

# Modern Asian Studies

<http://journals.cambridge.org/ASS>

Additional services for *Modern Asian Studies*:

Email alerts: [Click here](#)

Subscriptions: [Click here](#)

Commercial reprints: [Click here](#)

Terms of use : [Click here](#)



---

## Technology and Religious Change: Islam and the Impact of Print

Francis Robinson

Modern Asian Studies / Volume 27 / Issue 01 / February 1993, pp 229 - 251  
DOI: 10.1017/S0026749X00016127, Published online: 28 November 2008

**Link to this article:** [http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract\\_S0026749X00016127](http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0026749X00016127)

### How to cite this article:

Francis Robinson (1993). Technology and Religious Change: Islam and the Impact of Print. *Modern Asian Studies*, 27, pp 229-251 doi:10.1017/S0026749X00016127

**Request Permissions :** [Click here](#)

## *Technology and Religious Change: Islam and the Impact of Print*

FRANCIS ROBINSON

*Royal Holloway, University of London*

A historian, like any other scholar, incurs many debts. I am no exception. I would like to begin this occasion<sup>1</sup> by acknowledging some of those debts. I have benefited greatly from the generosity of colleagues—from the generosity of colleagues in my particular field of Islamic and South Asian history in North America, Europe and the Subcontinent, but also from the generosity of historians in general. It is a great privilege to work amongst historians in the University of London, who form arguably the largest group of historians in the world, that work together.

This said, there are four very specific debts to be acknowledged—debts to scholars who have laid their mark on me. The first debt is to Anil Seal of Trinity College, Cambridge, who taught me both as an undergraduate and as a postgraduate. Anil Seal, as his many pupils spread through North America, Europe and South Asia will maintain, is a remarkable supervisor of postgraduate work. He is also a remarkable man, remarkable for his charismatic personality, his fertility with ideas, and his capacity both to create and to destroy. It was he who lured me from a long-cherished ambition to study the politics and society of a late medieval Italian city state into what were then the arcane paths of modern Indian history. It was he, too, who made sure that I was first established on the academic road. In my first book I acknowledged him as my ‘goad and guide’. Scholarly wits claimed a misprint; the acknowledgement should have read my ‘god and guide’.

The second debt is to the late Professor R. A. Leigh, the Rousseau

<sup>1</sup> Inaugural lecture given on 4 March 1992 at the Royal Holloway and Bedford New College as Professor of the History of South Asia in the University of London. I am particularly grateful to my colleague, Rosalind Thomas, for allowing me to read the typescript of her forthcoming book, *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1992 forthcoming). She has enabled me to see the pitfalls of this subject and to embark upon it with greater ease than I had the right to expect.

scholar and editor of that extraordinary work of learning in 50 odd volumes, *Correspondance Complète de Jean Jacques Rousseau*. Ralph Leigh was that invaluable member of a scholarly community, a man who loved to share in learning, even if at times it became a highly competitive exercise. He was also a senior scholar who delighted in helping the young. Ralph Leigh was a constant source of advice and encouragement both at Trinity College, Cambridge, and when I moved on here as a lecturer. Looking back he provided precisely the kinds of guidance and encouragement which the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals now wishes us to institutionalize in systems of mentorship and training for new lecturers.

My third debt is to the historian of late antiquity, Peter Brown, who was head of the department of history at the old Royal Holloway College from 1975 to 1978, before moving to chairs at Berkeley and then Princeton. It was my enormous good luck to be here at the same time as Peter Brown. Peter, like Ralph Leigh, is a great encourager and enthuser of the young; he provided key support as I came to explore anthropology and sociology, and moved from being primarily a historian of political change to one who was much more concerned with religious and social change . . . and very particularly with Islam. But Peter Brown offered more than intellectual support to a young scholar, he also offered friendship—and he possesses the arts of friendship to a very high degree.

My final specific debt is not to a person but to a family, the Firangi Mahal family of Lucknow. Over the past three centuries the family rates as one of the two great families of learned and holy men of Muslim South Asia. If you wanted a British comparison, although the learning is of a very different kind, you might compare them to those great Cambridge intellectual dynasties such as the Darwins, the Huxleys, the Hodgkins or the Keynes. Since I first encountered them during the hot weather in Lucknow in 1968, this family has been closely entangled with my research, both as a subject of study and as a source of inspiration. It is primarily through the investigation of their records that I have approached Islamic history. It is primarily through sitting at their feet that I have learned about Islamic scholarship. It is primarily through being with them that I have learned how Muslim lives are lived. I regard their continuing friendship and encouragement as my great good fortune. I am delighted that there is a representative of the family here tonight. It is to him and to them that I dedicate this lecture.

\* \* \*

More than five hundred years ago there was a revolution in information technology; Johann Gutenberg invented the moveable type printing press for the Roman alphabet.<sup>2</sup> This made possible a further revolution, a revolution in the transmission of knowledge. Down to the Middle Ages, oral transmission was the normal way in which knowledge was passed on. Knowledge was stored up in men; the art of memory was amongst the most highly prized of arts; scholars were masters of mnemonic tricks. But, the advent of mass-produced printed books steadily reduced dependence on oral systems of transmission, until they became mere traces in our language and our values; we still talk, for instance, of auditing accounts, we still worry about the loss of the arts of memory in educating our young. Gutenberg's press also accelerated a revolution in human consciousness. This is, of course, the particular insight of Marshall McLuhan and George Steiner, who perceive a transformation of human consciousness as it moves from oral to written speech, as it moves from a consciousness dominated by sound to one dominated by visual space. Knowledge became less warm, less personal, less immediate and more cold, more abstract, more intellectual.<sup>3</sup>

It is hardly surprising that Francis Bacon named printing, along with gunpowder and the compass, as one of the three things that had changed 'the appearance and state of the whole world'.<sup>4</sup> A host of major historical developments are associated with it: making the Italian Renaissance a permanent European Renaissance, pressing forward the development of modern capitalism, implementing western European exploration of the globe, transforming family life and politics, making possible the rise of modern science and so on. But, amongst the most important of the ramifications of print was the

<sup>2</sup> The first printing from moveable type was done by Pi Sheng in China during the years AD 1041-49. Because of the vast number of characters required in Chinese, the invention was not widely adopted. Gutenberg's invention was made without knowledge of the Chinese discovery.

