Rethinking the authority of Muslim religious scholars and mosques in shaping religious discourse in Pakistan: An ethnographic account

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Abstract

The mosque is the fundamental institution in any Islamic society, its role extending far beyond its function as a religious centre. The question that arises for this ethnographic study in Pakistan is whether the mosque is still as central as it was in the past, or as it is understood to be. A similar question can be raised for those Muslim religious scholars trained in Islamic law who frequent the mosque and serve the religious community as prayer leaders. This study explores the part played by the mosque – and by the Muslim religious scholars – in the life of worship and, beyond that, in the everyday social structure. The study suggests that no longer can the Muslim religious scholars or mosques be called representative of Pakistani society.

KEYWORDS: Muslim religious scholars, mosque, Islam, everyday life, religious schools, Pakistan

Introduction

In each neighbourhood (*maHallah*)[1] of Muslim Town, there are mosques affiliated with rival tendencies of practice within Islam. In ordinary everyday speech, these tendencies are referred to as sect or school of thought (*maslak*; plural *masaalik*). The sectarian affiliations of the mosques are typically indicated at their main doors. Two principal divisions within the Sunni branch of Islam (which are also referred to as the people of the Sunnah (*Ahl-e-Sunnat*) are identified at the mosque (*masjid*; plural *masaajid*) doors as Deoband and Barelvi. These two major divisions dominate the area, standing in obvious opposition and hostility due to abiding differences in their interpretations of the Sharia, religious rituals and practices. Their contrasting understandings of the Prophet Muhammad, as omnipotent (*Haz:ir-o naaz:ir*) and helper (*madadgaar*), light (*nuur*) and human (*bashar*), Sufism, intercession (*tavassul*), the belief in the oneness of Allah with no part-

[1] Notes on transliteration: For the purposes of this paper, I have used the Pritchett/Khaliq transliteration system for Urdu words.

ANTHROPOLOGICAL NOTEBOOKS 24 (2): 5–24.
ISSN 1408-032X
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ners in his being and attributes (*tauHiid*) and polytheism (*shirk*) constitute the basis of their sectarian conflict. Each group exercises its unique identity through the mosques, religious schools (*madaaris*; singular *madrasah*) and religious rituals to which it adheres. At Barelvi mosques, the *kalimah*[2] is recited loudly after every obligatory prayer.

Furthermore, the verses in praise of the Prophet Muhammad (*Salaat-o-salaam*) is recited before the call for prayer (*aazaan*) and after Friday (*Jum'ah*) prayers. This practice is a symbolic enactment of Barelvi identity. The Barelvi population of the area gladly celebrate the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad (Eid Milad-un-Nabi), whereas the Deobandis and Ahl-e-Hadith[3] reject this celebration, declaring it innovation in Islam (*bid'at*; plural *bid'aat*). The Ahl-e-Hadith population in Muslim Town exercise their religious identity through their mosques. Contrary to other sects of Sunni Muslims who follow one of the four schools of thoughts (*madhabs*); i.e., Hanafi, Hanbali, Malakii, and Shafeyii, Ahl-e-Hadith do not follow imams in Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*). The Deobandis and Barelvis both criticise them heavily for not following any Islamic fiqh. The Shi'a Muslims in the area demonstrate their unique identity through Shi'a congregation halls (*imaam Barghas*)[4] and by displaying flag (*alam*)[5] on their rooftops. Their Muharram rituals are firmly criticised by non-Shi'a Muslims who assert that Shi'a mourning ritual (*maatam*)[6] is forbidden (*haraam*) in Islam**.** The Shi'a and non-Shi'a Muslims have generated overt opposition and hostility due to their opposing understandings of the Companions (*SaHaabah*)[7] and wives (*Ummahat-ul-Momineen*) of the Prophet Muhammad, and the institution of leadership (*imaamat*).[8] It is common practice in Muslim Town for the Muslim religious scholars (*ulamaa;* singular *alim*) of each sect to declare others guilty of non-belief, even heresy (*kufr*).

No preoccupation concerning Islam could be more widespread among the inhabitants of Muslim Town than the question of the various alternative forms of practice and faith. This is not always a question of the denunciation of a practice or belief as un-Islamic (*takfiir*), which is a distinctive feature of fundamentalist militancy. It is rather a matter of the existence of many religious outlooks or practices with which one person or another may disagree but which are known to be legitimate. This paper dealing with the practice of Islam in Pakistan asks an important question that has been debated among

[2] The wording containing the fundamentals of Islam testifying the oneness of Allah and finality of the Prophethood of Muhammad .

[3] A religious movement that emerged in Northern India in the mid-nineteenth century from the teachings of Syed Nazeer Husain and Siddiq Hasan Khan. Adherents regard the Quran, sunnah, and hadith as the sole sources of religious authority and oppose everything introduced in Islam after the earliest times.

[4] Congregational hall for Shi'a ritual ceremonies, especially those associated with the remembrance of Muharram.

[5] `Alam is of spiritual significance for Shia Muslims. On the top of this flag there is a Panja (hand) which is associated to the Hazrat Abbas Alamdar (A.S), younger son of Hazrat Ali Ibn-e-Abu Talib (A.S).

[6] Maatam or self-flagellation includes chest beating and cutting the body with knives or chains to demonstrate the grief for Imam Hussain (RA), who was brutally martyred in the battle of Karbala by the forces of the second Umayyad caliph Yazid.

[7] Shi'a Muslims do not recognize the authority of first three Caliphs. They curse them, believing that following the Prophet Muhammad's death, leadership should have passed directly to Hazrat Ali (RA), the fourth Caliph.

[8] The Shi'a believe that after the Prophet , there should be no other prophet. But Allah appointed 12 "imaams" from the lineage of the Prophet as his successors to continue his mission. Hazrat Ali (RA) was the first of them.

scholars for many years (Gellner 1981; Gilsenan 1982; Eickelman 1982; Gaffney 1992; Tapper 1995; Lukens-Bull 1999; Ali 2011): Is there "one" Islam throughout the length and breadth of the Islamic world? Or are there "many" Islams?

