are the only believers who have not corrupted God’s message, non-Muslims are prohibited Islamically from preaching their religions on Muslim lands, while Muslims are responsible for propagating Islam on non-Muslim lands;<sup>69</sup> “Muslim women” are against Naik because in the name of “pseudo-science,” he restricts “their freedom that has been ordained by the Creator;” “the list,” the source claims, is ever-ending – “[so] much that now even Wahabis [sic] have started calling Zakir Bhai a Shaitan.”<sup>70</sup> Despite this listing, it cannot be determined easily, as mentioned earlier, which groups of Muslims accept him and which reject him. Many women and feminists, for instance, appreciate him because he supports women’s rights and denounces certain practices, such as forced marriages and female infanticide, that are prevalent in India and other countries with large Muslim populations. This can be noted from the reaction of the female

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<sup>69</sup> “Non-Muslims will not have equal human rights – Zakir Naik.” January 26, 2008. YouTube. Viewed April 1, 2011. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6jYUL7eBdHg>>.

<sup>70</sup> “Why Muslims Consider Zakir Naik A Shaitan,” Feb. 16<sup>th</sup> 2010. Retrieved September 25<sup>th</sup> 2010. <http://www.zimbio.com/Islam/articles/kGFsVICMdYz/Muslims+Consider+Zakir+Naik+Shaitan>.

audience in Naik's lectures in which he discusses women's Islamic rights, as well as the views they express of Zakir Naik on the Internet.

In a book titled *Zakir Naik: A Crisis in the Making* (December 2010), Mudassir Ahmad Qasmi heavily criticizes Naik not only for teaching Islam but also for offering commentaries on Qur'anic verses without having the qualifications to do so. He writes that

Dr. Zakir Naik stands in the category of those people who made their own commentary of the many verses of the glorious Qur'an. Is it just a wrong commentary to satisfy his audience? He has done it repeatedly. For [instances,] when he was asked, if a man is given houris in paradise, what would be given to a woman. He replied women would be given male houris. It is not merely a mistake but rather it is a blunder. It is proved by the context of the verse in which this matter is mentioned that houris would only be female. Moreover in the entire collection of hadith there is not even a single shred of evidence in support of his comment.<sup>71</sup>

Mudassir's claim that there is not a "single shred of evidence" that support Naik's claim that both men and women will have *houris* in the hereafter suggests that Naik has not studied existing commentaries on those verses relevant to the subject of *houris*. If he is familiar with them, then he is clearly disagreeing with what is considered a standard opinion. This is clearly one instance during which Naik conducts *tafsīr*, or commentary on the Qur'an. Mudassir also states that "most of the prominent *ulama* who have national or international fan following have so far kept themselves away from Dr. Zakir's stage...."<sup>72</sup> The list of such '*ulama*, according to Qasmi, includes mostly Debandi scholars,<sup>73</sup> who have been strong opponents of Naik's teachings.

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<sup>71</sup> Muddassir Ahmad Qasmi, *Zakir Naik: A Crisis in the Making* (Mumbai: Eastern Crescent, 2010), 20.

<sup>72</sup> Qasmi, *Zakir Naik*, 22.

<sup>73</sup> Qasmi, *Zakir Naik*, 22.



The Deoband *madrasah*, a traditional Islamic institution founded in 1866 in India, has issued several *fatawa* (singular: *fatwa*), or legal opinions, against Zakir Naik. One fatwa states, “The statements made by Dr Zakir Naik indicate that he is a preacher of *Ghair Muqallidin* [non-conformist; does not abide by one specific *madhhab*, or school of thought;] he is of free mind and does not wear Islamic dress. One should not rely upon his speeches.”<sup>74</sup> Another *fatwa* declares that “according to the sayings of Zakir Naik quoted in people[']s questions, he is religiously deviated, some of his talks are unauthentic. A *common man* may not be able to differentiate between right and wrong; therefore[,] people should avoid listening [to] his speeches[:] they are feared to fall in deviation” (emphasis added).<sup>75</sup> Clearly, one is not to rely on Naik’s knowledge because he is a “common man,” which may mean that he is not a Deoband scholar. Another *fatwa* adds in, response to a question about whether or not the questioner should listen to Naik’s lectures,

Religion should always be learnt through authorized Ulama and authentic books. According to the beliefs and thought that we know about him, he is deviated from the path of well-versed Ulama in many of the thoughts. His approach seems contradicted to authentic Ulama of *salaf*. Therefore, one should avoid attending his programmes. However, if you happen to listen [to] his talk you should not rely him until you confirm it by any Aalim.<sup>76</sup>

The opinion expressed concerns Naik’s credentials. While Naik indirectly asserts himself as an authority on Islam, his listeners should verify his teachings with a ‘*alim*, according to the Deobandi muftis. The Deoband School rejects Naik as an authority because he is not a ‘*alim*, and the ‘*ulama* are to be well-versed in many Islamic thoughts before they issue opinions on Islamic

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<sup>74</sup> Darul-Ifta: Darul-Uloom Deoband, “Faiths and Beliefs: Deviant Sects and Beliefs.” August 21, 2008. Retrieved August 18, 2010. <<http://darulifta-deoband.org/viewfatwa.jsp?ID=7077>>.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid, “Miscellaneous: Others.” April 7, 2009. Retrieved October 21, 2010. <<http://darulifta-deoband.org/viewfatwa.jsp?ID=11443>>.

<sup>76</sup> Darul-Ifta: Darul-Uloom Deoband, “Miscellaneous: History and Biography.” January 13, 2008. Retrieved October 18, 2010. <<http://darulifta-deoband.org/viewfatwa.jsp?ID=2415>>.

subjects. Perhaps this is an indication that only Deobandi scholars should be relied upon for authentic information about Islam. After all, as Cornell points out, it is “the legitimate task of the ulama, as guardians of normative Islam, to establish a clearly demarcated community of belief by maintaining common standards of doctrine and practice.”<sup>77</sup> This comment supports the Deobandi *fatwa* in that Naik is performing the role of a ‘*alim* without having the certification to do so, and Deoband therefore advises Muslims not to follow Naik’s teachings.

Naik has been characterized as an illegitimate authority in *fatwas* outside of the Deoband School as well: Mufti Muhammad Ashraf Qadri, a Pakistani Islamic scholar, issued a *fatwa* against Naik in 2008 as a result of the “calls from Sunni Islamic scholars” demanding that Naik be banned from preaching.<sup>78</sup> A *fatwa* was issued also by the Qazi of Lucknow, Maulana Mufti Abdul Irfan Qadvi, because of Naik’s support “for Osama Bin Laden on terrorism and asking the youths to join terrorism.”<sup>79</sup> In the *fatwa*, the Qazi also demanded a ban on Peace TV [Zakir Naik’s television station] and asked the authorities to probe into the funds received by Dr Naik for his support to the terrorism. The *fatwa* says that he should be treated as ‘Kafir’ and be debarred from the Muslim community.”<sup>80</sup> It should be mentioned that Naik’s statement about bin Laden was taken out of context; his final statement was, “If he [Osama bin Laden] is terrorizing the terrorists, if he is terrorizing America the terrorist, the biggest terrorist, I am with him. Every Muslim *should* be a terrorist. The thing is that if he is terrorizing a terrorist, he is following

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<sup>77</sup> Vincent Cornell, “Faḳīh Versus Faqīr in Marinid Morocco: Epistemological Dimensions of a Polemic” in *Islamic Mysticism Contested: Thirteen Centuries of Controversies and Polemics*, eds. F. D. Jong and B. Radtke (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 207.

<sup>78</sup> “BFM Supports the Zakir Naik Ban.” June 23, 2010. Retrieved October 7, 2010.

<<http://www.spittoon.org/archives/6855>>.

<sup>79</sup> “BFM Supports the Zakir Naik Ban.”

<sup>80</sup> “BFM Supports the Zakir Naik Ban.”

Islam.”<sup>81</sup> Naik explains that he does not know what bin Ladin does and whether he is a terrorist or not, but that if he fights the enemies of Islam, particularly America, then he has Naik’s support. However, Naik could have been more careful in expressing his thoughts about bin Laden and terrorism considering the consequences of such a matter.

Despite the views of some scholars as well as of other Muslims who do not support him, Naik to receive support from a large number of Muslims. His fans include young educated students who have decided not to take western scientists seriously anymore, observe Geoffrey Samuel and Santi Rozario, anthropology professors at Cardiff University (UK).<sup>82</sup> In an interview with said researchers, Bangladeshi informants expressed much reverence towards Zakir Naik. One interviewee says,

Over the last four years or so, a man known as Dr Zakir, you might have heard about him? . . . Today’s generation believe in science and technology. Dr Zakir Naik has some lectures which are attracting the young generation. For example, God’s word, Quran and Modern Science, Reconciliation or Contradiction. Young people are now thinking, there are so much scientific things in the Quran, let me read and see.<sup>83</sup>

This comment supports Naik’s own objectives to teach Islam taking a more rational and scientific approach to appeal to the educated youth.

## 2.2: Other Preachers

Other influential contemporary Muslim preachers include Ahmed Deedat of South Africa and Amr Khaled of Egypt. The IRF website lists a number of them, but because this study highlights

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<sup>81</sup> “Every Muslim Should be a Terrorist – Mullah Zakir Naik.” December 2, 2006. YouTube. Viewed April 1, 2011. 00:30-00:45. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bxk5AAA5FbI>>.

<sup>82</sup> Geoffrey Samue and Santi Rozario, “Contesting science for Islam: The Media as a Source of Revisionist Knowledge in the Lives of Young Bangladeshis.” *Contemporary South Asia*, 18:4 (201), 427-441.

<sup>83</sup> Samue and Rozario, “Contesting science for Islam,” 429.

the role of those preachers who lack formal training from traditional Islamic institutions, many of the preachers listed on IRF do not bear much pertinence in this study, because they have obtained the necessary training. I will discuss Ahmed Deedat and Amr Khaled in detail because Deedat influenced Naik to become a proselytizer, and Naik has adopted his style of preaching. Amr Khaled is considered a “phenomenon” in the Arab world in the same manner that Zakir Naik is considered a “phenomenon” in the South Asian world; both are clearly influential and iconic figures in their regions with immense support.

### *Ahmed Deedat*

Zakir Naik’s major influence, he says, has been Sheikh Ahmad Hoosen Deedat. Deedat was born in Surat, India, on July 1, 1918. Suffering from extreme poverty in India and being unable to receive formal education, he migrated to South Africa at the age of nine in 1927. His mother passed away a few months after his migration. He started school in South Africa but was unable to complete it as a consequence of a family financial crisis. He began working in retailing. In 1936, he worked at a store, owned by a Muslim, near a Christian seminary on the Natal South Coast. This time and place are recorded as perhaps the most significant of his life, because “working in a country shop near a mission school [subjected him] to taunting by students critical of Islam.”<sup>84</sup> The “incessant insults of the trainee missionaries hurled against Islam during their brief visits to the store infused a stubborn flame of desire within the young man to counteract their false propaganda.”<sup>85</sup> In an effort to contest the “false propaganda” of the missionaries who visited him, he began seeking information on Islam, starting by chance with a book called *Izhar*

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<sup>84</sup> Brian Larkin, “Ahmed Deedat and Islamic Evangelism.” *Social Text* 96. 26.3 (2008), 105.

