

Introduction

IT HAS OFTEN BEEN ASSUMED that in the face of massive and unrelenting changes in the modern world, the traditionally educated Muslim religious scholars, the *‘ulama* (singular: *‘alim*),¹ have become utterly redundant, a mere relic of the past, as it were, and therefore of little interest to anyone seriously interested in understanding contemporary Muslim societies. Not very long ago, a somewhat similar attitude was common towards the role of religion in public life as a whole, though movements of religious revival, and not just in the Muslim world, have forced a major rethinking of such attitudes in recent years. The religiopolitical activism of the college- and university-educated, the professionals and the urban bourgeoisie—the “Islamists,” as they are often called—has now come to receive extensive attention; and thanks to their leadership of the Iranian revolution of 1979, so have the Shi‘i *‘ulama*. But old assumptions have remained rather more entrenched in the case of the *‘ulama* of the *Sunni* Muslim world. The “new religious intellectuals”² emerging in the Muslim public sphere undoubtedly merit close attention, and the contemporary Islamist movements continue to be in much need of sober analyses. The emphasis on relatively new and emerging intellectuals and activists should not, however, obscure the significance of a community of religious scholars that has existed in Muslim societies for more than a thousand years and, in recent decades, has also witnessed a resurgence of great moment.³ As increasingly prominent actors on the contemporary scene in Muslim societies, the *‘ulama*—their transformations, their discourses, and their religiopolitical activism—can, indeed, only be neglected at the cost of ignoring or misunderstanding crucial facets of contemporary Islam and Muslim politics. The processes and consequences of social and religious change as they have shaped, and been shaped by, the *‘ulama* are the subject of this book. The book focuses primarily on British India and Pakistan, but does so in a comparative framework, with extensive and sustained consideration of religious and political trends in a number of contemporary Muslim societies.

The challenges and consequences of modernity have no doubt hit the *‘ulama* hard. Mass higher education and the impact of print and other media have made deep inroads into the *‘ulama*’s privileged access to authoritative religious knowledge,⁴ even as the “reflexivity” of modernity, that is, the need to constantly adapt existing forms of knowledge, institutions, and social relations to relentless flows of information, poses severe challenges to the credibility of their discourses.⁵ The modern bureaucratic state seeks to bring all areas of life under its regulation. And the trans-

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formative forces of global capitalism grow ever more relentless in undermining culturally rooted identities and social relations. How have the ‘ulama responded to these challenges, to the fragmentation of their authority, to the rapidly changing world around them?

To the French sociologist Olivier Roy, “the ‘Islamic political imagination’ [of the ‘ulama] has endeavored to ignore or disqualify anything new. . . . The atemporality of the mullahs’ and ulamas’ discourse is striking to this day. History is something that must be endured; whatever is new is contingent and merits only a *fatwa* from time to time.”⁶ On this view, the ‘ulama are the representatives par excellence of a religious tradition that is stagnant and, for all their glosses and commentaries on the texts that comprise this tradition, essentially anachronistic in the modern world. Their “status” might vary a great deal, ranging anywhere between a certain approximation to the social position of “Westernized intellectuals” on the one hand and the “lumpen-intelligentsia” on the other;⁷ but there is little evidence to temper the “atemporality” of their discourse or action.⁸

Yet the ‘ulama have not only continued to respond—admittedly, with varying degrees of enthusiasm and success—to the challenges of changing times; they have also been successful in enhancing their influence in a number of contemporary Muslim societies, in broadening their audiences, in making significant contributions to public discourses, and even in setting the terms for such discourses. In many cases, they have also come to play significant religiopolitical activist roles in contemporary Islam. The ‘ulama’s institutions of learning have grown dramatically in recent decades. In Pakistan, there were less than 150 *madradas* at the time of the establishment of the state in 1947; according to certain recent estimates, there are at present more than 2700 in the Punjab, the most populous of Pakistan’s four provinces, alone. The number of madrasa students in the Punjab has increased from 24,822 in 1960, to 81,134 in 1979, to 249,534 in 2001; that is, their number has multiplied by more than ten since 1960 alone.⁹ In several other contemporary states, both where Muslims constitute a numerical majority and where they are a minority, the ‘ulama in recent decades have grown increasingly prominent in society and politics. The case of Iran is, of course, the most striking example of the ‘ulama’s successful leadership of a revolutionary movement. But in Egypt too, where the millennium-old university, the Azhar, continues to be one of the most prestigious centers of Islamic learning, a new generation of politically activist ‘ulama has made its presence felt in the public arena. ‘Ulama in Saudi Arabia, in India, in Afghanistan, in the southern Philippines, and elsewhere in the Muslim world are a crucial part of the changes sweeping through these societies in increasingly significant, often unprecedented ways.