An influential formulation of one response to this question was provided by El-Zain (1977), who maintains that there are many forms of Islam and is critical of the efforts of anthropologists and theologians to determine which of these are more "real". He rejects those anthropological representations, which conceive of the varieties of local Islam as 'less ordered, less objective, and somehow less complete versions of the religious experience' (El-Zein 1977: 243). Ovamir Anjum (2007), while appreciative up to a point, is strongly critical of El- Zain's position. He cites Launay's (1992) ethnography of a west African town to buttress his point. Both scholars maintain that because anthropologists are forever studying local-scale societies with their own particularities, they are perhaps too inclined to agree with arguments like the one that there are "many" Islams.

The concept of "many" Islams would be unacceptable to the people of Muslim Town who are aware of the fundamentals of Islam that are common among them; all Muslims, Shi'a, Deobandi, Barelvi, Ahl-e-Hadith, and others would agree to the centrality of those elements called the five pillars of Islam,[9] the Quran, and the actions and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad (*Hadith*, plural *Ahadith*). They might disagree over which sayings are acceptable and which are not, but there would be in principle agreement among all Muslims on certain aspects. Not all would agree that there are in fact many valid manifestations of Islam – that, although Islam is in a sense one, it is also the case that it is in practice far more varied than many orthodox Muslims would agree to be the case to abiding differences in their interpretations of the Sharia, religious rituals, and practices.

The study asks specific questions such as whether the mosque is still as central as it was in the past, or as it is understood to be. A similar question can be raised for those *ulamaa* who frequent the mosque and serve the religious community as prayer leaders (*imam masajid*).[10] The study finally explores the role of Muslim religious scholars and mosques in everyday social structure.

Methods

The present research is based on one-and-a-half years of my fieldwork conducted between 2011 and 2012 in Muslim Town. Muslim Town is a region of Rawalpindi city commonly known as Pindi in the Punjab province of Pakistan. Rawalpindi is adjacent to Pakistan's capital of Islamabad and is the fourth largest city in Pakistan with a population of 2.098 million. As a large urban residential region, it does not represent the typical life of rural Punjab. However, there is an explicatory benefit in examining a specific area of a Pakistan city, even though the results cannot be generalised over rural Punjab or other provinces of Pakistan. This is a way of revealing some impression of lives as they are actually lived, rather than a statistical account.

[9] Shahadah, confession that there is no God but Allah and Muhammad is Allah's Prophet, Prayers, Fasting, Hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca) and Zakaat (obligatory charity).

[10] The terms prayer leader, ulamaa, imaam masjid, imaam, maulaanaa and xat:iib (he who delivers the sermon during the Friday prayers, usually the imaam masjid) are used interchangeably in this paper.

This paper seeks to contribute to the understanding of this facet by supplying a focused account of the role of religious scholars and mosques in one small urban region of Pakistan, Muslim Town, comprising several neighbourhoods. Usually, a neighbourhood consists of two or three streets. There are now between 25 and 30 neighbourhoods in Muslim Town. This ethnographic exploration is being undertaken by an anthropologist who is a native of the place and was educated at nearby institutions. I undertook my field research for my M.Sc. and M.Phil anthropology degrees in Muslim Town and have spent more than 25 years of my life in this locality. My relationship with the locale and its inhabitants enabled me to compare significant religious changes that have occurred over time, both at the ideological and structural levels.

This research uses the anthropological technique of participant observation, augmented by tape-recorded in-depth interviews in mosques, religious schools, homes, and socialisation places visited by inhabitants of Muslim Town to obtain a deeper understanding of the role played by the mosques and Muslim religious scholars in everyday life of Muslim Town. In each neighbourhood of Muslim Town are mosques affiliated with rival tendencies of practice within Islam. Regular assembly at the mosques, to some extent, provides a space for Muslims to discuss personal and social issues. I, as a participant observer, attended mosques during prayer time, which eventually enabled me to understand the views of the Muslim religious scholars and observant Muslims on the role of the religious institution in everyday life.

Muslim Town has a vigorous nightlife. There are about 10 to 15 hotels in Sadiq Abad, and in the adjoining Transformer Chowk. Many of these hotels and other places such as fresh juices and soda corners remain open till midnight. These places, besides offering food, also proffer spaces for socialisation. My position of being a local helped me immensely to connect with local residents in such informal settings to know their opinions on role and influence of the religious institutions in the vicinity.

This is how the research was carried out along the lines of "follow the people" multi-sited fieldwork (Marcus 1998), taking part in social activities during an extensive amount of time in order to comprehend significant religious outlooks, priorities, and practices and regularly logging occurrences and conversation in detailed field notes.

A total of 120 respondents of various ages, with diverse socio-economic and educational backgrounds, were interviewed to obtain a deeper understanding of the phenomena. To enrich the data collection, it was ensured that the selected respondents hold various sectarian affiliations. The respondents include general residents of the area belonging to varied economic and cultural backgrounds, Muslim religious scholars, teachers of formal schools and religious schools, parents of school going children as well as students of religious and formal schools, colleges and universities. I also conducted a survey in Muslim Town using a structured questionnaire asking the parents of 60 families to provide preferences regarding formal and religious education for their children.

Mosques in Muslim Town

Mosques are easily recognisable by their distinctive architectural features. Among them are domes, minarets, a courtyard before the prayer hall with pools allowing for ablution

(before prayer), and the niche indicating the direction of Mecca (*meHraab*). Calligraphic inscriptions written in Arabic – principally the text of the Quran and the names of Allah, the Prophet Muhammad , and four rightly guided successors (*xulafaa-e raashidiin*) Abu Bakr, Umr, Usman and Ali (RA), who ruled after the death of the Prophet – decorate the walls. There are no icons or representational depictions, which are forbidden in Islam.

In the early days of Islam, the mosque was not restricted to being a place of worship or for performing rituals**.** Its significant role in the life of the Muslim community is evidenced by the fact that the mosque was the headquarter of the Islamic State's supreme leadership, a centre from where the state's affairs were administered. The Prophet Muhammad used the mosque to meet envoys, sign agreements and to decide disputes. The mosque served a variety of purposes, as the seat of the Judiciary, as a university for learning and teaching, an eating place for the hungry and needy, and, last but not least, as a venue for celebrations, socialising, and amusement (Muhammad n.d.; Lotfi 2001).

