Review Essay

Revival from Below: The Deoband Movement and Global Islam

Brannon D. Ingram
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Brannon D. Ingram's monograph casts fresh light on the global life of the Deoband movement, which is "arguably the most influential Muslim reform and revival movement outside of the Middle East in the last two centuries" (2). The seminary (madrasa) associated with this movement was founded in 1866 in the North Indian town of Deoband by religious scholars (*ʿulamāʾ*) who were at once Ḥanafī jurists and Chishtī ṣūfīs. They reimagined "Sufism *through* law, Sufism *as* ethics, Sufism *in* politics" (3). The author elucidates this movement's internal differences and uses its complex history, in both South Asia and South Africa, to illuminate broader features of global Islam, including "the place of Sufism in the modern world, the position of the *ʿulama* in Muslim public life, and the very notion of Islamic tradition" (11). The study is grounded in a range of primary texts authored by and about Deobandī scholars. The book's title, *Revival from Below*, refers to how the Deobandīs have pursued "a bottom-up reform largely invisible relative to the top-down reform of Islamist political projects" (18). I will return to the limitation of this argument at the end of this review. Here, let us appreciate how the author approaches the binaries that structure his object of study in a dialectical fashion: "Deobandi tradition arises out of a tension—sometimes productive, sometimes strained—between the anthropocentric and the bibliocentric, between the centrifugal force of a global movement and the centripetal force of intimate encounters, between the dispersal of books and the proximity of bodies, between esoteric centers and exoteric peripheries, and above all, between the 'little' tradition of the

maslak, to which they adhere as Deobandis, and the 'great' tradition of the Sunna, to which they adhere as Muslims" (23-24).

The chapter summaries below describe Ingram's insights into law, ethics, and politics in Deobandī sources. After discussing each chapter and the conclusion, I will raise some broader methodological questions and also identify some possible topics for further inquiry. Here, let me mention two crucial points made by Ingram that we, as readers, should keep in mind. First, not everyone who attends a Deobandī madrasa or becomes affiliated with a Deobandī ṣūfī guide might choose the label, "Deobandī," for himself, herself, or themselves. The second point pertains to the relationship between the Deobandī tradition and the Tablīghī Jamāʿat, a transnational Islamic missionary group founded in 1927 by the Deobandī theologian Muḥammad Ilyās Kāndhlavī (d. 1944). This missionary group has been the main engine for the global travels of Deobandī Islam from the 1950s onward. Yet, it is important to note that "Deoband has been a global phenomenon nearly since its inception. Whether through figures such as Hajji Imdad Allah teaching scores of Deobandis in the Hijaz or through graduates of Deobandi madrasas fanning out over the British empire, Deobandis moved, like millions of other Indians, through the global networks established by the British empire" (166).

The first chapter analyzes how "an emergent colonial modernity" shaped the Deoband madrasa as "a 'religious' space" and its graduates "a class of 'religious' scholars" (32). For Ingram's project, the most crucial feature of colonial modernity was its enactment of a transition from flexible to firm borders between the religious and the secular. Leaving *secular* sciences and spaces to others, early Deobandī scholars taught *religious* knowledge in *religious* spaces. Yet, theirs was a "modern madrasa" because it inhabited an institutional-cum-epistemic place carved out for religion within colonial modernity. The author concludes this chapter by claiming that the idea of a "purely religious" madrasa lacks "precedent in medieval Islamic societies" (53). I would offer a slightly different account, one that does not presuppose nominal determinism. While named a madrasa, what the early Deobandī luminaries established was a creative amalgamation of the Ḥadīth study circle, the classical madrasa, the British college of colonial India, and the Sufi lodge: "I saw a *khanqah* [Sufi lodge] in this madrasa" were the words of the major Deobandī scholar Maḥmūd Ḥasan (d. 1920) referring to the Deoband madrasa, as cited and discussed by Ingram himself later in this book (147). Ingram comments on the varied visions of two founders—namely, Muḥammad Qāsim Nānautvī (d. 1880) and Rashīd

Aḥmad Gangōhī (d. 1905)—but does not say much about a third major figure, namely, Muḥammad Yaʿqūb Nānautvī (d. 1884). What was his vision for this new institution? This is a crucial question to answer, since it was his vision that Ashraf ʿAlī Thānvī (d. 1943) claimed to have materialized in his own *khānqāh*-cum-madrasa in the nearby town of Thāna Bhawan.

