CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Society for Comparative Studies in Society and History

Religious Education and the Rhetoric of Reform: The Madrasa in British India and Pakistan

MUHAMMAD QASIM ZAMAN

Brown University

The madrasa is one of the many institutions which have seen recurrent attempts at reform in Muslim societies during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Since the eleventh century, when it first emerged as the principal institution of higher Islamic learning, the madrasa has undergone many changes, adapting in varying degrees to local cultures and changing times.[1] Given the centrality of this institution in the preservation and production of knowledge as well as in the formation of the religious elite, the madrasa is crucial to the construction of religious authority. Profound changes in Muslim societies in modern times have not necessarily marginalized this institution, but such changes have frequently raised questions about the position and function of the madrasa in society and of the ʿulama reared in it, about whether this institution ought to be reformed, and if so, to what end, how, and by whom.

   Debates on such questions have received some scholarly attention with reference to several Muslim societies.[2] South Asian Islam has hitherto been much neglected in this regard, and though the role of the madrasa as an agent of reli-

---

   [1] On the madrasa in medieval Islam, see George Makdisi, *The Rise of Colleges* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1981); Jonathan Berkey, *The Transmission of Knowledge in Medieval Cairo: A Social History of Islamic Education* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992); Michael Chamberlain, *Knowledge and Social Practice in Medieval Damascus 1190–1350* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

   [2] See J. Heyworth-Dunne, *An Introduction to the History of Education in Modern Egypt* (London: Luzac, 1938), especially 1–84; A. L. al-Sayyid Marsot, "The Beginnings of Modernization among the Rectors of al-Azhar, 1798–1879," in *Beginnings of Modernization in the Middle East*, W. R. Polk and R. L. Chambers, eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 267–80; A. Chris Eccel, *Egypt. Islam and Social Change: al-Azhar in Conflict and Accommodation* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 1984); S. Akhavi, *Religion and Politics in Contemporary Iran: Clergy-State*

gious change—that is, the reform of local social and religious practices through the madrasa—have begun to be studied,[3] the significance of the initiatives towards reforming the madrasa itself remains to be appreciated. A variety of efforts towards reforming the madrasa were, in fact, undertaken during the colonial period, both by British administrators and by Muslim reformers; and attempts have likewise been made to reform madrasas in Pakistan. This study draws attention to the importance of these initiatives and of the reactions they have called forth in shaping not only competing visions of the madrasa itself but also some of the ways in which Islam has come to be viewed and located in society and the position and authority of the ʿulama is visualized.

I hope to show in the following study how particular concepts and categories of colonial analysis have shaped and continued to persist in much of the debate on the reform of the madrasa in modern South Asia. What these categories connote differs quite markedly for different people engaged in or affected by the debate, as indeed does the very meaning of reform. Yet all modern discussion of reform not only presupposes these categories (even as many of those engaged in it deny their value or validity), the problem of madrasa reform also raises fundamental questions about what religious education consists in, about the usefulness of such education, and, ultimately, about the place of religion in Muslim society. I will try to indicate how the initiatives towards reform, no less than the opposition to them, have fostered views of religion as occupying a distinct sphere in society. Such a conception of religion is distinctly modern, so far as Muslim societies are concerned. Yet, it is striking that this conception is favoured even by many ʿulama, that is, by the very people who are known to deny in principle that matters religious comprise, or that they are limited to, a separate, or separable, sphere of life.

MADRASA REFORM: BRITISH PERCEPTIONS, CATEGORIES, INITIATIVES

In their effort to understand and regulate the systems of education prevalent in India, to relate them to their own ideas of how education ought to be imparted and to what end, and to reform the local systems in view of their own perceptions, colonial officials routinely invoked what to them were familiar and often self-evident concepts and categories. These were not peculiar to colonial analyses of the educational systems in India, though we shall consider them here only with reference to education. The significance of these categories lies not only in their defining the British understanding of Muslim (and Hindu-Sanskrit) education but also in their subsequent influence both on the ʿulama and on initiatives by successive governments of Pakistan to reform the madrasa.

Relations in the Pahlavi Period (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1980), 117–58; Brinkley Messick, *The Calligraphic State: Textual Domination and History in a Muslim Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

[3] See, most notably, Barbara D. Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband 1860–1900* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982).

The most important of categories that have shaped all discussion of the madrasa, as indeed of many other institutions of Indian society, is the notion of religion itself. As Talal Asad has argued, developments in modern Europe, and especially the impact of the Enlightenment, have led not merely to the subordination of religion to the state or the confinement of the former to the sphere of "private" life but also to "the construction of religion as a new historical object: anchored in personal experience, expressible as belief-statements, dependent on private institutions, and practiced in one's spare time. This construction of religion ensures that it is part of what is *inessential* to our common politics, economy, science, and morality."[4]

In India the British constantly encountered situations and institutions where no clear distinctions between the religious and the secular or non-religious were made. To many, this situation was reminiscent of Europe's own medieval history, where such distinctions were frequently blurred, often to the advantage of the Church. For all the horrors that this parallel suggested, viewing India as dominated, or determined, by religion meant that the Indians could be seen as not only different from post-Enlightenment Europeans but also inferior to the colonial rulers and therefore in need of the latter's enlightened governance and liberating reform.[5] There was, however, much ambivalence on whether all life was in fact governed by religion in India or, conversely, that Indians only thought (or were made to believe by a devious religious elite) that it was. Either way, it was imperative for sound practical administration and, in the interest of reform and improvement, to make a distinction between the religious and the non-religious, the personal and the public or general.

Such distinctions were commonly made in the British handling of the Muslim endowments (*waqf*),[6] but no less in matters of education. In government schools, a policy of religious neutrality was adopted, which meant excluding all formal instruction in religion from the school curriculum.[7] This policy suggested that religion could be confined to a definite sphere, which in turn ought to be excluded from the course of general education. Conversely, if indigenous education was perceived to be suffused with a religious ethos, then reform meant, among other things, taking education out of the religious sphere. The

[4] Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 207 (emphasis in the original). On the evolution of the modern notion of "religion", see Peter Harrison, *"Religion" and the Religions in the English Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

[5] Thomas R. Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 4ff, 66–112, and passim; cf. Barbara D. Metcalf, "Too Little and Too Much: Reflections on Muslims in the History of India," *Journal of Asian Studies*, 54 (1995), 956.

[6] See Gregory C. Kozlowski, *Muslim Endowments and Society in British India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), on the British distinction between public and private endowments.

[7] For a discussion of the debate on this policy, see Gauri Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989).

first Director of Public Instruction in the Punjab had little doubt about how to effect a separation of the religious and the secular. "I [have] ordered all village schools to be removed from the precincts of mosques and other buildings of a religious character," he wrote in June 1858. "Native subordinates informed me that no other buildings were available. I then ordered that the schools should be closed rather than held in such buildings. . . . I [have also] directed the disuse of all books of a religious character in the schools."[8]

The madrasas were, of course, regarded as religious institutions and, in many cases, especially in the aftermath of the Mutiny of 1857, were abolished or their existence was effectively jeopardized for that reason.[9] Yet many also continued to be administered or financially supported by the government. What concerns us here is only the fact, however, that familiar distinctions between religious and secular learning continued to be invoked in colonial analyses of the madrasas, quite as much as in that of other educational institutions. Even in institutions defined as religious, British policy favoured the patronage of what was deemed to be secular learning. Thus "indigenous religious schools . . . [were] entitled to a grant from the Government . . . so long as they teach secular subjects in a satisfactory manner."[10] However reform was conceived, the distinction between the religious and the non-religious was central to that project.[11] As we shall see, this distinction has remained a constant theme of all discussion on the reform of the madrasa; it is, however, a modern distinction, with little precedent in earlier Muslim societies.[12]

Medieval Muslim scholars often distinguished between the "traditionally transmitted" (nagliyya/manqulat) sciences—such as morphology and syntax, Qurianic studies, Hadith (the traditions attributed to the Prophet Muhammad), law (fish), principles of jurisprudence (usul al-fiqh), theology, and so forth— and the "rational" ('agliyya/ma'qulat) sciences, for example, logic, philosophy, astronomy, and arithmetic. The rational sciences were also studied in madrasas, whereas the study of the "transmitted"—or for that matter, any other—sciences was not confined only to these seminaries.[13] The standing of the sciences relative to one another was frequently discussed, and many scholars were opposed

---

[8] Education Report from the Director of Public Instruction, Punjab to the Financial Commissioner, Punjab, June 25, 1858, section 18; extracts in G. W. Leitner, History of Indigenous Education in the Punjab since Annexation and in 1882 (Patiala: Languages Department Punjab, 1971 [first published in 1883]), Appendix, vi, 20.

[9] See Leitner, History, 71–72 and passim; also see F. A. Nizami "Madrasahs, Scholars and Saints: Muslim Response to the British Presence in Delhi and the Upper Doab 1803–1857" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Oxford, 1983), 42–58.

[10] Extracts from Parliamentary Report (1874, C. 1072-II, part III) in Leitner, History, vii.

[11] Cf. T. Metcalf, Ideologies, 36–37.

[12] I do not intend to suggest, of course, that British categories of analysis were the only source of such distinctions in colonial India, only that the former seem to have substantially contributed to them. Factors other than the impact of colonial rule may have played some part, and even the influence of colonialism had many different manifestations.

[13] Cf. Berkey, Transmission, passim; Chamberlain, Social Practice, 69–90.

to the study of such "foreign," rational sciences as Aristotelian logic and philosophy; there were also complaints that the sciences which are worth studying "for their own sake," such as Qur'an, Hadith, and law, were sometimes given less attention than ancillary disciplines like morphology and syntax, which were meant only to assist in the study of the former.[14] Yet discussions on madrasas as representing, and guarding, the "religious" sphere in society; on what is "purely religious" in the curriculum of the madrasa; or on religion as occupying a distinct sphere in society—discussions which have continually occupied reformers of the madrasa in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—are eminently *modern* debates with little precedent in medieval Islamic societies.