The mosques of Pakistan do not function as community centres in this sense, though they are an integral part of community life. Their community role – apart from functioning as places of worship – is reduced to the provision of some typical services including announcement of a person's death, the offer of free use of the bathing board (to bathe the deceased person), and the lending free of charge of 30 chapters (*paare*; singular *paarah*) of the Quran that mourners recite for the forgiveness (*baxshish*) of the deceased. On occasion, the mosques' loudspeakers are used to announce details about missing children.

Regular assembly at the mosques, to some extent, provides a space for Muslims to discuss personal and social issues. Two typical, inconspicuous instances may be given in Muslim Town. After performing his prayers*,* Fareed[11] *SaaHib*[12], a regular worshipper (*namaazii*) at a local Deobandi mosque discussed with two fellow worshippers his apprehension that his child is too mischievous and is only interested in cricket, and asked for their advice. In another instance at a Barelvi mosque, Bashir SaaHib, a daily wage labourer, requested a fellow worshipper to lend him some money to meet the expenses of his upcoming wedding.

Some insight into the relationship between the mosque and the local community may be gained by considering the structure of the mosque organisation while exploring the extent of centralisation of this structure.

The management of mosques

Mosques management committees, which are responsible for the mosques' day-to-day administration, are usually composed of five to ten members, depending on the size of the mosque. In most cases, the members are people who live near the mosque (*maHalle daar*). The committees typically include a president (*Sadar*), who is usually the founder of the mosque (*baanii-e masjid*) or a well-heeled person, a treasurer (*xazaancii*), and regular worshippers who attend the mosque frequently.

[11] Pseudonyms are used to protect the identities of research participants.
[12] A form of address placed after a man's name or designation as a symbol of respect.

Mosques in Muslim Town rely heavily on the surrounding communities to meet their expenses. Many mosques in the area are under a huge financial burden since the Auqaf Department[13] does not support them financially. For the majority of mosques, the collection of weekly charity (*candah*) on Friday prayers, which attract large congregations, and monthly assistance provided by affluent residents ranging usually between 100 and 500 rupees (around €0.63 to 3), are the main sources of paying maintenance expenses, the energy bills, and the salaries of the prayer leaders and the second in command (*naaiib imaam*) who is typically the one who has memorized the Quran (*Haafiz:-e Qur'an*). Those worshippers who offer regular charity exercise more authority when deciding mosque-related matters such as the recruitment of the prayer leader and the second in command. A reputation for piety or spirituality in this context becomes irrelevant. It is social status and financial standing which eventually matters.

A traditional method of collecting charity is the placement of charity boxes outside the mosques. However, in some cases, the mosques successfully generate income by employing other strategies. The Farooqya mosque, for example, allows its restrooms to be used as public toilets free of charge during prayer time; but, otherwise, it charges 10 rupees per person (around €0.063). Some mosques have converted their street entrances into shops from which they charge a monthly rent. In cases of significant expense, such as the expansion of the mosque, the installation of a speaker system, or buying prayer carpets, the mosque committee launches a special appeal for charity. Mosques also announce charity requests to meet the food and arrangement costs for gatherings on special occasions such as the annual celebration of the prophet's birthday or during the holy month of Ramadan.

Compared with mosques, far less is known about the sources of funding of religious schools. It is often unclear as to whether their funding comes from their respective neighbourhoods or from outside sources (Andrabi, Das & Khwaja 2012). The religious schools in Muslim Town, similar to the mosques, are funded by local sources. In Muslim Town, a large number of people pay a regular contribution to the religious schools; as well, they pay the annual obligatory giving of a fixed portion of one's wealth (*zakaat*) and the obligatory giving prior to Eid-ul-Fitr[14] (*fit:raanah*). People also offer the hides of animals sacrificed on Eid-ul-Adha.[15] During an interview conducted on 11 March 2011, I asked Asad – a Muslim legal specialist who is authorised to issue rulings on religious matters (*mufti*) about the financial resources of religious institutions, he angrily replied:

> People are so curious to know that what are our financial sources? It is the philanthropy of our Muslim brothers who help us in the form of *zakaat*, *fit:raanah* and otherwise because people love Islam whether they are religious or not. How we would know who gave this charity? It is the Almighty's system and beyond the understanding of ordinary people like us.

[13] Auqaf Department is responsible for the management and maintenance of Mosques and Shrines.

[14] The Muslim festival marking the end of the fast of Ramadan.

[15] The Muslim festival marking the culmination of the annual pilgrimage to Mecca and commemorating the sacrifice of Abraham.

Prayer leaders in Muslim Town: How powerful?

Mosques' management committees recruit religious scholars as prayer leaders for conducting daily procedures at the mosques. In this paper, the focus is upon religious scholars who serve as prayer leaders at mosques, rather than on those religious scholars who belong to political or jihadi organisations. The category of a religious scholar is very different from that of the politician or jihadi (Zaidi 2009). The power of the imam in determining mosque matters varies from mosque to mosque, principally in accordance with his social background, financial status, how articulately he delivers sermons, and his popularity among the worshippers.

Mufti Nasir, the Barelvi cleric in the Muslim Town area, is one conspicuous example of a religious scholar who combines procedural authority with the cultivation of a political following, though he would not be regarded as a jihadi as such. His sermons and public pronouncements are said to have motivated the assassin Mumtaz Qadri, who killed the Governor of Punjab, Salman Taseer, for his opposition to the blasphemy laws in Pakistan. In an attempt to shore up the Barelvi identity and belief system, the mufti established an organisation called Muslim Youth of Pakistan (*Shabaab-e-Islami Pakistan*). Mufti Nasir is very commanding in deciding the mosque's affairs, and the mosque committee could no longer oppose his decisions. His connections with the local politician and his financial stability were additional grounds supporting his commanding position**.**

Another source of an imam's power is his hereditary association with the mosque, which confers him with traditional authority. Imam Shabbir, the imam of the largest Deobandi mosque in Muslim Town, is an example of such an authoritative figure. He succeeded his father, imam Iftikhar, who had served as imam at this mosque for many decades till his death. Imam Iftikhar had earned massive respect in the area for being tolerant and respectful to other sects. His son*,* imam Shabbir completed the study of Quran (*Hifz:-e Qur*'*an*) and the Muslim law and religion course – a study curriculum (*Dars-i Nizami*) used in religious schools and also holds an M.Phil degree in zoology. Besides his function of leading the prayers (*imaamat*) and delivering sermons (*xit:aabat*), he serves as a lecturer at a government college. His exercise of personal authority is unusual. In many other cases, prayer leaders were dependent on mosque committees and had very little say in the administrative affairs of their mosques. This dependency, as I will argue in the following discussion, is aggravated by their inability in most cases to persuade the mosques committees to pay them a respectable salary.