<sup>3</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (Routledge & Kegan Paul: London, 1962); George Steiner, *Language and Silence* (Faber & Faber: London, 1967); much work has also been done on the subtler effects of print on consciousness by Walter J. Ong, *The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History* (Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 1967); *Rhetoric, Romance and Technology: Studies in the Interaction of Expression and Culture* (Cornell University Press: Ithaca, 1971); *Orality and Literacy; The Technologizing of the Word* (Methuen: London, 1982); 'Writing is a Technology that Restructures Thought' in G. Baumann (ed.), *The Written Word: Literacy in Transition* (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1986).

<sup>4</sup> Francis Bacon, *Novum Organum*, Aphorism 129 in Francis Bacon *Advancement of Learning and Novum Organum* (The Colonial Press: New York, 1899), p. 366.

transformation of the religious life of western christendom. Print lay at the heart of that great challenge to religious authority, the Protestant Reformation; Lutheranism was the child of the printed book. Print lay at the heart of the Catholic counter-offensive, whether it meant harnessing the press for the work of the Jesuits and the office of Propaganda, or controlling the press through the machinery of the Papal Index and the Papal Imprimatur. Print, and the enormous stimulus to literacy which the desire to read the Bible gave, was at the heart of that slow change in northern European Christianity from a time when a Church building and its decoration might be read as one great iconic book to one which was increasingly focused on the Bible, the Word, which many could read and all might understand, because at last it was in their language.<sup>5</sup> In the end, as Elizabeth Eisenstein the historian of the influence of print tells us, the impact of printing on western scriptural faith points in two quite opposite directions: towards ‘“Erasmian” trends and ultimately higher criticism and modernism, and toward more rigid orthodoxy culminating in literal fundamentalism and Bible Belts’.<sup>6</sup> Clearly, print has a lot to answer for.

\* \* \*

Print did not begin to become established in the Islamic world until the nineteenth century, four hundred years after it began to become established in Christendom. Where Muslim regimes still wielded power, but were threatened by the expansion of the West, such as Egypt, Iran and the Ottoman Empire, presses were started up in the early nineteenth century but not widely used until the second half of the century. It is not until the years 1870–1890, according to Mehmet Kaplan, that it is possible to see the Ottoman elite beginning to be transformed by book knowledge.<sup>7</sup> Where Muslims were under some form of colonial rule, and the threat of the West was more evident, the response was much more rapid, much more urgent. Within two decades of the beginning of the century, the Muslims of Tsarist Russia had seventeen presses in operation. By the 1820s in the Indian sub-continent Muslim reformist leaders were busily printing tracts. By the

<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communication and Cultural Transformation in Early-Modern Europe* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1979), vols I and II.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. I, pp. 366–7.

<sup>7</sup> Mehmet Kaplan, *Tevfik Fikret ve Siiri* (Turkiye Yayınevi: Istanbul, 1946), p. 19 cited in Serif Mardin, *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey: The Case of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi* (State University of New York Press: Albany, 1989), p. 120.

1830s the first Muslim newspapers were being produced. By the 1870s editions of the Quran, and other religious books, were selling in tens of thousands. In the last thirty years of the century, over seven hundred newspapers and magazines in Urdu were started. All who observed the world of printing noted how Muslims understood the power of the press. In Upper India at the beginning of the twentieth century 4000–5000 books were being published in Urdu every decade and there was a newspaper circulation of tens of thousands.<sup>8</sup>

The question remains, nevertheless, why did the Islamic world trail so far behind the Christian world in adopting print? It wasn't that Muslims did not know about printing presses. As early as 1493 Jewish refugees from Spain set up printing presses in Istanbul, printing Bibles and secular books. Jewish and Christian communities, moreover, continued to use printing presses in various parts of the Muslim world. It wasn't that the rather more difficult problems of printing in Islamic cursive scripts, in which letters have four different forms depending on their position in the word, and vowels and inflections are signalled by a complex system of pointing, had not been overcome. As early as the fifteenth century the Quran was printed in Arabic in Italy; in the sixteenth century Christians were using the press for Arabic printing in Syria.<sup>9</sup>

In fact, current scholarship is unsure about why Muslims rejected printing for so long—indeed, it is a problem that seems not to have been seriously studied. Doubtless, the great guilds of khatibs or scribes would have been opposed to printing. But, if this was the case, why should they have carried greater weight than the occupants of the Christian scriptoria? Certainly, orthodox ulama, that is Muslim learned men, ever wary of the possibility of religious innovation (i.e. *bida*, the nearest that Islam gets to the Christian concept of heresy) would have been deeply concerned about the introduction of printing; the one printing press operated by Muslims in Istanbul in the 1730s and 1740s aroused so much opposition that it had to be closed down. More generally, there would have been the doubt which many pious Muslims would have felt about associating with *kufur*, with the products of non-Islamic civilization. Such doubts never lasted for long in

<sup>8</sup> Francis Robinson, *Separatism among Indian Muslims: The Politics of the United Provinces' Muslims 1860–1923* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1974), pp. 77–8.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas F. Carter, 'Islam as a Barrier to Printing', *The Moslem World*, 1943, XXXIII, pp. 213–16; J. Pedersen, *The Arabic Book* trans. G. French, ed. R. Hillenbrand (Princeton University Press: Princeton, N. J., 1984), pp. 131–41; Michael M. J. Fischer and Mehdi Abedi, *Debating Muslims: Cultural Dialogues in Postmodernity and Tradition* (University of Wisconsin Press: Madison, 1989), pp. 93–4.

the case of seriously useful items like military technology, or significant sources of pleasure like tobacco, but it has been a feeling which has dogged all initial Muslim responses to new things from the West from clocks to electric light. My own feeling, however, is that the origin of the negative Muslim response to printing lay much more deeply than this. The problem was that printing attacked the very heart of Islamic systems for the transmission of knowledge; it attacked what was understood to make knowledge trustworthy, what gave it value, what gave it authority.

