

Deobandi Islam: The Religion of the Taliban

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“We have a common task – Afghanistan, the USA and the civilized world – to launch a joint struggle against fundamentalism. If fundamentalism comes to Afghanistan, war will continue for many years...Afghanistan will be turned into a center for terrorism.”ⁱ

Mohammed Najibullah, August 1996
Afghanistan President

(The following month Najibullah was assassinated by the Taliban. His mutilated body was hung from a light pole for public display in downtown Kabul)

“Afghanistan is the only country in the world with a real Islamic system. All Muslims should show loyalty to the Afghan Taliban leader, Mullah Mohammad Omar”ⁱⁱ

Osama Bin Laden, April 2001

The International Deobandi Conference, April 2001

From April 8-11th of this year an estimated half-million people converged on a small town outside of Peshawar, Pakistan to celebrate the founding of a religious seminary known as Dar-ul-Uloom (house of knowledge). Dar-ul-Uloom is an Islamic madressa (religious school) that was founded in the city of Deoband, India in 1867. This celebration known as the “International Deoband Conference” acknowledged the madressa’s history but its primary purpose was to affirm a philosophy of a branch of Sunni Islam that has come to be known as Deobandi. From its inception almost 150 years ago the Dar-ul-Uloom madressa has expounded a religious philosophy that now bears the name of the city in India where this well-known school resides.

The April conference was organized by Jamiat Ulema-I-Islam (JUI), a Pakistani political party with a history of supporting and encouraging radical Islamic groups made up of fundamentalists and religious fanatics. The majority of the delegates to this conference came from Deobandi madressas in Pakistan. There were also a large number of delegates from Afghanistan as well as India. With the exception of Israel every middle-eastern country was represented, as were representatives from non-Arab Muslim nations.

The highlights of the conference were a keynote address by Libyan leader Mu’ammr Al-Qadhafi, and taped speeches broadcast over loud speakers by the Afghanistan Taliban leader, Mullah Mohammad Omar and international terrorist, Osama bin Laden. Mullah Omar’s speech contained the strongest rhetoric. He accused the United Nations of being a tool of Western aggression and accused the West, particularly the U.N. and the United States, of oppressing the Muslims in Palestine, Kashmir, Bosnia and Chechnya. Osama bin Laden in his speech had high praise for the Taliban government as defenders of Islam against “non-Islamic forces” both foreign and domestic. He praised the Taliban government for having the resolve to stand firm in upholding the standard of Islam in the face of international criticism.

The Iranian delegation, while comfortable with the anti-American diatribe, were clearly uncomfortable with the Deobandi religious philosophy which runs counter to the Shia understanding of Islam. It is probably for this reason that the Iranians tried to redirect the focus of the conference on the importance of Islamic unity. The Indian delegation, clearly bothered by the radical tone of the conference, pleaded for moderation. Despite these efforts the conference maintained a strong anti-American and anti-Western bias. The food Kiosks observed a ban on

American products. Signs advertising Coca-cola were painted over and posters depicting burning American flags were popular souvenir items.ⁱⁱⁱ

Introduction

The goal of this paper is to shed some light upon the *Deobandi* movement, the primary religious influence among the *Taliban* in Afghanistan. While religion is a significant factor it is only one piece in understanding the *Taliban* and Afghanistan situation. Historical, political, economical, and social factors must also be thoroughly examined. Perhaps most importantly tribal/ethnic divisions (there are more than 50 ethnic groups in the country) and the opium trade are major influences not only on the religious expression but also on the politics of the *Taliban* in Afghanistan. The reader of this paper is encouraged to investigate these other factors before drawing any conclusions about the *Taliban*.

Divisions and Pluralism within Islam

Throughout its twelve hundred year history Islam has experienced a variety of ways that people, remaining faithful to the Islamic tradition, have sought to live their faith in the reality of a changing world. While in theory Islam clings to the *Ummat-a-Wahidah* (One Community) in reality there exists a great variety of religious expression as the 'one community' struggles to live out its ideal.

Sunni-Shia. The oldest, and most radical, division in Islam began early in its history when members of the Islamic community had differences concerning who should lead the Muslim community after the death of the prophet Muhammad in 732 AD. The majority favored an open election to determine a *Caliph* (successor). A minority insisted the successor be a blood relative of the prophet.^{iv} Hopes for a peaceful solution to this crisis were dashed when the sixth *Sunni* Caliph, in an attempt to stamp out the *Shia* 'heresy,' ordered the murder of the prophet's grandson, Hussein. The *Shia* community was outraged and Hussein became the first *Shia* martyr. The division between the two groups remains to this day.