The economic status of prayer leaders

Historically, the Muslim religious scholars enjoyed great respect and power under the Delhi Sultanate. They served as Heads of the Department of Religious Affairs, the Department of Public Law and Order (*Hisbah*) and as Chief judge (*Qazi*) of the state. Later**,** some of the Lodi ulamaa continued to hold offices under the early Mughal rule. But Akbar, who with time became disenchanted with the petty-mindedness, intolerance and the mutual enmities of the religious scholars of his court, curtailed their power. It was never reinstated to the same degree as earlier under the Delhi Sultanate (Ahmad 1970). The Muslim religious scholars once again acquired great importance when the Mughal

rule was abolished by the British. In the absence of Muslim political power, the religious scholars played an essential role in leadership to answer the challenges that resulted from the socio-cultural dislocation of the Muslim secular power. However, their golden era could not be reinstated (Metcalf 1982).

Some of the consequences of this decline of the Muslim religious scholars can be well observed in Pakistan where the prayer leaders have never enjoyed an assured financial status, whether in the cities or in the rural areas that constitute the home of the vast majority of Pakistani population. Kurin (1985) provides a historical account of the social position of prayer leaders in rural Pakistan:

> *Maulvii* was technically a village seipi, dependant upon the allocation produce from village lands set aside for the purpose of supporting him and his family… During my stay in 1978, the *maulvii* was being criticized for not being attentive to his duties. Some villagers noted a pattern of lateness for prayers, others thought he was not doing a very good job in his teaching and so on. The *maulvii* was not seen as an arbiter or judge of village conflicts (Kurin 1985: 855).

Even for a city like Rawalpindi twenty-eight years later, this observation mostly holds true. The majority of the prayer leaders in Muslim Town perform their roles in relative poverty. Low salary packages and the absence of job security are the defining features of their economic vulnerability. Imam Sajid, for example, recently joined a Deobandi mosque as a prayer leader after the successful completion of the Muslim religion and law course. His monthly salary is 7,000 rupees (€44), even less than the earnings of a daily wage labourer, who earns approximately 10,000-12,000 rupees per month (€63-75).

The financial instability and meagre salaries of prayer leaders have forced them to find other ways of earning money. The imam of one Barelvi mosque works part-time as a tailor. Another imam runs an informal marriage centre as a means of earning extra money. Many imams of the local mosques were offering home tuition for teaching to read the Holy Quran in Arabic by rote and without translation (*naaz:rah Qur'an*). The fee for Quranic tuition, between 100 and 2000 rupees (€0.63-13) a month, is much smaller than the amount people spend on private tutoring for school education, which ranges between 1,000 and 12,000 rupees per month (€6,25-75). The following comparison (Figure 1), based on my own enquiries, represents the estimates of sixty families of their monthly spending on the religious and school education of their children:

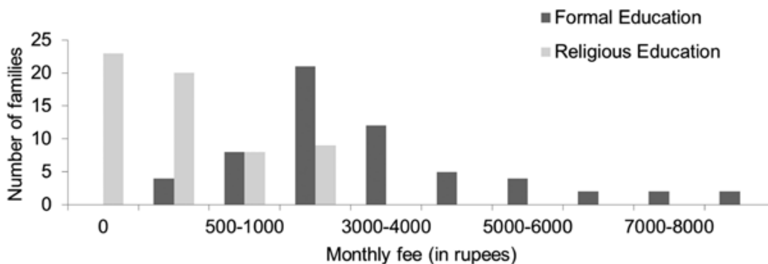

Figure 1: Comparison of monthly fees for formal and religious education

On special occasions, the imams may receive support from the more affluent people in their communities, but this is nothing to depend on. Marriage and funeral ceremonies are traditional occasions when monetary help and food may be given. A typical prayer leader usually earns between 200 and 1000 rupees (€1.25-6.25) in his capacity as a provider of matrimonial contract. On the occasion of matrimonial contract, clients themselves decide the amount that should be accepted by the provider without objection.

At funerals, mourners may give money and food as voluntary charity (*Sadaqah*) in favour of the deceased. In other cases, people invite imams to gatherings of and rituals after the third day (*qul*) and the fortieth day (*caaliisvaaN*) of funeral prayer, which are held in private homes. The rituals consist of supplication (*du'aa*) and Quran recitation to donate the reward (*s:avaab*) to the deceased. At the end, the prayer leader, students of religious schools and other participants are offered food such as rice and meat. The prayer leaders, as has been shown, have no say in the amount of money, which they receive as matrimonial contract providers; in the case of funerals too, people themselves decide the quantity and quality of food. The participation of the religious scholars and their students in the above-mentioned gatherings is not only a ritual obligation but also a vivid illustration of their financial vulnerability. The financial susceptibility of the religious scholars gave birth to popular rhetoric of insult and sarcasm "*maulvii Halvah xaur*" (prayer leader, sweet eater), which is used to indicate their social status.

Prayer leader, sweet eater: Exploring the cultural critique of the Muslim religious scholars

In the phrase "maulvii Halvah xaur" which is commonly heard throughout Pakistan, the term *maulvii*, does not apply only to a religious scholar or a prayer leader. It is in general use to refer to someone who is religious or who embraces a religious outlook such as wearing the rounded cap worn by observant Muslim (*topii*), a turban over the cap (*'imaamah*), or the national dress of Pakistan (*shalvaar qamiiZ*) and keeping a beard. Halvah is the dessert made from semolina (*suujii*), a clarified butter used in South Asian countries (*diisi ghii*), sugar, and various nuts, which is served at certain ceremonies. At marriage celebrations, for example, it is traditional for ulamaa to be invited to undertake the matrimonial contract and is served with Halvah or any other sweet dish. Halvah is used with a pejorative connotation and as a symbolic expression aims to portray that the religious scholars are greedy for money and food. As another popular expression has it: "*jahaaN Halvah vahaaN maulvii kaa jalvah*" (where there is Halvah, there would be a prayer leader). This disparagement of the religious scholars is expressed by a woman in Chitral (a Northern Areas district):

> Amina announced that Chitral's *dashmanan*[16] *were nothing more than tsar zhibak*, or the eater of funeral feasts. They were interested in Islam only because they wanted to fill their stomachs (Marsden 2008: 414).