Another fundamental category of education was the criterion of what was called useful instruction. The English Utilitarians were most emphatic in invoking the notion of what was called useful learning, though not unique in their commitment to it. Addressing the question of the allocation of funds by the East India Company for the advancement of education in India, the influential Utilitarian thinker and historian James Mill (d. 1836) had written in February 1824:

The great end should not have been to teach Hindoo learning, or Mahomedan learning, but useful learning. . . . In professing, on the other hand, to establish Seminaries for the purpose of teaching mere Hindoo, or mere Mahomedan literature, you bound yourself to teach a great deal of what was frivolous, not a little of what was purely mischievous, and a small remainder indeed in which utility was in any way concerned.[15]

In his evidence before the Punjab Education Commission of 1884, G. W. Leitner, a Hungarian Orientalist and principal of the Government College in Lahore, provides the following, somewhat sarcastic illustration of education in government schools in terms of the notion of "useful learning":

After leaving the middle school, a boy . . . knows arithmetic, Urdu and Persian, if not a little English, all of which may be said to be "useful" to him, whilst he has acquired some information regarding history, geography, and elementary science, which, also, cannot be affirmed to be "useless." He has also learnt the elements of mensuration, which is a "practical" acquirement for him, especially if he wishes to become a sub-overseer, overseer, or engineer. He has also, if he has studied English, read Cunningham's Sanitary Primer, and if he has practiced the lessons contained in it, that knowledge too is "practical."[16]

---

[14] Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, F. Rosenthal, trans. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1958), III, 299–300; Hajji Khalifa, *Kashf al-zunun ʿan asami al-kutub waʾl-funun*, G. Fluegel, ed. (Leipzig: Oriental Translation Fund, 1835), I:114–5.

[15] James Mill, Revenue Department dispatch, February 18, 1824, Bengal, E/4/710,-para. 83, India Office Library and Records, British Museum, quoted in Lynn Zastoupil, *John Stuart Mill and India* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 32–33. Also see the despatch of the Court of Directors to the Bengal Government, October 24, 1832, in *The Correspondence of Lord William Cavendish Bentinck*, C. H. Philips, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 933–4 on some of the content of useful learning.

[16] *Report by the Panjab provincial Committee with evidence taken before the committee and memorials addressed to the education commission* (Calcutta: Superintendent of Government Printing, India, 1884), 369.

But Leitner goes on to note that by the time a student completes high school, "he has more information [but] . . . is rather less suited for a 'useful' and 'practical' career, than when he passed the middle school. His distaste to all physical exertion, except to that of the pen, has grown, and he is more unwilling than before to return to his father's shop."[17]

Given constructions of usefulness such as James Mill's, the religious sciences studied in madrasas were scarcely useful, which meant that it was deemed inappropriate for the East India Company to support such institutions at all or without first reforming their "inefficient" condition. But many British officials of the early nineteenth century had a different view of useful learning. They did not of course deny the utility of English and the European arts and sciences but did affirm the value of Oriental learning and the need for its patronage by the British. The disagreement between the Orientalists and the Anglicists over what constituted useful knowledge was settled in the 1830s in favour of the Anglicists[18]; the notion of useful knowledge continued, however, to define British approaches to problems of education in India and, specifically for our purposes, their negative perception of madrasa education and the need to reform it.

The notion of useful knowledge (al-ʿilm al-nafiʾ) also figures prominently in the Islamic tradition, where it refers primarily (but not exclusively) to knowledge which assists in salvation and is consequently used to facilitate virtuous acts.[19] The very activity of imparting or receiving knowledge was frequently also described in medieval texts as useful or as a benefit (nafʾ, faʾida, mufid).[20] The modern ʿulama's defence of madrasa education as useful owes its inspiration to Utilitarian notions of useful learning far more than it does to the medieval ʿilm al-nafiʾ, however. The useful learning that colonial officials spoke of left little room for religion in general, let alone for the learning acquired in the madrasa. It was precisely in response to this challenge that the ʿulama argued for the usefulness of madrasa education and, as we shall see, for religion as comprising a distinct sphere in society.

British initiatives at reform were limited to those madrasas which had either been established by them, such as the Calcutta Madrasa founded by Warren Hastings in 1781, or which they financially supported. Even among the latter, however, not all madrasas were reformed or reformed in the same measure. Colonial policies were often confused and contradictory, the more so because

[17] Ibid., 370.

[18] On this controversy, see David Kopf, *British Orientalism and the Bengal Renaissance: The Dynamics of Indian Modernization 1773–1835* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 7–8, 241–52, and passim; Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest*, 29ff., 101ff., and passim.

[19] Cf. A. J. Wensinck et al., *Concordances et indices de la tradition musulmane*, IV [Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1962], 330; Franz Rosenthal, *Knowledge Triumphant: The Concept of Knowledge in Medieval Islam* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1970), 243; Hajji Khalifa, *Kashf al-zunun*, I:48–52.

[20] Chamberlain, *Social Practice*, 111–3.

of the hesitation with which they were implemented[21]; and education was no exception. Though the idea of reform remained paramount, precisely how it was conceived or carried through varied at different times or in case of different madrasas. The reform of the Madrasa-i A'zam of Madras, found in a 'very inefficient condition" according to the Education Report of 1858–59, may be taken to represent one end of the spectrum:

The amount of useful instruction imparted was extremely limited. The business of the Institution, like that of its namesake at Calcutta, was teaching the Arabic and Persian languages, and the doctrines of the Mahommedan religion. All this has been altered. An efficient Master [sic] has been placed at the head of School; and the teachers, generally, have been replaced by more competent ones.[22]

The Calcutta Madrasa, on the other hand, was treated less severely. The Madrasa had begun by following the *Dars-i Nizami*, a list of authoritative texts the study of which was in vogue in most other madrasas of the subcontinent too.[23] But only a decade after its inception, the first of several efforts at reforming the Madrasa was already thought to be necessary; and among other things, changes were introduced in the curriculum. A major reorganization was also effected in 1850, when the Madrasa was divided into two separate departments, the Arabic (or Senior Department) and the Anglo-Persian (or Junior Department). The latter was modelled on other "Anglo-Vernacular" government schools and was termed "a complete success" in government reports.[24] Much ambivalence continued, however, to characterize efforts to reform the former—to substitute "a more modern and rational system of instruction in the Arabic language and in the principles of Mahommedan Law for the antiquated and faulty system of the Indian Moulovies."[25] There was resistance to radical reform from the Muslims and, more decisively perhaps, from many British officials themselves. Though some saw the Madrasa as not merely useless but also politically subversive,[26] government support for it continued. So also did uncertainties about reform. The "Moulovies" were occasionally reminded that the Madrasa was a "Government Institution . . . and it is the Government and not the Professors who are responsible for the nature of the education given to its Mahommedan subjects therein."[27] Yet the Calcutta Madrasa (and in particular its Arabic Department) was usually exempted from having to teach the useful subjects introduced in most of the other government madrasas of Bengal.[28]

[21] Cf. Javed Majeed, *Ungoverned Imaginings: James Mill's The History of British India and Orientalism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 196ff.

[22] Quoted in A. M. Monteath, *Note on the State of Education in India*, 1862, in *Selections from Educational Records of the Government of India*, vol. I: *Educational Reports. 1859–71* (Delhi: National Archives of India, 1960 [hereafter *SERGI*, I]), 45–46.

[23] For the history of this Madrasa, see 'Abd al-Sattar, *Ta'rikh-i Madrasa-i 'Aliya*, 2 vols. (Dhaka: Research and Publications, Madrasa-i 'Aliya, 1959). On proposed or actual reforms in the Madrasa, see ibid., I:47ff. and passim. On the *Dars-i Nizami*, see note 39, below.

[24] *SERGI*, I:21.   [25] Ibid., I:21.

[26] 'Abd al-Sattar, *Madrasa-i 'Aliya*, I:119–20, 129, 134.   [27] *SERGI*, I:23.

British ambivalence on the question of reform seems to have been due primarily to two factors: lingering uncertainties, despite the success of the Anglicists against the Orientalists, about the usefulness of Oriental learning; and apprehensions that drastic measures of reform might provoke a hostile reaction on the part of Muslims.[29] In 1873, the government of Bengal even took the initiative (to the dismay of many, including some Muslims[30]) of establishing three new madrasas, to "realize the Muslim ideals of liberal education." Lest this measure be seen as a reversion to the discredited Orientalist stance, it was emphasized that "the encouragement of the study of oriental literature for its own sake was a very subsidiary part of the plan."[31] These new institutions were, in all likelihood, "reformed" madrasas, where useful instruction was to be imparted together with the teaching of authoritative Islamic texts. The latter was deemed desirable, if only because it appealed to Muslim ideals and was worth patronizing for that reason.

British administrators were aware of the prestige many madrasas enjoyed[32] and were conscious that drastic changes, even in madrasas they had themselves established, provoked deep resentment. For all their uncertainties about the efficacy of oriental learning, British administrators saw themselves as preserving tradition, not doing away with it.[33] In case of madrasas they established or took over and administered, the British usually thought of reform as meaning the addition of useful learning to the Islamic sciences taught in the madrasas, not—as at the Madrasa-i A'zam of Madras—reforming Oriental learning out of existence in these institutions. The extent to which useful learning was introduced in madrasas varied. This meant that, as in Bengal, a spectrum of reformed, semi-reformed, and unreformed government madrasas, in addition to those which the government neither recognized nor supported, existed side by side, posing a constant challenge to the energies of the government committees which were periodically constituted to suggest ways to reform them.[34]

---

[28] See the revised curriculum introduced in 1871 in ʿAbd al-Sattar, *Madrasa-i ʿAliya*, I, 171–2. Most of the texts which comprise the curriculum are the same as those in the *Dars-i Nizami*.

[29] For such apprehensions, see for instance ʿAbd al-Sattar, *Madrasa-i ʿAliya*, I:55, 140–1.

[30] Cf. Sayyid Amir ʿAli's evidence before the Education Commission of 1882, quoted in *Report of the Muslim Education Advisory Committee*, 1934, in M. S. A. Ibrahimy, *Reports on Islamic Education and Madrasah Education in Bengal (1861–1977)*, 5 vols. (Dhaka: Islamic Foundation Bangladesh, 1987 [hereafter: Ibrahimy, *Reports*]), III:141.

[31] Quoted in the *Report of the Madrasah Education Committee*, 1941, in Ibrahimy, *Reports*, III:335.

[32] See, for instance, William Adam, *Reports on the State of Education in Bengal (1835 and 1838)*, A. Basu, ed. (Calcutta: University of Calcutta Press, 1941), II:153.

[33] On the contradictions in this "preservationist ideal," see T. Metcalf, *Ideologies*, especially 66–92.

[34] For the recommendations of the various madrasa-reform committees in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Bengal, see Ibrahimy, *Reports*, passim.