Shia. Among the *Shia* minority divisions also occurred. Because of their belief that the leader of the Muslim community must be a blood relative of the prophet, disputes arose when two sons of an *Imam* (the title given to the *Shia* leader) both claimed to be the rightful successor. These disputes caused the *Shia* sect to further divide into three groups: *Zaidis*^v, *Ismailis*^{vi} and *Ithna Asharis*^{vii}

An important feature of their distinctiveness is that all three *Shia* groups developed their own distinctive legal schools. The most well known is the *Fiqh-a-Jafari* school belonging to the *Ithna Ashari Shias*.

Sunni. The differences within the *Sunni* branch of Islam are primarily based upon different ways that *fiqh* (religio-legal precepts) are developed and practiced. After the death of the prophet the Islamic community began to develop a body of law known as *sharia*. This law was based upon the *Quran* (the prophet's revelations) and the *Sunnah* (the words and deeds of the prophet). For legal solutions that could not be found in these sources the prophet had sanctioned the use of *ijihad* (independent reasoning).

Within 150 years two distinct *sharia* schools were recognized: the *Hanafi* school founded by Imam Abu Hanifa in Kufa and the *Malik* school founded by Imam Malik in Madina. In the following century two other major schools emerged, the *Shafei* school of Imam Idris al-Shafei in Egypt and the *Hanbali* school of Imam Ahanad ibn Hanbal in Baghdad. In time the vast majority of Sunni Muslims accepted one or another of the four schools as final and binding. By the 15th century it was believed that all important legal questions had been addressed. "The gates of *ijihad*

were closed,” that is, independent reasoning was no longer permitted in Islamic jurisprudence and Muslims were to conform to the rulings of past authorities.^{viii}

Others. In reaction to the growing emphasis on jurisprudence the *Sufi* movement was born. Moving away from a focus on legal codes they stressed an interior ‘heart-felt’ relationship with God. The *Sufis* also saw a necessity to be guided by a *Sheik* (spiritual leader) and their religious orders began to spring up all over the Islamic world. In addition to the *Sufis* add a mixture of fringe fundamentalist and/or radical groups and a myriad of splinter sects like the *Alawites*^{ix} and the *Ahmadiyyas*^x and one can begin to glimpse the diverse nature of Islam today.

Summary. Islam is not a monolithic religion as it is sometimes perceived in the West. The closer one examines this religion’s mosaic the more color and variety one can detect. The purpose of this paper is to look a bit more closely at one expression of the Islamic tradition, *Deobandi*.

The Indian Connection

While Islam was introduced into the Indian sub-continent in the 8th century it was unable to establish a firm hold among the Hindu population. It wasn’t until the 11th century when *Sufi* missionaries, eager to share their faith, settled in India, that Islam became part of the religious landscape. The *Sufis* with their emphasis on spirituality instead of doctrinal conformity were open to the possibility of new truths. While bearing the witness of Islam they were also open to a wide variety of spiritual expressions, which they believed could be found anywhere, even in other religious traditions. As a result Islam found acceptance in spiritually rich India and there developed a spirit of cooperation between the Muslim (i.e. *Sufi*) and Hindu communities in India. Muslims in India would often visit Hindu holy sites and observe Hindu festivals. Likewise, many Hindus participated in Muslim celebrations.

By the time the British *East India Trading Company* began to regulate the Indian spice trade in 1601 Islam (and Islam/Hindu cooperation) had been firmly planted in Indian soil for close to 400 years. The *East India Company*, taking advantage of what they saw as a disorganized and chaotic situation, began to organize commerce, and then the Indian government, along the British model. The magnitude of change (which negatively affected the Indian subjects) boiled over in the “Revolt of 1857” when the Indians tried, but failed, to gain their independence from British rule. In the aftermath of this revolt the British parliament stepped in, taking direct control of Indian affairs. Although the revolt of 1857 was a grassroots national movement the British parliament felt the Muslims were particularly subversive and they received much of the blame for the bloody uprising. The British subjected the Islamic community to humiliating collective punishments and totally excluded Muslims from public life.^{xi}

By this time (1857) the Muslim community itself was engaged in bitter disputes about how Islam should be practiced in India. The more traditional Muslims wanted Islam to be completely separated from Hindu and especially British interference. This puritan strand of Islam later became known as, *Deobandi*. Other Muslims, deeply influenced by the *Sufi* tradition in India, insisted on maintaining cooperation with Hindus and worked to change the British rule by working within the established governmental system. This innovative strand of Islam later became known as *Bid’ati* (practitioners of innovation). These two strands, and the many sub-groups they have created, are still visible in India today.