<sup>85</sup> IRF. “Ahmed Hoosen Deedat.” 2009. Retrieved March 20, 2011.

[http://www.irf.net/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=164%3AAbiodata-ahmed-deedat-&catid=57%3Aorators-international&Itemid=174](http://www.irf.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=164%3AAbiodata-ahmed-deedat-&catid=57%3Aorators-international&Itemid=174).

*al-Haqq* (“The Truth Revealed”) (1864) by Allamah Rahmatullah Kairanavi ( d. 1891), an Indian Shiite Muslim theologian.

*Izhar al-Haqq*, originally written in Arabic, was an attempt to challenge Christianity during British rule in India. It was a response to Christian polemics against Islam that were prevalent throughout India at the time. The country “had become opened to Protestant Christian missionary activities by a decree of the British Parliament in 1813 [... and in] 1832/1833 non-British missionary agencies were allowed to follow and began to establish their net of Christian mission all over India.”<sup>86</sup> The book is said to be recognized internationally as “one of the most authoritative and objective studies of the Bible.”<sup>87</sup> The author’s “intention ... was first of all to show that the Bible cannot in any way be considered as a directly revealed book,” and he “demonstrates beyond doubt that the Books of the Old and New Testaments have been altered, almost beyond recognition, from their original forms.”<sup>88</sup> The book influenced Ahmed Deedat, who became known as a “response” to “the massive rise of evangelical Christianity and a media presence to rival Christian preachers”;<sup>89</sup> Deedat, in turn, influenced Zakir Naik, who continues to use a similar approach to teaching and preaching Islam.

Borrowing Kairanavi’s style of debate with Christians and Christian televangelists’ methods of promoting their faith, Deedat established the Islamic Propagation Center in 1957.<sup>90</sup> The center’s objectives include making the message of Islam heard and understood and presenting Muslims as a blessing to mankind.<sup>91</sup> Initially a local organization and now an

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<sup>86</sup> Christine Schirrmacher, “The Influence of German Biblical Criticism on Muslim Apologetics in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.” Published 1997. Retrieved April 1, 2011. <<http://www.contra-mundum.org/schirrmacher/rationalism.html#fn5>>.

<sup>87</sup> IslamForAll, “About the book and its Author.” Retrieved April 1, 2011. <<http://islam4all.com/newpage81.htm>>.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Larkin, 101.

<sup>90</sup> Larkin, 105.

<sup>91</sup> “The IPCI beyond Sheikh Ahmed Deedat.” Retrieved March 25, 2011. <<http://www.ahmed-deedat.co.za/frameset.asp>>.

international one, it continues to play a vital role in propagating Islam. Among Deedat's other accomplishments are the more than 20 books he has published and the millions of copies he has distributed to Muslims and non-Muslims free of charge; his numerous lectures all over the world; his public debates with Christian evangelists; and the several thousand people who have converted to Islam as a result of his efforts.<sup>92</sup> The books he has authored include *Al Qur'an: the Ultimate Miracle* (1986), *Arabs and Israel – Conflict or Conciliation?* (1989), *Crucifixion or Cruci-Fiction?* (1990), *Is the Bible God's Word?* (1990), *What the Bible says about Muhammed* (pbuh) (1991), and *The Choice - Between Islam and Christianity - Volumes I and II* (1993). In 1986, the King Faisal Foundation presented him with the King Faisal International award, a prestigious recognition in the Muslim world.<sup>93</sup> The award was for his service and contribution to Islam. Deedat passed away on August 8, 2005.

One point that differentiates Deedat from Naik is that Deedat rarely engaged in discussions on Shiism or Sufism;<sup>94</sup> he was more concerned with proving that Christianity is a false religion. Naik, however, speaks on many different Islamic topics and Muslim groups, including Shiites and Sufis; he is also involved in debates with Shiites and other non-Sunnis.<sup>95</sup> Their similarities include their approaches to handling questions from Muslims and non-Muslims, but especially Christians: They both use “a rationalist tone, using Christian texts themselves to prove their own errancy.”<sup>96</sup> With atheists and agnostics, Naik avoids relying on religious scriptures to support his arguments and instead turns to logic.

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<sup>92</sup> IRF.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Larkin, 106.

<sup>95</sup> “Dr. Zakir Naik Vs. Brelvi or Shia.” October 2009. YouTube. Viewed April 1, 2011.

<<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IUJrBI7aJIQ>>.

<sup>96</sup> Larkin, 108.

**Amr****Khaled**

Amr Khaled was born in Alexandria, Egypt, on September 5, 1967. He graduated from Cairo University in 1988 with a degree in accounting. In 1997, he was invited to deliver a sermon “on good manners at his social club’s mosque.”<sup>97</sup> He gave up his accounting career in 1998 to become a full-time preacher. It was in Ramadhan of 1981 that he realized he wanted to develop a relationship with God. Once he had developed a high level of personal piety, he was able to inspire other Muslims to do the same. In 2010, he obtained his PhD in Islamic *Shari’a* with high honors from Wales University in the UK; his thesis title was “Islam and Co-existence.”<sup>98</sup> He also founded the Right Start Foundation, based in the UK, which aims to address “the current state of our society, promoting positive values and helping, reducing and avoiding its negative elements,”<sup>99</sup> among other objectives, all of which highlight social issues and provide practical solutions to them.

According to Khaled’s resume, his website ([www.AmrKhaled.net](http://www.AmrKhaled.net)) is “classified as the most famous Arabic website, the first individual website worldwide and ranked as number 425 among all other websites all over the world. [It attracts more] than 2 millions visitors monthly [*sic*].<sup>100</sup> His lectures and sermons appear to millions of Muslims across the globe, but particularly in the Middle East, since he speaks in Arabic. He “brings a modern message to millions of

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<sup>97</sup> “Amr Khaled.” *Encyclopædia Britannica*. 2011. Retrieved Apr 1, 2011.

<<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/1240840/Amr-Khaled>>.

<sup>98</sup> “Amr Khaled, Founder.” Right Start Foundation International. Retrieved April 1, 2011.

<[http://www.rightstart.org.uk/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=24&Itemid=111](http://www.rightstart.org.uk/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=24&Itemid=111)>.

<sup>99</sup> “Our Mission.” Right Start Foundation International. Retrieved April 1, 2011.

<[http://www.rightstart.org.uk/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=20&Itemid=107](http://www.rightstart.org.uk/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=20&Itemid=107)>.

<sup>100</sup> Amr Khaled. Retrieved March 23, 2011. <<http://amrkhaled.net/newsite/uploads/Resume-English-updated.pdf>>.

disenchanted youth across the Muslim world” and his “satellite TV programs are seen in over 20 million homes across the west and Middle East.”<sup>101</sup>

Like Zakir Naik, Amr Khaled is no longer “just” a preacher; he is a “phenomenon”—the Amr Khaled phenomenon—an influential television icon in the Arab world. They both attract predominantly the youth and women: the youth because “they are our future” and women because they need to be empowered and encouraged so that Muslims might have a better future.<sup>102</sup> According to the *New York Times*, Khaled is “the world’s most famous and influential televangelist.”<sup>103</sup> As discussed above, Naik has been counted among the most influential leaders of the Muslim world.

The differences between Zakir Naik and Amr Khaled are many, however, an important one being that Khaled holds a Ph.D. in Islamic Studies and is there academically trained in the subject. Whereas Naik attempts to prove other religions wrong, arguing that the only solution for humanity is Islam, Khaled “achieved global fame with his message of religious tolerance and dialogue with the West.”<sup>104</sup> Naik maintains that Islam is a religion of peace and justice, but his opposition to the West, particularly America, and everything that represents the West is clear in most of his lectures. Khaled, too, asserts that Islam is a religion of peace, but he argues that there are “no anti-Muslim conspiracies in the West” and “coexistence, not terrorism, is the answer.”<sup>105</sup> He proposes that the solution to better, more peaceful relations between Muslims and the West is

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<sup>101</sup> “Amr Khaled on CBS News.” December 18, 2007. Viewed March 25, 2011. (00:22-00:26 & 00:50-00:56). <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sT503AEqBIY&feature=related>>.

<sup>102</sup> “Amr Khaled's Quest for Muslim-West Dialogue.” March 7, 2008. YouTube. Viewed March 25, 2011. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FiTd2yWQU84&feature=related>>.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid, 0:02-0:08.

<sup>104</sup> “Amr Khaled.” *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, 2011. April 2, 2011. <<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/1240840/Amr-Khaled>>.

<sup>105</sup> “Amr Khaled on CBS News” 0(1:20-01:32).



for both to “find overlapping projects to work together.”<sup>106</sup> Another significant difference between the two preachers is the languages in which they deliver their lectures: Khaled lectures in Arabic, while Naik lectures in English and rarely in Urdu. Their style also differs in that Naik’s lectures are more lecture-based, seemingly intended to inform and teach, whereas Khaled’s bear a closer relation to sermons, are emotional, and often bring the audience to tears.

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid, (1:58-2:38)

### Chapter 3: Zakir Naik's Presentation

Zakir Naik is well aware of the kind of people to whom he appeals, and he therefore speaks to them in a tone and manner that he is confident they would welcome. They admire and follow him for several reasons, discussed in this chapter.

#### 3.1: Naik's Audience

Naik's audience appears to be mostly modern, educated, and English-speaking. I use the term "modern" here to mean supporting or upholding values that have been developed recently, especially in the contemporary era. Examples of such values include gender equality and human rights. Most in his audience also wear non-traditional (i.e., non-Indian) or Western clothing, including suits and ties. Naik himself, in fact, wears a suit and a tie. Importantly, ties are considered unacceptable by many Muslims,<sup>107</sup> and those who wear them are categorized as "western," which in effect means disbelieving or un-Islamic.<sup>108</sup>

As mentioned previously, Naik is a medical doctor by training. This is important to bear in mind because doctors in India "have carved the reputation of having good moral characters and behaviors."<sup>109</sup> Since it is assumed that they have a good, moral character, they are trusted enough for others to rely on them for true information. The importance of doctors in the Indian society cannot be overstated. Examples of the reverence to doctors are reflected in the pressures that many Indian parents apply on their student children to study medicine. Conversations with students of Indian background in medical school reveal that many of them enter the medical field

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<sup>107</sup> Islamic Academy, "Is it allowed for Muslims to wear a Tie?" Retrieved April 1, 2011.

<<http://www.islamicacademy.org/html/Fatwa/English/Tie.htm>>.

<sup>108</sup> Ozay Mehmet, *Islamic Identity and Development: Studies of the Islamic Periphery* (London: Routledge, 1990), 36.

<sup>109</sup> Chittabrata Palit and Achintya Kumar Dutta, *History of Medicine in India: The Medical Encounter* (Delhi: Kalpaz Publication, 2005), 245.

to make their parents proud, to fulfill their parents' dream, and to prove their intelligence. For instance,

For as long as [Amy] can remember, [her parents] planned for her to become a doctor. She recalls a time when, as an Asian Indian living far from her ethnic culture, she wanted to study Indian classical music. It was not until Amy moved away from her parents' home to do her residency that she felt free to pursue this interest.<sup>110</sup>

Many parents highly discourage their children, especially those who excel in their academics, from entering non-medical fields. It is believed throughout India that the arts (as opposed to the sciences) “are meant for idiots, that the more intelligent students opt for medicine, engineering, or management.”<sup>111</sup> Hence, those who enter the science field are considered intelligent. However, many parents pressure their children to become doctors not just because they might display signs of intelligence, but also because of the high income of doctors. Many students' personal accounts suggest that their parents also believe that doctors have “divine attributes” and are “god-like” people.<sup>112</sup>

Since doctors are given such importance in Asia, Naik's position as a medical doctor is perhaps the most important factor in his appeal to his audiences and followers. His opinions, teachings, statements have more value, particularly those that are related to science and the human body, because a trained doctor like Naik is believed to be qualified to make such statements, and others have a legitimate reason for trusting him. This idea, however, is not to suggest that his followers have superficial understanding of religion or of society, but it is important to point it out because of the way doctors are viewed in many societies: They are the

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<sup>110</sup> Clara Park, *Asia and Pacific American Education: Learning, socialization, and Identity* (Greenwich, Connecticut: Information Age Publication, 2006), 206.

