intersections

Article

Explore SHARIAsource

December 19, 2023

A portal into the digital world of Islamic studies

In the political sphere, the term *sharia* is frequently used and often abused—particularly by political figures in the West. Directly translated from Arabic, "*sharīʿah*" means "the path" or "the way." Practically, sharia (or Islamic law) is a set of sacred imperatives that direct the everyday lives and actions of Muslims. This code of conduct has both private and public manifestations with some encoded into formal laws and some primarily existing as personal codes of behavior.

Meaning and Controversy

In general, sharia encompasses two sets of obligations: (1) obligations that people have to each other and (2) obligations that people have to Allah. Two of the primary sources of sharia are the Quran (the holy book of Islam, containing the divinely inspired word of Allah) and the hadith (reports of the words and actions of the prophet Muhammad). Throughout the long life of Islam, there has been considerable debate about the exact role of sharia in the public sphere. For instance, Muslims disagree about which of the hadith are divinely inspired and which are simply traditions passed

down from religious leaders like Muhammad. Therefore, sharia has always operated alongside secular or customary legal frameworks in Muslim-majority countries.

Many of these distinctions have been lost in mainstream discourses surrounding Islamic law. In the aftermath of the United States' declaration of the War on Terror, proponents of that open-ended war used the incendiary phrase (sharia law) to stoke Islamophobia in areas where Muslims were the minority and to justify military interventions throughout the Muslim-majority world. One of the aims of Harvard's Program in Islamic Law is to provide clarity about sharia and how it is interpreted in different Muslim populations. SHARIAsource is an online portal that offers one of the world's largest repositories of digitized documents pertaining to Islamic law as well as data tools to help contextualize this body of information.

The Impact of Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq: An Interactive Map

One of the many resources of SHARIAsource is this interactive map of Imam Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq, one of Islam's most influential jurists and thinkers.

Islamic Law in the Age of Colonialism

Another resource is the collection Islamic Law in the Age of Colonialism, which includes documents written during the colonization of Muslim populations by imperialist powers such as the Ottoman Empire and Britain. According to the project's description, "The study of Islamic law in the era of colonialism represents an important anchor-point in the transition from pre-modern to modern conceptualizations of Islamic law and its [*sic*] practice in majority and minority Muslim contexts."

SHARIAsource provides a much-needed intervention into our understanding of the diverse origins, changes, and contexts that have shaped the body of Islamic law. More broadly, it is an illuminating look at how religious and legal traditions develop codependently. This kind of endeavor also offers religious studies a powerful template for understanding the relationship between religious and secular traditions, even outside of Islam.