The ‘Ulama and the Islamic Religious Tradition

“No categories require more careful handling these days,” the ethicist Jeffrey Stout observes, “than *tradition* and *modernity*.”¹⁰ Not long ago, contrasts between “tradition” and “modernity” were a convenient shorthand way of explaining what particular societies had to get rid of in order to become part of the modern world. Increasingly, however, such dichotomous constructions have given way, in academic writing at any rate, to a recognition that “tradition” is not a monolithic entity any more than “modernity” is; that appeals to tradition are not necessarily a way of opposing change but can equally facilitate change; that what passes for tradition is, not infrequently, of quite recent vintage; and that definitions of what constitutes tradition are often the product of bitter and continuing conflicts within a culture.¹¹

With such caveats, can the concept of tradition be rescued from the role Western modernization theorists of an earlier generation¹²—or Muslim modernists, for that matter—assigned to it? Can it serve as an analytical tool in examining some of the competing discourses and conflicts in the Muslim public sphere, in listening to debates on issues of religious authority, in trying to understand how perceptions and imaginings of the past shape articulations of identity in the present? As a way of introducing some of the themes of this book, I propose to explore briefly the meaning and implications of this concept, both to show how we might try to understand major trends in contemporary Islam with reference to it and to suggest its relevance for our understanding of the ‘ulama, the Muslim religious scholars who are the subject of this book.

Historian of religion William Graham has argued that “traditionalism” ought to be seen as a defining feature of Islamic thought. This traditionalism consists, he says, “not in some imagined atavism, regressivism, fatalism, or rejection of change and challenge,” but rather in the conviction that “a personally guaranteed connection with a model past, and especially with model persons, offers the only sound basis . . . for forming and reforming one’s society in any age.”¹³ The traditionalism Graham considers characteristic of Islam is rooted in styles of authenticating the statements attributed to the Prophet Muhammad (or statements about his conduct and teachings as reported by his companions) by affixing to each of these statements a chain of transmission that goes back to him or to one of the other early authorities. Western scholars have usually characterized these discrete statements (*hadith*) as “traditions” of Muhammad. But the traditionalism of which Graham speaks is something broader in scope and significance: it is the recurrent effort by Muslims to articulate authority and evaluate claims to such authority by positing and reaffirming a con-

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nectedness to the past. Graham acknowledges that anchoring authority in efforts to establish a link with the past is not unique to Muslims, but he argues that this effort is nowhere more pervasive than in Islam, and that it is institutionalized here to an unparalleled degree. For instance, the emphasis on “a personally guaranteed connection to a model past” has, for centuries, remained the fundamental principle of validating the transmission of religious knowledge; it underlies genealogical claims to social standing; it is at the heart of the Shi‘i belief in the authority of the rightly guided and infallible *imams*; and it is the basis on which institutionalized Sufism, with its lineages of masters and disciples, rests.¹⁴

Yet, while Graham shows how “traditionalism” informs religious authority in Islam, he does not give much attention to the concept of tradition itself.¹⁵ For that, we must turn to the moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre, whose conception of tradition, especially as mediated to Islamicists by the anthropologist Talal Asad, offers a potentially fruitful way of approaching and understanding Muslim institutions and discourses in the complexities of their development, change, and continuity.¹⁶

To MacIntyre, tradition is, quite simply, “an argument extended through time in which certain fundamental agreements are defined and redefined in terms of two kinds of conflict: those with critics and enemies external to the tradition who reject all or at least key parts of those fundamental agreements, and those internal, interpretative debates through which the meaning and rationale of the fundamental agreements come to be expressed and by whose progress a tradition is constituted.”¹⁷ Traditions may be more or less successful in asking new questions or satisfactorily answering old ones, in meeting the challenges posed to their adherents and in adapting to change; but what remains key to their constitution as traditions is a history of argument and debate over certain fundamental doctrines in shared languages and styles of discourse.¹⁸

The intellectual positions held by the adherents of a tradition can only be understood, MacIntyre insists, in the context of that tradition. There are no texts, theses, or conceptions—of justice and rationality, for instance—in themselves; they exist, and can be evaluated, only as part of this or that tradition, and so far as their criteria for evaluation are concerned, the different traditions are “incommensurable.”¹⁹ For all the disagreements within a particular tradition, there remains a broad agreement on which differences are the critical ones and how, or within what limits, to argue over them. There is, however, no such agreement *between* traditions, and even to understand a rival tradition presupposes that one be immersed in the language of that tradition. This position is at the heart of MacIntyre’s quarrel with contemporary liberalism.