REFORM AND THE ʿULAMA IN BRITISH INDIA

The decline of the madrasa is a familiar theme in modern Muslim analyses of the decline of Islam. Sayyid Abuʾl-Hasan ʿAli Nadwi, an influential religious scholar of contemporary India, suggests, for instance, that the decline of the madrasa—whose beginnings he dates to the sixteenth century—reflected and exacerbated, a more pervasive intellectual and cultural decadence of Muslim societies everywhere. The authoritative writings of the earlier masters were gradually eliminated from among the list of texts which were commonly studied, to be replaced by the glosses and abridgements of uncreative pedants. According to Nadwi, an obscure, allusive, convoluted style, characterized by "an extreme economy in the use of paper", took the place of the clear and readily intelligible (ʿam fahm) style of writing characteristic of the "ancients."[35] Nadwi belongs to an institution of learning which, as we shall presently see, had sought to break with the styles of education prevalent in most madrasas of the nineteenth century. But even those who continued to affirm the efficacy of existing styles of learning agreed at least that the madrasas of modern times no longer produced figures comparable to the intellectual giants of medieval Islam.[36]

It is not clear when, or where, the idea first originated that at some point in medieval Islam the madrasa was undergoing a thorough decline and that a lack of creative thinking, manifested in the tradition of writing glosses and commentaries on earlier works, was reflecting that decline. Recent scholarship on medieval Islamic law has suggested new ways of looking at the role of glosses and commentaries, however. As Brinkley Messick has argued, medieval works ought to be seen as "open texts" which, by "internal discursive construction," required constant interpretation and commentary: "The written literature of shariʾa jurisprudence, for example, developed largely by means of [such] interpretive elaborations on basic texts."[37] Though the provenance of notions of Muslim intellectual decline cannot be explored here, it is tempting to speculate that the influence of modern, Western ideas of useful learning, of creative and, conversely, of degenerate thinking, exercised some influence. There is much in laments of Muslim intellectual decline that echoes Gibbon's characterization of Roman intellectual life, for instance, as one of "blind deference" to authorities of the past, of "cold and servile imitations," with "a cloud of critics, compilers, and commentators darken[ing] the face of learning."[38] Modern Muslim efforts to reform madrasas do often presuppose such analyses of decline.

[35] Abuʾl-Hasan ʿAli Nadwi, *Insani dunya nar musalmanon key ʿuruj wa zawal ka athar*, 5th ed. (Lucknow, 1966), 226; cf. Ibn Khaldun, *The Mucaddimah*, III:290–1.
[36] Cf. Mawlana Muhammad Zakariyya, *Taʾrikh-i Mazahir*, I (Saharanpur: Kutub khana-i ishaʾ et al-ʾulum, 1972 [written in 1916]), I:144.
[37] Messick, *Calligraphic State*, 30–36, at 30.
[38] Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, David Womereley, ed. (London: Allen Lane, 1994), vol. I:ch. ii, 84. Also see the remarks of James Mill on tradi-

The texts studied at present in most madrasas of India and Pakistan comprise what is known as the "Dare-i Nizami," a corpus whose introduction in madrasas is attributed (somewhat questionably) to the influence of Mulla Nizem al-din Muhammad (d. 1748), the founder of the Farangi Mahall family of scholars in Lucknow in northern India. Many of these texts were being taught in Indian madrasas long before Nizam al-din's time, however; and several others were added considerably after his death.[39] The texts themselves were, in most cases, composed between the ninth and the eighteenth centuries C.E. largely by scholars of Iranian, Central Asian, and Indian origin. The precise textual content of the Dars-i Nizami was subject to considerable fluidity until after the middle of the nineteenth century. Only in the latter half of the nineteenth century, and, as Farhan Nizami has suggested, possibly in response to a certain measure of influence exercised by Western styles and institutions of education in British India, did the Dars-i Nizami acquire a more or less standardized form and was widely adopted as a "curriculum" by madrasas of the Indian subcontinent.[40] Yet madrasas have continued to differ in their versions of this curriculum, and the latter has scarcely been impervious to change. The single most important of such changes concerns the relative prominence that the study of Hadith has come to have in the Dars-i Nizami from the late nineteenth century onwards.

The primary emphasis of the Dars-i Nizami is on the "rational sciences" (maʾqulat), as distinguished from the "transmitted sciences" (manqulat).[41] Already in the eighteenth century, the north Indian reformer Shah Wali Allah (d. 1762), had introduced in his own madrasa in Delhi a style of learning which gave special importance to works of Hadith.[42] Though his curriculum did not become widely prevalent, Wali Allah's ideas have continued to exert a powerful influence on later reformists, in particular on those associated with the madrasa of Deoband.

The movement associated with the madrasa of Deoband in northern India (established in 1867) represents perhaps the most prominent instance on the In-

---

tional Islamic education in India: *The History of British India*, 5th ed. (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1968 [1858 edition]), I:52ff.

[39] On Mulla Nizam al-din, see Muhammad Rida Ansari, *Bani-yi Dars-i Nizami* (Lucknow: Nami Press, 1973); *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, new ed. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1960–) s.v. "Nizam al-din, Mulla" (F. Robinson); on the Farangi Mahall, F. Robinson, "Problems in the History of the Farangi Mahall Family of Learned and Holy Men," *Oxford University Papers on India*, I:pt. 2 (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987), 1–27; on the *Dars-i Nizami*, see ʿAbd al-Hayy al-Hasani, *al-Thagafa al-Islamiyya fiʾl-Hind,* 2nd ed. (Damascus: Majmaʾ al-lugha al-ʾArabiyya bi-Dimashq, 1983), 9–17; Akhtar Rahi, *Tadhkira-yi Musannifin-i Dars-i Nizami* (Lahore: Maktaba-yi Rahmaniyya, 1978); Nizami, "Madrasahs, Scholars and Saints," 24–32, 279–81; Jamal Malik, *Islamische Gelehrtenkultur in Nordindien* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1997), 151ff., 522ff.

[40] Nizami, "Madrasahs, Scholars and Saints," 30–32.

[41] For some of the major texts of this curriculum, see Nizami, 279–81; Malik, *Islamische Gelehrtenkultur*, 522ff.

[42] On the style and substance of learning in Wali Allah's madrasa, see S. A. A. Rizvi, *Shah Wali-Allah and his Times* (Canberra: Maʾrifat Publishing House, 1980), 382–86.

dian subcontinent of inviting people to conform to the "true" Islam of authoritative religious texts, as defined by an urban, madrasa-based, religious elite. The reformist ideology of this madrasa soon acquired a sectarian dimension, with these Deobandis distinguishing themselves (and their madrasas) from such other sectarian groups as the Barelawis and the Ahl-i Hadith, all of which (as well as others) emerged in India in the second half of the nineteenth century and still constitute the most significant sectarian affiliations among Sunni Muslims of the Indian subcontinent.[43] My concern here is not with reform in this sense, however, or with the madrasa as an agent of religious change but with the reform of the madrasa itself (though the latter may, of course, itself be conceived of as a means, or a prelude, to other forms of reform). Deoband's aspirations signified more, however, than weaning the masses away from their inherited, customary beliefs and rituals. In the perception of the ʿulama of Deoband, these purposes necessitated a revival of those aspects of the Islamic intellectual heritage, such as Hadith, which were thought to be most authoritative and best suited to providing religious guidance to Muslims. That is, some reform of the madrasa was thought to be required too.

While the texts of the Dars-i Nizami continued to be studied at Deoband (as indeed they were at most other Islamic seminaries), the study of Hadith was given an importance much greater than it had previously enjoyed in most other madrasas.[44] Thus, rather than the *Mishkat al-Masabih*, a compendium of Hadith based on selections from the six classical Hadith collections deemed authoritative in Sunni Islam, the latter collections themselves came to be studied.[45] As Barbara Metcalf has shown, Deoband was also different from its predecessors in "emulating the British bureaucratic style for educational institutions." Deoband—and soon madrasas everywhere in the Indian subcontinent—came, for instance, to have a set curriculum, separate classes for students of different levels, an academic year, annual examinations, and networks of affiliated madrasas.[46]

The texts studied in this new institutional setup have remained, with the exception of a more extensive emphasis on Hadith, the same as those of the Dars-i Nizami. The primary concern at Deoband—and most other madrasas—has always been the conservation of the classical Islamic texts and sciences as studied in madrasas, not textual innovation. Unlike Deoband, the movement of the Nadwat al-ʾUlama, launched towards the end of the nineteenth century to bring

[43] On Deoband, see B. Metcalf, *Islamic Revival*, passim; on other contemporary sectarian movements, ibid., 264–314. On the Barelawis, see Usha Sanyal, *Devotional Islam and Politics in British India: Ahmad Riza Khan Barelwi and his Movement 1870–1920* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996).

[44] B. Metcalf, *Islamic Revival*, 100ff.; cf. Golanʾ, *Nizam-i Taʾlim*, I:240ff., 289.

[45] These six collections of Hadith are: the *Sahih* of al-Bukhari (d. 870); the *Sahih* of Muslim (d. 874); the *Jamiʾ* of al-Tirmidhi (d. 892); the *Sunan* of Ibn Maja (d. 886); the *Sunan* of Abu Daʾud (d. 888); and the *Sunan* of al-Nasaʾi (d. 914–15).

[46] B. Metcalf, *Islamic Revival*, 87–137, at 93.

Muslim religious scholars of various persuasions together, concerned itself from the outset, self-consciously and even ostentatiously, with the reform of the madrasa.[47] The revival of the Muslim community depended, in the view of the Nadwa's founders, on infusing the ranks of the 'ulama with fresh vigour and on broadening the scope of their activities and their role in the Muslim community. To achieve these goals, it was deemed imperative to reform the prevalent styles of learning, for the existing madrasas were seen as lacking in intellectual creativity and as being equally indifferent equally to changes in Muslim societies and to the challenges facing them.[48] As Mawlana Muhammad ʿAll Mongiri, one of the founders of the Nadwat al-ʾUlamaʾ, emphasized at its annual session of 1896, the Nadwa's proposed curriculum sought to produce religious scholars capable of providing guidance and leadership to the community in a wide range of spheres: in law and theology, in *adab* (belles-lettres), in philosophy, and in "matters of the world."[49] As part of the initiative to unite the ʿulama, it was proposed to have all the existing madrasas adopt the curriculum that the Nadwa promised to devise. It was not long before it became clear, however, that not many among the ʿulama were willing to merge their differences into a common curriculum, or to accept the Nadwa's reformers as arbiters of their differences.[50] Consequently, the founders of the Nadwa established a new madrasa (the Dar al-ʾUlum) of their own, where at least, if nowhere else, they could hope to experiment with their reforms.

