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## **Traditionalist' Islamic Activism:Deoband, Tablighis, and Talibs**

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### **Citation**

Metcalf, B. D. (2002). Traditionalist' Islamic Activism:Deoband, Tablighis, and Talibs. *Isim Paper*, 1-24. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/10068>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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‘TRADITIONALIST’ ISLAMIC  
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*'Traditionalist' Islamic Activism: Deoband, Tablighis, and Talibs*

**'TRADITIONALIST' ISLAMIC  
ACTIVISM: DEOBAND,  
TABLIGHIS, AND TALIBS**

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PRINTED IN THE NETHERLANDS

ISBN 90-804604-6-X

ISSN 1568-8313

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When the Afghan Taliban entered into the international spotlight at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, no image was more central than what seemed to be their rigid and repressive control of individual behavior justified in the name of Islam. They set standards of dress and public behavior that were particularly extreme in relation to women, limiting women's movement in public space and their employment outside the home. The Taliban enforced their decrees through public corporal punishment. Their image was further damaged, particularly after the bombings of the East African American embassies in 1998, when they emerged as the 'hosts' of Usama Bin Laden and other 'Arab Afghans' associated with him.<sup>1</sup>

Many commentators described the Taliban by generic, catch-all phrases like 'fanatic', 'medieval', and 'fundamentalist'.<sup>2</sup> The Taliban identified themselves, however, as part of a Sunni school of thought that had its origins in the late 19<sup>th</sup>-century colonial period of India's history, a school named after the small, country town northeast of Delhi, Deoband, where the original madrasa, or seminary, of the movement was founded in 1867. Many of the Taliban had indeed studied in Deobandi schools, but one spokesman for the movement in its final months went so far as to declare: 'Every Afghan is a Deobandi.'<sup>3</sup> This comment may be disconcerting to those familiar with the school in its Indian environment where its *ulama*—those learned in traditional subjects and typically addressed as *maulana*—were not directly engaged in politics and were primarily occupied in

1. I am grateful to Muhammad Khalid Masud, ISIM Academic Director, and Peter van der Veer, ISIM Co-Director, who invited me to deliver the annual lecture of the Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World (ISIM), Leiden University, 23 November 2001. This essay is based on the lecture I delivered at that occasion.
2. An example of the typically imprecise discussion of 'Deobandism' is: 'a sect that propagates [...] a belief that has inspired modern revivals of Islamic fundamentalism'. John F. Burns, 'Adding Demands, Afghan Leaders Show Little Willingness to Give up Bin Laden', *The New York Times*, 19 September 2001.
3. Conversation with 'the ambassador at large' of the Taliban, Rahmatullah Hashemi, Berkeley California, 6 March 2001, in the course of his tour through the Middle East, Europe, and the United States.



teaching and providing both practical and spiritual guidance to their followers. (The comment might also be disconcerting since it was suggestive of a regime shaped by ideals more than reality, given, for example, the substantial Shi'a element in the Afghan population.)

Another movement linked to Deoband came to international attention at the same time: an a-political, quietest movement of internal grassroots missionary renewal, the Tablighi Jama'at. It gained some notoriety when it appeared that a young American who had joined the Taliban first went to Pakistan through the encouragement of a Tablighi Jama'at missionary.<sup>4</sup> This movement was intriguing, in part by the very fact that it was so little known and, despite not having any formal organization or paid staff, it sustained networks of participants that stretched around the globe.

The variety of these movements is in itself instructive: clearly, not all Islamic activisms are alike, and each of these movements deserves attention on its own. However, for all their variety, these Deoband movements were, in fact, alike in one crucial regard that set them apart from other well-known Islamic movements. What they shared was an overriding emphasis on encouraging a range of ritual and personal behavioral practices linked to worship, dress, and everyday behavior. These were deemed central to *shari'a*—divinely ordained morality and practices, as understood in this case by measuring current practice against textual standards and traditions of Hanafi reasoning. The anthropologist Olivier Roy calls such movements 'neo-fundamentalist' to distinguish them from what can be seen as a different set of Islamic movements, often called 'Islamist'.<sup>5</sup> Limited, as he puts it, to 'mere implementation of the *shari'a*' in matters of ritual, dress, and behavior, 'neo-fundamentalist' movements are distinguishable from Islamist parties primarily because, unlike them, they have neither a systematic ideology nor a global political agenda. A more precise label for them is, perhaps, 'traditionalist' because of their continuity with earlier institutions, above all those associated with the seminaries and with the *ulama* in general.

The contrasting Islamist movements include the Muslim Brothers in Egypt and other Arab countries, and the Jama'at-i Islami in the Indian sub-continent, as well as many thinkers involved in the Iranian revolution. All these constructed ideological systems and systematically built models for distinctive polities

4. See, for example, 'A Long, Strange Trip to the Taliban', *Newsweek*, 17 December 2001; and Don Lattin and Kevin Fagan, 'John Walker's Curious Quest: Still a Mystery How the Young Marine County Convert to Islam Made the Transition from Spiritual Scholar to Taliban Soldier', *San Francisco Chronicle*, 13 December 2001.