The view that texts and authors can be approached, translated, and evaluated according to some universal principles of rationality is a liberal

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myth, MacIntyre believes, and one characteristic of “modernity, whether conservative or radical.”²⁰ To him, this view is deplorable, but not only because it leads us to gravely misunderstanding traditions other than our own.²¹ The liberal view also underlies a hegemonic discourse where intellectual positions from other traditions are decontextualized in translation and those at odds with liberalism are rendered innocuous by being recast as “debates within liberalism, putting in question this or that particular set of attitudes or policies, but not the fundamental tenets of liberalism. . . . So so-called conservatism and so-called radicalism in these contemporary guises are in general mere stalking-horses for liberalism: the contemporary debates within modern political systems are almost exclusively between conservative liberals, liberal liberals, and radical liberals.”²²

MacIntyre’s notion of the incommensurability of traditions has been criticized for its many perceived inadequacies, as indeed has his conception of tradition itself. Critics have observed, for instance, that if a tradition were so utterly incommensurable as he supposes, one could not comprehend *any* of its ideas; yet MacIntyre’s own writing about other traditions intelligibly and at length seems to suggest otherwise.²³ Rival traditions, even in MacIntyre’s sense, do, in fact, often share many basic assumptions;²⁴ conversely, certain disagreements *within* what MacIntyre characterizes as a single tradition of liberalism are so fundamental as to qualify for his label of incommensurability.²⁵ Liberal critics have also discerned authoritarian implications in MacIntyre’s views of tradition and of tradition-centered criteria of rationality, fearing that “MacIntyre is in the grip of a world view promulgated by authority rather than reason [and] . . . is using this view to justify perpetuating authority at the heart of human life and, indeed, at the heart of human reason.”²⁶ MacIntyre has not answered all his critics to their satisfaction. And he has continued to not only insist on tradition-specific criteria of moral valuation but increasingly to write self-consciously in a way that foregrounds his own commitment to a particular tradition—Roman Catholicism, specifically Thomism.²⁷ Yet he has also continued to affirm the possibility, in principle at least, of debate and interaction with other, rival traditions. His condition is, however, that one be willing and able to learn “the language of the alien tradition as a new and second first language”²⁸ in order for such interaction to be possible, and that only then can one tradition seriously try to remedy its weaknesses by creative engagement with a rival.

We need not, however, agree in all respects with MacIntyre to see the relevance of his concept of tradition for our purposes here. Drawing on the work of MacIntyre, Talal Asad has underlined the relevance of the concept of tradition, as a “discursive tradition,” to the study of Islam. To Asad:

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A tradition consists essentially of discourses that seek to instruct practitioners regarding the correct form and purpose of a given practice that, precisely because it is established, has a history. These discourses relate conceptually to *a past* (when the practice was instituted, and from which the knowledge of its point and proper performance has been transmitted) and *a future* (how the point of that practice can best be secured in the short or long term, or why it should be modified or abandoned), through *a present* (how it is linked to other practices, institutions, and social conditions). An Islamic discursive tradition is simply a tradition of Muslim discourse that addresses itself to conceptions of the Islamic past and future, with reference to a particular Islamic practice in the present.²⁹

This discursive tradition is constituted and reconstituted not only by an ongoing interaction between the present and the past, however, but also by the manner in which relations of power and other forms of contestation and conflict impinge on any definition of what it is to be a Muslim. Such a view of Islam, Asad suggests, helps avoid essentialist constructions that strive to judge all facets of Islamic thought, ideals, and practice in terms of how they relate to (or, more often than not, fail to relate to) Islam's foundational texts, even as it seeks to steer clear of the temptation to reduce the variety of religious and cultural expression to different, local "islams."³⁰

But if Islam *in general* ought to be approached as a "discursive tradition," I would argue that particular facets of this tradition can also be viewed in a broadly similar way. The *shari'a* is the preeminent example of a tradition and, indeed, of a discursive tradition. Often translated as "Islamic law," the *shari'a* is more accurately characterized, as the anthropologist Brinkley Messick has argued, as a "total discourse," viz., a set of institutions and practices that pervaded and shaped varied aspects of people's lives in premodern Muslim societies (see chapter 1).³¹ But many other facets of the intellectual and religious history of Islam are also discursive traditions in their own right. Classical Islamic historiography, for instance, has its own "continuities of conflict"³² even as it also reveals a broad consensus on how, say, the earliest history of Islam is represented—a consensus that baffles and exasperates modern historians as they try to reconstruct Islam's origins. This historiography, too, is a tradition, shaped by arguments within the earliest community as well as by disputations with outsiders.³³ One might similarly characterize institutionalized Sufism or the career of Hellenistic philosophy in Muslim societies as discursive traditions. The etiquette, styles of argumentation, and modes of transmitting knowledge that informed Islamic higher learning, and the institutions with which such learning was often associated, comprise another example

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of a multifaceted Islamic tradition—a tradition whose modern transformation is the subject of this book.