<sup>111</sup> Charles Yesalis, *Anabolic Steroids in Sports and Exercise* (Champaign, Illinois: Human Kinetics, 2000), 240.

<sup>112</sup> “Did Your Parents Pressure You to Pursue a Certain Career?” March 29, 2008. Online Discussion. Retrieved April 1, 2010. <<http://www.physicsforums.com/showthread.php?t=224988>>.

saviors of the humankind. If humans can trust doctors with their lives, their bodies, their health, it appears, then they can certainly trust them with their souls; if God heals people through them physically, if God gives them the ability to heal people, then humans, too, should be able to trust them to guide them. Knowledge of the body, therefore, is deemed particularly important. Unlike most other doctors, however, Naik chose to give up his medical career to spread Islam, to bring people to Islam, and to renew the faith of the Muslim community in the modern world. This alone is enough for many Muslims to respect him, for he willingly chose to give up his high status in society in order to be a proselytizer. This is important to his followers because it presents him as someone who is certain enough in his knowledge of Islam, the religion of God, to teach it to the rest of the world. Not only this, but his passion for proselytizing suggests that he loves humans, both Muslims and non-Muslims but especially non-Muslims, and that is why he attempts to bring them to the right path. It also humbles Muslims in that, as one of his fans writes, he “could have gone working as a Doctor and made a good living, yet he decided to dedicate his life to the path of Allah, converting many to Islam all over the world. Wonder how many people any of us have converted with our words?”<sup>113</sup> Another fan says, “Dr. Zakir is doing a lot for Islam and he has converted many people to Islam. He should be praised for this.”<sup>114</sup> That he left his career, for which he had gone to several years of medical school, only to spread God’s message also shows that he does not involve himself in worldly matters and professions: while being a doctor would have enabled him to save lives and promote a more healthy society, being a

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<sup>113</sup> J. J. Robinson, “Islamic Ministry says Zakir Naik will be the ‘biggest event ever held in Maldives.’” April 15, 2010. Retrieved December 19, 2010. <<http://minivannews.com/society/islamic-ministry-says-zakir-naik-will-be-the-biggest-event-ever-held-in-the-maldives-5959>>.

<sup>114</sup> “Zakir Naik is Called *Kafir* by Barelvi Ulama.” February 25, 2010. Online Discussion. Retrieved April 1, 2011. <<http://www.sunniforum.com/forum/archive/index.php/t-55961.html>>. (Original comment is edited for grammar.)

preacher is more rewarding in the afterlife because of the thousands who may convert by listening to him.

Naik's skilled oration also appeals to listeners, which contributes to his aplomb in handling questions and allaying the doubts of those who listen to him. He challenges his audience to ask questions and assures them that he will give them an answer that they will find convincing. Many different types of questions are asked of him, and he has answered each one, never faltering or saying, "I do not know" or "I need to review or verify this information before I speak on it."

Naik's outer piety adds to his appearance and presentation of himself as an authority on Islam. One fan writes that Zakir Naik follows the *sunnah* since he has a beard, wears his pants above his ankles, and covers his head.<sup>115</sup> Naik teaches that these are the commandments of the Prophet and are obligatory upon all Muslim men. In response to a question that asked, "There is so much confusion on a simple thing as the trousers or pant covering the ankle. While different Alims explain this based on their own school of thought, what is the authentic ruling on this as guided by the prophet (pbuh)?" Naik replied:

There is no difference of opinion amongst the scholars with regards to covering/noncovering of the ankles. All the scholars, regardless of their different schools of thought and differences in many issues, have no difference of opinion in this regard.... Thus it is forbidden for men to cover their ankles with their lower garments i.e. trousers/pants/izars etc.... There may be few Muslims who tend to differ on the subject due to ignorance.... However, there are many Ahadith in which the Prophet has instructed in unambiguous words to wear the Izar above the ankles without mentioning

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<sup>115</sup> "Dr. Zakir Naik's Truth (new) 5 Dec.2010 by Moulana Syed Anzarshah Qasmi (Banglora)." May 12, 2010. Online Discussion. Retrieved April 1, 2011. <<http://www.sunniforum.com/forum/showthread.php?65980-Dr.zakir-Naik-s-Truth-%28new%29-5.dec.2010-My-moulana-Syed-Anzarshah-qasmi>>.

the aspect of pride or arrogance.... Thus, it is incumbent upon the Muslim men to wear the pants/trousers/izars above the ankles.<sup>116</sup>

Naik thus assures his followers that he follows the command of the Prophet by justifying his display of piety through *hadith* reports.

Many other factors also explain why Naik has attracted such a large audience. The audience includes not just those who watch his lectures online or through other new media but also those who subscribe to his Peace TV channel, which, according to Naik, is “the most watched Islamic TV channel of the world” with “a worldwide audience of some 75 million.”<sup>117</sup> One Bangladeshi female student states that she likes Zakir Naik’s shows “because he has answers to all questions. And he does not only read Quran, he also reads Gita, Bible, and has ideas about all these and more. And he answers his questions beautifully.”<sup>118</sup> It is important to note that Naik has never, according to my understanding, expressed a lack of knowledge about a topic or question he was asked. He offers quick, direct, and simple answers to most questions, and that makes his audience believe that he is certain about what he says.

Naik’s lectures on peace and his belief that the only way world peace can be achieved is if the entire world embraces Islam are important to his followers. His main television program, in fact, is titled “Peace TV,” which is not about peace alone but argues that the only way to achieve world peace is to convert non-Muslims to Islam. It also clarifies misconceptions about Islam. He thus organizes and leads conferences annually on the subject of peace and Islam. The first such conference was held from November 23 to December 2, 2007, and its purpose was “to create

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<sup>116</sup> Zakir Naik, *Question and Answers on Islam*. Electronic Book. Retrieved April 1, 2011.

<<http://www.scribd.com/doc/15685367/Q-A-on-Islam>> pp. 22-23.

<sup>117</sup> Syed Neaz Ahmad, “Justice, Peace, and Unity: The Cornerstone of Islam”

<http://www.saudigazette.com.sa/index.cfm?method=home.regcon&contentID=200803311990&archiveissuedate=31/03/2008>

<sup>118</sup> Samuel and Rozario, 430.

better awareness and understanding of Islam and its message of peace for the entire humanity.”<sup>119</sup> This was clearly “the first conference of its kind in the history of the Muslim world.”<sup>120</sup> Naik’s efforts to bring and promote peace and to argue that there is an Islamic basis for world peace assure Muslims, particularly his followers, that his intentions are positive and honorable, for he strives sincerely to make the world a safer and more peaceful place for Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

A relevant point to this study’s theme of authority is that Zakir Naik’s major influence was Ahmed Deedat, as discussed previously. Deedat wrote him that “Zakir, my son, I am proud of you.... Keep up the good work.”<sup>121</sup> And “My son, you have achieved in four years what took me forty years.”<sup>122</sup> Deedat is also reported to have called him “Deedat Plus” in 1994; he also “presented a plaque in May 2000 with the engraving ‘Awarded to Dr. Zakir Abdul-Karim Naik for his achievement in the field of Da’wah and the study of Comparative Religion.’”<sup>123</sup> It can be argued that Deedat granted Naik authorization to teach Islam, for if Deedat had not approved, he would not have supported Naik’s efforts and achievements, even though Naik did not study under Deedat, nor was he trained by him. However, since Deedat himself was not qualified to present such authorizations, the argument does not hold valid. Nonetheless, it must be recognized that Deedat’s comments about Naik bolstered the latter’s authority. Further, Deedat’s death

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<sup>119</sup> Syed Neaz Ahmad, “Justice, Peace, and Unity: The Cornerstone of Islam” <http://www.saudigazette.com.sa/index.cfm?method=home.regcon&contentID=200803311990&archiveissuedate=31/03/2008>

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> “How Deedat Made Me Daaee - Dr. Zakir Naik (1/8).” January 25, 2009. YouTube. Viewed April 1, 2011. 04:34-04:42. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C2EIEpBbTfg>>.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid, 07:28-07:31.

<sup>123</sup> “Dr. Zakir Abdul-Karim Naik - President, IRF.” Retrieved April 1, 2011. <[http://www.irf.net/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=165%3AAbiodata-dr-zakir-naik&catid=57%3Aorators-international&Itemid=174](http://www.irf.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=165%3AAbiodata-dr-zakir-naik&catid=57%3Aorators-international&Itemid=174)>.

makes Naik even more important because he gained Deedat's followers and serves as Deedat's successor.

Moreover, Naik sacrificed a successful career in medicine solely to serve God. He made this decision in 1991 after being inspired by Ahmed Deedat. This important sacrifice attests to his piety and dedication to serving God.

Clearly, Naik's perceived ability to convert people to Islam is much appreciated by his fans, who almost always cite Naik's zeal for the conversion of non-Muslims to Islam as one of his most important and unique contributions to Islam—and to humanity: He guides people to the path of God. This is because, as Naik emphasizes, it is the duty, the obligation, of every Muslim to share the message of Islam with as many non-Muslims as possible and to convert them to Islam.<sup>124</sup> Sharing the message apparently does not mean simply teaching the religion; it also means inviting others to Islam. Naik therefore offers *da'wah*, proselytizing, courses in which he teaches his students how to make Islam more attractive to non-Muslims and shows how to convert them to Islam.

Other appealing characteristics of Naik's preaching are his sharp memory, which enables him to recite not just the Qur'an and hadiths but non-Islamic sacred scriptures, such as the Vedas and the Bible, as well, and his frequent travels to America and Europe to debate with theologians. These points have "made Naik quite a star in Central Mumbai."<sup>125</sup> In an era and in a world where there is little attention given to memorizing entire scriptures or texts because of the pressures of modernization, Naik proves himself an exceptional character and orator for being a *hafiz*, a memorizer of the Qur'an. Memorizing the Qur'an and *hadiths* was one of the most

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<sup>124</sup> Zakir Naik, *Answers to Non-Muslims' Common Questions about Islam* (New Delhi: Al-Hasanat Books, 2006), 2.

<sup>125</sup> Thomas Blam Hansen, *Wages of Violence: Naming and Identity in Postcolonial Bombay*, 177.



effective ways of preserving Islam in classical Islamic times. As Makdisi points out, “The development of the memory is a constant feature of medieval education in Islam. [Those who possessed prodigious memories] were referred to in the biographical works as ‘oceans’ (*bahr*) of learning, ‘receptacles’ (*wi’a*’, pl. *au’iya*) of knowledge.”<sup>126</sup> Even in modern times, in fact—although not as common as in pre-modern times—memorizing the Qur’an is given much importance because the one who memorizes the Qur’an is considered a “preserver” of revelation. Since “the memorizer carries (*hamala*) the Qur’an in memory, he or she is a special kind of person ... who performs religious obligation on behalf of the community.”<sup>127</sup> Naik thus has earned his audience’s respect for being a preserver not only of the Qur’an but of the Bible but also of the Vedas.