To understand why this might be so, we need to spend a little time examining the system for transmitting knowledge as it flourished over 1200 years from the beginning of Islam. At the heart of this system of transmission is the very essence of knowledge for the Muslim, the Quran. For Muslims the Quran is the word of God—His very word. It is more central to Islamic theology than the Bible is for Christians or the Torah is for Jews. It is the divine presence. It is the mediator of divine will and grace. So, for instance, as Christian theological discussion might focus on the virgin birth of Christ as the proof of his divine nature, so Islamic theological discussion might focus on the Quran, on its matchlessness, as the guarantee of its divine character. ‘Quran’ itself means ‘recitation’, al-Quran, the recitation, the reading out loud. It is through being read out loud that the Quran is realized and received as divine.<sup>10</sup> Muslims strive to learn as much of it as possible by heart. They recite it constantly through the daily round, at prayer times, through the passage of the year, most notably in the month of Ramadan, and through all the stages of life. It is like a sacrament, ever on their lips. For its words are not mere words. ‘They are’, in Constance Padwick’s magical phrase, ‘the twigs of the burning bush aflame with God.’<sup>11</sup>

The Quran was always transmitted orally. This was how the Prophet transmitted the messages he had from God to his followers. When, a few years after the Prophet’s death, these messages came to be written down, it was only as an aid to memory and oral transmission. And this has been the function of the written Quran ever since. Telling evidence for the essential orality of the Quran and its transmission is that, when in the 1920s the Egyptian standard edition

<sup>10</sup> An outstanding analysis of the essential orality of the Quran is to be found in William A. Graham, *Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1987), pp. 79–115.

<sup>11</sup> Constance E. Padwick, *Muslim Devotions: A Study of Prayer-Manuals in Common Use* (SPCK: London, 1961), p. 119.

was produced, it was produced not from a study of variant manuscript versions but from a study of the different traditions of recitation, of which there are fourteen.<sup>12</sup>

The oral transmission of the Quran has been the backbone of Muslim education. Learning the Quran by heart and then reciting it aloud has been traditionally the first task of young Muslim boys and girls. It is a process begun with celebration, a *Bismillah* ceremony, celebrating the first words the child will learn. It is a process which if completed successfully, and the whole Quran is committed to memory, will be celebrated with great joy. It is not given to many to learn to recite the whole Quran, and the title thus won of *Hafiz* or *Hafizah al-Quran* is greatly respected. The usual method of learning was that each day the teacher would write some verses on the pupil's slate, and the pupil would spend the rest of the day learning them. Those who were able to recite them successfully the next day, in addition to what they already knew, would be entitled to wash their slates and have more verses written on them. This is still the method of transmission in much of the Islamic world, and it is why, as you wander through the neighbourhoods of a Muslim town, you are likely to hear a polyphonic hum—it will be the chanting of young children as they learn the word of God.

The methods of learning and of transmitting the Quran laid their impress on the transmission of all other knowledge. 'The Quran', declared that great fourteenth-century Muslim historian, Ibn Khaldun, in a disquisition on the art of teaching to rival anything that the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals might produce today, 'has become the basis of instruction, the foundation of all habits that may be acquired later on.'<sup>13</sup> Take, for instance, the publication of a book in the early Islamic centuries. Its writing down like that of the Quran was merely an aid to oral publication. The author would dictate his first draft, either from memory or from his own writing; the copyist would then read it back to him. Publication would take place through the copyist reading the text to the author in public, usually in a mosque. During this process the author might make additions and emendations and several readings might be required before it was given his authorization. This was known as his *ijaza*, which means 'to make lawful'. Thus the author gave permission for the work 'to be transmitted from him'. Further copies had real auth-

<sup>12</sup> Graham, *Beyond the Written Word*, pp. 96–7.

<sup>13</sup> Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, trans. Franz Rosenthal, ed. N. J. Dawood, (Princeton University Press: Princeton, N. J., 1967), p. 421.



ority only when they had been read back to the author and approved.<sup>14</sup>

Now let us assume that this book enters the madrasa curriculum i.e. the school curriculum, indeed it becomes one of the great texts of the school curriculum. It would be transmitted in a very similar way. The teacher would dictate the text to his pupils, who might write it down, or frequently would commit it to memory—many Islamic pedagogical texts were written in rhyme to help the memory. Subsequently, there might be an explanation of the text, depending on its nature. The completion of the study of the book would involve a reading back of the text with an explanation. If this was done to the teacher's satisfaction, the pupil would then be given an *ijaza*, a licence to teach that text. On that *ijaza*, and such *ijazas* are still given today, would be the names of all those who had transmitted the text going back to the original author. The pupil was left in no doubt that he was trustee in his generation of part of the great tradition of Islamic learning handed down from the past.

The question arises, why should the style of Quranic transmission have had such an impact on the transmission of Islamic knowledge in general? Why should Muslims memorize and recite out loud when writing was in wide use throughout urban society? It was not as if Islam had anything against writing. 'Good writing', declares a tradition of the Prophet, 'makes the truth stand out.' Calligraphy is the highest of the Islamic arts. The beautiful writing of the words of God is the typical adornment of Islamic space. Yet, writing and literacy have always danced attendance on a superior oral tradition in the transmission of knowledge. This is hard for us, who are so deeply imbued with the culture of print, to understand. For us writing is a vehicle which can carry words and ideas across time and space. It is a fairly mechanical process which can make an absent author present. Of course, there can be ambiguities and misunderstandings, and the further away we get from an author in time or in culture the greater the chance of there being those ambiguities and misunderstandings. But they are not a central problem of writing. Writing is for us reliable communication. Speech is unreliable communication. If in doubt, we get it in writing.<sup>15</sup>

Muslims, on the other hand, were always fundamentally sceptical of the written word. 'Language', declares Ibn Khaldun, 'is merely the

<sup>14</sup> Pedersen, *The Arabic Book*, pp. 20–36.

<sup>15</sup> *Idem.*; Timothy Mitchell, *Colonizing Egypt* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1988), pp. 128–60.

interpretation of ideas that are in the mind . . . Words and expressions are media and veils between the ideas . . . The student of ideas must extract them from the words that express them.' Oral expression was crucial to success. 'But', Ibn Khaldun goes on, 'when a student has to rely on the study of books and written material and must understand scientific problems from the forms of written letters in books, he is confronted with another veil . . . that separates handwriting and the form of letters found in writing from the spoken words found in the imagination.'<sup>16</sup> Properly to understand the words, to approach their meaning, the student must read them out loud. So, as the Quran gained full realization only by being recited out loud, so too did the academic book give of its full meaning only by being read out loud. Muslims were always in doubt about writing. The truth they got at in speech.<sup>17</sup>

What this means is that person to person transmission was at the heart of the transmission of Islamic knowledge. The best way of getting at the truth was to listen to the author himself. Muslim scholars constantly travelled across the Islamic world so that they could receive in person the reliable transmission of knowledge. This custom grew up with the early collectors of the traditions relating to the Prophet. It was steadfastly maintained by later scholars. So the great Spanish mystic, Ibn Arabi (b. 1165) travelled from Murcia to Seville, to Tunis, to Fez, to Cordoba, to Almeria, to Tunis again, to Cairo (twice), to Jerusalem (twice), to Mecca (twice), to Baghdad (twice), to Mosul, Malatya, Sivas, Aksaray, Konya, and Damascus where he died in 1240. So, too, the remarkable writer of pedagogical texts, Saiyid Sharif al-Jurjani, (b. 1339) travelled from Taju (by the Caspian) to Herat, to Karaman (Anatolia), to Alexandria, to Constantinople, to Shiraz, to Samarqand, where he became a great figure at the court of Timur, dying in 1413. When a scholar could not get knowledge from an author in person, he strove to get it from a scholar whose *isnad*, or chain of transmission from the original author, was thought to be the most reliable. The personal nature of the transmission is captured by the words of this tenth-century *ijaza*:

I entrust my book to you with my writing from my hand to yours. I give you authorization for the poem and you may transmit it from me. It has been produced after having been heard and read.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*, p. 431.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 431–3; Mitchell, *Colonizing Egypt*, pp. 150–4.

