

***The Nature of Islam and its Sources of Authority:  
Islam and Islams with Reflections for the Insider Movement Discussion***

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One topic of discussion with the BtD Community in 2013 and 2014 has been the question of what constitutes “Islam” and whether there is one Islam or several “Islams.” In recent versions of this discussion, the question has been raised as to what the sources of authority are within Islam, especially relative to how those are employed in determining what sorts of ideas and people and practices are “in” or “out” in terms of being Islamic (or not).

Our working group for this topic (ie., the Nature of Islam and Its Sources of Authority) has recognized that in addition to official sources of authority such as written texts and recognized authorities, both present and historical, there are also more local expressions of authority which in some cases may be of equal weight in terms of how different Muslims manage to live together or not, as well as for determining the consequences for expressions of Islamic faith and practice that end up deemed unacceptable.

In this paper I am focused on this more local expression of Muslim authority. My purpose in doing this is to provide some perspective on the ways in which, within Islam, there are ongoing “boundary discussions” among Muslims concerning what is and is not truly “Islam”. The ultimate aim of this is to provide a framework for understanding how believers in Jesus as Lord and Savior within so-called “insider movements” can legitimately claim to be Muslims when their beliefs and in some cases practices differ so profoundly from those of other Muslims.<sup>2</sup>

Though my paper will be limited by design, I would recommend the reader look through the material uncovered in a recent research project undertaken by the Pew Charitable Trust.<sup>3</sup> The survey covered a wide variety of topics including sharia law, extremism, women’s rights, and a helpful comparison of Muslims in the United States of America. What is striking to me is the variety of viewpoints on even central topics.

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted (greatly) from a chapter in my doctoral thesis.

<sup>2</sup> Note, then, that I am not here addressing the question of whether such movements represent an authentic biblical or missional approach. That is a crucial discussion for us in the BtD community and is an ongoing, multi-faceted topic. Here I am only addressing the Muslim side of the discussion.

<sup>3</sup> “The Worlds Muslims: Religion, Politics, and Society”. The full report can be found at <http://www.pewforum.org/2013/04/30/the-worlds-muslims-religion-politics-society-overview/>. (Accessed May 23, 2014).

A survey of the history of Islam brings the reader to a number of movements within Islam. There is not space or scope in this paper to survey every example. I will limit myself to several movements variously referred to as reform or revivalist movements within South Asia. (Lapidus 1988, Rahman 1966, Esposito 1998)

Among such movements, the most important might be that of Wahhabism (named after Abd al-Wahhab, d. 1792). The Wahhabi movement had several avenues of influence among Muslims in the sub-continent (Esposito 1998: 118).

### **The Wahhabi Movement**

According to Upadhyay, the Wahhabi movement emerged with the intent “to Saudise the Muslim society by pushing them to the extreme Arabic tradition” (2010: 2). This effort was undertaken by Wahhab in support of a Bedouin leader, Mohammad ibn Saud, in keeping with a 1744 agreement between the two men (2010: 2). Upadhyay’s main interest seems to be in asserting the influence of Wahhab with specific relevance to the rise of jihadi movements in the sub-continent, concluding that the Wahhab/Saud alliance “left a deep jihadi bent on...the Indian sub-continent” (2010: 2).

According to Rahman, Wahhab was a reformer who in great part reacted to what he saw as the decline in faithful practice of Islam among his contemporaries, and in part to the increase in western influence in the region. In addition, his reforming interests followed his “conversion” from Sufism to strict Hanbalite Sunni Islam (Rahman 1966: 197). The Hanbalite influence included a rejection of Sufism, and in particular, the importance given to saints and shrines and other specific Sufi practices.