5. Olivier Roy, 'Has Islamism a Future in Afghanistan?', in *Fundamentalism Reborn? Afghanistan and the Taliban*, ed. William Maley (New York: NYU Press, 1998), 208.

that challenged what they saw as the alternative systems: nationalism, capitalism, and Marxism.<sup>6</sup> Participants were Western educated, not seminary educated. They were engineers and others with technical training, lawyers, doctors, and university professors, and, generally speaking, they had little respect for the traditionally educated *‘ulama*. These ‘Islamist’ movements sought to ‘do’ modernity in ways that simultaneously asserted the cultural pride of the subjects and avoided the ‘black’ side of Western modernity. Many of the jihad movements that arose in Afghanistan in opposition to the Soviets were heirs of Islamist thought (although over time they also moved to define their Islamic politics primarily as encouragement of a narrow range of Islamic practices and symbols).<sup>7</sup> Participants in militant movements, including Bin Laden’s Al-Qa’ida, often belonged to extremist, break-away factions of Islamist parties.

What is perhaps most striking about the Deoband-type movements is the extent to which politics is an empty ‘box’, filled expediently and pragmatically depending on what seems to work best in any given situation. Islam is often spoken of as ‘a complete way of life’—arguably a modernist and misleading distinction from other historical religious traditions—so that political life must be informed by Islamic principles. In fact, as these movements illustrate, virtually any strategy is accepted that allows the goal of encouraging what are defined as core, *shari‘a*-based individual practices, coupled with a range of mundane goals that may or may not be explicit—from protection of life and property, to social honor and political power, to the dignity that comes from pious adherence to what are taken as divine commands. Indeed, these movements often work well in the context of secular regimes where they can pursue their emphasis on disseminating adherence to correct practice with relative freedom.

Secondly, the movements illustrate another important corrective. A great deal is written about modern Muslim societies being consumed with antipathy toward America, American values, and American international political activities. No one, especially after 11 September 2001, would deny that this anger exists. However,

6. Here I differ from Salman Rushdie, who uses the term too broadly: ‘These Islamists [here he speaks of “radical political movements”]—we must get used to this word, “Islamists”, meaning those who are engaged upon such political projects, and learn to distinguish it from the more general and politically neutral “Muslim”—include [...] the Taliban.’ Salman Rushdie, ‘Yes, This is about Islam’, *The New York Times*, 2 November 2001.
7. The Jamiyyat-i Islami was formed by Burhanuddin Rabbani and others who had studied at Al-Azhar; the Hezb-i Islami of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar was more influenced by the Pakistani Jama‘at-i Islami. On the original movements, see Seyyid Vali Nasr, *The Vanguard of the Islamic Revolution: The Jama‘at-i Islami of Pakistan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994) and Richard Mitchell, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers* (London, Oxford University Press, 1969).

anger may well be very specific, for example directed at American intervention abroad and not at American ‘freedom’ or ‘values’ in general. Moreover, Islamic movements like the ones discussed here may have many goals and offer a range of social, moral, and spiritual satisfactions that are positive and not merely a reactionary rejection of modernity or ‘the West’. Quite simply, these movements may, in the end, have much less to do with ‘us’ than is often thought. In all their complexity, the Deobandi movements serve as an example of one important model of contemporary Islamic thought and action, a major example of what can be called ‘traditionalist’ Islamic activism.

### THE DARU’L-‘ULUM AND ‘CULTURAL STRENGTHENING’

The origin of the Deobandi school of thought is literally a school, a madrasa or seminary, founded in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century at the height of colonial rule in the Delhi region of northern India.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the key institution of the movement would prove to be the seminary. The madrasa does not appear to have been a major institution in the pre-colonial period. Instead, those who wished to be specialists in the great classic disciplines studied through Arabic—the Qur’an, Qur’anic recitation and interpretation, *hadith*, jurisprudential reasoning based on these holy sources, and ancillary sciences like logic, rhetoric, and grammar—would sit at the feet of one or more teachers, traveling often from place to place, seeking not a degree but a certificate of completion of particular books and studies. The modern madrasa, in contrast, as a formal institution, organized by classes, offering a sequential curriculum, staffed by a paid faculty and supported by charitable campaigns, was a product of the colonial period and the result of familiarity with European educational institutions. The founders of the school gained support by utilizing all types of new technologies, from printing presses to the post office to railroads, as they turned from reliance on increasingly constrained princely patronage to popularly based contributions. Deoband spun off some two-dozen other seminaries across the sub-continent by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>9</sup>

8. See my *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband 1860–1900* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982).

9. For an evocative picture of the education of an ‘*ālim*’ that, despite the Shi’a setting, resonates broadly with the kind of education briefly described here, see Roy P. Mottahedeh, *The Mantle of the Prophet: Religion and Politics in Iran* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985).

Boys who came to the school were provided their basic necessities. They lived modestly and were expected to adhere to a serious schedule of discipline. They did not learn English or other 'modern' subjects. They used Urdu as a lingua franca, enhancing links among students from Bengal to Central Asia to the south. The *‘ulama* who founded this school were above all specialists in prophetic *hadith*, the narratives which constitute the Prophet Muhammad's sayings and practices which serve either directly or analogously to guide every aspect of moral behavior. Their lives were meant to embody their teachings. Through the issuing of *fatawa*, they responded to inquiries with advisory opinions to guide their followers as well. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Deoband had formalized the position of a chief *mufti* at the school. Increasingly, the Deobandi *fatawa*, like the *fatawa* of other groups, were disseminated through print. *Fatawa* were judgments, attempts to fit sanctioned precedent to present circumstances, and it was well accepted that there could be differences of opinion about what was correct. Islamic law at its core is not rigid but profoundly contextual.