<sup>18</sup> An *ijaza* given by al-Mutarriz to his pupil Abu Ja'far al-Tabari, the great historian and commentator on the Quran, Pedersen, *The Arabic Book*, p. 36.

Knowledge was being transmitted from man to man. I do not believe, moreover, that this practice can be explained away merely by asserting the preference for the oral over the written text. It is to be explained by a central concern for the transmission of the author's meaning, the true meaning of the text. Person to person transmission through time was the most reliable way of making up for the absence of the original author in the text. It enabled the student to read the white lines on the page, as the Muslim teachers used to say, as well as the black lines.<sup>19</sup>

Much Islamic scholarship, its form and its method, was designed to compensate for the absence of the author in the text. So the history of this scholarship, indeed for many Islamic history itself, was the history of its transmission from person to person. This was exemplified in that classic literary form, the *tazkirah* or collective biography. The *tazkirah* might deal with the scholars of a particular time, a particular place or a particular family. It recorded, after family details, who a man's teachers were, what he learned and who his pupils were. His own contributions to knowledge would be listed along with anecdotal evidence bearing on the scholar's reliability as a transmitter of knowledge. Related to the same concern to compensate for the absence of the author in the text, we have the enormous respect given to the teacher in the Islamic tradition. The teacher was after all the living embodiment of knowledge; he cherished truth in his heart. 'Know that . . . one does not acquire learning nor profit from it', declared a thirteenth-century educational manual, 'unless one holds in esteem knowledge and those who possess it. One [must also] glorify and venerate the teacher.'<sup>20</sup> The situation was little different at the beginning of the twentieth century. The pupil 'should walk several paces behind his teacher,' declared a leading north Indian scholar, 'he should strive to be the first to do his teacher's bidding . . . and should they differ his teacher's word was final.'<sup>21</sup> Such was the impact of person to person transmission on respect for the teacher. Moreover, it

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35; Mitchell, *Colonizing Egypt*, pp. 150-4; Sayyed Hossein Nasr, 'Oral Transmission and the Book in Islamic Education: The Spoken and the Written Word', *Journal of Islamic Studies*, vol. 3, no. 1, January 1992, pp. 1-14.

<sup>20</sup> This statement appears in a trenchant exposition of how teachers should be venerated, E. E. Von Grunebaum and T. M. Abel (trans. and eds), *Az-Zarnuji: Ta'lim al Muta'allim-Tariq at-Ta'allum: Instruction of the Student: the Method of Learning* (The Iranian Institute and School of Asiatic studies, New York, 1947), p. 32.

<sup>21</sup> Statement by Maulana Abdul Bari, the leading Firangi Mahali scholar of the early twentieth century in Altaf al-Rahman Qidwai, *Qiyam-i Nizam-i Ta'lim* (Lucknow, 1924), p. 86.

was such an influential model that it was the method of transmission not just of formal religious knowledge, but of all knowledge. It did not matter whether it was music, or calligraphy, or of course the spiritual dimension of Islam, sufism—authoritative knowledge was transmitted from person to person.

With this understanding, the objections which Muslims might have had to printing become a lot more clear. Printing, by multiplying texts willy nilly, struck right at the heart of person to person transmission of knowledge; it struck right at the heart of Islamic authority. No Muslim was likely to adopt it until he saw a good in printing greater than the evil it might cause. In fact, Muslims came to adopt printing only when they felt Islam itself was at stake and print was a necessary weapon in the defence of the faith.<sup>22</sup>

\* \* \*

Evidently, the adoption of print was likely to have a revolutionary impact on Islam. I am now going to consider this impact in South Asia, where one-quarter of the world's Muslims live. It is the region of the Muslim world which has felt the forceful impact of print longer than any other. Of course, print in South Asia, no more than in any other context, did not act as an independent variable. It interacted with a context in which Muslims were beginning to realize that they were a minority, about 25 per cent, in a majority Hindu population. It interacted with a context of Islamic revival in which there were calls to renew Islam being expressed both inside and outside the region. It interacted with the rapid social, economic and political changes set off by British rule. But most important of all it interacted with Muslim attempts, after six hundred years of political domination on the sub-continent, to find answers to the questions of how to be good Muslims, of how to enable the Muslim community to survive under foreign Christian power. At the same time as noting this context, it is also important to remember that when I talk of print in the nineteenth century, I am not talking of Gutenberg moveable type, but of lithography. Moveable type for Islamic cursive scripts was not widely used in

<sup>22</sup> These arguments are developed in relation to Islam and printing. Nevertheless, it is recognized that the widespread printing of books was also not adopted in the Hindu, Chinese and Japanese worlds until the nineteenth century. In these areas too there were cultural and political barriers to the adoption of printing. In Hinduism, for instance, 'the oral word has remained the only fully acceptable and authoritative form for sacred texts for over two, possibly over two and one-half, millennia after the implementation of writing'. Graham, *Beyond the Written Word*, p. 68.

South Asia until the twentieth century, and to this very day has not succeeded completely in displacing lithography.

