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| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Epistemic Structures and Public Discourse: Tracing Religious Reasoning in Arab Public Spheres

Hadi A. Alsamdani
Assistant professor, Department of English Language, Allith University College, Umm Al-Qura University in Saudi Arabia.
Corresponding Author: Hadi A. Alsamdani, **E-mail**: haasamadani@uqu.edu.sa

| ABSTRACT
The paper presents a case study exploring how the everyday deliberation of public matters in the Arab world is epistemically traceable. Since processes of socio-political communication are deeply rooted in wider epistemological structures, and because social actors operating in the public sphere are socially informed, it is imperative to understand the underlying epistemic structures that determine everyday communicative practices. The paper seeks to identify the role played by religious discourse/reason in Arab public spheres. It begins by introducing the theoretical approach that informs the discursive analysis, Critical Discourse Studies (CDS). It then summarises the concept of the public sphere and its historical evolution in the Arab world. Following this, it identifies three epistemic stances that dominate Arab public spheres: (1) the traditionalist stance, (2) the revisionist stance, and (3) the stance of the epistemological break. The paper concludes with a case study that illustrates each of these epistemic structures and locates their epistemological stances by schematising their arguments on a prominent problematic issue in modern Arab thought: equal shares of inheritance for men and women. The data for analysis was derived from discussion and debate on this topic in the wake of the late Tunisian president's proposal.

| KEYWORDS

Religious discourse, religious reason, critical discourse studies (CDS), the Middle East

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

Public reason and religious reason present themselves as rival counterparts in contemporary sociopolitical deliberation. In the West, religion has been the subject of scholarly attention since the 1970s and debates on religion have been shaped by the rise of the new religious right, Western anxiety about Islam and confrontations between groups defined in religious terms (Balmer, 2022; Green, 2015; Shryock, 2010). Moreover, the debate has recently addressed the question of whether and how religious authority and reason relate to political deliberation, which is presumably a secular field of action (cf. the debate between Taylor and Habermas in Butler et al., 2011). Yet religious authority is used in the Arab World, to varying degrees, to legitimise socio-political realities. It is therefore invariably prominent in the deliberation of public matters.

Religious traditions have enormous power to articulate moral values, which has the potential to turn religious speech into a serious vehicle for possible truth content (Habermas, 2008). In the modern Arab world, religion can address any crises of identity and politics. Indeed, as far as the question of identity is concerned, religious reason appears to be identical with public reason in the Arab world. This can be seen in the fact that even those who are ideologically *a*-religious appeal to the authority of religious tradition, as shown below in sections 3–4. The argumentative potential of religious discourse relies exclusively on the widely accepted assumption that drawing historical analogies with religious tradition provides the epistemic basis for legitimising the worldviews disseminated in public arguments (Alsamdani, 2017). The articulation of religious discourses, therefore, involves an epistemic system, of which the animating reasoning mode relies almost exclusively on analogies with discursively constructed tradition and assumed pasts.

Critical discourse studies (henceforth CDS) shares an interest in the role discourses can play in organising and structuring social life (Fairclough, 1992; Wodak & Meyer, 2009). Religious discourses play a major role in shaping the socio-political orientations of both faith community members and society at large. However, appealing to religious arguments, alluding to religious texts and making analogies between contemporary political realities and an assumed sacred past are, in a sense, discursive practices strongly related to religious discourse. Such argumentative strategies, all of which are analogical and therefore religious, are employed by different deliberating parties in Arab public spheres. In this way, the complex and problematic cognitive potential of religion raises serious questions for CDS, about how the discourse analyst observes the religious reason embedded in competing discourses, religious and a-religious alike. The appeal to religious authority can be formalised as follows (Reisigl, 2014, p. 76):

Conclusion Rule:	If authority X says that A is true/that A has to be done, A is true/ A has to be done.
A:	X says that A is true/that A has to be done.
C:	Thus, A is true/A has to be done.