Perhaps another quality that Zakir Naik’s fans appreciate about him is that he does not consider himself a Sunni, a Shiite, or an adherent to any other sect of Islam. When asked about the correctness of an Islamic branch and what he wants Muslims to call themselves, for instance, he responds, “Making sects, making divisions in the religion of Islam is prohibited.”<sup>128</sup> However, it is clear that he identifies “sects” as the four Sunni schools of thought, for he adds, “What was the Prophet? Was the Prophet Hanafi, was he Shafi, was he Hanbali, was he Maliki? What was he? He was a Muslim!”<sup>129</sup> This suggests that he does not recognize Shiites as Muslims, since they are not among the “sects” to which he alludes. Naik argues in another lecture that in Islam,

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<sup>126</sup> Makdisi, 99.

<sup>127</sup> Anna M. Gade, *Perfection Makes Practice: Learning, Emotion, and the Recited Qurān in Indonesia* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 2004), 62.

<sup>128</sup> “Which Sect Are You?” December 30, 2009. YouTube. Viewed April 1, 2011. 01:14-01:26

<<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k4w0bYOioj0>>.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid*, 01:33-01:41.

there are no Shiites and Sunnis.<sup>130</sup> When asked which sect will go to heaven, he answers that since the Qur'an prohibits the creation of sects in Islam and since the Prophet said that only the sect that follows him and God will go to heaven, Muslims are not permitted to refer to themselves by name any other than "Muslim," that the Muslims who will go to heaven are those who not only avoid creating new sects but also do not adhere to any except "Islam."<sup>131</sup> This suggests to his listeners that he strives to avoid dividing the Muslim community. However, he denies that Sufism is a correct form of Islam on the grounds that it is *shirk*, or polytheism.<sup>132</sup> While he avoids defining himself through labels, this may beg the question of whether or not he is a Salafi, a group of Muslims "known to emphasize ... the unity and sovereignty of God over everything; reject ... innovation; and believe in the necessity of ... the declaration of heresy, which is punishable by death, and the in the notion of the centrality of *jihad* [or holy war]."<sup>133</sup>

As mentioned earlier, Zakir Naik believes that what he teaches is not from him but from God, that his teachings are not his interpretations but the interpretation of God. This, of course, legitimates his position as an authority, for it illustrates his humility and allows his followers and supporters to believe that he is doing service to the Muslim community by clearing up misconceptions about Islam among modern Muslim generations using the exact word of God, not his own "interpretation" of it. His followers, then, and perhaps many other groups of believers, do not consider what his specialty is but only what he teaches. It should also be noted that Zakir Naik holds "culture" responsible for all the wrongs committed in Muslim cultures,

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<sup>130</sup> "Shia or Sunni Muslims? Dr Zakir Naik." January 20, 2010. YouTube. Viewed April 1, 2011. 00:02-00:07. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QhqMdwiyg6c>>.

<sup>131</sup> "Zakir Naik ----Which sect will go to paradise??" September 13, 2009. YouTube. Viewed April 1, 2011. 00:57-01:00. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6TRhKfUa45c&feature=related>>.

<sup>132</sup> "Dr Zakir Naik - Question Regarding Sufis." YouTube.

<sup>133</sup> Akbar Ahmed, *Journey into America: The Challenge of Islam* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2007), 257.

particularly those against women—from domestic abuse to a lack of education for women to forced marriages to the denial of property rights to women. The “culture versus religion” argument is quite popular among young educated Muslims, and it appears to have started as a result of globalization.<sup>134</sup> According to this idea, “Islam,” in theory, is a perfect way of life, the path that all Muslims must strive to attain, but they are often hindered from doing so by “culture,” which is also seen as the reason for everything that is wrong in Muslim communities worldwide. “Culture” here usually refers to those practices of the Muslims that do not conform to “correct” Islam. This philosophy denies that, while there might be one Islam, there are multiple ways of understanding and practicing it. Naik suggest that culture be replaced with Islam, which is impossible from a sociological point of view because religions and cultures are inextricably connected and heavily embedded in each other and thus are inseparable. In fact, Michel Foucault and Jeremy Carrette suggest that “a culture cannot understand itself without first understanding its implicit connection and development within the constructs of religious belief and practice.”<sup>135</sup> Interestingly, though, Naik, while attempting to oppose “culture” to “Islam” and insisting that the mistreatment of women in the Muslim world is not due to “Islam” but rather due to “culture,” himself perpetuates a certain negative treatment of women with the interpretation of Islam that he promotes, as will be discussed below, for his interpretation, too, is a product of the culture that nurtured him. This can be concluded because his interpretation of women’s rights in Islam and his understanding of gender roles are a result of the social norms with which he grew up.

### **3. 2: Zakir Naik on Science**

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<sup>134</sup> Olivier Roy, *Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Ummah* (New York: Columbia UP, 2004), pp. 129 & 258.

<sup>135</sup> Michel Foucault and Jeremy R. Carrette, *Religion and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 33.

One of Naik's strongest points that attract his audience, possibly because of his medical knowledge, is his discussion on science in every lecture where he deems it pertinent. Because of the importance of science in the modern world, many Muslims have been reliant on science to understand Islam as well as to verify their faith. Currently, many Islamic websites emphasize the "scientific miracles" of the Qur'an in an effort to prove its authenticity and to negate the generally perceived clash between science and religion. Zakir Naik is neither the first nor the only one to have presented numerous lectures on "science in the Quran." Were he to avoid discussing science, or the "scientific miracles of the Qur'an" that are rampant in the virtual world today, it is unlikely that he would have achieved the popularity that he has. Moreover, his knowledge of medicine assures his audience that he is educated in the sciences enough to offer scientific explanations for many Islamic guidelines. His fans consider his lectures and publications on science and Islam to be among his most commendable contributions to Islam.

Many Hindus, Christians, and atheists attend Naik's lectures to pose questions and challenges towards him regularly; and Naik answers most questions by starting off with, "The sister/brother has asked a very good question." He believes that his thoughts on the "scientific miracles" of the Qur'an are cogent enough to convince the non-Muslims to embrace Islam. In his words,

Many atheists demand a scientific proof for the existence of God. I agree that today is the age of science and technology. Let us use scientific knowledge to kill two birds with one stone, i.e. to prove the existence of God and simultaneously prove that the Qur'an is a revelation of God.<sup>136</sup>

Hence, because it is "the age of science and technology," one must be able to respond to the challenges according to the call of the day. Naik also recognizes the fact that "a modern rational

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<sup>136</sup> Zakir Naik, "Proving the Existing of Allah to an Atheist." Retrieved April 4, 2011. <<http://www.islam101.com/tauheed/provingGodExists.htm>>.

man ... would never accept a religious scripture which says, in the best possible poetic language, that the world is flat. This is because we live in an age, where human reason, logic and science are given primacy.”<sup>137</sup> Since non-Muslims do not accept the Qur’an’s divinity, it would not make sense to invite them to Islam merely on the basis that the Qur’an is God’s message to all of humanity, and that the Qur’an warns that God will not accept from anyone a religion other than Islam.<sup>138</sup> Hence, the listener must be provided with concepts and facts that she accepts because they are universal knowledge, such as science. Naik therefore strives to collect established scientific facts, he writes, as evidence for the truth of Islam. Moreover, because many believe that religion and science, or faith and reason, cannot coexist,<sup>139</sup> Muslims, according to Naik, are responsible for educating them that the Qur’an, a Holy Book sent over fourteen hundred years ago, is replete with scientific facts.

In his book *Qur’an and Modern Science*, Naik discusses astronomy, physics, hydrology, geology, oceanology, zoology, medicine, physiology, embryology, and general science. In this section, I will explain briefly Zakir Naik’s stance on a couple of different subtopics in relation to Islam to show how he engages in the practice of *tafseer*, or exegesis, providing commentaries on Qur’anic verses that may or may not be correct according to traditionally accepted *tafseer*.

Naik teaches that the Big Bang Theory—which proposes that the universe was originally in a hot and dense state that expanded, cooled through expansion, and continues to expand today—is “profound scientific truth” that is explicitly supported by the Qur’an: “Do not the Unbelievers see that the heavens and the earth were joined together (as one unit of Creation), before We clove them asunder?” (Qur’an, 21:30) The Big Bang, he writes,

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<sup>137</sup> Naik, *Quran and Science*, 5.

<sup>138</sup> Quran, 3:85: “And whoever desires a religion other than Islam, it shall not be accepted from him, and in the hereafter he shall be one of the losers.”

<sup>139</sup> Chad Meister, *Introducing Philosophy of Religion* (London: Routledge, 2009), 148.

is supported by observational and experimental data gathered by astronomers and astrophysicists for decades. According to ‘The Big Bang’, the whole universe was initially one big mass (Primary Nebula). Then there was a ‘Big Bang’ (Secondary Separation) which resulted in the formation of Galaxies. These then divided to form stars, planets, the sun, the moon, etc. The origin of the universe was unique and the probability of it happening by ‘chance’ is nil.<sup>140</sup>

His quote gives one the impression that the theory is an established fact, for he states that it is “profound scientific truth”: “How could a book, which first appeared in the deserts of Arabia 1400 years ago, contain this profound scientific truth?”<sup>141</sup> However, the reality is that, while the Big Bang is the most widely accepted theory regarding the origin of the universe, many scientists reject it.<sup>142</sup> Naik’s point is that the Qur’an must be from God, the Creator, since it contains much scientific knowledge that was unknown to humankind until recent decades, while the Qur’an was revealed over 1400 years ago to a man who could not read or write.

Another scientific idea that Naik expounds on in his book is that “the shape of the earth is spherical,” which he claims was proven to be true in 1597 when Sir Francis Drake sailed across the earth.<sup>143</sup> Until that time, he writes, “men were afraid to venture out too far, for fear of falling off the edge!”<sup>144</sup> Some of the verses he draws on to support his point are ambiguous—for example, verse 31:29: “Seest thou not that Allah merges Night into Day and He merges Day into Night?” Nothing in this verse suggests what the shape of the earth might be. However, he explains that “Merging here means that the night slowly and gradually changes to day and vice versa. This phenomenon can only take place if the earth is spherical. If the earth was flat, there

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<sup>140</sup> Zakir Naik, *The Quran and Modern Science: Modern or Outdated?* (Riyadh: Darussalam, 2007), 6.

<sup>141</sup> Naik, *The Quran and Modern Science*, 6.

<sup>142</sup> See Alex Williams and John Hartnett, *Dismantling the Big Bang: God's Universe Rediscovered* (Green Forest: Master Press, 2006), and Ken Ham and Gary Vaterlaus, *War of the Worldviews: Powerful Answers for an Evolutionized Culture* (Petersburg, KY: Answers In Genesis, 2005).

<sup>143</sup> Naik, *Quran and Modern Science*, 8.

