

Mohammad Waqas Sajjad
PhD Student,
Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley

Deobandism and Barelvism in Pakistan: Tracing Developments in Postcolonial Discursive Traditions

My doctoral project aims to fill a gap in the study of Islam in South Asia. It focuses on two Sunni groups, Deobandis and Barelvis, which emerged as reformist movements during British Raj that share many similarities. However, their primary theological differences regarding the nature of prophethood have persisted and expanded, so that in Pakistan today both contest for authority and the claim to formulate the country's religious path. Thus their conflicts have increased significantly. In competing for orthodoxy, they have developed separate institutions (mosques and madrasas), political parties, and ritual practices, and also constructed histories in line with the state's nationalistic narratives. In doing so, they have formed strong identities centered on notions of Sufism (for the Barelvis), and reformism that purifies Islam from external influences (in case of Deobandis). This is despite their founders' fluid and diverse positions on some of the issues that now neatly divide their followers into Sufi and non-Sufi groups. In my doctoral project, I am tracing these developments in both their religious practices, and their political and religious texts, as I understand them to be taking place in distinct colonial and postcolonial contexts. This demonstrates them as essentially discursive traditions mediating their positions and shifting their emphases according to the challenges they face in different circumstances.

My research on the Deobandis and Barelvis over the summer will primarily be in the twin cities of Rawalpindi and Islamabad. For a study of their political pasts, including some works of their founders and those involved in the freedom movement, I plan to make use of the resources at the National Archives of Pakistan and the National Library of Pakistan. In addition, I will obtain some of their post-independence publications from libraries of their madrasas in Rawalpindi. Their Urdu books are locally published often by affiliated publishing houses, and in general meant for a Pakistani religious audience. These madrasas and mosques are also settings of my research as I plan to meet their scholars in order to understand their modern dynamics, especially in regard to their historical and religious self-perceptions, perceptions of the other (i.e. Barelvis for Deobandis and vice versa), and their positions on religious celebrations such as the Mawlid (the Prophet's birthday) which has become a major divisive issue. Meetings with religious scholars or ulama (some through personal contacts and some with those I will be introduced to through Deobandi friends) will at this stage be more informal and will enable me to build trust and start a conversation that I intend to build on over the next few years of research. I have already been in contact with some Deobandi scholars and am likely to obtain (in addition to their insights into modern practices and historical constructions) from them key textual sources that I am told are fundamental to their conceptions as normative traditions – as against those of their opponents.

I am traveling to Pakistan during the month of Ramadan in order to observe their religious rituals and practices in a more religiously charged environment. During this month, I want to observe in Deobandi and Barelvi mosques (i) congregational Friday prayers, (ii) the daily Ramadan-specific prayers and gatherings including post-tarawih (late evening prayer) practices, and (iii) rituals and celebrations on the Laylatul Qadr (or "Night of Power", usually celebrated on the 27th of Ramadan). I plan to carry out this participant observation in different Barelvi and Deobandi mosques in the urban center of Islamabad, smaller and more locally organized community mosques of Rawalpindi, and if possible at a third setting in nearby connected villages to get a sense of the urban-rural dynamics of the Deobandi-Barelvi divide. In essence then, my research project has a historical and an anthropological basis. Spending this summer in Pakistan will allow me to get a firmer grasp of the relevant issues today for Deobandis and Barelvis, through a study of their texts and contexts, which comes through library and

archival research, as well as participant observation and meetings with scholars in their mosques and madrasas.