This scheme is the argumentative force underlying a wide range of arguments that manifest in everyday discursive practices. CDS views discourse as a social practice (Fairclough, 1992; van Dijk, 1997; Gee, 2011; Wodak & Meyer, 2009). This is a fundamental premise that underpins its various conceptions and definitions of discourse. In its broadest sense, the term discourse encompasses many semiotic modalities, such as words, pictures, symbols and so on. (Fairclough et al., 2011). However, following the Habermasian tradition, this paper adopts a specific working definition of discourse that views meaning-making processes as reason-making ones. As Habermas (2008, p. 16) suggests, 'in a discourse we exchange reasons in order to assess validity claims that have become problematic.' In other words, discourse is a platform that includes everyone concerned and on which all pertinent contributions are heard.

2. The public sphere

A major concern for discourse studies in the Arab world is the fact that most of the Arabic scholarly works with the catchy title 'discourse analysis' neglect current and immediate discursive practices. Few discourse-analytic studies have investigated naturally occurring language used by real-life language users, such as everyday conversations about society or discussions about public affairs in the mainstream media and mediated social networks. In other words, the public sphere, as a domain of social life, has attracted far less scholarly interest than it deserves. It is the aim of this paper to show how the public sphere can be a useful resource from which relevant data can be derived to study pressing socio-political issues. Before sketching the Arab public sphere, it is necessary to discuss the concept itself.

2.1. The concept of the public sphere

The concept of the 'public sphere' is a modern one, which, according to Habermas, dates back to the eighteenth century in Europe. Habermas (1974, 49) defines the public sphere broadly as 'the realm of social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed'. The public sphere 'can best be described as a network for communication, information, and points of view… reproduced through communicative action, for which mastery of a natural language suffices' (Habermas, 1996, p. 30). In Nancy Fraser's words, it is 'a theater in modern societies in which political participation is enacted through the medium of talk'.[i] This Habermasian concept is directed at forms of participation and engagement that fulfil certain conditions (Fraser, 1995, p. 110). First, they should take place in a public space for transacting debates on activities of the state or 'matters of general interest' (Habermas, 1992). This is where people find out what is happening in their communities, and what social, cultural and political issues they are facing (McKee, 2005). Second, this sphere is free from the constraints of the state bureaucracy, the church and the market. Third, such spaces can be accessed by all citizens. These categories combine to create a unique realm between the state and the liberal bourgeois societies that Habermas studied.

While the terms 'public sphere' and 'the media' are at times used interchangeably, the public sphere is a virtual space larger than the media. It refers to all human activities that involve discussions about public matters, whether this involves talking to friends in a café or pub, an email exchange, or a phone call to the local radio station. Nevertheless, the media obviously plays a central role in the virtual space of the public sphere.

Despite the historical (and geographic) specificity of Habermas' theory to liberal and bourgeois public spheres, I would argue that Habermas's concept of the 'public sphere' provides a sound basis for critical analysis of both media of communication and competing ideologies in the Arab world. Indeed, an important premise running through Habermas's account is the privileged status of rational deliberation through speech as a mode of communication in the public sphere. Van de Beek (2006, p. 24) rightly argues that for Habermas:

> *… rationality is not only a faculty of the mind, positioned in a subject, but something that can be traced in acts of communication. This new insight was possible because Habermas moved away from the Kantian idea that reality is understood by subjective interpretations and concept formulation by individuals.*

So, the alternative is to move towards 'social interactions in which the use of language oriented to reaching understanding takes on a coordinating role' (Habermas, 2008, p. 53). He has appreciated philosophy's turn away from the paradigm of the subject and consciousness to the paradigm of language and communication (Habermas, 1984).

2.2 Arab public spheres: an historical overview

The Arab public sphere represents a rich resource base for investigating competing and increasingly entrenched Arab discourses and the modes of rationality they offer. However, before proceeding it is important to distinguish between the Habermasian public sphere and what can be called Arab public spheres. The former is located somewhere between society and the modern state, while the latter is not. The Habermasian public sphere, as noted above, is a public space where individuals form a collective body that exists in between society and state. This concept is related to modernity and its forms of communication, which make possible individuals' engagement in public affairs within a modern state. On the other hand, the public sphere in the Arab world can manifest on two levels. The first is a transnational public sphere; that is, one located somewhere between the state and an assumed pan-Arab/Islamic ummah, a wider community. At this level, the public sphere is not necessarily confined to the borders of the modern state but extends beyond. The second level is sub-national, similar in size and location to the Habermasian public sphere, which is increasingly taking shape as the nation-state system endures through time. The former is older and correlated to the two ideologies that dominated Arab intellectual thought in the twentieth century, as either a pan-Arab or a pan-Islamist worldview.