We have already noticed the speed and vigour with which print was taken up by Urdu-speaking Muslims, from the tracts and newspapers that were published in the 1820s and 1830s through to the thousands of books being published at the beginning of the twentieth century. This vigorous exploitation of print was led by the ulama, that is by the scholars and teachers who were the custodians of 1200 years of oral transmission of Islamic knowledge. Two of the earliest Muslim books to be printed were Saiyid Ahmad Bareilvi's *Taqwiyat al-Iman* and his *Sirat al-Mustaqim*, both of them key works in the Muslim revival of the early nineteenth century, and both of them works which the family of Shah Abdul Aziz of Delhi, a great family of ulama, played a major role in bringing to a wider public. In the latter part of the nineteenth century, the no less great Firangi Mahal family of ulama from Lucknow were considerable publishers of Islamic texts which were sold throughout Upper India and through Afghanistan in Central Asia. They also published some of the earliest Urdu newspapers.<sup>23</sup> One of them, *Karnamah*, often carried just one advertisement; it was for Thomas Holloway's 'pink pills for pale people'.<sup>24</sup> Then, Deoband, the most important centre of Islamic scholarship in late nineteenth-century India, and the town which now houses what many regard as the most important traditional university in the Islamic world after Cairo's al-Azhar, was already by this time, as it is today, a town of printed books and bookshops.<sup>25</sup>

You will want to know why ulama in north India embraced printing with such vigour. Simply, without power they were fearful for Islam. They were frightened that the community, the vast majority of whom were converts from Hinduism, might slip back into the maw of Hindu India. They were frightened by the activities of Christian

<sup>23</sup> For a discussion of the style and content of the first Urdu newspaper published by a Firangi Mahali, Maulvi Muhammad Yaqub, see Iqbal Husain, 'Lucknow between the Annexation and the Mutiny', unpublished paper, Department of History, Aligarh Muslim University, which analyses *Tilism-i Lakhnaw*, which came out in 1856 and 1857.

<sup>24</sup> *Karnamah* was the second of Maulvi Muhammad Yaqub's papers and appeared for three decades from the 1860s. Thomas Holloway manufactured patent medicines and pioneered the intensive use of newspaper advertising for the marketing of products. He used part of his fortune to found the Royal Holloway College, University of London. Caroline Bingham, *The History of the Royal Holloway College 1886-1986* (Constable: London, 1987).

<sup>25</sup> Barbara D. Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860-1900* (Princeton University Press: Princeton N. J., 1982), pp. 198-215.

missionaries who attacked Islam on the streets and in the press—although when missionaries ventured on set-piece debates with ulama they were soundly beaten. They were frightened because there was no legitimate power to put the holy law of Islam, the *sharia*, into operation. Their answer to this challenge was better religious knowledge. Muslims should know much more clearly and much more certainly than before how to behave as Muslims. The printing press was a crucial means to this end. It worked side by side, moreover, with a great programme of translation of the Islamic classics from Arabic and Persian into the vernacular. Many of the more important works of the Islamic educational curriculum were translated into Urdu in the nineteenth century. There were at least twelve attempts to translate the Quran into Urdu during the century. Moreover, the process of translation not just into Urdu but into the other vernaculars of South Asia continues to the present day.<sup>26</sup> Knowledge was no longer to be the special possession of an elite but open to all those who could read, memorize and listen with understanding.

The ulama were delighted by the huge increase in the number of books and the great improvements it brought to education:

Now God has been gracious by providing books [declared one scholar in 1895]. Books which one could not see in dreams or conceive of in imagination are now sold for cowries.

Going on to talk of his schooldays in Delhi in the first half of the century he said:

There were only eighteen copies of Bukhari, and of these, generous people had divided copies into parts and distributed them amongst students so that they could study them. When I studied Tirmizi from Miyan Sahib three of us shared one copy; and we three lived in different sections of the city . . . One of us would study it for a few hours, then another would carry it off . . . No one had a chance to study a whole book . . . Because of reading incompletely and out of order [the study of] every book was deficient.<sup>27</sup>

Thus, the ulama used the new technology of the printing press (what the Chairman of the Universities Funding Council would term the new mode of delivery) to compensate for the loss of political power. If Islam could no longer be supported by the swords of Muslim princes,

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 203–10; see a series of articles on the translation of the Quran into Tamil, Telegu, Kannada and Gujarati in Christian W. Troll (ed.), *Islam in India: Studies and Commentaries*, vol. I, (Vikas: New Delhi, 1982), pp. 135–67 and on the translation of the Quran into Malayalam in *ibid.*, vol. II, (Vikas: New Delhi, 1985), pp. 229–36.

<sup>27</sup> Metcalf, *Islamic Revival*, pp. 205–6.

it could now be supported by the enhanced religious understanding of Muslims themselves.

But the most powerful reason why the ulama felt able to adopt printing with such vigour was because it was not seen, at least initially, as involving any abandonment of the oral tradition, of person to person transmission. The printed book was designed to reinforce learning systems that already existed, to improve them, not to transform them. No one was to read a book without the help of a scholar. This was made very clear in one of the most influential works of popularization written over the past two centuries, Ashraf Ali Thanawi's *Bihishti Zewar* (Jewels of Paradise), a companion for Muslim women, a book designed to take the cause of Islamic reform into the harem. Rounding off the 'Jewels of Paradise' Thanawi warns his readers against the dangers of the unsupervised reading of books:

To avoid all this [he says] first show to a scholar any book being bought or read. If he says it is useful, then read it. If he says it is harmful, do not look at it or even keep it in the house . . . In short do not read any book without consulting a scholar. In fact, without a scholar do nothing at all.<sup>28</sup>

Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the popularization of formal religious knowledge through print in South Asia has been closely intertwined with Muslim religious revival. This revival has been accompanied by a whole series of religious changes associated to a greater or lesser degree with the use of print.

The first religious change is the development of a new way of being Muslim alongside those that already existed. It has come to be called Islamic protestantism and bears comparison with Christian protestantism. It was a major answer to the problem of how to be Muslim under British rule. For Muslim Protestants the route to survival was scriptural knowledge, knowledge of the Quran, and the traditions, and how to be a Muslim. Print was central to broadcasting this knowledge and making it available. Print was essential, too, to the successful working of their school system, independent of the colonial state and based on Deoband, which was to transmit this knowledge. The idea was that, with better Islamic knowledge, Muslims would be able to will a proper Muslim life for themselves. It would not matter if

<sup>28</sup> Barbara D. Metcalf, *Perfecting Women: Maulana Ashraf 'Ali Thanawi's Bihishti Zewar: A Partial Translation with Commentary* (University of California Press: Berkeley & Los Angeles, 1990), p. 376. This advice comes in the first of three essays with which Thanawi ends his book. It is entitled 'On acquiring further knowledge and the names of worthwhile and harmful books' and lists worthwhile and, perhaps unwisely, harmful books.

a Christian colonial state occupied the public arena. Their knowledge would tell them what God's will was; their consciences would make them obey it. This Islamic way, moreover, was reinforced by an approach to Islamic mysticism which forbade any thought of intercession at saints' tombs. Nothing was to dilute the powerful mixture of God's word and human conscience.<sup>29</sup> Supporters of this way of being Muslim by and large had little interest in state power; they opposed the Muslim demand for Pakistan in the 1940s. Similar responses to colonial rule grew up both in Indonesia and in North Africa.