Those associated with the Nadwa have frequently complained of a duality in the system of education "between the old and the new, the religious and the secular," a duality they trace to colonial rule in India.[51] Yet even as they lamented this compartmentalization and pledged, in striving for a new curriculum, to do away with it, the Nadwa's founders often spoke and wrote in terms which presupposed precisely the same distinctions. Religion or matters religious continued to be defined as comprising a distinct sphere, albeit one which was assigned the first importance. The early leaders of the Nadwa were also keen to allay all British suspicions about this institution by insisting on its strictly apolitical character. This entailed presenting the Nadwa as an exclusively religious forum. It also meant laying claim to exclusively representing the Muslim com-

[47] On the Nadwat al-ʾUlamaʾ, see Muhammad Ishaq Nadwi and Shams Tabriz Khan, *Taʾrikh-i Nadwat al-ʾUlamaʾ*, 2 vols. (Lucknow: Nizamat Nadwat al-ʾUlamaʾ, 1983–84 [hereafter TNU]); Sayyid Muhammad al-Hasani, *Sirat-i Mawlana Sayyid Muhammad ʿAli Monairi. bani-yi Nadwat al-ʾUlamaʾ* (Lucknow: Maktabat Dar al-ʾUlum Nadwat al-ʾUlamaʾ, 1964 [hereafter Sirat]); Abuʾl-Hasan ʿAli Nadwi, *Karwan-i Zindagi*, 5 vols. (Karachi, 1983–94), passim; B. Metcalf, *Islamic Revival*, 335–47; Jamal Malik, "The Making of a Council: The Nadwat al-ʾUlama,"' *Zeitschrift der deutschen mor~enlandischen Gesellschaft*, 144 (1994), 60–90.

[48] For various criticisms of the traditional madrasas, see *TNU*, I:63–79.

[49] Ibid., I:139–42.

[50] For some aspects of the opposition to the Nadwa, see Muhammad al-Hasani, *Sirat*, 143–4, 170ff.; Sanyal, *Devotional Islam*, 217–26; B. Metcalf, *Islamic Revival*, 342ff.

[51] *TNU*, I:57; cf. ibid., I:125, 249.

munity in all matters religious. As Mawlana Shibli Nu'mani (d. 1914), a major Muslim intellectual who was prominent among the leaders of this movement, suggested at the annual session of 1912, the Nadwa ought to become the voice of the entire nation in religion on par with the All-India Muslim League, which sought recognition as the representative of the Muslims' political interests.[52] Abu'l-Hasan ʿAli Nadwi, the present Rector of the Nadwa, has likewise noted that the basis of the movement which culminated in the establishment of the Nadwat al-ʾUlama was "purely religious," unlike that of many other, contemporary reformist movements.[53]

In discussing the establishment of a new madrasa under the aegis of the Nadwa, Shibli Nu'mani lamented that "there is not even one *purely religious madrasa* in the whole of India, no institution worthy of being considered the 'great madrasa' in terms of its all-embracing concern [with the religious sciences] and its grandeur. "[54] The implication here seems to be that the existing madrasas were spending far more time teaching "ancillary sciences" like morphology and syntax or the "rational sciences" like logic and philosophy, rather than the "purely religious sciences", such as Hadith, law and legal theory, and the Qurʾan and its exegesis. The madrasa of Deoband and its affiliates had tried to redress this perceived imbalance by emphasising the study of Hadith in the curriculum, but the Nadwa wanted to go further. Striking here is the sense, which the ʿulama of the Nadwa had possibly imbibed from colonial analyses of educational and other institutions, that religion was a distinct sphere of life. They denied that religion was a private matter, divorced from public life, yet had little trouble speaking of a "purely religious" institution and of the religious sphere as clearly distinguishable from all others.

Paradoxically, however, the founders of the Nadwa also attacked the madrasas from another perspective which was quite incompatible with the one outlined above. The existing madrasas were out of touch with the world in which they existed, it was said, hence they were incapable of providing leadership to the community. "A major reason for the decline in the ʿulama's influence in the country," Muhammad ʿAli Mongiri wrote, "is the popular perception that they have withdrawn into their cells and know nothing about the state of the world, so that in worldly matters their guidance is entirely unworthy of attention."[55] On this view, even if the madrasas were academically sound— which they were deemed not to be—and even if they were purely religious in-

---

[52] See Shibli's speech on this occasion in *Khutbat-i Shibli*, ed. Sayyid Sulayman Nadwi (Aʾzamgarh: Dar al-Musannifin, 1941), 128.

[53] *TNU*, I:59, citing Abu'l-Hasan ʿAli Nadwi, *Hayat-i hand al-Hayy* (Lucknow: Majlis-i tahqiqat wa nashriyyat-i Islam, 1970), 130.

[54] *Magalat-i Shibli*, Sayyid Sulayman Nadwi, ed. (Aʾzamgarh: Dar al-Muannifin, n.d.; reprinted Lahore: National Book Foundation, 1989), VIII:91 (emphasis added).

[55] Quoted in Muhammad al-Hasani, *Sirat*, 147–8; *TNU*, I:79.

stitutions, they would still not be fulfilling what was required of them. In fact, to be purely religious was precisely what a madrasa ought not to be if it were to meet modern challenges to Islam. In its initial years, therefore, the Nadwa had sought to bridge medieval and modern disciplines—a goal whose implications bitterly divided the leaders of this movement and which, as it turned out, was never to be achieved.[56]

The ambivalence in the Nadwa's goals points, among other things, towards an inability to arrive at an acceptable definition of religion itself and how to reform it.[57] At issue in the enterprise of devising a new curriculum was nothing short of determining what an Islamic education—and, by extension, Islam itself—signified, how to teach it, and how to make that education useful to the Muslim community.

As in the reports and recommendations of British policy makers on education, there was much in the Nadwa's reformist rhetoric on useful education.[58] The reformers of the Nadwa did not mean quite the same thing by the notion of useful education, though all agreed on the ultimate goal of creating a new generation of 'ulama fit to lead the Muslim community. Some other attributes of this type of education, as enunciated by the Nadwa's leaders, are also worth noting here. The study of commentaries and glosses was deemed detrimental to creative thinking, for instance, as we have noted earlier; useful Islamic education meant, rather, the study of the original and authoritative works of the "ancients." Learning to write and converse in the Arabic language, which was said to be beyond the abilities of most graduates of the Indian madrasas, was another accomplishment the Nadwa sought. Products of its curriculum were to be not only aware of modern challenges to Islam but also able to defend Islam against them and to engage actively in proselytization. An intimate knowledge of Arabic would assist them in these purposes as well as in establishing a rapport with scholars elsewhere in the Muslim world; the Arabic language would also serve as the basis of the study of literature, a subject "the neglect of which was tantamount to neglecting the religious sciences."[59] Much emphasis was also laid on "moral" instruction, of which the study of certain classical sufi texts were to be a medium.[60] Finally, there was a recognition that some practical

---

[56] See *TNU*, II, 32–81 passim; Muhammad al-Hasani, *Sirat*, 204ff., 260–90.

[57] Contrast Malik, "Making of a Council," especially 87ff., for an interpretation of the differences among the Nadwa's leaders in terms of their different social origins and cultural orientations.

[58] Cf. Muhammad al-Hasani, *Sirat*, 71, 82, 119, 167 etc.; TNU, such as I:147, 238; II, 110, 180, 219, 240, 294, 318f. Indeed, as Sayyid Sulayman Nadwi noted in his speech at the annual session of 1915, disquisitions on the necessity (*darurat*) and usefulness (*fawa'id*) of the Nadwa's Dar al-'Ulum were a constant feature of all its annual sessions. Ibid., II:110–11.

[59] As Shibli put it in his speech at the annual session of the Nadwat al-'Ulama' in 1894: see *Khutbat-i Shibli*, 19. On the importance of literature (*adab*) in the Nadwa's curriculum, see *TNU*, I:147.

[60] Cf. *TNU*, I:148, 218.

skills ought to be imparted to students so that they would be able to earn a re-spectable living.[61]

In general, not just the notion of useful education but also of what such use-fulness consists of shows the influence of colonial analyses and, perhaps, a de-sire to make the Nadwa's education look useful to colonial authorities. The em-phasis on moral instruction—which British officials thought was lacking in Indian systems of education[62]; on literature, which in government schools had come to substitute for formal instruction in religion[63]; on practical skills; on fostering a generation of 'ulama who would be more in touch with, and hence, according to British notions, more "representative" of the people[64]; on bridg-ing medieval and modern education; and, not least, on an intimate knowledge of Arabic, which to many colonial officials was one of the "classical languages of India,"[65] and hence a mark of cultural authenticity and religious authority—are all interpretable as responses to ideas much in vogue in late-nineteenth-century British India.

Though the existing madrasas served as the foil against which the Nadwa's goals were defined, there was serious disagreement over the extent to which it was deemed appropriate to break with the madrasas' prevailing intellectual styles. To have many a religious scholar agree that the choice of texts and sub-jects needed revision was one thing; to have a consensus on precisely what changes were to be brought about and how was quite another. That the ʿulama would agree to substitute the books which they had studied for long and from whose mastery they derived their religious authority proved to be an unrealis-tic expectation.[66] The Nadwa had initially aspired to have a reformed curricu-lum introduced in all the madrasas; but even in its own Dar al-ʾUlum, a centu-ry after the movement of the Nadwat al-ʾUlama began, change has only been partial as well as controversial. Aristotelian logic and philosophy came to be given much less importance than they were in other madrasas; and scriptural exegesis, Hadith, history, and Arabic literature are prominent in the curricu-lum.[67] Yet key texts in law and legal theory, theology, even logic and philoso-phy (which had especially been the object of criticism by the Nadwa's

---

[61] For the goals of the Nadwa as enunciated on various occasions during its early years, see ibid., I:55ff., 139ff., and passim.

[62] Cf. Adam, *Reports*, II:147, II:151; *Report of the Punjab Education Commission*, 411.

[63] Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest*.

[64] On British notions of representation, see Farzana Shaikh, *Community and Consensus in Is-lam: Muslim Representation in Colonial India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

[65] Cf. Leitner, *History*, vi, vii.

[66] The following (unattributed) verses celebrating the authority of the *Hidaya*, a compendium of Hanafi substantive law which dates to the twelfth century and has long been studied in madrasas, indicates the authority certain texts in the madrasa enjoyed: "The *Hidaya*, like the Qurʾan, has ab-rogated whatever books had been written on law; so persist in reading it and carefully attend to its recitation, for thereby will your speech become free of waywardness and falsehood." Quoted in Gi-lani, *Nizam-i Taʾlim*, 313.