With the emergence of new forms of communication and engagement, new public spheres appear or evolve out of older ones. Accordingly, their evolution across the Arab world can be said to have gone through three distinct, though not mutually exclusive, phases according to the dominant mode of communication: the print phase, the satellite TV phase, and the digital phase. First, the print phase began with the advent of printing in the Arab world. Printing triggered a scholarly movement, elitist in character, whose intellectuals influenced the formation of opinions, within the reach of their readership, through rhetorical arguments which were geared towards an assumed alert and responsive public. Newspapers and magazines are the media of this public sphere. However, the advent of satellite telecommunication brought with it substantial change. Early instances of radio and TV communications were public, and state regulated and did little to alter the structure of the pre-existing public sphere. However, as TV in particular became privatised as a domestic mode of consumption, the way was paved for the public sphere to extend its reach more widely in its second stage – satellite telecommunication. The expansion of the new TV delivery services that led to this phase was marked by the appearance of direct-broadcasting satellites. These are more or less under market control, rather than state control, and increasingly international. According to Lynch (2006), the transnational TV station of Al-Jazeera created a genuinely Arab public sphere, particularly in relation to the concerns of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the US invasion of Iraq in 2003.

The digital phase, thirdly, began with the advent of the internet. The internet has enabled an expansion and fragmentation of communications networks and severely undermined the ability of the state to control information. Throughout this phase, technological advances increasingly created a split public sphere; that is, one in the real world and the other in the digital world. The latter provides the real public sphere with a wealth of online data, information, news and images as well as a relatively unrestricted space for public discussion and exchange of opinions. More importantly, the digital world represents a more or less private space for individuals, a reality in their life, over which they have some control. If this was the defining feature of the public sphere, one could comfortably say that a genuine public sphere, over which individuals have control, came into being only with the advent of the internet.

However, it is worth noting that these phases are not mutually exclusive. Quite the contrary, all forms of communication exist side by side and influence each other. As the table below shows, every phase widens the potentialities of the forms of communication and the number of active members in the public sphere. That is, the emergence of new forms and the involvement of new members do not mark the end of earlier forms and members but mean that all are concurrently in play. It would be premature to assert that the electronic revolution has destroyed the stage for the elitist performances of conceited intellectuals. If anything, television, which essentially operates in national public arenas, has enlarged the stage for the press, magazines and literature. The same holds true for the latest digital phase.

As the nation-state system stands the passage of time, public concern shifts from transnational pan-Arab/Islamist concerns to more localised public matters. In the meantime, Arab public spheres are rapidly expanding realms, in which individuals are able and willing to engage in matters of public interest within an increasing range of possible media outlets (Lynch, 2006).

	Print phase	***Satellite telecommunication phase***	***Digital phase***
Mode of communication	Print forms: books, newspapers, magazines	+ The core mode is TV	+ Digital forms
Active members	The intelligentsia	+ The wider elite: journalists, experts, politicians,	+ The wider public
Extent of public interest	Predominantly transnational (pan-Arab/Islamic)	Predominantly transnational with emerging subnational interest	Predominantly subnational but with transnational interest still in play

Table 1: The three phases of the public sphere [ii]

3. Sketching Arab public reason

Genuine CDS cannot take place in Arab and Middle eastern contexts without considering the key ideological underpinnings that give shape to contemporary debates in Arab thought. These ideological underpinnings connect to the key epistemic stances adopted by the competing ideologies in the Arab socio-cultural scenery. Since the structures and processes of socio-political communication are deeply rooted and embedded within the wider epistemological and ideological structures, and because individuals and social actors operating in the public sphere are socially informed, it is imperative to understand the underlying epistemic structures that determine everyday communicative and discursive practices. These epistemic stances are intrinsic to modern Arab thought and relate to a question that that has been prevalent since the advent of modernity. This is the question of renaissance, or why have Arabs/Muslims been delayed while others have progressed? Three ideologies or epistemic stances are pertinent in this regard. These are (1) the traditionalist stance, (2) the hermeneutic revisionist stance, and (3) the stance of the epistemological break. All three can be defined in terms of their take on whether or not *turath* 'tradition' or 'cultural heritage' can be taken as a source of legitimacy and/or a possible civilisational model.