Though Asad does not say so, the concept of tradition is helpful not only in studying the history of discursive practices but also in tracking and understanding the significance of the *ruptures* in that history. No rupture is greater in the history of Islam than that brought about by the impact of Western modernity. As Marshall Hodgson observed at the end of his magisterial history of Islamic civilization, modern Western societies have managed to retain a much deeper, more coherent, and more integral relationship with their traditions than have Muslim societies: the former are far more “traditional” in this sense than the latter. In the Western philosophical tradition, for instance, “from the Scholastics to Descartes to Hume to Kant to Hegel to Husserl to the Existentialists, the philosophical dialogue has been continuous. By and large, the old books continue to be read, and some of the same terms continue to be used, even if in transformed contexts.”³⁴ Alasdair MacIntyre would no doubt respond that, so far as Western intellectual history is concerned, what we have is not one continuous tradition but several “incommensurable” ones. Moreover, the notion that one can approach the “great books” without much attention to the particular traditions in which they are embedded is, for MacIntyre, a characteristic liberal fallacy.³⁵ Yet Hodgson’s point here is different: in question for him is not the issue of *how* the classics of the Islamic intellectual and religious tradition are to be studied, but whether, with the rupture that modernity has entailed, those reared in modern, Westernized systems of education retain any significant link with the tradition such classics once constituted.

The rupture with the past has also meant sharper divisions within Muslim societies. Those schooled in modern secular institutions have often continued to regard Islam as an important, even fundamental, part of their identity, but typically in a very different way from how the ‘ulama have done so. Two of what might very broadly be characterized as the major intellectual and religiopolitical trends that have successively emerged in the Muslim world since the late nineteenth century—modernism and Islamism—have both been largely rooted in modern, Westernized institutions of education.³⁶ Modernist Muslim intellectuals have sought, since the nineteenth century, to find ways of making Islam compatible with what they have taken to be the challenges of the modern age. And their proposed reforms have encompassed virtually the entire spectrum of life in Muslim societies. The intellectual vigor with which these reforms were proposed, and the success with which they have been carried through—often in alliance with the postcolonial state—has varied from one Muslim society to another, as have the precise ways in which different

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thinkers among these modernists have viewed the Islamic intellectual and religious tradition and defined themselves in relation to it. More often than not, however, the effort has been to retrieve the teachings of “true” Islam from the vast and oppressive edifice that centuries of “sterile” scholasticism, “blind” imitation of earlier authorities, and the “intransigence” of the religious specialists had built. In general, the modernist project is guided by the assurance that once retrieved through a fresh but “authentic” reading of the foundational texts, and especially of the Qur’an, the teachings of Islam would appear manifestly in concord with the positions recommended by liberal rationalism.³⁷

In terms of cultural authenticity and religious authority, however, as well as in view of the failed promises of liberal, socialist, and nationalist regimes, the cost of the effort to find a concordance between Islam and Western, liberal rationalism has, seemed too high to many in the latter half of the twentieth century. These “Islamists,” as they are often called in Western scholarship, are typically also products of modern, secular educational institutions but are drawn to initiatives aimed at radically altering the contours of their societies and states through the public implementation of norms they take as “truly” Islamic. To them, such norms need no justification in terms of Western liberal thought; the sole rationale for their implementation is that they express the will of God. Yet, while the Islamists position themselves towards Western thought and institutions in ways that are starkly different from the Muslim modernists, Islamist activists and intellectuals are themselves nothing if not modern, and as historian of religion Bruce Lawrence has argued, they are inconceivable in any but the modern age.³⁸ This is so not only because they rail against the epistemological assumptions of Western Enlightenment rationalism and the ideologies based on such assumptions, or against the overarching powers of the nation-state, or against global capitalism—all of them part of the experience of modernity.³⁹ Nor is it only because they are dexterous in their use of modern technology in disseminating their oppositional message.⁴⁰ They are also modern in that their intellectual positions are often formulated in terms heavily indebted to the discourses of the modern age. For instance, in his conception of social justice, Sayyid Qutb (d. 1966), one of the most influential Islamist thinkers of the twentieth century, is far more indebted to modern Western ideas than he is to the Qur’an.⁴¹ And as political theorist Roxanne Euben has observed, Qutb’s “reification of Islam, the understanding of social systems in terms of dynamic, social processes, the incorporation of an idea of progressive (if contingent) historical change . . . the dialectical vision of history, and the very concept of modern jahiliyya [a new paganism]” all exemplify the influence of the modern world against which Qutb was so vociferously preaching.⁴²