[67] Cf. *Khutbat-i Shibli*, 57, 88.

founders[68]) have remained substantially the same as those in other madrasas.[69] In general, the Nadwa's curriculum has continued to be very much under the shadow of the Dars-i Nizami. Contrary to the rhetoric of some of the Nadwa's founders, the teaching of English and the question of the students' exposure to Western learning have also remained thorny and divisive issues.

A major factor militating against initiatives towards reform was the frustrating realization that the graduates of Nadwa's Dar al-ʾUlum were not usually (though with some important exceptions) accorded the same deference by the ʿulamaʾ, or as ʿulamaʾ, that the students of madrasas such as Deoband were. If being one of the ʿulamaʾ meant that one was reared on certain texts (rather than others), then to deny their authority or to replace them with others, as attempted at the Nadwa, was to be marginalized in the structures of authority sustained by reverence for such texts. Moreover, as noted, the Nadwa had sought not only to combine medieval with modern learning but also to create a favourable impression on the colonial government. In 1908, the latter had even approved a monthly grant for the promotion of secular education (*dunyawi tatlim*) at the Nadwa.[70] During the nearly 100 years of the school's existence, scholars of the Nadwa have often looked for alternate sources of influence: the Tablighi Jamaʾat, a respected proselytizing movement with a worldwide network,[71] Sufism, and, perhaps most distinctively, recognition in the Arab world.[72] But they have also tried to minimize their differences with the other 'ulama, to become (and thus to be recognized as) one of them.

The Nadwat al-ʾUlama's rhetoric regarding the need to reform the madrasa curriculum has no parallel among non-governmental reformist initiatives in British India. Yet the question of madrasa reform has continued to be much discussed—in both post-independence (1947) India and Pakistan—and in terms not dissimilar to those familiar in British India. Much of the discussion in Pakistan has revolved around government initiatives towards reforming madrasas, and it is these initiatives and reactions to them which I now propose to discuss.

MADRASA REFORM IN PAKISTAN

Pakistan did not inherit most of the better-known madrasas which had been active in the colonial period and many of which have continued in existence in

[68] Cf. ibid., 18; *Magalat-i Shibli*, III:127.

[69] Abuʾl-Hanan ʿAli Nadwi, *Karwan*, I:199–226, especially 200, 225f.

[70] TNU, II:53. This grant was finally discontinued, at the Nadwa's own initiative, in 1920. Ibid., 272.

[71] On the Tablighi Jamaʿat, see B. Metcalf, "'Remaking Ourselves': Islamic Self-Fashioning in a Global Movement of Spiritual Renewal," in Martin Marty and R. Scott Appleby, eds., *Accounting for Fundamentalisms* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 706–25.

[72] On this aspect of the Nadwa's pursuit of recognition, see Muhammad Qasim Zaman, "Arabic, the Arab Middle East and the Definition of Muslim Identity in Twentieth Century India," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, series 3, vol. 8 (1998), forthcoming.

post-independence India.[73] One notable exception was the Calcutta Madrasa which, as its historian says, "migrated" to Dhaka at the time of the partition of India.[74] Significantly, this migration was also a partition for the Madrasa itself and along lines in keeping with familiar categories of colonial analysis. Thus, it was decided, in August 1947, that of the two departments which comprised the Madrasa, the Anglo-Persian Department, which had borne the brunt of government reforms and experiments in usefulness, would stay in Calcutta, while the Arabic Department, concerned with the classical texts, would move to Dhaka in what was to become East Pakistan (now Bangladesh).[75] It was thought fitting perhaps that only the purely religious side of the Madrasa ought to become part of a state established in pursuit of the Muslim community's Islamic aspirations.

The subsequent history of the Calcutta Madrasa will not occupy us here. While other prominent madrasas of British India did not migrate to Pakistan, religious scholars associated with many of them did; together with scholars native to the areas which comprised Pakistan, they came to play a considerable role in the religious and political life of the newly established state and fostered the growth of new madrasas. The modern school system has everywhere come to dominate education, yet the madrasas have not only survived but shown a quite phenomenal growth. There were 137 madrasas in what is now Pakistan (the former West Pakistan) at the time of the establishment of the state in 1947; in early 1994, there were estimated to be more than 2,500 in the Punjab alone, the most populous of Pakistan's four provinces.[76]

Of the various government efforts to reform and regulate the affairs of this institution, two deserve special notice.[77] The first dates to the early 1960s; and the second, to the late 1970s. Reports comprising recommendations on madrasa reform were produced on both occasions by committees which included some prominent religious scholars, though bureaucratic officials outnumbered the ʿulamaʾ in the first committee and were marginally fewer than the ʿulamaʾ in the second—neither committee was headed by a religious scholar.[78]

---

[73] On madrasas in post-independence India, the study of which is beyond the scope of this essay, see Kuldip Kaur, *Madrasa Education in India: A Study of its Past and Present* (Chandigarh: Centre for Research in Rural and Industrial Development, 1990).

[74] ʿAbd al-Sattar, *Madrasa-yi ʿAliya*, II:114ff.

[75] Ibid., II:114.

[76] For figures on the growth of madrasas between 1947 and 1971, see Hafiz Nadhr Ahmad, *Jaʾiza-yi madaris-i ʿarabiyya-yi Maqhribʾ Pakistan* (Lahore: Muslim Academy, 1972), 691–2; for the growth of madrasas in the Punjab in more recent years, see *Zindaui* (Lahore), February 17, 1995, p. 39; *The News* (Islamabad), March 7, 1995. Recent figures for the country as a whole are not available to the present writer.

[77] Recommendations for the reform of madrasas in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) were also made at various times between 1947 and 1971. See Ibrahimy, *Reports*, vols. 4–5, passim. These will not be discussed in this essay.

[78] For a list of members comprising each committee, see *Report of the Committee set up by the Governor of West Pakistan for Recommending Improved Syllabus for the various Darul Ulooms*

Some of the major issues with which policy makers and reform committees had grappled in British India have continued to be prominent in both reports, while certain other themes are conspicuously new. Of the latter, the single most important theme, a refrain throughout these two reports, is the assurance of Pakistan's continuing commitment to Islam. As the *Report* of 1962 puts it, "No doubt it was Islam which gave birth to Pakistan and more than anything else it is Islam which will guarantee its future greatness. The importance of religious education is therefore obvious in a country like Pakistan."[79]

Yet, a nagging uncertainty about precisely what religious education means, or worse still, what is religious in the education imparted in madrasas, continues to persist. The *Report* of 1962 explains that it refers to religious learning ("Deeni Uloom" [sic]) and non-religious learning ("Duniavi [literally, worldly] Uloom" [sic]) "only as convenient expressions and not . . . to convey the impression that Duniavi Uloom are something outside religious education." Yet repeated reference to "basic Islamic studies," "strictly religious subjects," and to the need to expunge "unnecessary non-religious subjects from the existing syllabus" suggest just the opposite: that is, the positing of a basic dichotomy of the religious and the secular, and a dichotomy not just in society but in the madrasa itself.[80] In the *Report* of 1962, reform seems primarily to mean two things: to restore the purity of religious learning to the madrasa by eliminating all that is perceived as unnecessary, non-religious, or both; and at the same time, to introduce "essential non-religious disciplines comprising modern knowledge"[81] in its curriculum. The latter is of course the useful instruction that colonial initiatives at reform so assiduously sought. The *Report* does not do away with the dichotomy between the religious and the non-religious but, rather, reinforces it. The sphere of the non-religious stays intact in the madrasa, with the only (though for the reformers, fundamental) difference being that "essential" non-religious disciplines are to occupy the space which is to be vacated by the "unnecessary" non-religious ones.

The *Report* of 1962 does not deny that the religious disciplines are useful but

---

and Arabic Madrasas in West Pakistan (Lahore: Superintendent, Government Printing West Pakistan, 1962 [hereafter *Report* {1962}]), p. i; *Report Oawmi Committee bara-yi Dini Madaris-i Pakistan* (Islamabad: Ministry of Religious Affairs, 1979), hereafter *Report* (1979), 3–7. For a discussion of the two reports and the reactions to them, see Jamal Malik, *Colonialization of Islam: Dissolution of traditional institutions in Pakistan* (Delhi: Manohar, 1996), 123–8, 132–9. I am much indebted to Malik's pioneering work, though his study, in being primarily concerned with the effects of state-sponsored Islamization (between 1977 and 1984) as a vehicle of increasing state control over "autochthonous institutions," has a focus different from mine. As will be observed, I am concerned here not with such encroachment by the state, but rather with the emergence of a distinct religious sphere as a response to categories of colonial analysis. Though he claims to discern the continuing existence of, *inter alia,* the "colonial" sector in Pakistani society, Malik pays scant attention to the shaping of religious discourse in terms of colonial categories, either in British India or in Pakistan.

[79] *Report* (1962), 3.   [80] For these phrases, see ibid., 5, 7, 9, 12, 14, passim.
[81] Ibid., 11.

only that everything usually taught in the madrasa is religious. Logic and phi-
losophy are subjects of particular emphasis in the Dars-i Nizami curriculum of
the madrasas. In the past, these disciplines have been considered fundamental
to the study of legal theory and jurisprudence (*usul al-fiqh*) and of theology
(*ʿilm al-kalam*); and expertise in them was taken to make many of the other dis-
ciplines accessible; for madrasa texts even on morphology and syntax, rhetoric
and disputation, often presume an intimate acquaintance with logic. The *Report*
of 1962 recommends, however, that logic and philosophy be "drastically cut
down" for "frankly speaking these are not essential in achieving the objective
of religious education."[82] That objective is taken primarily to consist of mak-
ing ordinary people, who are "generally religious-minded, though they have
very little knowledge of Shariʾah," better acquainted with Islam.[83] But incul-
cating "true religious values" presupposes that those charged with the task are
themselves possessed of it and that in turn requires that the religious learning
must only be based on "undisputed sources of knowledge." For the latter alone
would assure both the usefulness of the madrasa's learning and the fact that it
will indeed be properly religious.

Medieval Arabic "rational sciences" are, in short, deemed to deserve less at-
tention than they have received in the past; while Qurʾanic studies, Hadith, and
early Islamic history are deemed to require greater emphasis.[84] Other implica-
tions of exercising this criterion of "undisputed sources" are not stated. But,
given that much of what is taught in the madrasa is considered not to be based
on such undisputed sources, it can hardly escape notice that, in purifying and
Islamicizing the sphere of religious learning, the recommendations of the *Re-
port* also restrict that sphere and, to the extent it is restricted, that of modern
knowledge will be enlarged in the madrasa.