For traditionalists, *turath* – or the Arab-Islamic tradition – is the source of legitimacy and makes the best, if not the only, possible civilisational model. This stance subsumes a wide range of intellectual groups, whose positions are similar in terms of the appeal to an assumed *turath*, but different in respect of which version of *turath* they adhere to. As Sabry (2011, p. 7) states, traditionalists hang on the 'utopian idea of a recoverable past' where the answer to the question of the renaissance of the Arab/Islamic world's present problems is to be sought in the timeless temporality of a golden Islamic era, in which the animating reasoning system operates by analogy with religious authority and the civilisational model of its era as a whole.

Secondly, the revisionists argue for the historicisation of *turath* and re-reading it with a critical modernist eye in order to reconcile it with and make it contemporaneous with present-day debates. The ideological stance of revisionists is neither to submit to the authority of *turath* nor to break with it. Rather, as put by the key voice of revisionism, Muhammed Al-Jabri, the strategy is a hermeneutic one that aims to disconnect from *turath* in order to reconnect with it. Al-Jabri (2011, p. 19) maintains that contemporary Arab thought is on the whole a-historical. And for this reason, he adds, its reading of tradition is a Salafist one that reveres the past and seeks its ready-made solutions to tackle present and future problematics. Al-Jabri's revisionist approach aims to accomplish a break, not with tradition itself but with the traditionalists' understanding of tradition; the alternative is a mental activity that introduces a modern reading of the pre-modern tradition.

At the other end of the continuum comes the stance of the epistemological break. A key figure in this ideological strand is Abdullah Laroui, a Marxist historian who calls for a decisive epistemological break with the past and the authority of its heritage. This epistemic camp opposes what Laroui (1973, p. 58) calls 'cultural salafism',[iii] which for him refers to the mindset that holds the view that 'Islamic tradition ... is capable of providing us with solutions for all current problems, be they familial, societal, civil, political, cultural or philosophical' (ibid, p. 59). Renaissance, therefore, can only be achieved by making an epistemological break and acknowledging the historical split from the pre-modern brought about by modernity (Laroui, 2001). This break is the necessary condition for Arabs to become conscious of their own history and their role in finding modern solutions to current socio-political problems. Tradition, then, can be an object of inquiry but it should not have authority over current socio-political and cultural realities. In other words, one can no longer seek to find in the pre-modern a reference point for modern problematics.

4. Case study: equal inheritance shares for men and women

In this section, to illustrate the three epistemic structures sketched above, I schematise their epistemological stances by reprising their arguments on a prominent issue in modern Arab thought: equal inheritance shares for men and women. This issue brings the three ideologies – traditionalist, hermeneuticist and the ideology of an epistemic break – face to face with the practice of a well-established pre-modern inheritance system that gives daughters a half-share of the inheritance while sons take a full share. This is stipulated in the Quranic verse: [Allah [thus] directs you as regards your children's [inheritance]: to the male a portion equal to that

of two females] (Chapter 4: 11). In this case, the authority of tradition is twofold: the Quranic text and the inheritance system practiced and accepted throughout Islamic history.

To make the account above more tangible, one can see this more or less theoretical account discursively exemplified in the debate on women's inheritance triggered by the proposal of the late Tunisian president Beji Caid Essebsi to establish equal inheritance shares for men and women. Proposed in August 2018, the bill was approved by the Tunisian cabinet in December 2019 and then was passed to the parliament to be ratified and passed into law. Ever since, it has been hotly debated in public spheres both in and outside Tunisia. The aim of this paper is not to quantitatively exhaust all the arguments advanced in the wake of this proposal but to categorise them from an epistemological perspective. I therefore collected a representative sample of discursive reactions over a period of five months from the time of Essebsi's proposal in August 2018, including communiqués and statements by influential social actors, TV show debates and news reports. The data was collected manually through advanced Google search, using various specific keywords related to the topic. The relevant search results were categorised according to their argumentation schemes and then reduced to their augmentative structures to show their respective conclusions or claims and the (chain of) premises that warrant them.

Overall, the data fell into three overarching categories pertaining to the three epistemic stances discussed above. The three macro arguments can be schematised as follows.