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Modernists and Islamists differ very considerably *within* their ranks in their attitudes to the Islamic tradition. Contemporary Arab modernist thinkers like the Moroccan Muhammad ‘Abid al-Jabiri (b. 1936) and the Egyptian Hasan Hanafi (b. 1935) have delved deeply into the Arab-Islamic “heritage” (*turath*) to discover the roots of the intellectual, social, and political malaise of the modern Arab world and, in Hanafi’s case, to explore ways of selectively mustering the resources from this heritage in the service of an intellectual and political revival.⁴³ Muhammad Shahrur (b. 1938), a widely read Syrian civil engineer who calls for a radically new reading of the Qur’an, rejects sources of law other than the Qur’an and the normative example of the Prophet (*sunna*). He is sharply critical of the premodern jurists for misunderstanding the legal import of the Qur’an and seems more indebted to the natural sciences in his “contemporary rereading” of the Qur’an than to premodern Islamic exegetical or juristic discourses.⁴⁴ By contrast, Fazlur Rahman (d. 1988), a Pakistani modernist thinker, while sharply critical of the ‘ulama, emphasizes a sustained constructive engagement with the “historic formulations of Islam—juristic, theological, spiritual” in the course of reinterpreting Islam in the modern world.⁴⁵

Islamists likewise display widely different orientations in their attitude toward the Islamic tradition. The radical Islamist Shukri Mustafa (d. 1977), whose “Society of Muslims” advocated a complete withdrawal from the existing iniquitous society (hence its designation by the Egyptian media as the “Society of Excommunication and Emigration”) was contemptuous of much of classical and medieval Islamic learning, arguing that one needed little more than a dictionary to explicate any possible complexities in the otherwise plain words of God.⁴⁶ On the other hand, the Egyptian Islamist ideologue Sayyid Qutb acknowledged that there was much to value in the writings of the medieval jurists and scholars⁴⁷ even as he insisted that Islam does not countenance any “priesthood” that would mediate between ordinary human beings and God.⁴⁸ And Abu’l-A‘la Mawdudi (d. 1979), the influential Pakistani Islamist thinker was often (though not invariably) even more laudatory than Qutb of the riches of medieval Islamic civilization:

If . . . people earnestly and dispassionately study the achievements of their ancestors in the field of jurisprudence . . . [t]hey will come to know that during the last thirteen centuries, their forefathers had not been engaged in fruitless controversies: on the contrary, they have left a very vast and priceless treasure of knowledge . . . for the posterity. They have built for us quite a considerable portion of the edifice; and what a folly it would be if, out of sheer ignorance, we insist on demolishing what has already been built and start constructing all anew.⁴⁹

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While there are varying attitudes towards the Islamic intellectual and religious tradition within the ranks of the modernists and the Islamists, what is often shared among them is a certain sense that one does not *necessarily* need that tradition to understand the “true” meaning of Islam,⁵⁰ and that one certainly does not need the ‘ulama to interpret Islam to the ordinary believers. That authority belongs to everyone and to no one in particular. So far as the rich and varied history of, say, classical and medieval exegesis or medieval legal debates or premodern theological speculation are concerned, most modernist and Islamist intellectuals—even those who might, in principle, acknowledge a certain attachment to that tradition—usually have only the most tenuous of links to it. This remains true even when certain older discursive modes—for instance, commentaries and study circles—are retained.⁵¹ For if the goal is, for example, to study the Qur’an not in the light of the long record of agreements and disagreements about how to read it, but as if “the Book had been revealed *to us*, as if it had come for our own generation . . . , and as if the Prophet had died only recently after bringing this Book to us”⁵² then such formal continuities as those constituted by the commentary or the study circle can barely conceal the reality of the fundamental rupture with the past.⁵³