This Wahhabi influenced reform movement hit the Indian subcontinent in the form of the Deobandi movement and as such it ran headlong into the Barelvi’s, a movement of Muslims which very much included emphasis on shrines, saints, and practices more associated with Sufi Islam. (Ahmed, 1998: 23ff., also Upadhyay 2010, Hashmi 2010, Rahman 1966, Esposito 1998)

### **Deobandi and Barelvi Movements**

These two schools, Deobandi and Barelvi, ended up on different sides of many issues (including developing their own translations of the Qur'an). However, they shared to a certain extent a common fountainhead. Wahhab was a fellow student in the Saudi peninsula with a man named Shah Waliullah. They shared a mutual interest in the reform of Islam.

Waliullah, however, took a more conciliatory or mediating position in relationship to Sufism. While affirming Sunni Islam and a return to the Qur'an and Sunnah and primitive Islam, Waliullah was more willing to embrace those who differed concerning shrines and saints and he was happy to seek to negotiate change over time (Esposito 1998: 120ff). The Deobandi Muslim movement traces its spiritual lineage to Waliullah, who has also been called the father of modern Islamic thought (p. 123).

So called "jihadist" applications of Wahhabi Islam in fact entered the region, ironically through the leadership of one of Waliullah's own sons, Shah Abdul Aziz (Fatima 2008: 144). His "jihad" was launched with a fatwa declaring India "dar-al-harb" under British occupation (2008: 146). The Barelvi movement held itself separate from this more political version of reform.

### **Comparing Deobandi and Barelvi Movements**

The Barelvis teach that there is no contradiction between Islam and offering prayers to holy men or pirs, both dead and alive. Many Muslims in South Asia believe that pirs and their direct descendants have supernatural powers and, each year, they visit shrines to the pirs by the thousands (Jones 2002: pp. 9-11, and contra Rahman, 1966: 204-205). Although among the Barelvis there have certainly been leaders committed to political and anti-colonial reform, they did not include the Wahhabi desire for the reform of practices inherited from Sufism.

In contrast, the Deobandi Movement officially opposed such Sufi practices, although a number of its famous leaders were renowned Sufi scholars, perhaps the best example being Thanvi (eg., in Jones 1989). Relative to jihad, the Deobandi movement has tended to promote it as an expression of Islamic revival (Upadhyay 2010:3).

The Deobandi movement has also been the key source of inspiration for the Tablighi Jamaat movement (Upadhyay 2010: 4). This movement promotes the revival of Islam through migrant bands of "Tablighis" who travel mosque to mosque and town to town for varying lengths of time in order to encourage and teach local Muslims to be more devoted to Islam. The Taliban have also been recipients of the Deobandi, or Wahhabbi, 'dna' (Jones, 2002: 9-11).

## Conclusion and Implications

Thus far my discussion has been mainly historical. The differences between these two movements are still very much alive and the disputes between the two groups escalate to the point of organized religious debates. These are often filmed, posted on You Tube, and discussed with passion in blogs, etc. A common feature in these debates includes seeking to prove that the other “side” are “kafir”.

These two groups, then, do not see each other as Muslim. They each cite Qur’an and Hadith as well as their own scholars to support their claims. And they have quite distinct religious practices and theological convictions. As such these two movements provide an example of a long standing, ongoing debate about which group is truly Muslim. Each have declared the other to be non-Muslim. Yet both continue to exist, side by side, in the same region.

This suggests to me the theoretical possibility that movements of Muslims who follow Jesus might end up in very similar scenarios in at least some cases. The context and region and types of surrounding Islam in which such movements emerge will of course factor heavily in this, as will the type of men and women who become believers: their religious training prior to faith, etc.

I have described this as a theoretical possibility. As of yet I do not know any cases on a large scale in which this sort of debate has occurred within Islam relative to insider types of movements. If and when such a time comes the ultimate decision about whether these movements are in fact “Islam” or capable of remaining somehow in Islam, will be a Muslim decision. And the Bareilvi and Deobandi example shows us that even if such a reply were to be a strong and passionate “no” by other Muslims, this may not result necessarily in the insider movement being either pushed out or destroyed. Both are of course possible.

When and if the day of such a debate comes, may God grant clear heads and voices among insider believers, and the courage and grace to bear witness to Him with honor. Indeed may we all be given such grace should we find ourselves in such times of testing.

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