The concern to form a precise definition and thereby delimit the sphere of
the religious accords with the strong distrust of the religious elite characteris-
tic of the Ayub Khan era during which the *Report* of 1962 was produced. That
concern is much less in evidence in the *Report* of 1979. The latter is a part of
the campaign of Islamization launched by General Muhammad Zia ul-Haq ear-
ly in his eleven-year rule (1977–88).[85] Courting the support of the religious
scholars was a major concern of Zia ul-Haq's policy; and the *Report* of 1979,
produced by a committee he had appointed to review the state of the madrasas
and suggest reforms regarding their functioning, leaves little doubt about the
regime's efforts to coopt the ʿulama. The *Report* credits the madrasas with pre-
serving Muslim identity in British India[86] and goes on to describe their posi-

[82] Ibid., 22–23.   [83] Ibid., 4.
[84] Ibid., 19–30, and Appendix IV (pp. 1–51 of the Urdu text).
[85] On some aspects of Zia ul-Haq's Islamization, see Anita M. Weiss, ed., *Islamic Reassertion
in Pakistan: The Application of Islamic Laws in a Modern State* (Lahore: Vanguard, 1987); Rudolph
Peters, "The Islamization of Criminal Law: A Comparative Analysis," *Die Welt des Islams*, 34
(1994), 246–74, especially 256ff. Malik, *Colonialization of Islam.*
[86] *Report* (1979), 44.

tion in Pakistan as that of "an anchor which holds the entire society together."[87] Yet, no less than earlier governments, Zia ul-Haq's regime sought to bring madrasas under government supervision, even as it paradoxically disclaimed any intention "to interfere" in their affairs. It was not without reason that many sceptics saw some incongruity between the government's initiatives to reform madrasas and, especially, to integrate them into the mainstream of education,[88] and disclaimers about any interference in their affairs.

The rhetoric justifying the integration of the madrasa into the educational mainstream—a major concern of the *Reports* of 1962 and 1979, as indeed it was of the reform committees in British India—has had many expressions but is perhaps best illustrated with reference to the *Report* of 1962. In terms with which the ʿulamaʾ could have had little to quarrel, the *Report* begins by characterizing Islam as an all-encompassing religion, which it takes to mean that religious education ought to "cover all aspects of human life."[89] Such a conception of Islam seems to contrast sharply with the effort to define and restrict the sphere of religion, which we have noticed earlier. But the contrast is apparent only. That Islam regulates all aspects of life, this worldly as well as other-worldly, only supports the case for the reform of the madrasas; for reform alone would enable the ʿulamaʾ to better participate in modern life—to play an active role in matters of the world, as Islam itself enjoins upon them. The ʿulama should not, moreover, have anything against the introduction of the modern sciences in madrasas, since Islam recognizes no distinction between the religious and the non-religious. But precisely because the latter is the case, not only should the modern disciplines be made part of the madrasas education, but (a point only implied) the latter should itself be integrated into the general system of education.

Neither the *Report* of 1962 nor that of 1979 actually says that madrasas should therefore cease to exist, but both do recommend that religious education be somehow brought within, and be regulated by, concerns similar to those of the general stream of state-sponsored education. Whether the sphere of religion is so delimited as to create greater space for the modern disciplines or, conversely, is so extended as to become indistinguishable from other areas of life, the independence of the madrasa and the authority of its ʿulamaʾ seems to be called into question or, at least, to be reshaped in ways which are not of the latter's own choosing. Even the *Report* of 1979—which offered the ʿulamaʾ many perquisites (financial aid to madrasas, scholarships, and various other amenities to students, government recognition of the degrees awarded by madrasas

---

[87] Ibid., 50.
[88] Ibid., i, 8–9. The terms used are *marbut karna* (p. i:literally, to integrate), *ham-ahana* [*karna*] (p. 8:to harmonize, or, "with the general system of education in the country"), and to establish *yakeaniyyat awr yakjahti* (similarity and uniformity, or, "between the curriculum and system of examinations" of the madrasa and general education).
[89] *Report* (1962), 7.

and hence the prospect of government employment) should they consent to the reform of their madrasas and was, in general, more favourable to them than any previous government initiative—was nevertheless a challenge to their autonomy.

Though few ʿulamaʾ would have failed to perceive that challenge, few were as stringent in their response as Mawlana Muhammad Yusuf Ludhianawi in his detailed critique of the *Report* of 1979.[90] Ludhianawi, a prominent religious scholar and polemicist, teaches at the Jamitat al-'Ulum al-Islamiyya, a major Deobandi madrasa in Karachi, where he is also the editor of its monthly journal. Though the ʿulamaʾ of different sects (and even of the same sect) sometimes differed among themselves in their criticism of the governmental initiatives, I shall confine myself in this essay to some aspects of the Deobandi critique. This critique, and others, will be discussed in the next section, but one point deserves attention here. Taking it as a given that the system of education established in India by the British was meant to undermine Muslim identity and culture and that it remains largely intact in Pakistan, Ludhianawi musters all his polemical zeal to argue that to integrate madrasas with this educational system can only mean destroying Islam itself—that the government of an Islamic state would thereby achieve what the British never could.[91] The madrasas are the "defenders of the religious sciences" in society, he says; their integration with the state-sponsored system of education signifies nothing but to "prevent them from their *purely religious services* and to subordinate them to [literally: make them the servants of] the modern [Western] sciences. Though in other contexts Islam's "worldliness," encompassing life in all its fullness, is a major theme in the ʿulamaʾs religious discourse, it becomes necessary to deemphasize this worldliness in the face of the madrasa's reform. On this view, the madrasas guarantee the preservation of religion in society. That is, there is a separate and independent sphere of religion to be so preserved; and only the independence of the madrasas can assure its continued existence.

REFORM AND RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY

Mawlana Yusuf Ludhianawi's critique of the *Report* of 1979 makes explicit an issue which is central to all discussion of madrasa reform: the question of religious authority. Any attempt at reform which is perceived to threaten the identity and the authority of the ʿulamaʾ is by definition suspect. The *Report* of 1979 had attempted to devise a curriculum which would be acceptable equally to all sectarian affiliations—to the Deobandis, Barelawis, and Ahl-i Hadith among

---

[90] For Ludhianawi's detailed critique of the *Report* of 1979, see *Bayyinat* (the journal of the Jamiʾ at al-ʾUlum al-Islamiyya), 38:2 (January 1981), 2–28. Also see idem, in *Bayyinat*, 47:1 (May 1985), 35–63. The *Report* of 1979 was also rejected by the Wifaq al-Madaris, the network of Deobandi madrasas. For the text of the latter's resolutions in this regard, see *Bayyinat*, 38:2 (January 1981), 4–5; *Bayyinat*, 47:1 (May 1985), 45. Also see Malik, *Colonialization of Islam*, 136–8.

[91] Ludhianawi, "Basaʾir wa ʿibar", in *Bayyinat*, 38:2 (January 1981), 12–13. Emphasis added.

the Sunnis, as well as to the Shiʾa; the establishment of a national board of madrasas was also visualized, and all sects were to have equal representation on it. But if the authority of a religious scholar is based, in part at least, on his sectarian identity and on his ability to appeal to (and foster) that identity in his audience, then a mixed or hybrid (*makhlut*) curriculum can scarcely be acceptable. Further, as Ludhianawi puts it, any equality between the sects is conceivable only "in the purely worldly sphere; but no convergence is possible from the point of view of religion. "[92]

The *Report*'s insistence that madrasas open themselves to the modern sciences and, more generally, that religious education be integrated into the educational mainstream, is likewise unacceptable, as we have seen, but not only because the latter is a legacy of the British and therefore detrimental to Islam. For a mixed curriculum, with something from both the religious and the modern sciences, will not produce men who "combine the medieval and the modern. . . . [Rather], the products of such a system would be useless equally for religion and the world."[93] What the reform seeks to create is not ʿulamaʾ, Ludhianawi concludes, "only loyal government servants."[94]

That government reform diminished a madrasa's standing in society had already been clearly recognized in British India. Though reformed madrasas of British Bengal had the privilege of government recognition, which meant that they might receive financial support and their graduates were eligible for government service as well as for admission in government educational institutions and universities, they were seen, even by the official reforming committees, to lack the prestige or authority that the unreformed, non-government madrasas enjoyed. Thus, even as the Harley Committee of 1915 insisted, for instance, that only by being reformed could madrasas "play their part in the various activities which go to make up the public life of India," it had recommended that the Calcutta Madrasa "be reserved for studies *on the orthodox lines* . . . [and] the kind of teaching which made the madrasahs in Upper India centres of Islamic learning for the whole of India."[95]

In British India, it did not perhaps take much imagination for the ʿulamaʾ to see government initiatives to reform madrasas as a conspiracy to undermine Islam and to do away with the ʿulamaʾ. But, as Ludhianawi's criticism of the *Re-*

[92] Ibid., 17. The reference to a "mixed" curriculum is meant, of course, to be contemptuous.

[93] Ibid., 16. For a very similar argument, see Mufti Jamil Ahmad Thanawi, *Nisab wa Nizam-i Dini Madaris* (Lahore: Nashiran-i Qurʾan Limited, n.d.), 59–60.

[94] Ludhianawi, "Basair," in *Bayyinat* (January 1981), 27. It is worth noting here that making government servants out of the madrasa educated does not everywhere carry the stigma it does in the foregoing statement. For instance, many of the scholars calling for the reform of the Azhar of Egypt in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century sought the introduction of modern subjects there precisely to enable graduates of the Azhar to compete with others in the quest for government jobs. Eccel, *Egypt. Islam and Social Change*, 313–4.

[95] Quoted in *Report of the East Bengal Educational System Reconstruction Committee. 1949–52*, in Ibrahimy, *Reports*, IV:40, emphasis added.

port of 1979 shows, similar suspicions have continued to be expressed in Pakistan.[96] He is in no doubt that the content of the proposed reform subverts the purpose of the madrasa and the position of the ʿulamaʾ, and he is not alone in such suspicions. The ʿulamaʾ have often defended their madrasas by pointing to the prestige, influence, and authority of some of the most distinguished of religious scholars educated in them. If madrasas can produce such scholars, then, the argument goes, there can hardly be anything wrong with their system of education; and those who insist on changes in the curriculum can have no purpose but to undermine the madrasa, to prevent the role this institution has historically played in the life of Muslims.