Focus on *hadith* was not only central to the desire to live in external conformity to certain behavioral patterns. It also was a route to cultivating, through practice, love for and devotion to the prophet Muhammad and, through the bonds of Sufism, to those guides and elders who were his heirs in chains of initiation that stretched back through time. Many of the teachers at Deoband shared Sufi bonds and many students sought initiation into the charisma-filled relationship of discipleship. The Deobandis cherished stories about the Sufis. They practiced the disciplines and meditations that opened them to what was typically imagined as a relationship that developed from one that was focused on their teacher to one that engaged with the Prophet and ultimately with the Divine. The bonds among students and teachers in this largely male world were profound and enduring, based on shared experience, commitments, and affection.

The *‘ulama* as a class were new in the modern period, much as the madrasas that produced them were. Of course there had been learned people in Mughal times, but the emergence of a distinctive class, one that over time became professionalized (for example with 'degrees' recognized by state authorities), was very new. The role of the *‘ulama* was distinctive as well. Instead of being trained, as the learned had been in the past, for specific state functions in such areas as the judiciary, these scholars went out to take up positions as teachers themselves, writers, debaters with rival Muslims and non-Muslims, publishers in the expanding vernacular marketplace, prayer leaders and guardians at mosques and shrines.

The Deobandis were 'reformists' in a way that, with broad strokes, were shared across a whole range of Muslim, Sikh, and Hindu movements in the colonial period. Characteristic across the board were movements that assessed world-

ly powerlessness and looked to earlier periods or pristine texts as a source of cultural pride and a possible roadmap to resurgence. Armed with their studies of *hadith*, the Deobandis, for example, deplored a range of customary celebrations and practices, including what they regarded as excesses at saints' tombs, elaborate lifecycle celebrations, and practices attributed to the influence of the Shi'a.

There were rival Islamic reformist schools in the quest for true Islamic practice. One group, the Ahl-i Hadith, for example, in their extreme opposition to such practices as visiting the Prophet's grave, rivaled that of the Arabians typically labeled 'Wahhabi'. The 'Wahhabis' were followers of an iconoclastic late 18<sup>th</sup>-century reform movement associated with tribal unification who were to find renewed vigor in internal political competition within Arabia in the 1920s.<sup>10</sup> From colonial times until today, it is worth noting, the label 'Wahhabi' is often used to discredit any reformist or politically active Islamic group. Another group that emerged in these same years was popularly known as 'Barelvi', and although engaged in the same process of measuring current practice against *hadith*, it was more open to many customary practices. They called the others 'Wahhabi'. These orientations—'Deobandi', 'Barelvi' or 'Ahl-i Hadith'—would come to define sectarian divisions among Sunni Muslims of South Asian background to the present. Thus, *ulama*, mosques, and a wide range of political, educational, and missionary movements were known by these labels at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, both within the South Asian countries of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, as well as in places like Britain where South Asian populations settled.<sup>11</sup> Beginning in the colonial era, *ulama* competed in public life to show themselves as the spokesmen

10. For a comparative view of the contexts of such movements, see William R. Roff, 'Islamic Movements: One or Many?', in *Islam and the Political Economy of Meaning*, ed. William R. Roff (London: Croom Helm and Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 31–52.

11. For a general background to all these movements, see Metcalf (1982) *op. cit.* On the 'Barelvis' (who call themselves Ahlu's-Sunnat wa'l-Jama'at in order to assert that they are true Muslims, not a sect), see Usha Sanyal, *Devotional Islam and Politics in British India: Ahmad Riza Khan Barelwi and His Movement, 1870–1920* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996). For the experience of religious institutions in Pakistan, see Jamal Malik, *Colonization of Islam: Dissolution of Traditional Institutions in Pakistan* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1996) and Muhammad Qasim Zaman, 'Religious Education and the Rhetoric of Reform: The Madrasa in British India and Pakistan', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 41, no. 2 (April 1999): 294–323; and 'Sectarianism in Pakistan: The Radicalization of Shi'i and Sunni Identities', *Modern Asian Studies* 32, no. 3 (July 1998): 689–716; as well as his forthcoming monograph from Princeton University Press. For the religious institutions of South Asian Muslims in Europe and North America, see Philip Lewis, *Islamic Britain: Religion, Politics and Identity among British Muslims* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1994) and Barbara D. Metcalf, ed., *Making Muslim Space in North America and Europe* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

or defenders of 'Islam' to their fellow Muslims. This was a new understanding of Islam as a corporate identity in competition with others, and it created a new role in public life for religious leaders.