A second religious change was a broadening Islamic vision to embrace a large part of the Muslim community in the world at large. Traditionally, of course, the idea of the *Ummah*, of the community of the Muslims in the world at large, had a sense of magic for Muslims; it was after all a community created through the grace of God's revelation through Muhammad. But the writings of Indian Muslims in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries give little sense of much involvement with the world outside South Asia, except with the Hijaz, Iran and perhaps Central Asia. However, as the second half of the nineteenth century developed, it is evident that South Asian Muslims were coming to experience an increasingly intense imaginative and emotional relationship with the wider Islamic world. The reasons for this expanding vision were, of course, many: the impact of colonial rule; the realization that the encroachment of the West was an experience being shared by almost all Muslims; the increasing ease with which Muslims were able to travel to be with Muslims in other lands; the need to find a sense of identity as they grappled with the meaning of the modern state in colonial form. Little of this expansion of vision could have taken place without the development of a large and vigorous Muslim press. Indeed, there was a symbiotic relationship between the growth of pan-Islamic consciousness and the growth of the press. The more Indian Muslims discovered about the fate of their brethren elsewhere in the Islamic world, the more they wished to know. When Russia and the Ottoman Empire went to war in the late 1870s, the press boomed. When the British invaded Egypt in 1882, it boomed again. When the Ottoman Empire entered its terminal stages from 1911 onwards, the Press boomed as never before. Great newspapers flourished—Abul Kalam Azad's *al-Hilal*, Muhammad Ali's *Comrade*, Zafar Ali Khan's *Zamindar*.<sup>30</sup>

Such was the fervour and the excitement that many Muslims came

<sup>29</sup> Metcalf, *Islamic Revival*, pp. 46–260.

<sup>30</sup> Robinson, *Separatism*, pp. 186.



to live a significant part of their imaginative lives in thought about the wider Islamic world. Muslims adopted headwear and other forms of dress to indicate their identification with the Middle East.<sup>31</sup> Their writings betrayed an absorption with the Muslims of other countries. Right at the leading edge of this pan-Islamic vision of Muslim community, and of course exploring its religious meaning, was the poet Muhammad Iqbal. When he wanted to emphasize the decline of Islam, he wrote a tearful poem about the end of Arab rule in Sicily. When he wanted to reflect upon human creativity, he wrote his finest Urdu poem on the mosque at Cordoba. When he wanted to emphasize that the Muslim community was not confined by any space, he wrote:

Our essence is not bound to any place;  
The vigour of our wine is not contained  
in any bowl; Chinese and Indian  
Alike the shard that constitutes our jar,  
Turkish and Syrian alike the clay  
forming our body; neither is our heart  
of India, or Syria, or Rum,  
Nor any fatherland to do we profess  
Except Islam.<sup>32</sup>

Iqbal's sweeping vision magnifies a broadening horizon that many lesser Muslims were coming to sense, to some extent at least. They were discovering that there was a part of themselves which was mentally and emotionally integrated with the wider Islamic world. They had a pan-Islamic layer in their identity. Without the press this pan-Islamic horizon could never have been seriously explored.

A third religious change, and one in which print played a large part, and arguably the most important part, was the erosion of the authority of the ulama as interpreters of Islam. A glance at public affairs in nineteenth and early twentieth century India would not necessarily suggest that this was the case. At no stage in the history of Islam on the Indian subcontinent were the ulama so influential. In a

<sup>31</sup> The early uniform of Aligarh College included the wearing of a Turkish fez. Abdul Halim Sharar tells how in the late nineteenth century the ulama of Firangi Mahal, and also Shibli Nomani, were beginning to adopt the styles of Syria and Egypt. At the same time Shia ulama were following Persian fashions. Abdul Halim Sharar, *Lucknow: The Last Phase of an Oriental Culture*, trans. and ed. by E. S. Harcourt and Fakhir Hussain, (Paul Elek: London, 1975), p. 176.

<sup>32</sup> From Iqbal's *Rumuz-i-Bekhudī* or 'The Mysteries of Selflessness', in W. Theodore de Bary (ed.), *Sources of Indian Tradition* (Columbia University Press: New York, 1958), p. 756.

situation in which Muslim power was destroyed, and in which the Muslim landed and government service classes were compromised by their association with the colonial power, the ulama were able to push themselves forward as the defenders of Muslim culture and Muslim values in a modernizing and westernizing world. As we have seen, they used print and the press as a major weapon in their struggle. And they had some considerable success in building a constituency in Muslim society at large to compensate for the loss of the support of Muslim state power. By the end of the nineteenth century Shibli Nomani was urging the first conference of ulama to take control of the Muslim community.<sup>33</sup> In 1917, when the British were considering a major devolution of power upon Indians, ulama sent in addresses to the Viceroy and the Secretary of State for India claiming that power should be devolved on them.<sup>34</sup> Such was their influence, moreover, that when they got up a massive protest against British rule, the biggest since the Mutiny of 1857, to try to save the Turkish Caliphate and to protect the holy places of Islam, they were able to blow constitutional politics off course for a good four years.<sup>35</sup>

But, ironically, while print enabled ulama greatly to extend their influence in public affairs, it was also doing serious damage to the roots of their authority. By printing the Islamic classics, and the print run for a major text could be as many as ten thousand copies, and by translating them into the vernaculars they undermined their authority; they were no longer necessarily around when the book was read to make up for the absence of the author in the text; their precious *ijazas*, which brought the authority of the past to their learning in the present, were made less significant; their monopoly of the transmission of knowledge was broken. Books, which they literally possessed, which they carried in their hearts, and which they transmitted with a whole series of mnemonic aids to memory, could now be consulted by any Ahmad, Mahmud or Muhammad, who could make what they will of them. Increasingly from now on any Ahmad, Mahmud or Muhammad could claim to speak for Islam. No longer was a sheaf of impeccable *ijazas* the buttress of authority; strong Islamic commitment would be enough. The force of 1200 years of oral

<sup>33</sup> Speech of Shibli to the Nadwat-ul-Ulama in 1894. S. M. Ikram, *Modern Muslim India and the Birth of Pakistan (1858-1951)* (Sh. Muhammad Ashraf: Lahore, 1965), pp. 139-40.