The ‘ulama, as I show in this book, are hardly frozen in the mold of the Islamic religious tradition, but this tradition nevertheless remains their fundamental frame of reference, the basis of their identity and authority. They differ widely in the extent of their actual acquaintance with this tradition. As the cases of the Egyptian reformer Muhammad ‘Abduh, and the later rector of al-Azhar university, Mahmud Shaltut, suggest, moreover, boundaries between the ‘ulama and “modernists” can become blurred, just as they sometimes do between the ‘ulama and the Islamists.⁵⁴ Yet, in general terms, it is a combination of their intellectual *formation*, their *vocation*, and, crucially, their *orientation* viz., a certain sense of continuity with the Islamic tradition that defines the ‘ulama as ‘ulama; and it is this sense of continuity that constitutes the most significant difference between them and their modernist and Islamist detractors.⁵⁵

What makes the ‘ulama of the modern world worth studying is not merely that they have continued to lay claim to and self-consciously represent a millennium-old tradition of Islamic learning, however. Their larger claim on our attention lies in the ways in which they have mobilized this tradition to define issues of religious identity and authority in the public sphere and to articulate changing roles for themselves in contemporary Muslim politics. The ‘ulama’s tradition is not a mere inheritance from the past, even though they often argue that that is precisely what it is. It is a tradition that has had to be constantly imagined, reconstructed, argued over, defended, and modified. All this has entailed highly significant

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changes in the world of the ‘ulama, and it is some of these changes—which constitute a critical part of the history of modern Islam, even though they have not always been adequately recognized as such—that this book seeks to explicate.

The ‘Ulama in This Study

With the aim of explaining the religious transformations of the ‘ulama in the modern world, this study focuses primarily on the traditionally educated Muslim religious scholars of British India and Pakistan during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It examines, in particular, one highly visible and influential strand among the ‘ulama, viz. those belonging to the “Deobandi” sectarian and doctrinal orientation. This orientation is associated with a madrasa founded in a small north Indian town called Deoband in the United Provinces (now Uttar Pradesh) in 1867. Thousands of other madrasas—all called Deobandi, though often without any formal affiliation with the parent madrasa—share the same doctrinal orientation, which emphasizes the study of law and of the traditions attributed to the Prophet Muhammad (hadith), as well as a self-consciously reformist ideology defined in opposition to existing forms of “popular” Muslim belief and practice. Within modern South Asian Islam, the “Deobandis” distinguish themselves not only from the Shi‘a but also from other Sunni rivals such as the “Barelawis” and the Ahl-i Hadith, both of which also emerged in India in the second half of the nineteenth century. Though these three movements are united in their reverence for the teachings of the Prophet, their interpretations of the sources of religious authority differ markedly. The Barelawis affirm the authority not just of the Prophet but also of the saints and holy people, whom they revere as sources of religious guidance and vehicles of mediation between God and human beings. It is against such a vision of shrine and cult-based Islam that the Deobandis have preached. The Ahl-i Hadith, for their part, deny the legitimacy not just of all practices lacking a basis in scriptural texts, but even of the classical schools of law, stringently insisting on the Qur’an and hadith as the exclusive and directly accessible sources of guidance.⁵⁶ Besides differentiating themselves from each other, the Deobandis, the Barelawis, the Ahl-i Hadith, and the Shi‘a are all opposed to the Ahmadis, who profess belief in Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (d. 1908) as a prophet after Muhammad. This Ahmadi belief contravenes the doctrine that Muhammad was the last of God’s prophets, and the Ahmadis are therefore regarded as heretical by most other Muslims.⁵⁷

All of these movements, including the Ahmadi, are products of a time of great ferment in the history of Muslim India. How Muslim scholars

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have historically positioned themselves in regard to the ruling authorities has varied considerably in different Muslim societies, but until the onset of colonialism, the ruling authorities were, for the most part, at least nominally Muslim. That was no longer the case in late-nineteenth-century India. But it was not only the loss of Muslim rule that posed serious problems to Muslim identity. Colonialism was itself the product of fundamental social, political, intellectual, and technological transformations in the West, and colonial rule was the medium through which new ideas, institutions, and forms of knowledge based on these transformations confronted Muslims as well as other colonized peoples—in India as elsewhere. Religious movements such as the aforementioned, as well as emerging forms of Muslim modernism, were ways of responding to a world that was becoming increasingly, and rapidly, unfamiliar. Initiatives aimed at revival and reform were nothing new in the history of Islam; but beginning in the late nineteenth century, the perceived challenges to existing institutions, practices, and traditions were more urgent and the responses to them more varied. The movement associated with the madrasa of Deoband was one response to these challenges.