That role in the colonial period was not overtly political. The brutal repression of the so-called Mutiny of 1857 against the British had fallen very hard on north Indian Muslims. In the aftermath, the *'ulama*, not surprisingly, adopted a stance of a-political quietism. As the Indian nationalist movement became a mass movement after World War I, the Deobandi leadership did somewhat of an about face. They were never a political party as such, but, organized as the Association of the 'Ulama of India (Jamiat 'Ulama-i Hind), they threw in their lot with Gandhi and the Indian National Congress in opposition to British rule. Deobandi histories written before 1920 insisted that the *'ulama* did not participate in the anti-colonial rebellion of 1857; those written after 1920 give 'freedom fighters' pride of place. Like much of the orthodox Jewish leadership in the case of the Zionist movement, most Deobandis opposed the creation of what in 1947 would become the independent state of Pakistan—a separate state for Muslims to be led by a westernized, secular leadership.<sup>12</sup> They preferred operating in an officially secular context apart from the government in pursuit of their own goals.

Despite a serious dispute over control of the institution in the early 1980s, Deoband at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century continued to thrive with over 3,000 students enrolled, although in the mid-1990s the Government of India terminated visas that allowed foreign students to enroll. The seminary's web page displayed a monumental marble mosque, still being built and intended to accommodate more than 30,000 worshippers. Links provided further information in English, Hindi, Arabic, and Urdu.<sup>13</sup> Visitors to the school reported remarkable continuity in the content and mode of teaching characteristic of the school,<sup>14</sup> and the web

12. Yohanan Friedmann, 'The Attitude of the Jam'iyat-i 'Ulama'-i Hind to the Indian National Movement and the Establishment of Pakistan', in *The Ulama in Modern History*, ed. Gabriel Baer (Jerusalem: Israeli Oriental Society, Asian and African Studies, VII, 1971), 157–83.

13. See <http://www.darululoom-deoband.com>. The estimate of numbers to be accommodated in the mosque is found in Rahul Bedi, 'Taliban Ideology Lives on in India', *On-line Asia Times*, 12 December 2001 ([www.atimes.com/ind-pak/CL12Df01.html](http://www.atimes.com/ind-pak/CL12Df01.html)).

14. Many journalists traveled to Deoband in late 2001 in order to report on the source of Taliban religious training. See, for example, Luke Harding, 'Out of India', *The Guardian*, 2 November 2001; Kartikeya Sharma, 'Scholar's Getaway', *The Week* ([www.the-week.com/21jul01/life](http://www.the-week.com/21jul01/life)); and Michael Fathers, 'At the Birthplace of the Taliban', *Time Magazine*, 21 September 2001 (republished on [www.foil.org/resources/9-11/Fathers010921-Deoband](http://www.foil.org/resources/9-11/Fathers010921-Deoband)). On 29 December 2001 the search engine 'Google' listed approximately 2,500 sites for 'Deoband', many of them reporting on the links of the school to the Taliban.

page itself stressed its enduring role: the training ‘of Ulama, Shaikhs, traditionists, jurisconsults, authors and experts’. Moreover, its schools were ‘stars of this very solar system by the light of which every nook and corner of the religious and academic life of the Muslims of the sub-continent is radiant.’ Among these, presumably would be the humble Deobandi madrasas along the Pakistan-Afghan frontier and in southern Afghanistan, which constituted the original Taliban base.<sup>15</sup> But within India at least the *‘ulama* of Deoband continued their pre-independence pattern: they did not become a political party and they justified political cooperation with non-Muslims as the best way to protect Muslim interests. ‘Freedom Fight’ is one of the web site’s links. For ‘millions of Muslim families’, the web site continues ‘[...their] inferiority complex was removed [...]’.

### TABLIGHI JAMA‘AT

The Tablighi Jama‘at was an offshoot of the Deoband movement. In some ways, it represented an intensification of the original Deobandi commitment to individual regeneration apart from any explicit political program. All reform movements strike some balance between looking to individual regeneration, on the one hand, and intervention from above, on the other. The Tablighis put their weight wholly towards the end of reshaping individual lives. They were similar in this regard to an organization—to choose a familiar example—like Alcoholics Anonymous, which began in about the same period, in its rejection of progressive era government politics in favor of individual bootstraps. And like AA, the heart of Tablighi Jama‘at strategy was the belief that the best way to learn is to teach and encourage others.

Always closely tied to men with traditional learning and the holiness of Sufis, Tablighi Jama‘at nonetheless took its impetus from a desire to move the dissemination of Islamic teachings away from the madrasa, the heart of Deobandi activity, to inviting ‘lay’ Muslims, high and low ranking, learned and illiterate, to share the obligation of enjoining others to faithful practice. It also differed from the original movement because it eschewed debate with other Muslims over jurisprudential niceties and resultant details of practice. The movement began in

15. The Madrasa Haqqania in Akhora Khatak trained the core Taliban leadership. See Jeffrey Goldberg, ‘Jihad U.: The Education of a Holy Warrior’, *The New York Times Magazine*, 25 June 2000.

the late 1920s when Maulana Muhammad Ilyas Kandhlawi (d. 1944), whose family had long associations with Deoband and its sister school in Saharanpur, Mazāhiru'l-'Ulum, sought a way to reach peasants who were nominal Muslims being targeted by a Hindu conversion movement.