<sup>144</sup> Naik, *Quran and Modern Science*, 8.

would have been a sudden change from night to day and from day to night.”<sup>145</sup> He neglects to explain why or how the phenomenon can take place “only if the earth is spherical.” It is in verse 79:30 that a clearer idea about the shape is given: “And the earth, moreover, hath He made egg shaped.” He writes, “The Arabic word for egg here is *dahaaha* which means an ostrich-egg. The shape of an ostrich-egg resembles the geo-spherical shape of the earth.”<sup>146</sup> His translation of the term *dahaha* is incorrect because it is a verb, not a noun, and it means “He spread it.” Two translators of the Qur’an, Ali Ünal and Shabbir Ahmed, define the term *dahaha* as “egg-shaped,” and their translation of the verse reads, respectively: “And after that He has spread out the earth in the egg-shape (for habitability)”; “And after that He made the earth shoot out from the Cosmic Nebula and made it spread out egg-shaped.” Many other translators, including Pickthall and Yusuf Ali, define it as “expanded” or “spread.” Pickthall’s translates the verse as, “And after that He spread the earth,” while Yusuf Ali as “And the earth, moreover, hath He extended (to a wide expanse).”<sup>147</sup>

Naik cautions Muslims against belief in “all” evolution. In fact, without citing Qur’anic verses or *hadith*, he teaches that evolution only at the “microscopic level” is supported by Islam, he teaches. When responding to a question on how the Qur’an can be reconciled with the theory of evolution, he states that no book of science considers evolution a fact, that evolution is a theory and nothing more, that Charles Darwin wrote to his friend Thomas Thrompton in a letter that he does not believe in natural selection and evolution because he has not found supporting evidence, that Darwin observed only one species of finches (this is false: Darwin observed at least fourteen different species of finches), and that the reason evolution is taught in schools

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<sup>145</sup> Naik, *Quran and Modern Science*, 8.

<sup>146</sup> Naik, *Quran and Modern Science*, 9.

<sup>147</sup> For a more comprehensive comparison of the translation of Qur’anic verse 79:30, see “Islam Awakened.” <<http://www.islamawakened.com/Quran/79/30/default.htm>>.

today is that it goes against the Bible.<sup>148</sup> Another support for his claim is that “hundreds of noble prize winners and scientists have spoken against Darwin’s theory.”<sup>149</sup> Among the scientists he names who reject the theory of evolution is Albert Szent-Györgyi de Nagyrápolt, who won the Nobel Prize for discovering Vitamin C. However, today, evolution is considered a “fact” by modern scientists,<sup>150</sup> or at least as much of a fact as the Big Bang, and Naik does not share this view with his audience. Nonetheless, even if evolution were merely a theory and rejected by Nobel Prize winners, so is the Big Bang. It seems, then, that if decades later, science were to compile ample evidence in opposition to the Big Bang, then those who support it today using the Qur’an will be required to re-interpret the Holy Book such that “clove asunder” does not imply then what it does today. Similarly, if evolution, which argues that humans and apes have a common ancestor,<sup>151</sup> were to be proven accurate, Zakir Naik might have to face the dilemma of re-interpreting the Qur’anic verses that allude to evolution and retracting his previous opinions and statements.

Among the problems that these conflicting interpretations yield is that of making sense of each interlocutor’s perception of the compatibility between science and the Qur’an. As a result, one encounters the issue of accepting certain interpretations while rejecting others. As Hamid Rafiabadi notes, “Ibn Baz [d. 1999, Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia] and Ahmad Raza Khan [d. 1921, Indian Islamic scholar] wrote books against motion of earth (apparently inspired by Qur’an according to them), Sir Syed [d. 1898, Indian Islamic scholar and reformer] and sees it impossible to prove either earth’s motion or its stationary nature from the Qur’an, and Zakir Naik

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<sup>148</sup> “Zakir Naik vs Evolution (Debunking).” Youtube Video. Viewed November 3, 2010. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UhYxUBoFMYA>>.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

<sup>150</sup> Jerry Coyne, *Why Evolution is True* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009), xiii.

<sup>151</sup> Roger Lewin, *Human Evolution: An Illustrated Introduction* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2005), 95.



proves motion of earth and celestial bodies from Quran.”<sup>152</sup> Rafiabadi points out that there is already much disagreement about the meaning of verses that allegedly allude to science.

It may be fair to ask what it means to scientists that the Qur’an includes many scientific “miracles,” assuming that Naik’s interpretations of them are correct? As Hamid Rafiabadi (b. 1958) interjects, “Should [the] Big Bang model be declared divinely approved ... and ban research on steady state model basing our scientific fatwa on Quran?”<sup>153</sup> Does science “end” here, as Nadeem Paracha, Pakistani journalist and culture critic, phrases it?<sup>154</sup> Should humans continue research and exploring the world, or should they merely read the Qur’an or another Holy Scripture to understand the world around them? In reality, the text is read and interpreted in such a way that it supports what science might have shown by the time the interpreter provides his claims. For instance, theories are “just” theories, as in the case of evolution, unless support for them can be derived from the Quran, in which case these “mere theories” become facts.

Naik’s training as a medical doctor affords him the authorization to indulge in discussions on science. These discussions begin to hold a stronger value in the minds of his audience when gender, particularly women, is involved, because he attempts to use his science background to support his stance on gender roles and rights. It is his competent display of his scientific knowledge, however, that draws the audience to trust his teachings on gender roles in Islam, because in this case, too, he claims to use reason and science to explain Islamic injunctions.

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<sup>152</sup> Hamid Rafiabadi, *Challenges to Religions and Islam: A Study of Muslim Movements, Personalities, Issues and Trends*, Vol. 2 (New Delhi: Sarup & Sons, 2007), 722.

<sup>153</sup> Coyne, xiii.

<sup>154</sup> Nadeem Paracha, “Science Ends Here.” *The Nadeem F. Paracha Works Archive*. June 20, 2010. Retrieved April 1, 2011. <<http://nadeemfparacha.wordpress.com/2010/06/20/science-ends-here/#comment-1157>>.

### 3. 3: Zakir Naik on Women's Rights in Islam

As noted earlier, Naik has won the respect of many Sunni Muslims worldwide, with crowds of thousands attending his lectures and millions showing him support on online social networks. This reverence appears to be due in part to his ostensibly pro-women teachings of Islam and the promotion of education and scientific knowledge.<sup>155</sup> When scrutinized, however, his views relegate women to a secondary status in society, something disguised by his reiteration that Islam advocates the equality of women and men. He insists that their equality does not grant them equal rights in all aspects. He essentially suggests that women and men are equal in essence, but, because of their biological differences, they are designed to complement each other, not to have the same rights. He reinforces the idea of women's submission to men, albeit subtly, and thereby reaffirms the popular belief in men's inherent dominance and superiority over women. At the same time, he asserts that Islam is a religion that considers women equal partners of men.

Naik translates the first lines of Qur'anic verse 4:34, *Al-rijālu qawwāmūna 'ala al-nisā'i* as, "Men are the leaders of women," and "men are protectors and maintainers of women."<sup>156</sup> This translation allows him to teach that Islam prohibits women from holding any positions of authority, because doing so would entail their leadership over men, which, he argues, contravenes verse 4:34.

While it is possible that Zakir Naik agrees with the idea of equality between the two genders, it appears that his definition of equality is different than what one might expect—i.e.,

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<sup>155</sup> He frequently lectures on women's rights and has published a book entitled *Rights of Women in Islam: Modern or Outdated?* (2009) in which he attempts to show that the rights that Islam gave women are far more superior to what America and other western countries have given to women.

<sup>156</sup> Zakir Naik, *Rights of Women in Islam: Modern or Outdated?* (New Delhi: Adam Publishers & Distributors, 2009), 19.

that if women and men are equal, then they have equal and the same right—for how is one to reconcile the obvious contradiction in his argument? He does not, however, define the term “equality” other than to say, “Islam believes in equality of men and women. Equality does not mean identity.”<sup>157</sup> In other words, women and men are equal, perhaps in value and merit, but they are physically designed differently (i.e., their reproductive roles are differ). Certainly, two entities need not be the same in order to be equal in merit, but the apertures in his arguments are quite clear: he believes that to be equal, two groups do not need to look or be the same; however, to have equal rights, they must be the same. The concern here, then, is more regarding his definition of “equal rights” than of “equality.”

Naik presents a different translation of verse 4:34 in different instances. In his book *Rights of Women in Islam: Modern or Outdated?*, he translates the verse as: “Men are the protectors and maintainers of women, because Allah has given the one more (strength) than the other, and because they support them from their means.”<sup>158</sup> He adds, “Admittedly, a woman is a weaker sex and she has got to be given special protection in certain matters.”<sup>159</sup> This is a striking contradiction in his earlier claim that women and men are equal, for if they are equal, then why does one gender require the “special protection” of the other? Moreover, while he says that the two genders are equal, he designates men as “in charge of,” “the authority over,” or “the leaders of” women, thereby making women followers of and, arguably, subservient to men. With his assertion that women and men have equal status in Islam, Naik appeals to those Muslims who promote the equality of women and men in Islam and seek to find Islamic justifications for their beliefs. Since Naik appears to uphold social justice, including gender justice, he may attract progressive Muslims and Islamic feminists, because both groups strive to bring equality between

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<sup>157</sup> Naik, *Rights of Women in Islam*, 57.

<sup>158</sup> Naik, *Rights of Women in Islam*, 57.

<sup>159</sup> Naik, *Rights of Women in Islam*, 57.

the genders in addition to fighting against oppression of all forms but particularly of women using the Qur'an as their tool. Naik also relies on the Qur'an, citing verses to argue that women and men are equal in Islam—but that they have different roles and rights because they are biologically different from each other. Their roles, he asserts, complement their physical structure, as will be shown below.

In what follows, I discuss Qur'anic verse 4:34 and its interpretations by prominent Muslim translators and scholars, including Muslim feminists and Zakir Naik, to demonstrate Naik's ambiguous stance on women's rights in Islam. He subtly portrays women as the weaker gender and denies them all positions of authority. To illustrate this point, I discuss Naik's ruling on various examples and show how, once his statements are studied more carefully, he indirectly teaches the inequality between women and men despite his claim that they are equal.

#### *Interpreting Verse 4:34*

Naik uses his translation of the first part of verse 4:34 to support his claim that women may not hold any positions of authority. Since this is another instance in which Naik offers *tafseer*, it is crucial to present both the Arabic text and the multiple translations of the verse to make the reader aware that Naik's conclusion is merely one possible way to approach verse 4:34. The verse begins with: *Al-rijālu qawwāmūna 'ala al-nisā'i bima faḍḍala Allahu ba'dahum 'ala ba'din wa-bima anfaqu min amwālihim.*<sup>160</sup>

Pickthall: "Men are *in charge of* women, because Allah hath made the one of them *to excel* the other, and because they spend of their property (for the support of women)."

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<sup>160</sup> In the preceding translations, the English equivalent of *qawwam* is italicized in each version.

Azizah Al-Hibri: “Men are *qawwāmūn* (*caretakers*) over women, *bima* (to the extent, in circumstances where) God has given some of them more than others, and *bima* they support them from their means.”<sup>161</sup>

Ahmed Ali: “Men are the *support* of women as God gives some more means than others, and because they spend of their wealth (to provide for them).”

Yusuf Ali: “Men are *the protectors and maintainers* of women, because Allah has given the one *more (strength)* than the other, and because they support them from their means.”