This sarcasm that pervades certain symbolic forms and phrases shows society's inherited conception about the ulamaa. What this implies is that one, of necessity, must

[16] Religious scholar.

have a broad understanding of the cultural conditions within which the deeply embodied meaning of religion prevails (Geertz 1973). As Clifford Geertz argues, the cultural significance of religion is not privately constructed by individuals, but is public and social, drawing its force from the flow of life (Geertz 2005). Halvah, funerals, gatherings of Quran recitations to denote the reward to the deceased or solve particular problems (*xatam*), voluntary and obligatory charity (*zakaat-o sadaqaat*) are all symbolic terms and institutions, which help enact the dependency of the religious scholars.

The daily routines of religious scholars are also indicative of their social isolation in comparison to the daily lives of ordinary Pakistanis. In most cases, scholars lack both the space and time to plan any leisure activities because managing the religious schools and mosques is a 24-hour job. Besides leading prayers, delivering sermons at the mosque, usually during the Friday prayers (*xut:abaat*; singular *xut:abah*) and teaching at religious schools, people may call on them on irregular occasions to perform matrimonial contracts and to lead funeral prayers. Of the scholars I interviewed, few were able to assure me that they had leisure time to go on picnics with their families. Most of them, regardless of age, education and sectarian association, were committed to the responsibilities of mosques and religious schools and had little time for any other interests. Without time for friends' gatherings, picnics, sports or watching dramas and films, the life cycles of the ulamaa are markedly different from that of other Pakistanis.

Why, then, do families choose education in religious school for their children when low salaries, infrequent advancement prospects and the wide-spread sarcasm levelled at the religious scholars combine to forecast what, at best, could be termed a challenging life (both socially and financially) for religious school graduates? In the following discussion, I present some perspectives to illustrate the motives and intentions of those who enrol their children into those schools.

Debating the typical reasoning for becoming a Muslim religious scholar

Poverty is often supplied as the dominant factor that compels parents to send their children (both boys and girls) to religious schools. However, this understanding may be outdated. There is little evidence of greater use of such schools by the poor, since the existing evidence shows almost no relationship between poverty and current enrolment in religious schools (Andrabi et al. 2006; Andrabi et al. 2010). In Muslim Town, as elsewhere, the decision to have one's children attend the madrasah is represented by parents as a free choice. Although many prayer leaders in Muslim Town do belong to poor families, this reflects former circumstances rather than of the present reality. The prayer leaders from poor backgrounds mainly graduated during the 1980s. Until very recently, poverty was an important factor in choosing religious education, as is revealed by this representative testimony of a Shi'a religious scholar during an interview (A. Nawaz, personal communication, 14 May 2011) who graduated in 1985:

> My parents passed away when I was a child. I completed matriculation in financially challenging circumstances. Later, my uncle sent me to a religious school because education was free and I became a religious scholar.

But those recent graduates, who were serving as prayer leaders or teaching at religious schools in Muslim Town, could not typically be characterised as poor. Some have emerged from strong financial and educational family backgrounds. Their families included high-ranking government officials, businessmen and local politicians. The siblings of many of the ulamaa with whom I met were university students or graduates. The explanation for this is the prevalence among many families of a prudent desire to keep a foot in both camps and serve the traditions of both worldly and religious education.

Contrary to the belief that poverty is the leading motivational factor, I found religious motivation and family tradition to be the main reasons behind the continuing production of ulamaa in society.

Religious motivation

Even among the poorest families, there would be reluctance in citing poverty as a motivation for sending children to a religious school. Becoming a religious scholar is not just a bid for a profession; it is a sacred service to Islam. I found hesitation and outright denial among respondents in representing "prayer leading" as a profession. The role of a religious scholar holds powerful connotation of service to religion (*xidmat*). It is considered an affront to the very spirit of Islam to call the prayer leading or the teaching of the Quran an "occupation". In this context, a prayer leader in an interview (M. Rafique, personal communication, 11 October 2011) stated: 'My father warned me never to commit the mistake of considering prayer leading a professional thing but always to take it as service to religion.'

However, one cannot deny the fact that religious scholars are financially dependent on the services they perform which are their main source of earning. This complexity of motives was a matter I discussed with the parents of several scholars. Parents always gave precedence to the religious motivation. Many regarded their children as continuous charity (*Sadaq-e jaariyah*), and this would earn their forgiveness on the Day of Judgment. In such instances, not only was inspiration religiously grounded, but it aimed at achieving the ideal socialisation of their children as an everlasting triumph.

Religious education as family tradition

The hereditary transference of religious passion to children is not a recent feature in Pakistan but has been attested historically. I met with several religious scholars who had joined *madaaris* because their fathers were religious scholars. As has been indicated, in religious families parents, particularly fathers, decide to send at least one of their sons or daughters into the *madrasah*. Imam Muneeb a recent graduate from a Deobandi madrasah was born into a religious family. His father, who was associated with the Tablighi Jamaa'at, persuaded him to become a religious scholar. A Barelvi scholar during an interview (M. Azhar, personal communication, 11 February 2012) narrated a similar story:

> After matriculation, I was thinking to pursue further studies in college but due to my father's wish, who was a very religious person, I took admission in a religious school.

Having discussed the scholars' daily routines, financial and social statuses and institutional authority, I will now present an account of how mosques platforms are used by different sects to disseminate their particular versions of Islam.