Maulana Ilyas's efforts took place in an atmosphere of religious violence and the beginnings of mass political organization. His strategy was to persuade Muslims that they themselves, however little book learning they had, could go out in groups, approaching even the *'ulama* to remind them to fulfill their fundamental ritual obligations. Participants were assured of divine blessing for this effort, and they understood that through the experiences of moving outside their normal everyday enmeshments and pressures, in the company of likeminded people bent on spending their time together in scrupulous adherence to Islamic behavior, they themselves would emerge with new accomplishments, dignity, and spiritual blessing. Tablighis not only eschewed debate, but also emulated cherished stories, recalling prophetic *hadith* of withdrawing from any physical attack, an experience mission groups periodically encountered. No word resonates more in Tablighi reports of their experiences than *sukun*, the 'peace' they experience as a foretaste of the paradise they believe their efforts (jihad) in this path of Allah help to merit.

A pattern emerged of calling participants to spend one night a week, one weekend a month, 40 continuous days a year, and ultimately 120 days at least once in their lives engaged in *tabligh* missions. Women would work among other women or travel, occasionally, with their men folk on longer tours.<sup>16</sup> Although Tablighis in principle preferred to use any mosque as their base while traveling, over time specific mosques throughout the world have come to be known as 'Tablighi mosques'. Periodic convocations also came to be held. With no formal bureaucracy or membership records, it is hard to calculate the number of participants over time, but at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, annual meetings of perhaps two million people would congregate for three-day meetings in Raiwind, Pakistan, and Tungi, Bangladesh; large regional meetings were regularly held in India; and other convocations took place in North America and Europe, for example in Dewsbury, site of a major seminary associated with Tablighi activities in the north of England. These convocations were considered moments of intense

16. See my 'Women and Men in a Contemporary Pietist Movement: The Case of the Tablighi Jama'at', in *Appropriating Gender: Women's Activism and Politicized Religion in South Asia*, ed. Amrita Basu and Patricia Jeffery (New York: Routledge, 1998), 107–121; and reprinted in the re-titled volume, *Resisting the Sacred and the Secular: Women's Activism and Politicised Religion in South Asia* (Delhi: Kali for Women, 1999).



blessings as well as occasions to organize for tours. They also gave evidence of the vast numbers touched by the movement.

Even though there are publications specific to the movement, above all those associated with Maulana Muhammad Zakariyya Kandhlawi (d. 1982) of the Mazāhiru'l-'Ulum madrasa at Saharanpur, the emphasis of the movement was not at all placed on book learning but rather on face-to-face, or 'heart to heart', communication.<sup>17</sup> Their cherished books included topically arranged prophetic traditions, used as a stimulus to everyday behavior. In invoking and embodying those traditions, participants felt themselves part of dense networks of Muslims, both dead and alive, and aspired to reliving the Prophet's own time when he too was part of a faithful few among a population sunk in ignorance. Participation thus gave meaning and purpose to everyday life. It is important to see that participation in such a movement, often explained as a response to the failures of the corrupt, underdeveloped, or alienating societies in which Muslims perhaps find themselves, in fact offered a positive, modern solution to people who were geographically and socially mobile. Participants in principle made a 'lifestyle' choice; they found a stance of cultural dignity; they opted for a highly disciplined life of sacrifice; and they found a moral community of mutual acceptance and purpose. That community would be re-invented and reformed in the course of missions, and replaced if participants themselves relocated. Other contemporary Islamic movements of the 'ulama or, indeed, of Sufi cults, provided many of the same satisfactions.

As noted above, the original Deobandis were both 'ulama and Sufis, offering 'a composite' form of religious leadership. Pnina Werbner has recently argued that the fact that Muslims in South Asia (in contrast to some other parts of the Muslim world) have not had to choose between Sufism and a learned, often reformist, leadership in the modern period accounts for the vitality of Sufism and, indeed, for the continued role of the 'ulama.<sup>18</sup> Tablighis continued to offer the 'ulama a respected role. The place of Sufism was more complex. Although what were seen as deviant customs concerning holy men were discouraged, Sufism in no sense disappeared. Indeed, among Tablighis, the holiness associated with the Sufi *pir* was in many ways defused into the charismatic body of the *jama'at* so that the

17. I discuss the movement's publications in 'Living Hadith in the Tablighi Jama'at', *The Journal of Asian Studies* 52, no. 3 (1993): 584–608.

18. See her forthcoming study of the regional Sufi cult of Zindapir, *Pilgrims of Love: The Anthropology of a Global Sufi Cult* (Bloomington: Indian University Press, 2002). This study also exemplifies the positive accommodation to contemporary life offered by a transnational Sufi movement and the author explicitly distinguishes herself from those who explain Islamic religious movements as a reaction to frustration and failure.

missionary group itself became a channel for divine intervention. The kind of story typically told about a saint—overcoming ordeals, being blessed with divine illumination, triumphantly encountering temporal authority—was in fact often told about a group engaged in a mission. Thus, as in the initial Deoband movement and in many other Sufi and sectarian movements in modern South Asia, it was not necessary to choose between the devotional power of Sufism and the conviction of reformist imitation of prophetic teaching.

