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“The Concept of Authority in Muslim Societies:  
Political, Religious, Social and Literary”

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**ABSTRACT**

“The Moral Authority of Self and Community in the Qur’an”

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As is well known, the Qur’an does not invest moral authority in specific individuals or kinds of individuals. Both individual authoritarian rulers and groups of elders or elites who typically hold power and influence in communities are almost always portrayed negatively. The Qur’an does recognize certain bases for hierarchy among people - most explicitly piety (*taqwa*), but more commonly knowledge (*ilm*). Given the latter, it seems natural to conclude that moral authority on the human plane (absent the presence of a prophet) should be vested in the pious learned scholars (*ulama*); and indeed Islamic communities from the medieval to the modern have considered moral (rather than political) authority to reside, at least ideally, with this group of “pious scholars.” Yet if we look closely at the Qur’anic statements about the virtue of knowledge and the nobility of the knowledgeable, we see that the Qur’an does not connect this directly with the notion of moral authority. I would argue that moral authority as presented in the Qur’an is better conceived of as a dialectic between the autonomy of the individual intellect/conscience and the collective judgment of the righteous, believing community as a whole. In traditional Islamic thought, the moral sovereignty of the individual is embodied in the valorization of individual intellectual exertion over the blind imitation of others (*taqlid*) in matters of religious principle. The moral authority of the righteous community is established in Qur’anic verses that praise the believing community for “commanding right and forbidding wrong” and for “deciding their affairs through mutual consultation (*shura*).” In reality, though, both of these ideas tend to be invoked rhetorically rather than applied in a serious manner to moral debates and crises that have emerged in the Islamic community. In this paper, I investigate the concept of moral authority in the Qur’an through an examination of a series of Qur’anic passages related to the subject. Ultimately, I argue that the Qur’an vests moral authority in both the individual and the community, and in doing so, makes it clear that the authority of the one can and should always act as a check on, and guide for, the other.