Mosques and sectarian antagonism: The Barelvi case

One of the most striking developments of the last few years has been the reassertion of an outspoken Barelvi subculture in Pakistan (White 2012). The Barelvis are an old face in Pakistan, particularly in the Punjab countryside. In contrast to their great rivals, the Deobandi, who generally opposed the Pakistan Movement in undivided India, the Barelvi were enthusiastic for Pakistan from the beginning (Malik 1990). They are taken to represent an institutionalised Sufi Islam partly eclipsed as a result of state and Saudi sponsorship of Deobandi and Ahl-e-Hadith reformers (Talbot 2012). However, their re-emergence (at least in the Muslim Town area) has taken surprising forms. In the past, the image of the Barelvis was peaceful and non-violent. They were typically criticised by the Deobandis for their inoffensive attitude. They were the "sweet eaters": Muslims who attend various religious occsasions only to eat sweets, who did not take part in the armed struggle in Kashmir and Afghanistan.

Nowadays, an emerging Barelvi radicalism is well sensed in Muslim Town. The public face of this emerging Barelvi activism is mufti Nasir, the imam of the Jamiya mosque**.** By declaring both the Deobandi and the Ahl-e-Hadith sects as disrespectful to the Prophet (*gustaax-e-rasuul*), mufti Nasir challenges them to face him in live theological debates (*munazarahs*). Many debates have taken place in Muslim Town between the Barelvis and Deobandis, and between the Barelvis and the Ahl-e-Hadith. While the purpose of these debates is to refute the arguments of other sects, very often they degenerate into personal attacks and allegations of apostasy and heresy on the part of the opponent (Rahman 2008). In Muslim Town, the debate culture is no different from that in other parts of the country. All of them end as controversial since both parties claim their victory, declaring each other heretical.

As part of this campaign, mufti Nasir also motivated other Barelvi scholars of the area to play their roles in defending those Barelvi activities that Deobandi and Ahl-e-Hadith sects consider innovations such as the annual celebration of the prophet's birthday gatherings, and celebrating the death anniversary (*'urs*) of Sufi saints. The imam fuelled the activities of *Da'wat-e-Islami* (Barelvi movement founded in response to the Deobandi movement *Tablighi Jamaa'at*) and the *Sunni Tehreek*, a militant Barelvi organisation established in Karachi in 1990 to counter the Deobandi and the Ahl-e-Hadith ascendancy. This organisation, which attempts to take over Ahl-e-Hadith and Deobandi mosques forcibly in Karachi (International Crisis Group 2011) has made similar attempts in Muslim Town. The growing popularity of the Madni TV channel (Barelvi TV channel), and the appearance of Barelvi scholars on different talk shows are other reflections of Barelvi advertising in the country.

Deobandi residents of Muslim Town appeared apprehensive of the growing Barelvi showcasing of their activities and wondered how to counter their influence. I witnessed one response in March 2011 when pastor Terry Jones of Florida publicly burnt

the Quran (Sieff 2011), so initiating demonstrations across Pakistan. At the time, I offered Friday prayer at a local Deobandi mosque located near Jamiya mosque. After Friday prayer, imam SaaHib led a protest that had been announced earlier. This small mosque had no history whatsoever of arranging any demonstrations. I participated in this rally and discussed this new tendency with fellow protesters. The march was planned to counter the activism of mufti Nasir, who successfully utilised the Qadri issue for Barelvi politicking and creating sectarian hegemony. Notably, it was the mosque committee that initiated this move, and not the prayer leader. The prayer leader has spent time with the Tablighi Jamaa'at, and was not in favour of this protest. It is generally believed in Pakistan that scholars associated with the Jamaa'at preach reconciliation and do not believe in any kind of demonstration. Nevertheless, the prayer leader participated half-heartedly in the protest saying that presently it is hard to convince others that such protest is of no value. I discussed this issue during an interview (A. Mehmood, personal communication, 23 November 2011) with one of the worshipers of this mosque, a local tailor who responded: 'Imam SaaHib is overly cool minded.'

He further added that he participated in the protest, but it was not enthusiastic compared to the protest rally launched by mufti Nasir, which was full of zest and zeal. They chanted slogans against America and the pastor Jones, and Nasir gave a very fiery speech on the issue. For many Pakistani Muslims, participation in such rallies is not only a matter of religion but an aspect of adventure. I learnt during my participation in different religious and political protests that a significant number of participants were bent solely on experiencing the fun of slogan chanting (*naare baazii*) and mob power.

The de-scholarisation of Islamic discourses and the emergence of a new Muslim community

Blind pursuance of the ulamaa has weakened in Muslim Town. In Pakistan, as in other Muslim countries today, people are more willing to debate the issue of what Islam is, and how it relates to their lives for themselves, rather than leaving such questions to the religiously trained authorities (Eickelman 2000). Ismail (2011) argues that Muslims experiencing modern conditions now ask themselves what it means to be Muslim instead of depending on the doctrines of religious experts.

In Muslim Town, lay Muslims have challenged the status of religious scholars as authorities in religious matters. I witnessed one such incident where the prayer leader of a local Deobandi mosque while delivering a sermon in Arabic, voiced the wish 'May Allah Almighty destroy America.' The president of the mosque committee raised a strong objection to his statement, saying that his son and scores of other Pakistanis live and work in America. If American political policies are unfair to Pakistan, then the protest should be launched against the government, not the people. It is insane, he said, to pray for the devastation of America and millions of its innocent people. This controversy ended when the committee forcibly compelled the prayer leader to leave the mosque. In another instance, a local cleric, who is renowned for his critiques of other sects, significantly lost audience among the worshippers. In an interview conducted on 13 December 2011, Siddique, a worshipper, responded:

> I stop offering Friday prayer in this mosque because I feel so uncomfortable when the imam declares other sects infidels and even directs us not to attend their funerals.

It is reasonable to suggest that Friday sermons are neither irrelevant to the wider Muslim community, nor do they constitute official statements. Rather, they contribute to the construction of sites of deliberation where people agree as well as disagree with the message (Hashem 2009). The case of Nasir, the radical Barelvi scholar who enjoys a noteworthy following, may be taken as a counterexample, whereby the congregation swells in response to his radical pronouncements. Yet, this also has a specific context.