Participants in *tablighi* activities define their efforts as jihad. This word is, of course, widely translated as ‘holy war’ but its root meaning is ‘effort’ or ‘struggle’. Following prophetic *hadith*, jihad may be classified as ‘the greater jihad’, the inner struggle to discipline and moral purification that a person exerts upon the individual self, or as ‘the lesser jihad’ of militancy or violence. For both kinds of jihad, the focus transcends the nation-state to a global *umma*. Tablighis use the same discourse of jihad as do those engaged in militant action. Their leaders are *amirs*; their outings are ‘sorties’ or ‘patrols’; the merit for actions are exponentially multiplied as they are during a military campaign; and a person who dies in the course of *tabligh* is a *shahid*. Finally, the obligation to mission is not negotiable: fulfilling it hinges nothing less than one’s own ultimate fate at the Day of Judgment. Both militants and Tablighis, moreover, stress the obligation of the individual believer, not (in the case of mission) the *‘ulama* and also not (in the case of militancy) the state.<sup>19</sup> One of the fundamental characteristics of the reform movements of the colonial period and after was a diffusion of leadership and authority, a kind of ‘laicization’, evident here.

The key difference in the two kinds of jihad is, of course, that one is the jihad of personal purification, the other of warfare. In the words of an annual meeting organizer at Raiwind: ‘Islam is in the world to guide people, not to kill them. We want to show the world the correct Islam.’<sup>20</sup> As noted above, the oft-told tales of the movement are ones of meeting opposition, even violence, and of unfailingly withdrawing from conflict—and of so gaining divine intervention and blessing.

19. A little noted aspect of Usama Bin Laden’s leadership was his claim to authority, despite his lack of a traditional education, to issue *fatawa*. His call to make jihad incumbent on all Muslims deployed a technical distinction of Islamic legal thought, saying that jihad was an individual duty, *farz ‘ain*, rather than a duty on some subset of the *umma* (e.g. political leaders, soldiers), *farz kifaya*.
20. Tempest Rone, ‘Huge Gathering of Moderate Muslims in Pakistan’, *San Francisco Chronicle*, 3 November 2001. Also, Maulana Zubair-ul-Hassan: ‘[The Holy Prophet] said it is not bravery to kill the non-believers but to preach [to] them is the real task’, quote in ‘Tableeghi Ijtimā Concludes’, *The Frontier Post* (Peshawar), 5 November 2001, ([www.frontierpost.com.pk](http://www.frontierpost.com.pk)).

Effectively by this focus, as in the original Deoband movement, religion, in practice, became a matter of personal, private life, separate from politics. This division, albeit un-theorized, has worked well in the context of a wide variety of state structures including the modern liberal state. Moreover, the Sufi tradition, here as elsewhere, always engages with, but imagines itself morally above, worldly power. This attitude further encourages an a-political or detached stance toward government.

### THE TALIBAN AND THEIR TEACHERS: THE JAMIAT ULEMA-I-ISLAM (JUI)

In the final years of colonial rule, a minority group among the Deobandi *‘ulama* dissented from support for the secular state and the privatization of religion espoused by the Indian nationalist movement. They organized, instead, as the Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam to support the Muslim League and the demand for a separate Muslim state. In independent Pakistan after 1947, they became a minor political party led by *‘ulama* and a voice in the ongoing debate over the nature of the Pakistani state. Should it be the secular state presumably intended by its founders, or a state meant to be shaped in accordance with Islam? The JUI has never had more than minute popular support, and the content of the party's programs over the years, it is probably fair to say, has been a fairly simplistic call for the primacy of Islam in public life.<sup>21</sup>

Like other Pakistani parties, the JUI has been subject to factional splits coalescing around personalities more than issues, and there were perhaps a half-dozen factions and reorganizations over its first half century.<sup>22</sup> The JUI struck alliances with any party that would win them influence. In the 1970s, for example, they allied with a Pashtun regionalist party in opposition to Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party (PPP), a party that was, in principle, socialist. In the mid-1990s, in contrast, they allied with that same PPP, now led by Bhutto's Harvard and Oxford educated daughter. Its *‘ulama* were given to Realpolitik with a

21. Seyyid Vali Reza Nasr, *op. cit.*, makes the important argument that it is by welcoming Islamist parties into the democratic process, as occurred in Pakistan in the mid-1980s, that they become politically moderate.

22. See Sayyid A. S. Pirazda, *The Politics of the Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam Pakistan 1971–77* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2000).

vengeance and, like just about every party in Pakistan, not shielded from corruption, in this case because they were clerics. Their most famous leader at one point, for example, was referred to as ‘Maulana Diesel’ because of his reputed involvement in fuel smuggling earlier in the 1990s.<sup>23</sup> When the JUI was excluded from power, its Islamic rhetoric became a language of opposition, often invoking a discourse of ‘democracy’ and ‘rights’.

At the same time, the *‘ulama* of the JUI were engaged with the madrasas that furthered Deobandi teachings. From the 1980s on, the number of seminaries in Pakistan soared, used as a tool of conservative influence by the military dictator Ziaul Haq (in power 1977–1988), who was, in fact, particularly sympathetic to the Deobandi approach. The seminaries were not only a resource in domestic politics but at times found themselves engaged in a kind of ‘surrogate’ competition between Saudis and Iranians, as each patronized religious institutions likely to support their side.<sup>24</sup> It was in this atmosphere of politics and education that the origin of the Taliban is to be found.