One way the Muslim community in India chose to respond to the British oppression was to open a seminary in Deoband in 1866. The leadership of this seminary was composed of former students of the Delhi *madressa* that was destroyed when order was restored after the “Revolt of 1857”. Two forces motivated the leaders of the new seminary in Deoband: (1) a zeal to indoctrinate Muslim youth with Islamic values and (2) an intense hatred towards the British and all foreign (i.e. non-Islamic influences). The seminary shunned everything foreign, Hindu, Western or British and

made a concerted effort to expose their students only to the rich spiritual and philosophical traditions of Islam.

Deobandi Theology. From its inception the school at Deoband made a sharp distinction between 'revealed' or sacred knowledge, and 'human' or secular knowledge. The school excluded all learning that was not obviously Islamic by firmly rejecting other religious traditions (the Hinduism of India and the Christianity of the British missionaries) and forbidding Western-style education and the study of any subjects not directly related to the study of the Quran.

The school was also highly critical of Islam as it was practiced in the modern world, especially India. They felt the established religious order had made too many compromises with its foreign environment and therefore Islam needed to be purified of these foreign elements. To live out the pure Islamic tradition they embraced *Taqlid* (acceptance of the old interpretations) and rejected *ijtehad* or reinterpretation of Islamic precepts to accommodate the changing times. It should also be noted that they are strict adherents to the *Hanafi* school of thought.^{xii}

This last point is critically important in understanding *Deobandi* (and by extension, *Taliban*) reasoning. When putting the *Hanafi* legal code into practice two fundamental principles are always considered.

First, the eventual outcome of an act must be considered before that act can be judged to be ethically permissible. For example the fact that a woman does not cover herself completely in public may not, in itself, be *haram* (forbidden). However, because it is likely to lead to a forbidden act, i.e., immorality, the activity is not permitted. The same can be said for women being treated by medical doctors or measured for clothes by a tailor. Medical examinations or proper fitting clothes are not forbidden. However, the fact that a doctor (or tailor) may entertain sexual thoughts while performing their duties makes this a forbidden practice.

The second principle revolves around *Ruskhah* (what is permissible) and *azeemah* (what is honorable). The practice states that what is honorable should take precedence over what is permissible. For example, it is "permissible" to take a life for a life but the "honorable" thing to do is to forgive. In the Afghan context it is difficult to arrive at a consensus when using this principle because often ethnic and tribal norms become factors in deciding what is permissible and what is honorable. Thus, the above example would be true in an Indian context but because of long-held tribal beliefs the *Taliban* in Afghanistan reaches the opposite conclusion. In short, it is sometimes impossible to sort out what is 'Islamic' from what is 'tribal' in Afghan society.

Their purist religious positions and practices were so rigid that it brought them into conflict not only with the British authorities but also with other Muslims. The British provoked theological arguments between the *Deobandi* and *Bid'ati* Muslims as a way of drawing the *Deobandi* school away from anti-British activities. This appears to have been somewhat successful. In the late 19th and early 20th century the *Deobandi* school was embroiled, and to a great extent preoccupied, in a verbal "*fatwa war*" with the *Bid'ati* school. With more than a quarter of a million *fatwas* (legal opinions) being issued on some of the most ordinary issues of daily life, the *fatwa war* helped the *Deobandi* scholars clarify their thinking. It also served to harden their deeply conservative theological and ethical positions. As a result of the *fatwa war* the *Dar-ul-Uloom madressa* became much more traditional than it was when first established in 1866. That is, it moved much further to the right than the founding fathers would have ever imagined.

As the school grew in years it also grew in size and prestige.^{xiii} *Dar-ul-Uloom* became 'the' place to prepare young men to become educated in the Islamic tradition. Young boys and men from all over the Muslim world filled its classrooms. Present in large numbers were students from Afghanistan and the soon-to-be nation of Pakistan. The normal length of study was ten years and its graduates would be well versed in the Quran and recognized in their home communities as *Mullahs* (local religious scholars).

The Pakistan Connection

Indian independence from British rule in 1947 was met with a bloody partitioning of the sub-continent into two independent nations...India and Pakistan. Having no longer to contend with English oppression the anti-British activities faded from the scene as the school in Debon turned its full attention upon training its students in its traditionalist/fundamentalist interpretation of Islam.