The work of Barbara Metcalf on the early history of Deoband has done much to evoke the reformist concerns of the ‘ulama associated with this orientation. Metcalf demonstrates that Muslim response to colonial rule was not exclusively in terms of adaptation to Western norms and institutions. As illustrated by the Deobandi ‘ulama, the Muslim response also took the form of systematic recourse to facets of the Islamic religious tradition in striving to affirm Muslim identity in a hostile and unfamiliar environment. For their part, the ‘ulama themselves underwent—even inaugurated—important changes in this process: for instance, nineteenth-century Indian Islam saw a new emphasis on the study of hadith; the ‘ulama adopted the technology of print, which, together with their use of the vernacular Urdu language as the medium of their reformist discourses, enabled them to reach ever new audiences; they founded new madrasas as a means of resisting some of the threats that colonial rule represented—though these institutions were themselves indebted to the organizational model of colonial schools. Above all, the Deobandi orientation represents to Metcalf a certain interiorization of Islam, an emphasis on the reform of the believer as an individual: the ‘ulama “fostered a kind of turning away from issues of the organization of state and society, toward a concern with the moral qualities of individual Muslims.”⁵⁸

Metcalf’s work remains extremely important for the early history of Deoband. But she stops at the end of the nineteenth century, which means that the better part of the history of Deobandi ‘ulama remains largely outside her purview. There are, however, certain other limitations to Metcalf’s pioneering work as well. It is largely a study of the “social milieu”

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of the ‘ulama, and much less so of their thought and their discourses, and it is based far more on the biographies of the first generation of Deobandi ‘ulama than it is on the ‘ulama’s own varied and extensive writings.⁵⁹ While such biographies are obviously an important resource in understanding the contours of the milieu to which these reformist scholars belonged, the ‘ulama’s world of learning can hardly be evoked without reference to what they regarded as their most important intellectual and religious concerns or what they themselves wrote in the pursuit of these concerns. Thus it is telling, for instance, that there is barely more than a passing reference to the considerable energy that the Deobandi ‘ulama expended writing commentaries on classical collections of hadith. The implication of this neglect is not merely that a critical facet of the ‘ulama’s discourses is thereby lost from view. What is also lost is a sense of how religious authority is constituted through the discursive medium of the commentary, why it has been important for the ‘ulama to retain this discursive medium, how they have fashioned their discourses at many levels simultaneously, and what impact the technology of print has had on the ‘ulama and their authority (see chapter 2). Furthermore, while Metcalf repeatedly emphasizes the ‘ulama’s effort to anchor their reformism in an orientation to the Islamic religious tradition of the past, what that tradition consisted of or how it informed the modern ‘ulama’s discourses remains unclear at best.

That the ‘ulama wanted, in the immediate aftermath of the establishment of British rule in India, to focus on *individual* reform, on inculcating a renewed sense of *personal* religious responsibility as a way of coping with new challenges, is a central argument of Metcalf’s work. Important as it is, however, this argument doesn’t provide an adequate frame of reference in which to understand the public and political dimension of the activities of Deobandi ‘ulama in the twentieth century. That the work stops at the beginning of the twentieth century partly accounts for this, of course, but Metcalf’s focus on the interiorization of reform also suggests a sharpness and narrowness of focus on the personal as opposed to the public or political that is not always borne out by the often-fluid world of the ‘ulama she has studied, a focus that becomes increasingly less convincing as the twentieth century progresses. Her account of Deobandi reformism hardly prepares one for the radical sectarianism in Pakistan in the last quarter of the twentieth century—a development in which the Deobandi ‘ulama have been central players (see chapter 5); nor does it contribute anything to our understanding of the Taliban of Afghanistan in the last years of the century, many of whom were the products of Deobandi madrasas in Pakistan and remained closely allied to the Deobandi orientation.