The surge in the number of madrasas in the 1980s coincided with the influx of some three million Afghan refugees, the male children of whom the madrasas located along the frontier frequently provided the only available education. One school in particular, Madrasa Haqqaniya, in Akora Kathak near Peshawar, trained many of the top Taliban leaders. These sometime students (*talib*; plural, *taliban*) were shaped by many of the core Deobandi reformist causes, all of which were further encouraged by Arab volunteers in Afghanistan. These causes, as noted above, included rigorous concern with fulfilling rituals; opposition to custom-laden ceremonies like weddings and pilgrimages to shrines, along with practices associated with the Shi‘a minority; and a focus on seclusion of women as a central symbol of a morally ordered society. Theirs was, according to Ahmed Rashid, a long time observer, ‘an extreme form of Deobandism, which was being preached by Pakistani Islamic parties in Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan.’<sup>25</sup> This focus on a fairly narrow range of *shari‘a* law, which emphasized personal behavior and ritual, was something the Taliban shared with other Deobandi movements, even while the severity of the Taliban approach made them unique.

23. The target of this is Fazlur Rahman, head of the JUI (F). See Rick Bragg, ‘A Pro-Taliban Rally Draws Angry Thousands in Pakistan, then Melts Away’, *The New York Times*, 6 October 2001.

24. See Vali R. Nasr, ‘International Politics, Domestic Imperatives, and Identity Mobilization: Sectarianism in Pakistan, 1979–98’, *Comparative Politics* 32, no. 2 (January 2000), 171–190.

25. Rashid is the definitive source for the history of the Taliban. Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 88.

The Taliban emerged as a local power in Afghanistan starting in 1994 because they were able to provide protection and stability in a context of warlordism, rapine, and corruption. They found ready support from elements within the Pakistani state, which welcomed any ally likely to protect trade routes to Central Asia and to provide a friendly buffer on the frontier. Similarly, the Taliban also appeared in the mid-1990s to serve a range of U.S. interests, above all in securing a route for an oil pipeline to the Central Asian oilfields outside Iranian control. The Taliban, on their part, like their teachers, were not ideologically driven as they determined whom they were willing to work with as allies and supporters. Indeed, the scholar Olivier Roy suggests that while they could not be manipulated easily—for example in relation to issues concerning women—they were profoundly expedient when it came to securing a power base. They worked with the Pakistani state, the United States, and anti-Shi'a or not, he argues, they would have dealt with Iran had it served their advantage.<sup>26</sup> The United States' interest in the Taliban shifted away from them, however; firstly, because of what were seen as human rights abuses in relation to women, and secondly, because the East African embassy bombings in August 1998 were linked to the presence of terrorist activists within Taliban controlled areas, with Usama bin Laden as their most visible supporter. That alliance would, after the World Trade Center bombings of 11 September 2001, be the Taliban's undoing. Bin Laden's charisma, his access to wealth and his networks had been invaluable to the Taliban in achieving their success, and his anti-Americanism found fertile soil among the Taliban already inclined to disapproval of 'the West'. There is an irony in the fact that links to him brought them down since the Taliban's driving force at its core had *not* been the abhorrence of Western culture but the specific goal of prevailing within Afghanistan, and, in so doing, fostering Islamic behavior.

The Taliban, for all their extremism and the anomaly of their rise to power on the basis of dual levels of support from Pakistan and Arabs, nonetheless throw into relief an important dimension of Deobandi strategy in the school's early years and later. None of the Deobandi movements has a theoretical stance in relation to political life. They either expediently embrace the political culture of their time and place, or withdraw from politics completely. For the Taliban, that meant engaging with the emerging ethnic polarities in the country and seeking allies wherever they could find them.<sup>27</sup> For the JUI, it meant playing the game of

26. Roy, *op. cit.*, 211.

27. The phrase 'ethnic polarization' is Olivier Roy's. He uses it to suggest that ethnic loyalties are complex and fluid, not ideologized. He further argues that these loyalties have shaped all parties in the Afghan competitions of recent years.

Realpolitik of Pakistani political life. For the Deobandis in India and the Tablighi Jama'at, it meant fostering benign relations with existing regimes—necessary even in the latter case to receive permits for meetings, travel visas, and protection.

## DEOBANDIS, TALIBS, AND TABLIGHIS

Deobandis, Talibs, and Tablighis demonstrate pragmatic responses to the varying environments in which they find themselves. The Taliban surely represent an exceptional case both in their rigor—criticized for example in relation to women even by leading *‘ulama* of the JUI—and in the deal they struck with Arab extremists, who were like them in embracing Islamic rituals and social norms, but much unlike them in their vision of global jihad. Even the Taliban, arguably, had moderate voices as well as pragmatism in their alliances that might one day have made their society more acceptable in terms of international standards had that possibility not been foreclosed by the attacks of 11 September and the American ‘war on terrorism’.<sup>28</sup>

The other Deobandi movements—the JUH in India, the JUI in Pakistan, and Tablighi Jama'at everywhere—although they tend to see the world in black and white, in fact all have played a largely moderate role by participating in or accepting ongoing political regimes. The recent exceptions were some students and teachers in the madrasas of Pakistan as well as Pakistanis from other walks of life, who were drawn to the heady rhetoric, demonizing America and Jews, on the one hand, and imagining the triumph of global Islam, on the other, symbolized by the jihad in Afghanistan.<sup>29</sup> Deobandi madrasas at the Pakistani frontier at the

28. Hashemi, for example, attempted to establish common ground with his foreign interlocutors in the spring of 2001 (see note 3). He emphasized the desperate conditions inside his country, both the crisis of public order characterized by warlordism following the Soviet withdrawal in the early 1990s and the immediate extreme conditions produced by drought and famine, as partial explanation for the regime's severe policies. He insisted that the regime favored public employment and education for women, but in the conditions of the time needed ‘to protect’ them. He tried to show that the destruction of the Bamian Buddhas was understandable—if perhaps irrational, he almost suggested—as a reaction to offers of international aid to preserve antiquities rather than to avert starvation and disease.