This particular mosque is located in a notorious neighbourhood, which houses large numbers of auto-workshops. People in these jobs are popularly disreputable in Pakistan for their vulgar language and indulgence in drugs and extramarital sex. Mufti Nasir remains popular in the locality due to the fiery speeches and zealous environment that characterise his sermons. Nasir's personal and business relations with a local politician influence the people's presence and responses at the mosque. The politician, in turn, exploits the mosque in the interests of his personal popularity. Hence, one finds plenty of resistance exercised in the neighbourhood of this mosque. A shopkeeper, who runs his grocery store opposite the mosque, abused Nasir many times publically accusing him of being anarchic (*fasaadii*). Nasir could do little in response to this abuse due to the strong presence of the shopkeeper's relatives from the mother's and father's side (*biraadarii*)[17]. The fact that the shopkeeper has many relatives in the neighbourhood makes him powerful. In such confrontations, the presence of the extended family becomes crucial. Even those who were followers of Nasir became alienated or passive in their presence.

It is expected of the religious scholars that they should not fuel controversies; rather, they should address those issues which will help build a progressive Islamic society. It is for this reason that new Islamic commentators such as Javed Ahmad Ghamdi, Syed Bilal Qutab, and Aneeq Ahmed[18] present Islam as compatible with the modern world and do not criticise other sects. This trend is also compelling the traditional scholars to accept new discourses; that is to show their compatibility with modernity**.** The prayer leader of a centrally located, large Deobandi mosque is an example in this regard. The morality of youth, male-female relations, and the obligation to attend the mosque for prayer as a means of resolving problems were the main topics of his peaceful sermons. Sermons of this kind are, however, not confined to Pakistan alone. They are also delivered in other Muslim societies, East African Muslim communities for example. Parkin (2000) who worked in a Zanzibar town in Tanzania and in a rural fishing village north of Mombasa, the major port of Kenya, finds similar sermons aiming to safeguard the society from certain moral evils and to establish high standards in society.

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[17] This term is also occasionally employed to refer to people from the same ethnic background, in such terms as Abbasi biraadarii, Sheikh biraadarii and so forth.

[18] Javed Ahmad Ghamidi, Aneeq Ahmed and Syed Bilal Qutab: popular religious scholars who host religious programs on TV channels. Javed Ghamidi, a former member of Jamaa'at-e Islami, is a theologian, exegete, and Quran scholar. Bilal Qutab is an architect by profession. Aneeq Ahmed holds a degree in International Relations from Karachi University (Pakistan). He is the host of a popular religious morning show "Morning's Message" (Payam-e-Subah).

The event of 9/11 influenced not only the government policy of jihad but also the shaping of religious discourse in Pakistan. The announced intention of the government is to keep a check on the religious scholars, not allowing them to spread sectarian hatred or militancy. For example, in order to confine hate material, mosques in Muslim Town are allowed only to use internal speakers during the Friday sermons. However the breach of this code of conduct remains wide-spread**.** Here, there are similarities with Morocco where prayer leaders were influential in deciding the Friday sermons content. However, after the Casablanca terrorist event in 2003, the government put a check on sermons to promote religious moderation (Errihani 2011).

Negotiating contradictions: The mosque as a sub-culture within Pakistani society

There is a wide range of contradictions between what is recommended in the institution of the mosque and the broader community culture of Muslim Town. In essence, the preferences of everyday life do not correspond to what is being preached at the mosques. People typically engage in activities that the Muslim religious scholars repeatedly declare to be forbidden, e.g., listening to music, watching movies (TV), dancing, celebrating the henna ceremony, which typically takes place one or two days prior to the main wedding observance (*mehndii*) and birthday ceremonies, co-education, and receiving interest (*suud*) from the banks, all of which are integral parts of the people's daily socio-cultural lives. Pakistanis are not as Islamic in their practice (Rehman and Askari 2010) as the history of the foundation of the nation might lead one to expect**.** While Muslims are commanded to offer prayers five times a day, the majority of the residents in Muslim Town do not even offer daily prayers. At the morning prayer (*fajar*) in the mosque, one may finds as few as 30-50 worshippers. During the evening prayer (*maGrib*) and night prayer (*'ishaa'*), this number becomes three times higher but still amounts to only 15 to 20 per cent of the neighbourhood population. A Shi'a Muslim during an interview (F. Malik, personal communication, 9 December 2011) made his point in this regard:

> People only give importance to Islam when they face bad circumstances or a tough time in their life and start reciting Quran and offering prayers. Otherwise, they do not take Islam seriously.

Islam is a favourite topic of daily gossip and public debate. People frequenting hotels, social functions, and other social occasions discuss their distance from Islam. It is commonly proposed that the ultimate solution to the country's social, economic, and political problems lies in following Islam in its true spirit. However, this seems merely a social expression of remorse at religious neglect, and in most cases is not translated into actions. Yet, when asked if they are religious, 84 per cent of Pakistanis, according to a recent survey, would say "yes" (Gallup & Gillani Pakistan 2012)**.** However**,** in practice, the majority give preference to other commitments over religious rituals and ceremonies.

I am quoting here a few instances that I witnessed during my fieldwork. A celebration of the Prophet Muhammad's birthday was arranged in a cul-de-sac in Muslim Town. Only a few children attended the event. One of the organisers, when I asked about

such a small attendance, replied sadly that people are too busy watching the cricket match between Pakistan and Australia. The Cricket World Cup, 2011 emerged as one of the most fascinating events in the history of the sport of Pakistan. As expected, routine life in the city came to a standstill and almost all cricket lovers including men, women, and children, were glued to their TV screens. This shows not that religious gatherings are insignificant in the minds of inhabitants but that they become secondary in such above-mentioned cases.

Another example of the relative unimportance of religious norms is the music culture in Pakistan. Music is an integral part of Pakistani culture as in other countries of the Islamic world where music endures as an important artistic tradition (Nasr 1976). Contrary to the stereotypical image of Pakistan, traditional cultural forms such as music, folk and performative art practices have withstood the opposition of the clergy (Saeed 2008). Pakistani singers such as Atif Aslam, Rahat Fateh Ali Khan and Shafqat Amanat Ali are ruling the Bollywood industry and delivered some of the biggest recent Hindi film hits (Arora 2011).

People listen to music in their homes, in their automobiles, and in shops. The majority accepts that ideally music is forbidden in Islam; but, it is very much a part of people's daily lives. A young boy during an interview (Q Nadeem, personal communication, 24 November 2011) expressed his view of the legitimacy of music:

> I know Islam does not encourage music. But there is music all around us, and it is hard to resist. I listen to music to make me fresh.