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The present study builds on the work of Metcalf on the Deobandi ‘ulama, as well as on studies of Islam and the ‘ulama in other Muslim societies.⁶⁰ This is not a “comprehensive” history of the ‘ulama in the modern world, however, nor even of the Deobandi ‘ulama. I seek only to illuminate what I consider the more important facets of religious change as they relate to the ‘ulama, and I examine them here with reference to the Deobandi ‘ulama of British India and Pakistan. The context and trajectories of social, political, and religious change are often different in other modern Muslim societies. My source material, analysis, and conclusions pertain in the first instance to the ‘ulama of modern South Asia, but wherever possible, I have tried to show parallels and contrasts with traditionally educated religious scholars elsewhere (see especially chapter 6). No such broadly comparative study has been attempted so far, but it is crucial that a beginning be made, not only because all major Muslim societies have their own ‘ulama who often define their identity and stake out their claims to authority in broadly comparable ways but also because the modern transformations of the ‘ulama and their increasing contemporary prominence can be appreciated more clearly once they are viewed in a larger, global context. Besides being the first book to study the ‘ulama of contemporary Islam in a comparative framework, the present work is also the first to study *both* their discourses and the significance of their religiopolitical activism in their multifaceted relationship; it is also the first work on South Asian Islam to examine the ‘ulama and their institutions of learning in both the colonial and postcolonial contexts. In examining how the ‘ulama have fared in responding to the challenges of a rapidly changing world, I seek to shed new light on religious and political thought in modern Islam. But I hope also to illuminate how a more nuanced understanding of religious and political trends in contemporary Islam can emerge when the ‘ulama are firmly integrated into the broader picture.

The first chapter examines some of the changes that the shari‘a underwent in colonial India. Unlike much of the scholarly work on Islamic law, I focus here not on how the shari‘a was gradually replaced by modern, Western legal systems, but rather on the ‘ulama’s discourses on the shari‘a during colonial rule. Though often neglected by scholars of Islamic law, this is not only an important part of the modern history of Islamic law but also critical to any understanding of how the ‘ulama have viewed and responded to a world that was rapidly changing around them.

Issues of religious authority are at the center of this book’s overall concerns, but they are especially the subject of the next two chapters. Chapter 2 focuses on the discursive form of the commentary to examine how religious authority is articulated in its terms, as well as through other kinds of texts, and what the technology of print has meant for the ways in which this authority is conceived or configured. Chapter 3 is concerned with

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colonial and postcolonial governmental discourses on the need to “reform” the education imparted in madrasas. Such efforts have often been seen by the ‘ulama as encroaching on their authority, but some of these initiatives came from within the ranks of the ‘ulama and, as such, point to contention within the scholarly community. More importantly, however, the contention over what needed to be reformed and how it should be reformed has led to a novel view whereby the ‘ulama have often seen religion as occupying a distinct sphere in society, and they have defended their own authority in terms of such a view. The history of this idea is the subject of the third chapter.

The construction and defence of religion as a distinct sphere in society has proceeded, in Pakistan, alongside the ‘ulama’s own calls for making the state “truly” Islamic. Yet the latter project also threatens to compromise the former, and it is this tension that I explore in chapter 4. More broadly, this chapter seeks to explicate what the ‘ulama mean when they call, as they often do, for an “Islamic state.” Islamist formulations on the Islamic state have received considerable scholarly attention, but, once again, the ‘ulama’s political thought has continued to be much neglected. This chapter examines how the ‘ulama debated the issues pertaining to the implementation of the shari‘a—a central concern of all discussions on the Islamic state—and it shows how a comparison of the contemporary ‘ulama’s political thought with that of the Islamists sheds considerable new light on their competing notions of the state.

In chapter 5, I consider various facets of the religious and political activism of the ‘ulama in Pakistan, demonstrating how, in the last quarter of the twentieth century, a remarkable configuration of social, political, and religious factors at the local, national, and transnational levels has led to the articulation and radicalization of new religious identities under the leadership of the ‘ulama, especially of the lower-ranking ‘ulama. Among the factors I examine as contributing to this new activism are the emergence of a new middle class supporting the growth of mosques, madrasas, and sectarian organizations; the strong impact of the Iranian revolution, which led to heightened tensions between the Sunnis and the Shi‘a of Pakistan, as well as to new avenues of patronage for the ‘ulama of both communities from Middle Eastern regimes; and, finally, Pakistan’s active involvement in supporting the Afghan struggle against the Soviet occupying forces. Many Pakistani ‘ulama and their madrasas played an active role in this struggle—a role that contributed to, and continued after, the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan. This examination of the ‘ulama’s activism is extended in chapter 6 to incorporate examples from Egypt, Saudi Arabia, India, and the southern Philippines. The purpose here is to understand why certain important facets of this activism emerged when they did, in the last quarter of the twentieth century, how it relates with other—

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Islamist—trends, and how the ‘ulama are to be situated in larger discussions of “political Islam.”

In each chapter, my analysis proceeds with reference to one or more key figures within the ranks of the ‘ulama. Many of these figures remain little known to students and scholars of Islam, yet their lives, activities, and thought illustrate with particular vividness some of the transformations that the ‘ulama, Islam, and Muslim societies have undergone in the modern world.