29. For a sensitive analysis of the tension between the lure of this rhetoric and actual moderation in behavior on the part of most British Muslims, see Pnina Werbner, ‘The Predicament of Diaspora and Millennial Islam’, *The Times Higher Education Supplement*, 14 December 2001. The argument is suggestive of the behavior of many Muslims in a place like Pakistan as well.

turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century periodically closed to allow their students to support Taliban efforts.<sup>30</sup>

Nevertheless, the historical pattern launched by the Deoband *‘ulama* for the most part treated political life on a primarily secular basis, typically, *de facto* if not *de jure*, identifying religion with the private sphere, and in that sphere fostering Islamic teachings and interpretations that proved widely influential. Aside from Deoband’s enduring influence, it exemplifies a pattern, represented in general terms in a range of Islamic movements outside South Asia as well, of ‘traditionalist’ cultural renewal coupled with political adaptability. This tradition, seen over time and across a wide geographic area, illustrates that there are widespread patterns of Islamic a-politicism that foster a *modus vivendi* with democratic and liberal traditions. It also demonstrates, most notably in the teaching and missionary dimensions of their activities, that the goals and satisfactions that come from participation in Islamic movements may well have little to do with opposition or resistance to non-Muslims or ‘the West’. Their own debates or concerns may well focus on other Muslims, an internal, and not an external ‘Other’ at all.<sup>31</sup> And what they offer participants may be the fulfillment of desires for individual empowerment, transcendent meaning, and moral sociality that do not engage directly with national or global political life at all.

As for the latter, recently the commentator Nicholas Lemann has argued that particularly in contexts of weak or non-existent states, alliances typically reflect estimates of who will prevail, not who is ‘right’. As Lemann puts it, ‘[i]n the real world people choose to join not one side of a great clash of civilizations but what looks like the winning team in their village.’<sup>32</sup> The JUI would seem almost a textbook case of this kind of argument. In the fragmented, factionalized world of Pakistan’s gasping democracy, the winning side seems to be whatever party—region-

30. See Thomas L. Friedman, ‘In Pakistan, It’s Jihad 101’, *The New York Times*, 13 November 2001; and Jeffrey Goldberg, ‘Jihad U.: The Education of a Holy Warrior’, *The New York Times Magazine*, 25 June 2000.

31. Mixed in with sites addressing current political issues among those noted in note 5 are sites that primarily transfer the materials of polemical pamphlets to the web. Thus, a site posting ‘Barelwi’ perspectives excerpts Deobandi *fatawa* to show that they are guilty of the very insolence toward the Prophet that they condemn—the kind of condemnation current a hundred years ago (see [www.schinan.com/jhangi](http://www.schinan.com/jhangi)). A particularly elaborate site, intended to show that Ahl-i Hadith beliefs alone are true, reviews the errors of many other groups, with a dozen and a half linked pages challenging issues of ‘Tableegi-Jama‘at’ (see [www.salaf.indiaaceess.com/tableegi-jamaat](http://www.salaf.indiaaceess.com/tableegi-jamaat)).

32. Nicholas Lemann, ‘What Terrorists Want’, *The New Yorker*, 29 October 2001, 39.

al interest, secular, or Islamic—offers some leverage. In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of 11 September, along with the Jama‘at-i Islami, the JUI was at the forefront of anti-American protest. Were they motivated, particularly given their support base among Pashtuns along the Afghan border, by the expectation that the ‘winning team’ would be transnational Islamic militants (and their funding sources) and in the end that they would gain the support of the presumed majority of Pakistanis who do not support religious parties but do resent American foreign policy? As for the Deobandis in India, sometimes the winning team seemed to be the British colonial power; sometimes the Indian National Congress; sometimes other parties.

Tablighi Jama‘at is particularly striking with respect to its accommodationist strategy since it implicitly fosters the privatization of religion associated with the modern liberal state. It is true that political leaders of all stripes in Pakistan and Bangladesh at least since the mid-1980s have invariably appeared at the annual convocations and have been welcomed accordingly. Some observers and political figures claim that the movement in fact is covertly political; others, that it is a first stage on the way to militancy. This argument is particularly made in Pakistan since the majority of Tabligh participants there belong to the frontier province adjoining Afghanistan. All of this is speculation however. What is clear is that the formally a-political missionary tours, gatherings in local mosques and homes, and annual gatherings continue to be the routine of the movement, one that clearly offers meaning and dignity to many who participate. In the various types of goals fostered by these movements—social, psychological, moral, and spiritual—as well as in the political strategies adopted with such virtuosity, many Islamic movements, in the end, turn out to be less distinctive than either they or outsiders often assume they are.



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*Design:*

De Kreeft, Amsterdam

*Printing:*

Stolwijk, Amsterdam