Muhammad Asad: “Men *shall take full care* of women with the bounties which God has bestowed *more abundantly* on the former than on the latter, and with what they may spend out of their possessions.”<sup>162</sup>

Abul Ala Maududi: “Men are *the managers of the affairs* of women because Allah has made the one superior to the other.”<sup>163</sup>

Ahmad Shafaat: Men are (*meant to be righteous and kind*) *guardians* of women because God has favored some more than others and because they (i.e. men) spend out of their wealth.<sup>164</sup>

Khaled Abou El Fadl argues that *qawwām* “could mean the ‘protectors,’ ‘maintainers,’ ‘guardians,’ or even ‘servants.’”<sup>165</sup> He adds, “the same word is used in the Qur’an in one other

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<sup>161</sup> Don Browning, M. Christian Green, and John Witte, *Sex, Marriage, and Family in World Religions* (New York: Columbia UP, 2006), 179.

<sup>162</sup> Asma Barlas, *Believing Women’ in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur’an* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006), 185.

<sup>163</sup> Amina Wadud, *Qur’an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman’s Perspective* (New York: Oxford UP, 1998), 71.

<sup>164</sup> Ahmad Shafaat, “A Commentary on the Qur’an 4:34.” *The Modern Religion*, 1984. Retrieved November 23, 2010. <http://www.themodernreligion.com/women/dv-4-34-shafaat.html>.

<sup>165</sup> Abou El Fadl, *Speaking in God’s Name*, 210.

context, and that is when Muslims are commanded to be the *qawwāmūn* of justice.”<sup>166</sup> Other scholars, like Amina Wadud, choose not to translate the term *qawwām*, thereby illustrating the difficulty of the term and recognize a need for a deeper understanding of the social context in which it was sent. By leaving the term un-translated, they allow the reader to form her/his own idea of its meaning as it is read in its textual and social contexts. In *Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur’an* (2002), Asma Barlas demonstrates how Yusuf Ali interprets these verses such that he “interpolates the themes of sexual differentiation and inequality into the Qur’an.”<sup>167</sup> She notes that he “inadvertently transforms the social responsibility implicit in this charge into paternalism by using the word ‘strength’ (which the Qur’an does not use), to qualify what it is that God has given the one more of than the other.”<sup>168</sup>

As previously noted, however, one of Zakir Naik’s interpretations of *qawwām* is “leader.” He claims that “the Qur’an clearly states that man is the leader of the family.”<sup>169</sup> Such a reading of verse 4:34 leads him to mandate that women may not work unless compelled to do so by family circumstances and that they may not be politically involved or serve in the army. As discussed later, for him, his interpretation of the verse also explains why the Qur’an has sanctioned the beating of wives, why women cannot initiate a divorce unless they have specified it in their contract, and why God never sent any female prophets. Naik stresses, however, that *qawwām* does not mean “one degree higher in superiority.”<sup>170</sup> He asserts that the term:

comes from the root word “*Iqāmah*”, which means ‘when you give the *Iqāmah* before prayers – You stand up’. So, “*Iqāmah*” means to stand up

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<sup>166</sup> Abou El Fadl, *Speaking in God’s Name*, 210.

<sup>167</sup> Barlas, *Believing Women’ in Islam*, 185.

<sup>168</sup> Barlas, *Believing Women’ in Islam*, 185.

<sup>169</sup> Naik, *Rights of Women in Islam*, 57.

<sup>170</sup> Naik, *Rights of Women in Islam*, 19.

– thus, the word “*qawwām*” means one degree higher in responsibility, not in superiority.<sup>171</sup>

Others, including Abou El Fadl, add to the above analysis that *qawwām* suggests the ability to provide financial support; hence, “if a woman is the one providing financial support, or stability, she becomes the one entrusted with the burden of guardianship.”<sup>172</sup> To bestow legitimacy on his claim above, Naik adds, “Even if you read the commentary of ‘Ibne-Kathir’, he says that the word, ‘*qawwām*’ means one degree higher in responsibility, not one degree higher in superiority.”<sup>173</sup> He neither provides reference to Ibn Kathir’s (d. 1373) work nor explains what he or Ibn Kathir means by “superiority.” Ibn Kathir was a student of Ibn Taymiyyah (d.1328), who was a noted Hanbali scholar and upheld a strict interpretation of Islam.<sup>174</sup> Some Muslims “view Ibn Kathir as a forerunner to the present-day Salafi or Wahhabi school of law.”<sup>175</sup> Naik’s insistence that Islam rejects the idea of man’s superiority over woman may allure his audience and compel them to re-evaluate their perception of gender superiority. For this reason, they might accept Naik’s idea that to have more responsibilities does not make one superior.

Naik also states that the husband’s protection of his wife “should be carried out by mutual consent of both – husband and wife.”<sup>176</sup> Terms like “mutual consent” might also appeal to Naik’s audience, for he leads his listeners to believe that the husband needs his wife’s consent in order to be responsible for her; yet he does not address the case in which a wife might not wish to grant her husband such consent. As Al-Hibri states, a patriarchal interpretation of verse 4:34 assured commentators of the “biological difference in intelligence, capacity, and piety

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<sup>171</sup> Naik, *Rights of Women in Islam*, 19.

<sup>172</sup> Abou El Fadl, *Speaking in God’s Name*, 210.

<sup>173</sup> Abou El Fadl, *Speaking in God’s Name*, 210.

<sup>174</sup> R. Hrair Dekmejian, *Islam in Revolution* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1995), 39.

<sup>175</sup> Shamim Akhter, *Faith & Philosophy* (Delhi: Kalpaz Publications, 2009), 79.

<sup>176</sup> Abou El Fadl, *Speaking in God’s Name*, 210.

between men and women.”<sup>177</sup> Naik does not agree that the verse hints at women’s lacking in intelligence, capacity, or faith, however. In fact, he reiterates that men’s being “in charge of” women does not equate to men’s superiority over women,<sup>178</sup> but his reasoning suggests that he is promoting the inequality of women.

### *On Working Women*

Zakir Naik’s views on women who work also appear contradictory and unclear. On the one hand, for instance, he writes,

A women [sic] in Islam, if she wishes to work she can work - There is no text in the Qur’an or the authentic Hadith which prevents or makes it prohibited for a woman to do any work, as long as it is not unlawful, as long as it is within the preview of the Islamic Shariah, as long as she maintains her Islamic dress code [sic].<sup>179</sup>

However, she is not required to work, because Islam has designated the man as the sole provider of the family.<sup>180</sup> One would understand this to mean that although she is not required to work, she may work of her own will. On the other hand, he states, “But in genuine cases, where there are financial crisis [sic] in which both the ends do not meet, she has the option of working.”<sup>181</sup> Although he does not define “genuine cases,” he implies that a woman may not work unless compelled to do so by extenuating circumstances. Yet, he adds that a woman does not have to work, but when she does, “whatever earning she gets, it is absolutely her property.”<sup>182</sup> If the woman can work only in “genuine” cases, or during the family’s financial crises, it does not

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<sup>177</sup> Maysam al-Faruqi, “Women’s Self-Identity in the Qur’an and Islamic Law” in *Windows of Faith: Muslim Women Scholars-Activists in North America*, ed. Gisela Webb (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 2000), 82.

<sup>178</sup> Naik, *Rights of Women in Islam*, 57.

<sup>179</sup> Naik, *Rights of Women in Islam*, 10.

<sup>180</sup> Naik, *Rights of Women in Islam*, 10.

<sup>181</sup> Naik, *Rights of Women in Islam*, 10.

<sup>182</sup> Naik, *Rights of Women in Islam*, 13.



make sense for her to keep her earnings for herself, for she works only in order to support her family.

### *On Women's Right to Divorce*

When he answers the question, “Is it only the husband who can say ‘Triple *Talaq*’ and get one? – What has a woman to do, if she wants to get divorce or ‘*Talaq*’?”<sup>183</sup> Naik claims that there are five categories of divorce in Islam:

unilateral – ... unilateral agreement between the husband and wife; ... unilateral will of the husband, called *Talaq* in which he has to forgo his ‘*Meher*’; ... unilateral will of the wife if she mentions it in her contract that she has the right to give unilateral divorce, it is called ‘*Isma*’; ... ‘*Nikah-e-Fask*’ ... when the *Qazi* [nullifies] the marriage ... if the husband ill-treats [his wife] or does not give her equal rights; and ‘*Khulah*’ [sic].<sup>184</sup>

In the book *Rights of Women in Islam*, he neglects to explain the last category. However, in a live lecture, he says, “If the wife has not specified in her marriage contract that she wants the right to divorce, she can request the husband to divorce her; that is called as *khula*’.”<sup>185</sup> The woman has the right to divorce, “but under normal circumstances, the husband has been given the authority [to divorce].”<sup>186</sup> He explains that this is because the husband is obligated to give dower to his wife at the time of the marriage, which puts her “on the receiving side.”<sup>187</sup> He seems to ignore the reality of many Muslim women who receive no dower, or an important question that arises is whether the husband is still entitled to his rights over his wife if no dower

<sup>183</sup> Naik, *Rights of Women in Islam*, p. 71.

<sup>184</sup> Naik, *Rights of Women in Islam*, p. 71.

<sup>185</sup> “Why ain’t Wives allowed to Divorce Husbands in Islam? Dr Zakir Naik” [sic] YouTube. December 7, 2009. Retrieved November 10, 2010. 01:28 - 01:40. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VFUM59C10Y8&NR=1>>.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid, 02:00 - 02:04.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid, 02:22.

was given. Naik, like many feminists, “praises dower as a source of economic security for women and a token of a husband’s willingness and ability to provide.”<sup>188</sup> Before marriage, she is under the guardianship of her family (father); after marriage, under her husband. After divorce, if applicable, the woman is again under her family’s care.<sup>189</sup> While classical Muslim jurists agreed with this view, most of them accepted the dower’s purpose to be to grant the husband “exclusive dominion over the wife’s sexual and reproductive capacity, which also conveys his sole right to dissolve the marriage tie by unilateral divorce.”<sup>190</sup> In fact, al-Shafi’i “graphically refers to dower as ‘the vulva’s price,’ *thaman al-bud’a*.”<sup>191</sup> Although Naik does not appear to agree with this interpretation of the dower, he does support the idea that the husband’s responsibility over his wife affords him the default right to divorce.

### *On Female Prophets*

Zakir Naik’s perception of the role of women as mothers and wives justifies his belief that women should not serve as prophets – and that God never sent any. When asked, “Why are there no women prophets in Islam?” Zakir Naik answers:

If by ‘*Prophets*’ you mean that a person who receives the *message* and who acts like a leader to the people, then I can say for sure that in Islam we have got no ‘*Women Prophets*’. And I think it is right, because if a woman has to be a *Prophet* – The Qur’an clearly states that man is the leader of the family. So, if the man is the leader in the family, how can he lead the ... how can a woman lead over the people?  
[Sic.]<sup>192</sup>

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<sup>188</sup> Kecia Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam: Feminist Reflections on Qur’an, Hadith, and Jurisprudence* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2006), 4.

<sup>189</sup> “Why ain’t Wives allowed to Divorce...?” 02:41 - 03:07.

<sup>190</sup> Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam*, 5.

<sup>191</sup> Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam*, 4.

<sup>192</sup> Naik, *Rights of Women in Islam*, 57.