4.1. The traditionalist epistemic/discursive stance

Traditionalists appeal to the authority of the Holy Quranic text. The (un)stated major premise of this argument is that (God/revelation) is the source of authority/truth. Therefore, the conclusion rule reads as follows:

Conclusion Rule: If religious tradition says that A is true/ A has to be done, A is true/ A has to be done.

The argumentation can be schematised as follows:

Assertive premise: The revelation stipulates that a daughter is given half the share of the son.
Conclusion: Thus, the inheritance system must allocate a daughter half the share of the son.

Examples 1 and 2 below are explicitly traditionalist, as the bold texts in them reveal. They employ various linguistic actualisations of the discursive appeal to religious authority: 'Quran', 'Sunnah', 'Sharia law', 'religion' and others. Moreover, a notable reference, on which such argument is based, is voiced in the Al-Azhar representative's quotation in excerpt (2), namely that the rulings of the Quran are timeless and not subject to personal reasoning. This both constitutes an objection to, and undermines, any potential non-literal interpretation of tradition and religious texts. These examples not only articulate the traditionalist argument with respect to equal inheritance for men and women per se, but also set out the normative epistemic structure that shapes the entire traditionalist worldview.

Example (1)

> The Shura Council decided to adhere to the system of inheritance as **stated in the peremptory texts in the Quran and Sunnah**, and as expressed in the personal status code. The council stresses that the initiative of equality in inheritance, as well as **its conflict with religion**, the constitution and the personal status code, raises concerns about the stability of the Tunisian family and the pattern of society. The Council supports every effort to develop the code, in a way contributing to the guarantee of women's rights and thus does not **contradict the peremptory texts of religion** and the provisions of the Constitution.
>
> *The communique of the 21st session for the Nahda Shura council, (MCD, 2018)*

Example (2)

> ... the Mufti explained in a statement on Monday that there is no way to reinterpret **sacred texts** under the pretext of cultural changes that societies undergo, as some people claim, since these texts are considered **definitive and not subject to personal reasoning**, and he said that "interpretation in such cases leads to **shaking the immutables that Islam has established**".
>
> *The Egyptian Mufti (Aljazeera, 2018)*

It is worth noting that the appeal to religious authority draws selectively on tradition as a whole, whether this is represented by specific texts from the Quran or Sunnah, or the religious opinions and rulings of prominent Islamic figures, or even an assumed historical narrative or 'religious imaginary', as put by Arkoun (2006).

4.2. The revisionist epistemic/discursive stance

Revisionists offer a complicated argument that breaks neither with the traditionalist one, nor with its unstated premise. That is, it does not break with the argument that God/revelation is the source of authority/truth nor with its conclusion rule. So, if religious tradition says that A is true, A is true. However, for them, truth is historical and lies in the intentions of the text rather than in its scriptural textuality. Therefore, historicity adds a chain of premises that technically make the assertive premise and conclusion adopted by adherents of the traditionalist reading defeasible. Here is a schematisation of Al-Jabri's (2009, pp. 202–204) take on this issue.

Premise 1: Society at the time of revelation was a tribal, pastoral one.
Premise 2: The amount of wealth in circulation in tribal society was limited.
Premise 3: The relation among pastoral tribes was one of contention about pastures.
Premise 4: Marriage was not simply a relationship between man and woman, but between the families of both, and, consequently, among their tribes.
Premise 5: Woman's inheritance might disrupt the economic balance among tribes.
Conclusion: Thus, the inheritance system should be changed to equality.

Taking tradition as the starting point is in a sense argumentative. After all, revisionists appreciate the cognitive and persuasive potential of religious reason. So, in their judgement, appealing to tradition with the rational apparatus of historicity would afford them a range of potential interpretations wider than those yielded by the scriptural reading of tradition. The outcome, then, is a more rationalist and modern worldview. Excerpt (3) is a pronouncement regarding the Tunisian case, similar to Al-Jabri's historical argument schematised above.

Example (3)

... the ruling of the verse is suspended because it **no longer fits society now**. Women's status nowadays differs from that **in the prophet's period as women today contribute more to societies.**

Mohamed el-Bazm, on '90 Minutes' program on Almihwar TV (Youm7, 2018).