Music plays a primary part on special occasions and during ceremonies; for example, marriages, birthdays, Eid, and the Pakistan Day celebrations. On one occasion I attended a henna ceremony. The celebration was not confined to the neighbourhood and could be appreciated from very far away due to the use of heavy music systems and fireworks. The event lasted till 2 a.m. The friends of the groom danced in the street to the beat of the double-headed South Asian drum (*Dhol*). Their dances included the traditional Punjabi dances *bhangra* and the *sammii*. The girls of the groom's family brought the henna paste from their nearby home to the main hall where the guests and groom were sitting. They walked along the street carrying candles on the decorated plates with henna paste. Later, boys sang songs live for the audience. They sang and played both Indian and Pakistani songs including regional music in the Pashto and Punjabi languages.

The poetry (*kalaam*) of Sufi poets such as Khawaja Ghulam Farid, Baba Bulleh Shah, Mian Muhammad Baksh, Sultan Bahu, Shah Hussain and Waris Shah is an integral part of the music culture of Pakistan. These days their poetry is heard, not only in the traditional performances but also in pop and rock versions. Different genres of Sufi music, for example, the practice of devotional singing and dancing of Islamic Sufism (*qavvaalii*) is an important part of the Sufi culture in Pakistan**.** Although the religious scholars in Pakistan, particularly those belonging to the Deobandi and Ahl-e-Hadith sects declared the content of this practice polytheistic and its singing and listening forbidden, it remains popular in the country (Khalidi 1989). Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan (deceased), Aziz Mian (deceased), Sabri Brothers, Rahat Fateh Ali Khan, Sher Miandad, and Sher Ali-Mehr Ali are a few of the noted qavvaalii singers in Pakistan. Iqbal Bahu (deceased), Abida Parveen,

Sai Zahoor, Hamid Ali Bela (deceased), Pathanay Khan (deceased) are popular singers of Sufi poetry.

The breach of Islamic veil[19] (*pardah*), which is one of the basic discourses of the mosque, is a routine practice as stated by one of the shopkeepers during an interview (K. Tufail, personal communication, 12 August 2011):

> Very few women wear the veil while the rest roam about in bazaars without any veil or *pardah*. In this new age, (sarcastically) males stare at the uncovered ladies in bazaars. There would be 20 out of 100 women who use *burqa'* while the rest of others ignore it completely including many who belong to so-called religious families.

Certain government and private institutions arrange cultural events, which clearly negate those Islamic ideals propagated through the mosques. The Lok Virsa Museum, Islamabad arranged a festival to celebrate Pakistan's regional cultures. Artists and performers from Baluchistan, Gilgit–Baltistan, Kashmir, Khyber Pakthunkhwa, Punjab and Sindh attended the festival. A colourful display of traditional folk dances from every province and corner of Pakistan was held during the festival. I talked to many visitors on this occasion, and they expressed their real happiness about such functions: 'Thank God, there is something else to see besides blasts.'

Another visitor during an interview (K. Mehmood, personal communication, 13 September 2011) said:

> We need to arrange such events through the whole of Pakistan to divert the attention of our people from this bizarre environment where we see and hear nothing but terrorism. We should present this great culture to our people and to the whole world. It is our real core.

The above examples should not be taken to belittle the place of Islam in Pakistani society. Rather, the intention is to differentiate what is being practised from what is idealised. People consider the mosque discourses appertaining to lifestyles as supreme given that they are based on the lives of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions. However, in practise, they frequently opt not to live their lives according to those Islamic teachings that they ostensibly consider ideal. The gap between the religious stratum and the ordinary Muslim community in Pakistan is well observed in a recent study:

> The Islamist parties have never been able to break out from their relatively narrow cultural and ethnic bases to appeal successfully to the mass of the Pakistani population. For this a number of factors are responsible. Firstly, their religious culture is in fact alien to that of a majority of Pakistanis (Lieven 2011: 132).

[19] The term veil and pardah contain multiple connotations including seclusion of women from sight of men as well as women wearing of the burqa`, a loose outer garment worn by women in order to cover their bodies in public or naqaab, the face veil.

Conclusion

A key strand of my argument is that the Muslim religious scholars, mosques, and religious schools should be understood not in terms of their formal description, but in relation to a history of their power and status in the society. The authority of these institutions is not fixed once and for all. We have seen through the course of this study that religious institutions and leaders are less influential than may be supposed in regulating social patterns. Part of the claim that has unfolded here is that though people in Muslim Town consider the Islamic way of life as supreme, cultural norms that are far from exclusively religious dictate public culture and individuals' dispositions in life. The religious scholars and mosques platforms, for example, have failed to restrain the public from engaging in undertakings that the scholars persistently affirm to be forbidden in Islam**.** People's fondness for music, movies, dancing and mixed-gender gatherings illuminate the ideological antagonism between Islamic ideals as professed by the religious scholars and the wider social practices of Pakistanis.

The authoritative character of the Muslim religious scholars has changed significantly. People now challenge many of those interpretations of Islam that resist or impose restrictions on modern lifestyles. This is not to suggest that the religious scholars have become ineffectual. However, their influence (at least in Muslim Town) seems nowadays limited to the spread of their respective versions of Islam (Deobandi, Barelvi or Ahl-e Hadith). No longer can the Muslim religious scholars or mosques be called representative of Pakistani society.

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Povzetek
Mošeja je temeljna ustanova v kateri koli islamski družbi, njena vloga pa precej presega njeno funkcijo verskega centra. Osrednje vprašanje te etnografske študije v Pakistanu je, ali je mošeja še vedno tako osrednja, kot je bila v preteklosti, ali kot predvidevamo, da je. Podobno vprašanje je mogoče postaviti tudi za tiste muslimanske verske učenjake, izobražene v islamskem pravu, ki pogosto obiskujejo mošejo in služijo verski skupnosti kot molitveni vodje. Študija raziskuje, kakšno vlogo igrajo mošeja in muslimanski verski učernjaki v bogoslužju in v vsakodnevni družbeni strukturi. Študija nakazuje, da verskih učenjakov in mošej ne moremo več pojmovati kot predstavnike pakistanske družbe.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: muslimanski verski učenjaki, mošeja, islam, vsakdanje življanje, verske šole, Pakistan

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