He does not cite his claim that the Qur'an "clearly states that man is the leader of the family," but it may be assumed that this is a reference to verse 4:34, which serves as his explanation for the question of women's authority in general. The question for him is clearly about leadership: A woman cannot lead a group of people if it includes men because, according to Naik's understanding of verse 4:34, God has strictly mandated that the man be the leader of the family. He rhetorically asks, if a woman is not permitted to lead her own family, how can she be permitted to lead "the people," or her tribe or nation? He also explains that "a Prophet has to even lead the congregational prayers. And as I said earlier, that there are certain postures like *Qayam* [*qiyām*], *Rukuh* [*Rukū'*] and *Sujud*, standing, bowing and doing the *Sujud* – prostration – and which, if a *Woman Prophet* does, the congregation behind [her] will get disturbed."<sup>193</sup> By getting "disturbed," he means that when a man looks at a woman, he *inevitably* experiences pleasure and "something" must "happen" to him, and "if someone says that he looks at a woman and nothing happens to him, then he requires a psychiatrist."<sup>194</sup> Here, his reference is to sexual excitement and erotic distraction: Men are naturally attracted to women's bodies and will therefore be distracted by women near them, even if the purpose is worship. He does not consider the reverse phenomenon—i.e., women's attraction towards men—because that, it seems, would be "unnatural." Concerned largely with men's "disturbance," Naik's comment justifies the lack of women prophets through the lustful desire that men have for women's bodies, and that desire interferes with men's worship of God. In response to the same question, he adds: "There are situations like... the Prophet has to meet the common men very regularly. If

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<sup>193</sup> Naik, *Rights of Women in Islam*, 57.

<sup>194</sup> "Why are women sitting on back and Men on front in your lectures? Dr. Zakir Naik" [sic]. YouTube. November 17, 2009. Retrieved November 12, 2010. 00:57 - 01:02.  
<<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GchZLOe7wf8&NR=1>>.

it is a *Woman Prophet*, Islam does not allow intermingling of sexes.”<sup>195</sup> He suggests here that if it is a male prophet, then Islam does not prohibit the intermingling of the sexes; the prohibition occurs only if a female prophet is in question.

Regardless of his insistence that men are designed such that they “get disturbed” upon seeing a female or hearing a female voice, he hears women’s voices as they ask him questions and make comments on his lectures, both on live television and in public lectures, and he often sees them as well. One must ask what impels him to interact with women, and to allow women to attend his lectures, if it is forbidden. If the answer is that he does it out of necessity and that exceptions are allowed in cases such as when knowledge is being sought, one may argue that female leaders, too, are allowed these exceptions when necessary. Interestingly, though, it seems that, while the auditoria in which he usually presents his lectures do not allow women to see him directly, but rather through a large screen in a separate hall,<sup>196</sup> they do appear in other lectures that he gives.

### *On Women in Politics*

Naik emphatically and incessantly argues that Islam promotes the equality of women and men, often citing Qur’anic verses such as 9:71, which reads, “The men and the women are supporters of each other.” He asserts that the term “supporter” here means that they are each other’s supporters not only socially but politically as well.<sup>197</sup> He lists women’s political rights as their rights to vote, take part in law-making, and join battlefields. His example for women’s participation in lawmaking is rather interesting:

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<sup>195</sup> Naik, *Rights of Women in Islam*, 57.

<sup>196</sup> Thomas Blom Hansen, *Wages of Violence: Naming and Identity in Postcolonial Bombay* (Princeton University Press, 2001), 177.

<sup>197</sup> Hansen, *Wages of Violence*, 27.

According to the famous Hadith in which Hazrat Umar (May Allah be pleased with him) was discussing with the Sahabas, and considering the putting an upper limit on '*Meher*', since young men were discouraged from getting married – a lady from the back seat objected and said “When the Qur’an says in Surah Nisa Ch. 4, Verse No. 20 that ‘You can even give a heap of treasure, a heap of gold in *Meher*, when the Qur’an puts no limit on '*Meher*', who is Umar to put a limit (May Allah be pleased with him)?” And immediately, Hazrat Umar (May Allah be pleased with him) said: ‘Umar is wrong and the lady is right’.<sup>198</sup>

He adds that “in technical terms it would be called that – ‘she is objecting to the breach of the constitution’,- because Qur’an is the constitution of the Muslims,” and concludes, “That means a woman can even take part in law making.”<sup>199</sup> He thus interprets the woman’s objection to Umar’s decision as a “breach of the constitution,” and attributes to Islam her boldness to speak up: That the Qur’an is the constitution of Muslims “means a woman can even take part in lawmaking.”<sup>200</sup> In Naik’s view, the lady’s decision to speak up means that Islam permitted her to do so, that she was speaking from an Islamic point of view while Umar was not. How he reaches this conclusion is unclear, since he makes the assumption that an “ordinary” lady’s bold disagreement with the caliph means that Islam approves of what she did. Naik also assumes that her standing up for her right to an unlimited dower means that Islam gives women the right to have an opinion in lawmaking.

Lastly, in his discussion of women on the battlefield, he writes, “As the Qur’an says, ‘Man is the protector of the woman’; under normal circumstances the women should not go to the battlefield.... Women are allowed to go there only when required or under necessity; otherwise, not.”<sup>201</sup> Despite this obvious restriction, he initially presents his point as though there

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<sup>198</sup> Hansen, *Wages of Violence*, 28.

<sup>199</sup> Hansen, *Wages of Violence*, 28.

<sup>200</sup> Hansen, *Wages of Violence*, 28.

<sup>201</sup> Hansen, *Wages of Violence*, 29.

were no restrictions whatsoever and that women are permitted Islamically to participate in battle; he does this perhaps so that his listeners will get the initial impression that there are no restrictions whatsoever. He also does not define what “normal” conditions are and what “under necessity” means. He reasons that women should not be on the battlefield unless required. He does not address the subtopic of women as political leaders, but one may presume that Naik most likely believes that it is not permissible for women to hold political offices, considering his stance on women as prophets, women as participants in battle, and women as leaders of their families.

### **Conclusion**

In the minds of many Muslims, Zakir Naik has established himself as a strong supporter of women’s rights, which draws attention towards his lectures and increases his audience. He sounds as though he supports a progressive view that is compatible with women’s rights, and this bolsters his authority, since it attracts a particular class of Muslims (progressives) towards him. However, when his teachings about women are scrutinized, he does not support women’s rights fully or considerably, and, in fact, it appears, in Naik’s lectures, that there is more support for the subjugation of women than of their uplifted status.

## Chapter 4: Virtual Religious Authority

The drastic changes in technology in the modern world have contributed to a major shift in the transfer of religious knowledge as well as in the “revolution” of religious authority.<sup>202</sup> While it is not just new media that have facilitated this change—because it is a result also of mass education, rising literacy rates, and the emergence of new technology and communication modes, and shifts from “traditional” to modern” attitudes<sup>203</sup> — this chapter focuses on religious authority among Muslims online to show that Naik’s assertion of authority in the virtual world is part of a larger movement.

In an era when modern technology has a major influence on the spread of knowledge and information, Zakir Naik’s apt use of new media has enabled him to maintain a large audience and achieve popularity. New media “offer self-consciously alternative forums for alternative voices” and may “evolve in complex and diverse ways to reach different audiences” from those rendered by print editions.<sup>204</sup> New media help circulate the type of Islamic teachings that a teacher might hope for her or his audience to understand and embrace. In particular, as Eickelman and Anderson point out, “new media play a major role in [the] questioning of local practices” that have long been “taken for granted and understood as Islamic [and are now] under increasing scrutiny with growing familiarity with other Islamic communities and ways of doing things.”<sup>205</sup> While there is no doubt that Naik’s listeners and fans might use audiotapes, phones, and many other technological tools to spread Naik’s teachings, I want to focus primarily on

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<sup>202</sup> Peter Mandaville, “Globalization and the Politics of Religious Knowledge: Pluralizing Authority in the Muslim World,” *Theory, Culture and Society*, 24. 2 (2007): 101-115.

<sup>203</sup> Mandaville, “Globalization and the Politics of Religious Knowledge,” 2.

<sup>204</sup> Dale F. Eickelman and Jon W. Anderson, *New Media in the Muslim World: The Emerging Public Sphere* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 2003), x.

<sup>205</sup> Eickelman and Anderson, *New Media*, xi.

Naik's use of internet technology. I will also discuss the topic of "virtual Islam," or Islam on the internet, and issues of authority that it poses for Muslims. This is because the internet has become a primary source of information on Islam for millions of people who include scholars and casual browsers, both Muslim and non-Muslim,<sup>206</sup> and has raised new aspects of issues of religious authority for Muslims.

People's understanding of Islam may be influenced by the information they encounter online, but this information is selective and tends to represent only certain points of view while ignoring or denying others. Islam-qa.com is a perfect example of a site that provides Islamic knowledge from one viewpoint while dismissing all others as "un-Islamic, incorrect, misguided, or deviant." While providing statements on Islam for all Muslims, regardless of their location, these sites accommodate primarily Muslims living in non-Muslim countries, for a majority of the questions asked are by Muslims in the United States and Europe.<sup>207</sup> On its homepage, Islam-qa.com features a list of "new" Fatwas, issued by Sheikh Muhammad Salih Al Munajjid, who, according to the website, is "a known Islamic lecturer and author" who uses "only authentic, scholarly sources based on the Quran and sunnah, and other reliable contemporary scholarly opinions."<sup>208</sup> A supervisor of said site, Al Munajjid also has authored several books, among which are *What Should You Do in the Following Situations* (1999), *Prohibitions That are Taken Too Lightly* (2004), *The Muslim Home: 40 Recommendations in the Light of the Qur'an and Sunnah* (2005), and *Weakness of Faith* (2005). The website aims to "teach and familiarize Muslims with various aspects of their religion, be a source for guiding people to Islam, to respond to users

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<sup>206</sup> Gary Bunt, *Virtually Islamic: Computer-mediated Communication and Cyber Islamic Environments* (Cardiff: University of Wales, 2002), 3.

<sup>207</sup> Jocelyne Cesari, *When Islam and Democracy Meet: Muslims in Europe and the United States* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 116.

<sup>208</sup> Islam Question and Answer. "Introduction." Retrieved April 10, 2011. <<http://www.islam-qa.com/en/ref/islamqapages/2>>.



questions and inquiries to the best of our resources and capabilities, and assist in solving the social and personal problems of the Muslims in an Islamic context.”<sup>209</sup>

Moreover, the site adds,

It was decided to make the site all-encompassing, directed towards Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Subject areas include, but are not limited to, Islamic fiqh and jurisprudence, Islamic history, Islamic social laws (including marriage, divorce, contracts, and inheritance), Islamic finance, basic tenets and aqeedah of the Islamic faith and tawheed, and Arabic grammar as it relates to the Quran and Islamic texts.<sup>210</sup>

With such a comprehensive guide to Islam, or to studying and understanding Islam, the site, one would hope, would represent more than one opinion on the issues it highlights. However, many of the guidelines mandated by the website are in conflict with those that a majority of Muslim authorities accept. For instance, it mandates that covering the face is obligatory for women and is sanctioned in the Qur’an<sup>211</sup> and that Muslim women may not wear pants because they are an imitation of men’s and *kafir* women’s clothing.<sup>212</sup> However, others, including Zakir Naik, teach that covering the face is not an obligation<sup>213</sup> and that wearing pants is not forbidden.<sup>214</sup> These are important allegations, because they deal with practical life and may be an expression of one’s practice of Islam. Many other questions and comments made on the site are relevant to a Muslim’s practice of Islam, including those regarding dating and relationships, divorce, the Internet, and music. Such information— available globally, potentially to all Muslims and non-Muslims who have internet access—“has serious implications, given the diverse material and

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<sup>209</sup> Ibid.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid.