The justification for reform offered by government committees is thus turned on its head: Madrasas can continue to play the role they have in Muslim societies of the past not by undergoing reform but rather by resisting it.[97] That reform can and does connote a variety of things in modern Muslim societies comes out strongly here. Many religious scholars, and madrasas like Deoband, are reformist in the sense of seeking change in existing styles of religious beliefs and practice. It can be argued, in fact, that their claim to religious authority is rooted, in part at least, on their reformist credentials.[98] But reform in this context does not mean striking out a new, uncharted path; rather, it signifies changes that would bring religious doctrine and practice, as interpreted by these reformers, into conformity with whatever is conceived of as true or original Islam—the Islam of the pious forbears. Reform in the sense of actively integrating modern with classical knowledge is suspect to many, however; for it is perceived as undermining the unity and integrity of madrasa education and as devaluing the credentials of those trained in it. Such sentiment is of course not peculiar to the Indian subcontinent. Shaykh ʿAbd al-Rahman al-Shirbini, the rector (1905–09) of Egypt's al-Azhar— one of the oldest and most prestigious institutions of Islamic learning in the Muslim world—had argued, for instance, that this institution had been established "for nothing but the preservance and propagation of *religion and the religious sciences.*" He demanded of the government therefore to "leave it as it is—as a fortress of religion. . . . If reform is sought at all, then let it be limited to better arrangements for] the health, comfort, and good food for the students. As for [modern] philosophy and the modern sciences, let the government introduce these in its own numerous colleges."[99]

---

[96] The ʿulama's reluctance to associate with those in power may also have something to do with their resistance to governmental reform of the madrasa, though the implications of such distrust should not be exaggerated. For if some ʿulamaʾ have always insisted on maintaining their distance from the ruling authorities, there has never been a dearth, in Muslim societies, of those who were willing to be actively involved in the administration.

[97] For this argument, see, for instance, Thanawi, *Dini Madaris*, 66–71. Cf. Gilani, *Nizam-i Taʿlim,* I:252–316 and passim.

[98] I am grateful to Professor David Gilmartin for elucidating this point to me.

[99] Quoted in Muhammad Rashid Rida, *Taʾrikh al-ustadh al-imam al-shaykh Muhammad ʿAbduh* (Cairo: Matbaʾ at al-Manar, 1931), I:504; emphasis added.

Notwithstanding al-Shirbini's reticence, the Egyptian government did carry through large-scale changes in al-Azhar, though these need not be discussed here.[100] It is worth mentioning, however, that the ʿulamaʾ of Pakistan have sometimes pointed to experiments with madrasa reform in other Muslim countries to caution that scholars of any standing have ceased to appear in those societies as a result of such initiatives; conversely, the madrasas of the Indian subcontinent, thanks to their having resisted reform, can still boast of many distinguished scholars.[101] The question here is not only the problem of religious authority—those reared on a hybrid (religious and non-religious) education would not be "real" ʿulamaʾ—but also of useful knowledge. In a book on "the syllabus and the system (nizam) of the madrasas," Mufti Jamil Ahmad Thanawi (d. 1995), the leading jurisconsult at the Jamiʾa Ashrafiyya, a prominent Deobandi madrasa of Lahore, had listed thirty(!) useful purposes that madrasas fulfill in society. To him, as also to Ludhianawi, the only useful knowledge for the madrasa is religious knowledge, and anything less, or more, is detrimental to the madrasa's *raison d'etre*: the maintenance of religion in society.[102]

Ideas such as those of Ludhianawi and Thanawi resonate in the writings of many others on the question of reform. There are, however, other shades of opinion, too.[103] Though the association representing the network of Deobandi madrasas rejected the *Report* of 1979, many prominent Deobandi (as well as non-Deobandi) scholars do, in principle at least, recognize the need for some kind of reform. Mawlana Muhammad Yusuf Banuri (d. 1978), the founder of the Jami 'at al-'Ulum al-Islamiyya of Karachi, conceded, for instance, that many of the texts which are studied in madrasas are sometimes "barely intelligible" without extensive commentaries and glosses. He held such texts to be "obscure" because they were written and introduced into madrasas during a period of Muslim intellectual decline in the later middle ages. For someone reared on the long tradition of studying—and writing—glosses and commentaries, this is a striking observation.[104] Yet Banuri's purpose here was not to subvert the madrasa's learning but ultimately to salvage it. The texts conventionally used in madrasas ought to be replaced, he wrote, but only by *earlier* ones: These

---

[100] On these reforms, see Marsot, "The Beginnings of Modernization," 267–80; Daniel Crecelius, "Nonideological Responses of the Egyptian Ulama to Modernization," in Nikki R. Keddie, ed., *Scholars Saints. and Sufis: Muslim Religious Institutions in the Middle East since 1500* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 167–209; Eccel, *Egypt. Islam and Social Change*.

[101] Cf. Thanawi, *Dini madaris*, 66–68.

[102] Ibid., passim.

[103] See, for instance, the proceedings of the seminar on "the education system of madrasas," organized in November 1986 by the Institute of Policy Studies, Islamabad: Muslim Sajjad and Salim Mansur, *Dini madaris ka nizam-i tatlim* (Islamabad: Institute of Policy Studies, 1987; reprint, 1993).

[104] Banuri is the author of a six-volume commentary in Arabic on the *Jamiʾ of al-Tirmidhi*, one of the major Sunni collections of Hadith. This commentary (entitled *Maʾarif al-Sunan*) is, in turn, based on the lectures on the *Jamiʾ* by his teacher, Mawlana Anwar Shah Kashmiri (d. 1933), the sometime principal of the madrasa at Deoband.

are simpler, clearer, and more authoritative. "We do not want to do away with the traditional sciences, but seek only to create greater competence in them through the introduction of better books. We do not want modernism (*tajaddud*) but rather to go further back (*tagadum* [in search of authenticity])."[105] Nevertheless, in viewing commentaries and glosses as impeding innovative and useful learning rather than making for "interpretive dynamism" and the construction of the interpreters' religious authority,[106] Banuri's comments do show the influence of colonial and modernizing analyses of the madrasa.

Yet Banuri, like many other scholars, also recognized the need for the introduction of new subjects (for example, modern philosophy, a "new scholastic theology," economics) in the madrasa[107]; and major Barelawi as well as Deobandi madrasas now include courses from the modern school system as part of their curriculum—a measure, no doubt, of the influence exerted by government reform committees.[108] But it is noteworthy that, in contemporary Pakistani madrasas, subjects from the government school system are typically treated as a distinct and separate segment of their education—a segment that students are expected to deal with as a barely legitimate, almost quarantined prelude to their real vocation, the Dars-i Nizami. However they are understood, purely religious studies occupy an exclusive space even within the madrasa. Rather than mitigating this sense of exclusivity, the presence of new elements from the government school system rather serves, ironically, to reinforce it.

THE ʿULAMAʾS RELIGIOUS SPHERE: DIMINUITION OR GROWTH?

In the epilogue to his history of the Calcutta Madrasa published in 1959, Mawlana ʿAbd al-Sattar, a lecturer in the Madrasa, vigorously emphasizes the importance of this institution in the preservation of Islamic learning and in the Islamicization of society. But with equal vigour, he also laments the declining fortunes of the Madrasa and, more generally, of religious education in all its forms. He cites several reasons for this decline, emphasizing in particular the hostility towards madrasas on the part of those who are reared in the English system of education. It is odd, he says, that while specialization is valued in all fields of modern knowledge, madrasas are criticized—and deemed harmful for "national interests"—precisely because they train their students to specialize in the Islamic sciences. "What this means is that . . . though the preservation and welfare of our society requires farmers, blacksmiths, tailors, and clerks, it needs

---

[105] See, for instance, Mawlana Muhammad Yusuf Banuri, "Dars-i Nizami: Chand tawajjuh-talab pahlu," in *Jaridat al-Ashraf* (Journal of the Jamiʾa Ashrafiwa Sukkur. March-April 1994), 26–52; the quotation is from p. 32.

[106] Messick, *Calligraphic State*, 34.

[107] Banuri, "Dars-i Nizami," 31.

[108] For instance, see the curriculum issued by the network of Barelawi madrasas: *Nisab-i taʾlim-i tanzim al-madaris (Ahl-i Sunnat) Pakistan* (Lahore: Markazi dafter tanzim al-madaris Pakistan, 1412 A.H. [1991]); and cf. Malik, *Colonialization of Islam*, 164–76.

no religious ʿulama [sic]." "Times have changed," he says. "Religion (madh-hab) no longer has any importance for the nation (qawm). Religion has become the pastime (mashghala) of the idle. In such circumstances, what use can the nation have for those who occupy themselves with the religious sciences?"[109]

At issue for ʿAbd al-Sattar is evidently not simply the madrasa and the use-fulness of its learning but the broader question of the place of religion in soci-ety. Several others among the ʿulama who have written on the question of madrasa reform have likewise insisted that the debate on the madrasa is a de-bate on the status and future of Islam itself, for the madrasa is both the bastion of Islam and its guardian. This equation between Islam and the madrasa is not just a polemical—and, to some, doubtless a persuasive—argument against re-form, it is also an argument for the reparation of religion from other areas of life and its autonomy in society.

The question here is not a separation of religion and state, or of society and state—which, some have argued, had come about in Muslim societies from the first centuries of Islam[110]—but rather a recognition, by the ʿulamaʾ themselves, of greater differentiation within society, with religion occupying a distinct, in-violable, autonomous sphere. Such a view of religion on the part of many ʿulama in Pakistan has close parallels with developments in modern Muslim societies elsewhere, and not only in the matter of madrasa education. For ex-ample, in the face of modernizing reforms of the nineteenth century, the sphere of Islamic law, of "the pure Shari ʿa in its traditional form," came to be in-creasingly restricted all over the Muslim world to laws of personal status that governed the family and matters of inheritance. The ʿulamaʾ left the rest to modernizing legal reformers, complaining only when this restricted sphere of law was threatened.[111] In education, likewise, the ʿulamaʾ left it to government initiative to devise new forms of education, resisting governmental efforts only when the madrasas—which they had increasingly come to define as their own sphere—were made the object of change or were otherwise directly threat-ened.[112] In turn, this differentiation increasingly led the ʿulamaʾ, as Serif Mardin has observed with reference to late-nineteenth-century Ottoman Turkey, "to focus on the primarily religious aspect of their vocation. Religion

[109] ʿAbd al-Sattar, Madrasa-i ʿAliya, II:146–47. Compare Asad, Genealogies, 207.