Laroui (1973), a prominent figure in the third camp (see 4.3 below), argues that the winner in the traditionalist-revisionist standoff is the traditionalist group. The latter taps into the audience as their arguments sound more credible, in as much as the appeal to authority is the governing principle. The escape from this predicament, according to Laroui and his like, is in the categorical break.

4.3. The discursive stance of an epistemological break

The proponents of an epistemological break reach the same conclusion as the revisionists; that 'the inheritance system should be changed to equality'. However, they break with the premises on which traditionalists and revisionists base their arguments. Abdullah Laroui makes the case for this conclusion based on the rule of common good (Al-Raji, 2018). His argument can be schematised as follows:

Premise 1: Society's laws should be based on the principle of the common good.
Premise 2: Equal inheritance for men and women achieves the common good.
Conclusion: Thus, the inheritance system should be changed to equality.

This third epistemic stance seems different from the first two both in form and content. It arrives at the same conclusion as the revisionist camp. Yet, while revisionists draw principally on religious reason, this camp resorts to a more or less natural reason, solely based on public arguments that are presumably equally accessible by everyone, not just the few who are in a position to interpret the tradition. In this vein, the arguments presented in examples (4-5) are based on secular and universal grounds rather than religious, namely the universal principle of economic right (4) and the pragmatic notion of economic good (5).

Example (4)

Equal inheritance shouldn't be seen as a religious question but an **economic right**. It's unacceptable that half of the Tunisian population **does not enjoy this right** in the same way

Leïla Belkhiria Jaber
Head of Tunisia's National Chamber of Women Entrepreneurs (Alaraby, 2018)

Example (5)

The [current] inheritance law is a significant barrier for women. It **reduces their economic autonomy**. Only 12% [of Tunisian women] own a house and only 14% own land**.**

Nabila Hamza, Co-founder of the Tunisian Association for Democratic Women (Forbes, 2018)

Here, there is a rather different kind of reasoning, which derives its legitimacy from experience rather than religious authority. In other words, this is an epistemic stance that replaces revelation with public reason with a secular outlook, an approach propagated by Laroui and others. Although this ideological stance seems to have had the fewest advocates in Arab public spheres, it appears to provide a way out of the predicament of circularity involved in the traditionalists vs. hermeneutists dichotomy, as to whose reading is to be accepted as valid and truthful.

To summarise, the three major argumentation schemes operating in Arab public spheres are: (1) the traditionalist who seeks authority in the past and regards it as a model that can be imported to deal with current realities, (2) the hermeneutist who presents a modern historical interpretation of the past, and (3) the scheme that breaks with idea of using the past to legitimise the present.

5. Conclusion

In sections 1 and 2, the paper briefly introduced the notion of the public sphere and provided an historical account of Arab public spheres. In section 3, it surveyed briefly the main epistemic structures in Arab thought. It concluded in section 4 with a case study

that illustrates and explicates these wider epistemic structures. The case study revealed how everyday communicative and discursive practices are informed by the dominant ideological structures. It also showed the role of religious reason in shaping the competing ideologies in Arab public spheres. It has shown that religious reason is immanent not only in discourses and ideologies deemed religious but also in other discourses, which can be characterised as areligious. Indeed, ever since the advent of modernity and the modern state in the Middle East, Arab public spheres have almost always been governed by religious reason, as all competing ideologies are defined according to their relationship with religious authority. Although proponents of an epistemic break base their arguments on a more or less common human reason, they have been and still are peripheral in Arab public spheres. A universally valid reason has not yet been the legitimising force that encourages popular participation in debating matters of public interest.

The paper's spotlight falls not on claims, but rather on the mode of reasoning. I have attempted to link the Habermasian notion of public sphere to a CDS investigation of Arab and Middle Eastern issues. The paper argues that Arab public spheres can be turned into useful resources for reasoned communicative exchanges. Brief as it is, the paper gives a holistic and broad view and indicates that future inquiries should be more sensitive to the complexities of the empirical and historical development of local and national public spheres and concerns.

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ORCID iD (https://orcid.org/my-orcid?orcid=0009-0007-3858-7504&justRegistered=true)

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[i] We shall take the term 'talk' here to a higher level that subsumes other means of making meaning
[ii] This is the author's own categorization.
[iii] The word *salaf* means 'predecessors' and refers specifically to the first three generations of Muslims, although it is also used to refer to ulema and Muslim figures beyond this period.