<sup>211</sup> Islam Question and Answer. “Ruling on Covering the Face, with Detailed Evidence.” Retrieved April 10, 2011. <<http://islamqa.com/en/ref/11774>>.

<sup>212</sup> Islam Question and Answer. “Ruling on Women Wearing Pants under a Short Garment.” Retrieved April 10, 2011. <<http://islamqa.com/en/ref/60131/pants%20for%20women>>.

<sup>213</sup> “Is Face Veil (Niqab) Obligatory in Islam? Dr Zakir Naik.” July 21, 2009. YouTube. Viewed April 10, 2011. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FW0rg8bjZNE>

<sup>214</sup> Cesari *When Islam and Democracy Meet*, 114.

perspectives available, and the random way in which [it] can be accessed.”<sup>215</sup> Hence, despite the availability of a plethora of information online, it has become increasingly difficult to determine its authenticity. This is one case during which preachers, particularly televangelists, prove helpful: They provide a structure that offers the same information in a much organized manner.

Many Muslims, particularly those in positions of authority, believe that there is a need for online authentic sources on Islam because of the wide use of the internet. One of Zakir Naik’s most valuable means of propagating Islam is his website, irf.net, belonging to the Islamic Research Foundation, “a non-profit public charitable trust.”<sup>216</sup> Established in 1991,

it promotes Islamic Da’wah - the proper presentation, understanding and appreciation of Islam, as well as removing misconceptions about Islam - amongst less aware Muslims and non-Muslims. IRF uses modern technology for its activities, where ever feasible. Its presentation of Islam reach millions of people worldwide through international satellite T.V. channels, cable T.V. networks, internet and the print media. IRF's activities and facilities provide the much needed understanding about the truth and excellence of Islamic teachings - based on the glorious Qur'an and authentic Hadith, as well as adhering to [reason] logic and scientific facts.<sup>217</sup>

The mission above points to the excellence of Islam and appears to have the resources necessary to proselytize—resources that include both humans (e.g., Zakir Naik and other preachers who appeal to reason and science when justifying Islamic ideals) and non-humans (e.g., TV networks and print media). It therefore would attract Muslims seeking an interpretation of Islam that supports reason and utilizes resources compatible with the contemporary era.

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<sup>215</sup> Gary Bunt, *Virtually Islamic*, 3.

<sup>216</sup> Islamic Research Foundation. Home Page. Retrieved April 1, 2011. <<http://irf.net/>>.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid.

What is important to realize about online discussions and teachings of Islam is that “any posted text appears equal in status to the proclamations issued by the custodians of Islamic orthodoxy,”<sup>218</sup>—presumably the ‘*ulama*—particularly when a Qur’anic verse or a *hadith* is given in support of the proclamations. This enables Muslims, or possibly even non-Muslims posing as Muslims, “from all walks of life to discuss critical matters that go to the heart of their religion.”<sup>219</sup> A positive way to look at this is that lay Muslims now have a chance to enter debates and discussions on Islamic matters, an opportunity they did not have prior to the popular availability of the Internet. Muslims who belong to minority groups, such as homosexuals, can find space for open discussions on Islam, expression of their sexual orientation, and networking.<sup>220</sup> This would be difficult, if not impossible, in other environments and circumstances. However, while they create an open space for women where they can “more directly join public discussions about their role in society and public debate over such issues as family law,”<sup>221</sup> they also provide channels for hate groups.

As discussed previously, Naik places great emphasis on reason, scientific knowledge, and modern means of communication. His website, however, is not the only source he uses to reach out to his audience. For instance, he presides over TV Channels, such as Q-TV, “a channel run by the UAE-based private television consortium ARY,”<sup>222</sup> and Peace TV, based in India;<sup>223</sup> both are broadcast throughout the world and offer programs in English and Urdu. He thus uses not just the internet but also television networks to convey his interpretation of Islam and comment

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<sup>218</sup> Jocelyne Cesari, *When Islam and Democracy Meet*, 115.

<sup>219</sup> Mohammed El-Nawawy and Sahar Khamis, *Islam Dot Com: Contemporary Islamic Discourses in Cyberspace* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 188.

<sup>220</sup> Gary Bunt, *Virtually Islamic*, 118.

<sup>221</sup> Eickelman and Anderson, xi.

<sup>222</sup> Ulrike Freitag and Achim Von Oppen, *Translocality: The Study of Globalising Processes from a Southern Perspective*, p. 332.

<sup>223</sup> <http://www.rizwanashraf.com/2008/01/16/watch-peace-tv-live-online-islamic-tv-channel/>

on Islam-related subjects. This website, along with the ones mentioned above, falls under the category of “denominational Islam,” as Jocelyne Cesari terms it. Denominational Islam is one of the two forms that informational websites tend to fall under (the other being academic).<sup>224</sup> Denominational Islam “refers to sites put up by all the national, ideological, or religious subcategories of Islam;” while academic website on Islam “provides objective information on Islam: sites posted by research institutes, universities, think tanks, and international organizations.”<sup>225</sup> As discussed earlier, Naik does not claim to follow any particular sect or even *madhhab*, of Islam, in which case “denominational” comes to mean only sectarian, although Naik does not admit to being a Sunni either. However, this is a case where his teachings contradict his claims. While he insists that IRF does not aim to promote to any particular branch or school of Islamic thought, some of the speakers and preachers featured on the website teach that Shiites are “infidels.” One such preacher is Sheikh Abdul Raheem Green, who states that it is illogical to be a Shiite because they curse and oppose the *sahabahs*, companions of the Prophet, even though they were the ones “to whom Jibreel [Gabriel] came to teach them their religion.... These are the people who know which *ayah* [Qur’anic verse] was revealed in which circumstance.... So who could know better about Islam than his companions?”<sup>226</sup> Rather, “We believe that the companions are the best of all the human beings after the Prophet, and the best of the human beings after the Prophet is Abu Bakr....”<sup>227</sup> He goes on to state that Shiites are “only 15% of the Muslims, a small minority. 85% of the Muslims are Sunnis, *walhamdulillah* [praise be to God].”<sup>228</sup> If Naik supports Green by featuring him on his website as one of the international

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<sup>224</sup> Jocelyne Cesari, *When Islam and Democracy Meet*, 112.

<sup>225</sup> Jocelyne Cesari, *When Islam and Democracy Meet*, 112.

<sup>226</sup> “Abdul Raheem Green: Shia People & Other Muslims.” February 17, 2011. YouTube. Viewed April 1, 2011. 00:01-01:26. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ScVF0nGcnG0uc>>.

<sup>227</sup> *Ibid*, 04:51-05:08.

<sup>228</sup> *Ibid*, 02:31-02:48.

Islamic orators—excluding any Shiite speakers in the same list—and that his teachings support Sunni Islam, it is safe to conclude that, despite Naik’s claim that he is neither a Sunni nor a Shiite, he supports Sunni Islam and rejects Shiite Islam.

## Conclusion

Zakir Naik is perhaps the most popular preacher in the Subcontinent and certainly one of the most influential Muslim leaders in the Muslim world. He, like several other contemporary preachers, such as Ahmed Deedat and Amr Khaled, has gained religious authority even though he lacks traditional training in Islamic sciences. Zakir Naik's popularity reflects the transformation of the concept of authority in Islamic societies, such that little to no attention is given to the authority's traditional training in. Instead, a socially respectable profession, such as in the medical field, coupled with an acknowledgement of the expectations of one's audience, proper use of modern technological tools, such as the Internet and television, and strong references to modern concepts may be sufficient for one's gaining acceptance as an authority on Islam.

The phenomenon of transmitting knowledge without training, or an *ijazah*, however, is not unique to modern times, for it was prevalent in medieval Muslim societies as well. There has always existed an internal conflict of religious authority among various groups of the 'ulama and preachers, as discussed in Berkey's and Stewart's works, among others, which highlight the struggle among various groups of authorities. We have seen that Zakir Naik's case is a continuation of that conflict. Specifically, the *fatwas* issued against Naik by the Deobandi 'ulama are indicative of this competition for authority. Since the reasons Naik received *fatwas* involve his refusal to abide by or claim adherence to a single *madhhab* as traditional scholars are expected to do, it is inevitable that there occurs a clash in the teachings of Naik and the *madhhabs* since the latter differ in their rulings on many legal issues. This can be concluded because Naik is often involved in responding to legal questions, and he has announced explicitly that, since all four Sunni *madhhabs* are authentic, he is not required to choose one. This study

aims to contribute to contemporary discourses on religious authority by emphasizing on Zakir Naik, about whom very little, if any, academic information is available.

For this study, I have relied primarily on Zakir Naik's lectures, available online as well as in print, and on Muslims' comments and responses to Naik's influence. There are three major points to my study: That Naik's medical degree attracts his audience of predominantly South Asian background, which regards doctors highly in the society; that his competence in making successful use of new media enables him to achieve popularity as an authority on Islamic matters; and that his use of "modern" concepts assure his audience that he is progressive-minded, thereby attracting females, the youth, and educated elders of the community. The first observation entails Naik's awareness of his audience and supporters, which is crucial in allowing him to become an established authority. Because his audience places a high value on medical doctors, who are considered vastly knowledgeable, particularly in the sciences, audience members give Naik the authority and space to conclude that science and Islam are congruent. This argument leads to the successive section of the paper, which highlights Naik's role as a teacher of science: Because of the importance of science in the modern world, because of the generally perceived clash between science and religion, and because it scientifically authenticates their faith, many Muslims use science to understand and promote Islam. I conclude that Naik's assumed knowledge of science, particularly regarding the human body, enables his followers to believe that his views on and interpretation of gender roles and rights are derived from both Islam and science and are therefore legitimate.

When elaborating the second observation regarding Naik's appeal to his audience, I also discuss the current phenomenon of online Muslim authorities, or virtual Islam as taught and proselytized over the internet. Illustrating the third observation, I point out that Naik provides

evidence of the Qur'an's divinity with what he considers established scientific theories and laws, both to reaffirm the faith of Muslims as well as to invite others to Islam. I conclude that, as an rather than by fulfilling traditional requirements of scholarship, religious authority may be gained by one's self-presentation, social status in society, consciousness of one's audience, and a competent understanding and utilization of modern technological tools. This mode of gaining authority differs from that upheld by Deobandi scholars, since they require studying under an accepted traditional Islamic scholar in order to transmit religious knowledge, and they thus do not recognize Naik as a legitimate Islamic authority.

It is hoped that this study will lead to further discussion on Zakir Naik's role as a figure of religious authority in South Asia, particularly since due to a lack of time and space, I do not address many issues that are relevant to this topic. I do not, for instance, discuss the history of televangelism or the role of Christian televangelists, although the influence that Christian televangelists have had on Muslim televangelists can be seen through the styles of the preachers discussed in this study. Moreover, it is evident that many non-Muslims, including atheists and Hindus, attend Zakir Naik's lectures—but their reasons for attending remain unknown. Since this study is not an anthropological survey of Muslims' and non-Muslims' responses to Naik, I avoided mentioning the significance and implications of the fact that his audience is not entirely Muslim.



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