[110] For example, Ira M. Lapidus, "The Separation of State and Religion in the Development of early Islamic Society," International Journal of Middle East Studies, 6 (1975), 363–85. Also see idem., "The Evolution of Muslim Urban Society," Comparative Studies in Society and History, 15:1 (1973), 21–50, especially 28ff.; idem, A History of Islamic Societies (Cambridge, 1988), especial-ly 120ff. Closer analysis of religious and political trends in early Islam, and especially of early ʿAb-basid history—on which Lapidus' findings are primarily based—reveals, however, that there is lit-tle evidence to suggest the "separation of state and religion" that he posits: see Muhammad Qasim Zaman, Religion and Politics under the Early ʿAbbasids (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1997).

[111] N. J. Coulson, A History of Islamic Law (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1964), 149–225; the quotation is from p. 154. Also cf. Messick, Calligraphic State, 61f.

[112] Cf. Crecelius, "Nonideological Responses," 187–8; Richard L. Chambers, "The Ottoman Ulema and the Tanzimat", in Keddie, ed., Scholars, Saints. and Sufis, 33–46, especially 41, 45.

thus became more of a subject matter or a field of specialization than a perva-
sive social function."[113]

In one sense, making religion a distinct sphere represents a diminution of the
more pervasive influence it enjoyed in Muslim societies in the past; and though
they themselves define it as such, none is more conscious of this diminution
than the ʿulama themselves. In his criticism of the 1979 *Report of the Nation-
al Committee on Madrasas*, Mawlana Yusuf Ludhianawi bitterly complained,
as have many others before and since, that those educated in the English sys-
tem of education and, under their influence almost everyone else, did not even
count graduates of the madrasa among the educated. Ludhianawi also recalled
an incident when a bus conductor snubbed a madrasa student's request for a re-
duced bus fare but accepted a reduced fare from students of an English school,
for the latter, he said, were "really students" and therefore entitled to that spe-
cial concession.[114] The point of this seemingly trivial anecdote is to draw at-
tention to the decline in the ʿulamaʾs social standing and, from the ʿulamaʾs
perspective, in the deference accorded to religion in society.

Laments on an inexorable decline comprise a familiar topos in Muslim liter-
ature.[115] However, as Jonathan Berkey and Michael Chamberlain have shown
for medieval Cairo and Damascus, respectively, the social status of the ʿulamaʾ
and the prestige accorded to religious learning was apparently quite different
from what it is in many modern Muslim societies.[116] Berkey shows, for in-
stance, that in medieval Cairo, no firm barriers existed between education and
religious devotion and between the scholars and the non-scholars so far as peo-
ple's interest in Hadith and the religious sciences was concerned; he also shows
how various (otherwise external) segments of society—the Mamluk military
aristocracy, women, and ordinary people—could all come together to partici-
pate in sessions where Hadith was heard and transmitted.[117] Though some even
then had reservations about sharing religious knowledge with all and sundry,
popular participation in Hadith sessions was nevertheless a mark of reverence
for such knowledge and for those—the ʿulamaʾ—who had more than a casual
interest in it. In many Muslim societies, much of the intellectual life had con-
tinued to be dominated, if not virtually monopolized, by the ʿulamaʾ until the
early decades of the twentieth century.[118] The situation has changed in modern
societies in more than one way, however. New, modern forms of education in-

[113] Serif Mardin, *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 112.

[114] Ludhianawi, "Basaʾir", in *Bayyinat* (January 1981), 22–23.

[115] Cf. Berkey, *Transmission*, 182ff.; idem., "Tradition, Innovation and the Social Construction of Knowledge in the Medieval Islamic Near East," *Past and Present*, 146 (1995), 38–65.

[116] Berkey, *Transmission*; Chamberlain, *Social Practice*.

[117] Berkey, *Transmission*, 128–218.

[118] Dale F. Eickelman, *Knowledge and Power in Morocco: The Education of a Twentieth-Century Notable* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 5–6; Green, *The Tunisian Ulama*, 53.

troduced during the colonial period have seriously restricted the usefulness of
madrasa education and its prestige, even in the eyes of those who lack any for-
mal education in modern schools. On the other hand, modern education as well
as exposure to other forms of information through, inter alia, the impact of print
on Muslim societies has meant that the ʿulamaʾs interpretations of religion can
be challenged or even ignored by people who can and do have independent ac-
cess to religious texts. Muslim societies have seen the emergence, during the
nineteenth and twentieth centuries, of what some scholars have characterized
as the "new" religious intellectuals: Individuals whose understanding of Islam
is not derived from the ʿulamaʾ or from formal education in madrasas and who,
more often than not, are sceptical of the usefulness of the ʿulamaʾ and their in-
stitutions of learning.[119] It is not surprising, then, that the ʿulamaʾ should seek
to preserve their autonomy from bureaucratic reform committees, no less than
from the new religious intellectuals. To do so entails for them defining religion
as a distinct sphere and claiming to be its exclusive guardians and representa-
tives.

If we ought to take the ʿulamaʾs laments about their decline seriously, we
cannot also be oblivious to the fact that the decline in question has proven to be
less severe than the rhetoric of many ʿulamaʾ would have it. To claim a sepa-
rate sphere for religion does not signify its privatization, still less its diminish-
ing appeal, as predicted by theorists of secularization.[120]Pakistan's successive
constitutions have assigned Islam a prominent place in public life, and many
among the ʿulamaʾ have remained active in the effort to define an Islamic iden-
tity for Pakistan.[121] The total number of madrasas has grown, not diminished
in Pakistan during the fifty years of the state's existence; and despite the emer-
gence of the new religious intellectuals, madrasas primarily sustain the struc-
ture of religious life (for example, in supplying prayer leaders and preachers in
mosques, as well as in providing education to many who never make it to gov-
ernment schools or drop out from them) in Pakistan.[122] The number of madrasa

---

[119] In characterizing such individuals as "'new' religious intellectuals," I follow Dale Eickel-
man and James Piscatori, *Muslim Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996). On the
impact of print in Muslim societies, see Francis Robinson, "Technology and Religious Change: Is-
lam and the Impact of Print," *Modern Asian Studies*, 27 (1993), 229–51; Adeeb Khalid, "Printing,
Publishing, and Reform in Tsarist Central Asia," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 26
(1994), 187–200; Messick, *Calligraphic State*, 115–31.

[120] For a recent critique of theories of secularization, see José Casanova, *Public Religions in the
Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); on notions of public and private re-
ligions, see ibid., 40–66.

[121] For an analysis of the ʿulama's early efforts in this regard, see Leonard Binder, *Religion and
Politics in Pakistan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961).

[122] At the level of primary education, the ratio of dropouts among boys was calculated in 1994–
95 to be 43 percent in the urban areas of Pakistan and 78 percent in the rural areas. For girls, the
ratio was 59 percent and 88 percent, respectively. See *The News* (Islamabad), June 27, 1995, p. 2.
Such dropouts appear to form an increasingly greater proportion of contemporary madrasas, though
many still come without any exposure to government schools. Figures naturally vary, and for a va-
riety of possible reasons, from one madrasa to another. An official of the Khayr al-Madaris, a promi-

students in the Punjab have increased from 24,822 in 1960; to 81,134 in 1979; to a startling 218,939 in 1995—that is, this number has increased nearly nine times since 1960.[123] Unlike, say, Morocco, as described by Dale Eickelman, the ranks of the madrasa-educated scholars are anything but being diminished in Pakistan.[124] The situation may be similar in some other Muslim countries as well. For instance, predictions about the decline of al-Azhar of Egypt[125] have proved premature. According to Malika Zeghal, the primary and secondary institutes run by the Azhar had "89,744 students at the beginning of the 1970s and more than 300,000 at the beginning of the 1980s. . . . Nearly a million students between the ages of 5 and 19 were in charge of the Azhar at the beginning of the 1990s."[126]

Nor indeed are the madrasas of Pakistan quite as impervious to change as the rhetoric of many ʿulamaʾ on the one hand and that of government reform committees on the other would have one believe. Many madrasas now provide for the teaching of certain subjects prescribed in government schools, as already noted; and a small but growing proportion of the ʿulamaʾ associated with madrasas are said also to have had some form of education in the modern school system.[127] Whether or not those associated with the madrasas realize or admit this, the very effort to preserve the madrasa, and Islam, unchanged in a rapidly changing world involves considerable redefinition of what Islam means, where to locate it in society, and how best to serve its interests. As we have seen, one way to do so is to define Islam as occupying a distinct sphere in society and to equate the autonomy of this sphere and the authority and identity of the ʿulamaʾ with an ideally invariant corpus of purely religious texts. For all its novelty, at least for the ʿulamaʾ, such a view of Islam and of its place in society is meant to claim for themselves the prerogative to define—if often in terms patently borrowed from colonial and post-colonial bureaucratic analyses—what constitutes useful education for the madrasa and what (if anything) needs

---

nent Deobandi madrasa of Multan, in the Punjab province, with about 2,500 students reported to the present writer in August 1995 that there were "very few" students who were illiterate at the time of their admission to the madrasa. Conversely, the Jamita Anwar al-'Ulum, a Barelawi madrasa also in Multan (with about 800 students) reported in July 1995 that the proportion of those who were illiterate prior to admission in the madrasa was about 55 percent. Precisely how to account for such differences remains to be studied.

[123] Figures based on: Nadhr Ahmad, *Jaʾiza*, 695; *Report* (1979), 198; *Zindaui* (Lahore), 17 February 1995, p. 39.

[124] Eickelman, *Knowledge and Power*, 167–8.

[125] See, for example, Crecelius, "Nonideological Responses," 167–209.

[126] Malika Zeghal, *Gardiens de l'Islam: Les ulama d'al-Azhar dans l'Egypte contemporaine* (Paris: Presses de la fondation rationale des sciences politiques, 1995), 279 (author's translation). Also cf. the remarkable increase in the number of mosques in Egypt, "by 100 percent between 1961 and 1979, leaping from 17,000 to 34,000", and to 50,000 by 1984. See Patrick D. Gaffney, *The Prophet's Pulpit: Islamic Preaching in Contemporary Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 15.

[127] See Ministry of Education, Government of Pakistan, *Pakistan ke dini madaris ke ʿulamaʾ-yi kiram ki directory* (Islamabad: Higher Education Research Cell, 1986), 476.

to be reformed or how. The ʿulamaʾ seek to extend their influence in society, to refashion all else, if not in their own image then at least according to their prescription. Yet the effort to do so has come increasingly to be predicated on the prior existence of, and firm boundaries between, their sphere of religion and the rest of society, not on the blurring of such boundaries.