Dar-ul-Uloom however, had a strong history as a hotbed for anti-British activities that were fueled by its conservative, uncompromising theological stance. After the creation of the nation of Pakistan in 1947 numerous satellite *Deobandi madrassas* sprung up throughout Pakistan. These *madrassas* carried on not only the strict *Deobandi* theological tradition but also its political activism, only now the target had changed. It was no longer the English but the Indian oppression of Muslims in the disputed area of Kashmir that inspired resentment. Later, with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 this resentment would expand to include communism. After the Soviets left the U.N. and the U.S. became demonized as the foreign invading and corrupting powers that threatened the pure expression of Islam.

Between 1947 and 1975 there were 868 *Deobandi madrassas* operating throughout Pakistan, most of them along the Afghanistan/Pakistan border. These schools were quite small and poorly funded...most of them teaching only a handful of students. Their influence on the population at large was minimal. The period of instruction was three years (not ten as required at *Dar-ul-Uloom*) and the young men who attended these institutions came from impoverished families and were usually illiterate. The quality of education was (and is today) dismal. It was not an education but indoctrination. If one was illiterate before attending a *madrassa* the chances were quite good that he would be illiterate upon graduation. Instruction centered on the memorization of the Quaranic text in Arabic, which is a foreign language to most of the students. Upon graduation the *talib* (student) was qualified as a village *mullah*, officiating at births, marriages, deaths and providing religious education for boys in exchange for cash contributions or gifts. Author Michael Griffin calls these *madrassa* graduates, "a cross between a country parson and a Shakespearean clown"^{xiv} and goes on to note, "The *mullah* was not, on the whole, revered for his religious insights. He was a community servant who earned a crust through bone-setting and the selling of religious amulets to protect against the evil eye or the myriad *jinn*, which live in the air and visit illness upon children and women."^{xv}

Nevertheless they not only continued but they prospered. A 1996 survey shows the number of *Deobandi madrassas* with a student population of 200 or more had mushroomed to a staggering 2,512 along Pakistan's Western border with Afghanistan. The number of smaller *madrassas* in the area may be even larger. Why? The answer was to be found across the border in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan

Centuries of long-standing Islamic traditions in Afghanistan were in danger of being pushed aside when the Soviets invaded Afghanistan in 1979. Ignoring tribal and ethnic diversity the Soviets ran roughshod over Afghanistan sensitivities by insisting on sweeping changes that included stripping women of the veil, requiring women to work outside of the home, imposing literacy and instituting sweeping land reform. The Afghan Muslim response was to declare a *jihad* to cast out the infidel from their borders. Afghans were spirited fighters because they saw their cause as a holy mandate. *Madrassas* produced young men who were primed to be fierce anti-Communist fighters. These new *madrassas* were financed in part by the U.S., Britain and Saudi Arabia, as part of their humanitarian programs to increase the literacy level in Pakistan. It is no accident that these schools sprung up in Pakistan along the Afghanistan border. Young men streamed back and forth across the border to these institutions which provided the spiritual motivation to resist the Soviet threat. The *madrassas* indoctrinated its students with a love of Islam and a hatred for

un-Islamic influences. It is important to note that military and/or terrorist training was not part of the *madressas'* curriculum. This was conducted elsewhere in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Military training, however, was often pursued both during and after studying at a *madressa*. For Afghans, involved in a *jihad* against an atheistic communist invader, it seemed that some form of military training was a natural and logical extension of the education that was received through the *madressa* system.

When the Soviets left in defeat in 1989 a provisional *Islamist* government, the *majahedim* (warriors of God) was put in place with the help of the U.N. and U.S. Those Afghan warriors, steeped in the *Deobandi* religious tradition were critical of a government that proclaimed the name of Islam but had a strong relationship with the U.S., the U.N., the Soviet Union and in some cases, India. The time and religious climate was ripe for a government void of external influences and steeped in Islamic tradition to claim the country.

In the spring of 1994 two teenage girls from the village of Sang Hesar were abducted by the *majahedim* and repeatedly raped at the local checkpoint. Mohammed Omar, a retired Afghan commander studying at a local *madressa*, gathered 30 fellow *taliban* (students) and mounted a successful rescue. The *Majahedim* commander was hung from a slowly ascending tank-barrel. This was the birth of a movement that came to be known as the *Taliban*.

The *Taliban* began as a moral force called to arms for the purpose of crushing the immoral and corrupt *Majahedim*. Its forces fought with a divine purpose. They were orderly, disciplined, obedient and strongly determined...living examples of the qualities they developed through years of disciplined study in the rigid *madrassa* system. In the early years they were admired among the common Afghans for their moral qualities. They were skilled in negotiating a peace with the terms slanted in their favor but when called to battle they were disciplined. There were no reports of rape or looting and the force could not be bought off with drug money. In spite of these positive characteristics the *Taliban* has not been a stellar fighting force and has experienced limited success on the battlefield. To date it has not been capable of crushing its longstanding opposition in the North.