<sup>34</sup> See Robinson, *Separatism*, pp. 284-6.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 289-356; Gail Minault, *The Khilafat Movement: Religious Symbols and Political Mobilization in India* (Columbia University Press: New York, 1982).

transmission, of person to person transmission, came increasingly to be ignored. In consequence, as Akbar Ahmed so often says, no one knows nowadays who speaks for Islam.<sup>36</sup>

In fact, ulama in the twentieth century are launched down a long decline in their authority. Of course, they still command respect. Of course, they still comport themselves as men should who cherish knowledge of God's word in their hearts—you recall the unbending carriage, the magisterial dignity of Ayatollah Khomeini. Nevertheless, authority has been draining away. As time goes on, ulama do not walk so tall. Their gowns and turbans do not signify as much. Doubtless they will end up like teachers in the universities of the West: scholars who wear their finery on special occasions, but with little sense of its meaning—which is of course a mere sartorial echo of the time when they had real authority.

By breaking the stranglehold of 1200 years of oral transmission, by breaking the stranglehold of the madrasa-trained ulama on the interpretation of Islamic knowledge, print helped to make possible an era of vigorous religious experiment. Print came to be the main forum in which religious debate was conducted; it was an era of pamphlet wars and of religiously partisan newspapers and magazines. Scholars, some madrasa-trained, some not, delved with increasing vigour into the resources of both the Islamic tradition and Western civilization, now so freely made available by print, to find answers to contemporary challenges. The result was a rapid florescence of sectarianism. Group after group sprang up: Deobandis, Bareilvis, Ahmadis, Necharis, Ahl-i Hadiths, Ahl-i Quran, Jamaatis etc.—almost all of which, in this century, have been translated to Britain.

As you might expect, some of the more extreme responses to contemporary challenges, some of the more radical leaps forward in religious thinking, came from men who were not formally trained ulama—men from outside the oral systems of transmission. One of these was Mirza Ghulam Ahmad of Qadian, the founder of the Ahmadiyya sect, who died in 1908. Drawing on strands in medieval Islamic thought as well as the spurious claims of a European explorer in the Himalayas and the Gospel of Barnabas, a medieval forgery, he made a series of assertions. Among them were the assertions: that Christ did not die on the cross but survived to preach to a lost tribe of Israel in the Punjab and is buried in Kashmir; that Ghulam Ahmad

<sup>36</sup> See, for instance, Akbar S. Ahmed, *Discovering Islam: Making Sense of Muslim History and Society* (Routledge & Kegan Paul: London, 1988).

himself was the Promised Messiah of the Christian and Muslim traditions; and that he, Ghulam Ahmad, was a Prophet—suggesting that Prophecy had not come to an end with the Prophet Muhammad. You will not be surprised to know that Ghulam Ahmad was not popular with his fellow Muslims; his ten million or so followers today are persecuted throughout much of the Islamic world. The important issue from our point of view is that it is unlikely that Ghulam Ahmad would have been able to develop his views outside the much freer access to knowledge offered by print. Certainly his followers in Britain know the value of print; at the heart of the complex they have recently built at Tilford, near Guildford, is a printing press with facilities for computer typesetting in thirty different languages.<sup>37</sup>

Ghulam Ahmad is something of a curiosity, although an interesting one. Much more important in developing new trajectories of religious thought were Saiyid Ahmad Khan, who died in 1898, and Saiyid Abul Ala Maududi, who died in 1979.

Saiyid Ahmad Khan is the founder of Islamic modernism, that is the development in Islamic thought which bears comparison with the development of higher criticism and modernism in Christian thought. Saiyid Ahmad came from an aristocratic background; his family had been leading figures at the Mughal court. Saiyid Ahmad himself was a giant of a man; a great leader of men, a major religious thinker, a man of much moral courage. He was deeply concerned that Islam should make sense in the light of Western science; he was no less deeply concerned that Muslims should be reconciled to Western civilization and British rule. A largely self-taught scholar, Saiyid Ahmad explored the Islamic tradition for himself. He also explored contemporary Western science and biblical criticism. He knew William Paley's *Natural Theology*. He knew John Herschel's *Outlines of Astronomy*. He approved of Unitarians such as Spinoza and Toland. He disapproved of radical German theologians of the Tübingen school such as David Strauss and Ferdinand Baur. He was certainly aware of the great achievements in natural history of Charles Lyell and Charles Darwin, if not directly, through their impact on Bishop Colenso's questioning of the historical nature of the Pentateuch.<sup>38</sup> Saiyid Ahmad remains the

<sup>37</sup> H. A. Walter, *The Ahmadiyya Movement* (Humphrey Milford: London, 1918); Yohannan Friedmann, *Prophecy Continuous: Aspects of Ahmadi Religious Thought and its Medieval Background* (University of California Press: Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1989); and Francis Robinson, 'Ahmad and the Ahmadiyya', *History Today*, vol. 40, June 1990, pp. 42–7.

<sup>38</sup> Christian W. Troll, *Saiyid Ahmad Khan: A Reinterpretation of Muslim Theology* (Vikas: New Delhi, 1978), pp. 105–70.

only Muslim, to my knowledge, to have produced a commentary on the Bible. He also produced his own vast commentary on the Quran. In developing a new Islamic theology, he echoed the natural theologians amongst the Christians of his time: the word of God and the work of God cannot be in conflict.<sup>39</sup> If they seemed to be in conflict, it was the fault of Muslim understanding. With a new sense of history he drew a distinction between the essence of the Quran and what belonged to the time when it was revealed. At the heart of his modernist method was his concern to draw this essence, the intention of revelation, into the modern world and to cut away the shackles of the past. Now Islam could fearlessly keep in step with the advance of modern science and of social change. It was an Islamic understanding which could never have been generated in the madrasas with their oral systems for transmitting knowledge. It was entirely a product of the world of print. To this day it flourishes only amongst those subject to western-style systems of education.

Saiyid Abul Ala Maududi is the founder of Islamic fundamentalism—or better put the Islamist movement—in South Asia, and the most powerful influence on its development worldwide. Like Saiyid Ahmad Khan he was not madrasa educated and stood outside the old oral systems of transmission; he was also self-educated in European social and political thought. His prime concern was that Islam and Islamic society should be able to withstand its increasingly corrosive encounter with the West. To do this rightly-guided Muslims had to take control of the modern state—he had no time at all for the Muslim protestants, who avoided the realities of modern politics and relied on individual human wills to make Islamic society. Political power was to be used to put revelation into operation on earth. All the guidance that was needed already existed in the holy law, the *sharia*, which embraced all human activity. God was sovereign on earth, not man; the state, manned by the rightly-guided, was His agent. This is the basic islamizing blueprint of Islamic fundamentalism. It has been carried forward by the organization of the rightly-guided, the *Jamaati Islami*, which has an influence in Pakistan and elsewhere out of all proportion to its numbers.

