Deoband's War on Television

Fury over a Fatwa

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In 2004 the Dar ul-'Ulum at Deoband, India's largest Islamic seminary, issued a fatwa declaring watching television, including Islamic channels, impermissible. Issued by Mufti Mahmud ul-Hasan Bulandshahri, a senior scholar at the Deoband madrasa, the fatwa declares that television is forbidden to Muslims because it was principally "a means for [frivolous] entertainment." Sikand explores the debate about television and islam that was caused by this fatwa.[1]

In 2004 Deobandi ulama issued a fatwa that forbid watching television. Although the fatwa did not clearly specify this, critics argued that it had in mind the new and increasingly popular Urdu islamic television channel Q TV, which now has millions of viewers in India and Pakistan. Based in Dubai, Q TV offers a mix of traditional Barelvi Sufi piety, regarded by many Deobandi ulama as nothing short of anathema, and neo-islamist apologist rhetoric by "lay" preachers such as the Pakistani Israr Ahmad and the Mumbai-based Zakir Naik, both of whom are trained medical specialists. Presumably, being non-ulama, they are regarded by the Deobandi ulama as a challenge to their authority. This, in addition to the Barelvi factor, probably has much to d with both the timing and the contents of the fatwa.

Protagonists of the fatwa

The fatwa has set off a major debate on the "Islamicity" of television. A good indication of the issues involved is provided by a few examples of the numerous articles on the fatwa that appeared in the New Delhi edition of the Urdu *Rashtriya Sahara* 22 August 2004. Both supporters as well as opponents of the fatwa frame the terms of the debate in "Islamic" terms, some seeing the fatwa as Islamically valid while others viewing it as a gross misinterpretation of Islam.

A vociferous backer of the fatwa is a certain Mufti Aijaz ur-Rashid Qasmi, a Deobandi graduate. In his article he declares watching any television programme prohibited for Muslims. He argues that no film can be made in an attractive and persuasive manner without including pictures of women or succumbing to sheer entertainment, both of which he castigates as "un-Islamic." He backs this claim by declaring that many Deobandi ulama believe that television has "become an expression of Satanic wiles." Seeking to preempt his critics who believe that television could be used for Islamic missionary purposes, he writes that while the duty of propagation is binding on all Muslims, this should be done only through "proper" means. Since television is used largely for "broadcasting immoral programmes" and is "basically a means of entertainment," it is not a proper means for Islamic propagation work.

The Mufti's defence of the controversial fatwa is backed by a declaration by the deputy rector of the Deoband madrasa, Abdul Khaliq Madrasi, whose article is titled "The Fatwa is Right and True." He adds that another reason why television is impermissible is because photography is forbidden in Islam. While thus castigating television, he approves, interestingly, of the Internet, which, he claims, is "to a large extent, free of pictures." He declares that the Internet can be used for "legitimate" purposes, provided pictures are not used. Accordingly, Deoband, while disapproving of television, has its own website and numerous Deobandi groups now offer online fatwas.

Pakistani youth burning television cables, Peshawar, 20 September 2000

Its critics

Not all Deobandi ulama agree. A number of younger Deobandi graduates appear to be critical of the fatwa, as appears in their articles in the *Rashtriya Sahara*. A good example is Waris Mazhari, editor of the Tarjuman Dar ul-'Ulum, the official organ of the Deoband madrasa's alumni association.

The fatwa's claim, he writes, that television is basically a means of frivolous or immoral entertainment, and, hence, Islamically impermissible is incorrect. Television can also be used for proper purposes, such as for providing news and information, rebutting "anti-Islamic" propaganda and for explaining Islam to Muslims as well as to others. Indeed, many Arab television companies host such Islamic programmes. Hence, rather completely shunning television, Muslims should stay away from "improper" channels while not hesitating to watch other channels that are "useful." In addition, Mazhari writes, Islamic television channels are fully legitimate.

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Despite being a trained *'alim* himself, Mazhari comes down heavily on the conservative ulama, including the author of the anti-television fatwa, for their hostility to progress. He sees the anti-television fatwa as part of a long tradition of ulama opposition to new inventions.

Yet another Deoband graduate who has spoken out against the fatwa is Asrar ul- Haq Qasmi. In his article he comments that the fatwa is based on ignorance of the real world. Questioning the authority of the author of the anti-television fatwa, he says, "If the 'alim is not well-versed with the spirit of the Shariah and its aims he does not have the right to issue a fatwa and the fatwa that he gives will have a wrong effect." Without naming the author of the fatwa but indirectly referring to him and other such ulama, he cites a hadith which castigates ulama who hasten to issue fatwas without careful reflection, and promoting their personal agendas.

Anzar Shah Kashmiri, a leading Deobandi 'alim, critiques the fatwa for "giving Islam a bad name [by depicting it as] intolerant, narrow-minded and obscurantist." To ban it simply because it is also used for broadcasting "immoral" programmes is as ridiculous as demanding that telephones be banned because they can similarly be misused. He believes that the fatwa is based on the outdated views of medieval scholars as contained in the books of medieval Islamic jurisprudence, and calls upon Muslim scholars to evolve understandings of Islam more relevant to today's context.

Besides criticizing the fatwa on "Islamic" grounds, Umaid ul-Zaman Qasmi Kairanwi, Acting President of the Deoband madrasa's alumni association raised the question of the double-standards in the arguments used by the author of the fatwa. Despite the fatwa's banning of television, numerous Deobandi ulama regularly appear on television and arrange to have their rallies broadcast on television channels. Riyaz ul-Hasan Nadvi, Convener of the Milli Council of Uttaranchal, points out what the contradiction in declaring television wholly impermissible (on the grounds that some channels promote immorality) while allowing for the use of the Internet.

Despite the hue and cry being made by defenders and opponents of the fatwa, not many Muslims seem to have taken it seriously. Certainly, there has been nothing like the organized smashing of televisions by Deobandi activists in Pakistan's North-Western Frontier Province some years ago. Fatwas like this one might be remarkable simply for the struggles among the ulama within the Deoband, but they serve little positive purpose for Muslims enjoying the new programmes on offer.

Note

1. An earlier version of this article was published in April 2005 on the Qalander website: www.islaminterfaith.org.

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