From the religious perspective the *Taliban* suppressed the Afghan expression of Islam with its heavy-handed approach to implementing traditional Islam into every area of the society. Because of this they may be in danger of alienating the very people who brought them into power. However, the *Taliban* has deep roots in Afghan society and Islamic tradition. Given Afghanistan's checkered history it is worth noting that this is the only political force in recent memory that has not been artificially created. For this reason alone outside governments need to tread cautiously with this regime.

Conclusion

From a religious vantagepoint the defeat of the *majahedim* by the *Taliban* is a clash between two different visions held by two distinct Islamic fundamentalist groups.

The *majahedim* were Islamists who carried the banner of Islam and combated secularism and then communism in Afghanistan. Islamists are modernists who seek a contemporary political interpretation of Islam. Educationally they tilt towards *Al-Azhar* University in Egypt where they have been strongly influence by the political orientation of the fundamentalist group the *Muslim Brotherhood*. Because they drew from this model other governments were quick to recognize their authority and they were able to form highly organized political parties.

The *Taliban* are traditionalists who have only entered the political stream in Afghanistan since 1994. They view the roll of government and society very differently from the *majahedim*. They do not see Islam in political terms but in religious terms. They seek to return to the purity of the

teachings of the Quran and the *Sunnah* (the practices of the Prophet). They are products of religious *madrassas* in Pakistan whose roots go back to the *Dar-ul-Uloom* seminary in Deoband, India. Their history makes the *Taliban* inclined to organize themselves around regional associations rather than political parties.

Religious edicts are believed to have a divine source so they carry more authority in this society than humanitarian law that stress individual freedoms. The purpose of government is to be a reflection of the divine will (as interpreted by the *Deobandi* scholars), not a guardian of individual rights and liberties as insisted upon by the West.

ⁱ Griffin, Michael, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, (Virginia: Pluto Press, 2001), pg.5.

ⁱⁱ BBC News Online, 10 April 2001, 10:13 GMT. www.institute-for-afghan-studies.org/dev_xyz/taliban/deobandi-conf-2001.htm

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid. This web site contains comprehensive coverage of the three-day Deobandi Conference held in Pakistan on April 9, 2001.

^{iv} The majority is known today as *Sunni* Muslims and represent 85-90% of the Muslim community. The minority who make up the other 10-15% are known as *Shia* Muslims.

^v Zaidis today found primarily in Yemen

^{vi} Ismai'ilis are today concentrated in Lebanon, Syria and Israel

^{vii} Ithna Asharis is the largest of the Shia groups. They are also known as 'twelvers' because they acknowledge twelve Imams. They make up 95% of the population of Iran and are also found in Southern Iraq.

^{viii} Armstrong, Karen, *Islam*, (New York, Modern Library Chronicles, 2000), pg.100.

^{ix} Alawites are a sect that blends Christianity with Islam. They observe Muslim precepts but also use sacramental wine and celebrate Christmas, Easter, and Epiphany. They consider themselves Muslim but most Islamic fundamentalists do not.

^x Ahmadiyyas are a persecuted sect in Pakistan because they reject Jihad [holy war] and the politicization of Islam. While they consider themselves to be Muslims the Pakistani government forbids them to take Muslim names or even to use Islamic greetings.

^{xi} "The Flowering of the Deobandi Movement" 20 April, 2001, www.pakistanlink.com/sah/04202001.htm

^{xii} The *Deobandi* School and the *Taliban* are strict followers of the *Hanafi* legal code. Saudi Arabia strictly follows the *Hanbali* legal code. This is a divisive point between the *Taliban* and the Saudi government. What confuses things is that both Saudi Arabia and the *Deobandi* School (i.e. the *Taliban*) are often referred to as "Wahhabis." This term, which originally referred to an Islamic reformer in the 18th century, developed a completely different meaning in India under British rule. What is important for the Western reader to keep in mind is that the term "Wahhabis" means something very different in the Saudi Arabian context than it does in the *Taliban* context. One must never assume that Saudi Arabia and the *Taliban* share the same Islamic vision...they do not.

^{xiii} BBC News Online. (Today *Dar-ul-Uloom* in Deoband, India has 3,500 students, 80 teachers, 250 other staffers and an annual budget of over one million dollars (U.S.) given through private donations.)

^{xiv} Michael, pg.57.

^{xv} Michael, pg. 58.