Maududi's Islamic understanding, which appeals to many edu-

<sup>39</sup> Troll emphasizes that Saiyid Ahmad's insistence that the word of God and the work of God could not be in conflict echoes the line taken by the Archdeacon of Calcutta of the time, John Pratt, in his *Scripture and Science not at Variance*, which was first published in 1856. Saiyid Ahmad frequently refers to Pratt's book in his commentary on the Bible. Troll, *Saiyid Ahmad Khan*, p. 155.

cated Muslims throughout the world, in particular those educated in the modern sciences, is entirely a product of print culture. Moreover, his Jamaat-i Islam organization is in significant measure sustained by print, a large part of its income comes from the sale of Maududi's works. Furthermore, its message is spread by print. The young Muslim fundamentalist gets much of his Islamic knowledge from books which will often be read without a teacher. The printed book is the great vehicle of Maududi's ideas, as it is for other Islamizing forces, whether it be the offshoots of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Arab world or the Nurcular in Turkey.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, the founder of the Nurcular actually insisted that books should replace people as guides in faith.<sup>41</sup> 'They are gazis', he said pointing to a pile of the writings of his followers, 'they have waged a battle against unbelief.'<sup>42</sup>

\* \* \*

Evidently, print has worked, or has helped to work, great changes. We have seen from our studies of its impact in South Asia how it made possible the development of a protestant or scriptural Islam, how it strengthened the Pan-islamic layer in the Muslim sense of identity, and how it levelled a major assault on the ulama as interpreters of Islam. We have also seen how print outflanked the oral, person to person, systems for the transmission of knowledge, how it thus opened the way to major new understandings of Islam such as those of the modernists and the fundamentalists, and how it assisted in the colonizing of Muslim minds with Western knowledge. You may be assured that developments such as these we have seen in South Asia are also mirrored to a greater or less extent by similar developments elsewhere in the Islamic world.

All these changes are results of what we might term the mass production effects of print. They are results of the revolution in access

<sup>40</sup> Emmanuel Sivan, the historian of jihad in the later Middle Ages, tells us how he was drawn to study the Muslim Brotherhood and its more recent offshoots in Egypt and elsewhere by discovering large quantities of newly published medieval Islamic texts, in particular the works of Ibn Taimiya and Ibn Kathir, in bookshops in East Jerusalem and in Cairo: 'these books, smelling of fresh print, were quickly snatched off the bookstalls by people in all walks of life, but especially by youngsters in modern garb. . . . I noticed that the introductions and commentaries thereof . . . [made] an evident effort . . . to reflect upon the meaning these texts could have for a modern and totally different historical situation.' Emmanuel Sivan, *Radical Islam: Medieval Theology and Modern Politics* (Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 1985), p. ix-x. For the Nurcular, see Mardin, *Religion and Social Change*.

<sup>41</sup> Mardin, *Religion and Social Change*, pp. 181-2.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

to knowledge that print makes possible. I have not considered at all the psychological impact of print, the role it will have played in reshaping Muslim minds as they have moved from consciousness primarily formed by sound to consciousness primarily formed by sight. This is fascinating territory; it is also contentious territory. Reluctantly, I leave it to another time. Nevertheless, even though I explore only part rather than the whole of the problem, the evidence for the revolutionary impact of print on the religious understandings of Muslims is weighty.

This said, it is important to be aware of the limits of this revolution. Print and print culture have achieved only a limited penetration of Muslim societies. Literacy rates in South Asia, for instance, range from 20 per cent in Bangladesh to 36 per cent in India; literacy rates in the wider Islamic world range from 14 per cent in North Yemen to 90 per cent in Iraq. Then, even where there is literacy, patterns of behaviour derived from oral culture can remain very influential, as Amin Sweeney has shown in his studies of Malaysian students.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, print can still be relegated to the status of mere handmaid of oral transmission. One of the most widely followed movements in the Muslim world today, some would say the most widely followed, is the *Tabligh-i Jamaat* or Missionary Society. Members of this society, often highly literate people, learn key texts by heart—books they regard as dead. They insist on human contact in the transmission of knowledge.<sup>44</sup> It is, in fact, crucial to remember that most Muslim societies have experienced barely one hundred years of print culture. Moreover, as print makes its way forward in these societies, it is rapidly being caught up by a second revolutionary force in information technology, the electronic media—wireless, telephone, television, video cassettes etc. The electronic media, deceptive though they can be, give a new lease of life to the oral preferences of Muslims in the transmission of knowledge. They are already beginning to have their impact on Muslim religious experience.<sup>45</sup> Certainly, the Islamic world

<sup>43</sup> Amin Sweeney, *A Full Hearing: Orality and Literacy in the Malay World*, (University of California Press: Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1987), pp. 267–302.

<sup>44</sup> Barbara D. Metcalf, 'Meandering Madrasas: Education, Itinerancy and the Tablighi Jama'at', paper delivered to the workshop on the purposes of education and information, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, December 1991.

<sup>45</sup> Much has been made in recent years of the role played by radio cassettes of Ayatollah Khomeini's sermons in the making of the Iranian revolution. See Peter Chelkowski, 'Popular Entertainment, Media and Social Change in Twentieth-Century Iran' in Peter Avery *et al.* (eds), *The Cambridge History of Iran*, vol. 7, p. 814 and

is in the midst of the revolutionary effects of print. Certainly, religious understandings have been and are being shaped by print. But, I put it to you that it is unlikely that the Islamic world will be influenced as deeply by print as the Christian West.

Peter Avery, 'Printing, the Press and Literature in Modern Iran' in *ibid.*, p. 829. Less dramatic, however, but rather more important in a general sense is the way in which electronic media are coming to serve regular habits of piety, whether it be the morning reading of the Quran on the wireless, Graham, *Beyond the Written Word*, p. 104, or the home use of video-cassettes of leading Middle Eastern preachers in France. Michel Reeber, 'A Study of Muslim Preaching in France', *Islam and Christian Muslim Relations*, vol. 2, no. 2, December 1991, pp. 275-94.