Ingram's second chapter illuminates some of the key normative concerns of Deobandī scholars. The author relates their theological normativity to the first political response to colonialism in which North Indian *ʿulamāʾ* played a crucial role. This takes us back to Shāh Muḥammad Ismāʿīl of Delhi (d. 1831), a theologian-turned-warrior of the famed scholarly family of Shāh Walī Allāh (d. 1763). Deobandī scholars accept Muḥammad Ismāʿīl's reformist agenda, which consists of condemning seemingly heretical "innovations in religious matters (*bidʿa*)" and refuting "beliefs or practices that compromise the integrity of [the idea of] God's oneness (*shirk*)" (55). At the same time, they seek "to constrain the populist hermeneutics that [Muḥammad] Ismaʿil unleashed" (64). The take-away from the chapter is that Deobandī discourses about doctrinal and ritual correctness imply parallel forms of normative public behavior. The Deobandīs do not restrict the practical implications of God's sovereignty and prophetic practice to privatized religion (as colonial secularity would have it). Rather, their investment in the normative order is about both self and society, the individual believer and the communal public.

Chapter 3 fleshes out the idea of the public. Ingram examines the pedagogical modalities and media through which Deobandī scholars contested social norms and articulated their religious authority in response to the emergent publics and crowds of colonial India. For the most part, Ingram's arguments here confirm points already made by scholars such as Barbara D. Metcalf (the significance of the individual in Deobandī reformism), Francis Robinson (the importance of print culture), and Ebrahim Moosa (the centrality of feelings and sensibilities in Muslim traditionalism). Yet, Ingram does advance the novel idea that through their reformist efforts vis-à-vis lay Muslims, Deobandī scholars aimed to achieve a balance between "the rarefied interpretive hierarchies of most premodern scholars and the hermeneutic populism of figures like Muhammad Ismaʿil" (114).

Chapter 4 turns to Sufism as ethics and elucidates the "mutual imbrication of inward and outward" aspects of the ethical self in Deobandī discourse and practice (120). Ingram argues that in his sources, "the subjected self is reoriented around the authoritative structure of the Sunna, as

mediated through and interpreted by Sufi scholars, at the very same time that it is liberated from competing modes of subjectivation, whether false customs (*rusum*) or illicit innovations (*bidʿat*)" (117). The chapter provides a careful analysis of how Deobandīs have navigated the dialectical relationship between "Shariʿa and Sufism as outer and inner manifestations of the same ethical imperative" (118). Ingram comments on two key Ṣūfī concepts in Deobandī sources, namely, "companionship" (*ṣuḥbat*) and "sainthood" (*walāya*), and further provides a corrective to the notion that Deobandī Islam negates "the intercessory roles of Sufi masters" (137). The author's nuanced reading of Deobandī Ṣūfism reflects his broader view of the Ṣūfī tradition as "consisting of three intersecting, mutually constitutive dimensions: *literary, interpersonal/institutional,* and *ritual/devotional*" (13). The scholars whose texts he examines "embraced the first two dimensions of Sufism but maintained a complicated, ambivalent relationship with the third" (13). Let me point out that this chapter complicates Ingram's earlier claim in the book that the "Deobandis opposed the role of what Arthur Buehler called the 'mediating shaykh'" (89). This claim does not hold true for at least Ashraf ʿAlī and his disciples, as well as Muḥammad Zakariyyā Kāndhlavī (d. 1982) and his disciples.

What happens to this "mutual imbrication of inward and outward" when Deobandī Islam goes global? Ingram addresses this question in Chapter 5 and in so doing contributes to theorizations of *maslak*, a concept that is relevant for understanding Islamic discursivities in modern South Asia more broadly. Ingram theorizes *maslak* as "a comprehensive juro-ethical discourse, a discipline oriented around the cultivation of specific affects" (141). The author further sheds light on a certain tension between anthropocentric and bibliocentric tendencies in how Deobandīs have inhabited their *maslak*. To this end, he utilizes two objects of study, namely, Qārī Muḥammad Ṭayyib's 1975 text, *Maslak-i ʿulamāʾ-yi Deoband*, and the Tablīghī Jamāʿat. In his foundational text, Muḥammad Ṭayyib characterized the Deobandī *maslak* as nothing other than the comprehensive and balanced conceptualization and practice of Sunni Islam (142). Turning to his second object of study in this chapter, Ingram explains that the Tablīghī Jamāʿat is best viewed as "an embodiment of Deoband's sociology of public knowledge: the masses should know just enough to fulfill their core Islamic ritual duties, but not so much that they publicly debate religious topics beyond the purview of their expertise" (151).

That the Tablīghī Jamāʿat has been pivotal in spreading Deobandī Islam beyond South Asia is not lost on the author. Chapter 6 turns to the recasting of the Deobandī *maslak* in the diaspora, using South Africa as a case study. It first summarizes the history of Islam in South Africa and then comments on the vital role played by the Tablīghī Jamāʿat in bolstering Deobandī scholarly institutions in that context. While the founder of this missionary group advised preachers not to partake in intra-Muslim polemics, especially those pertaining to theology and jurisprudence, in South Africa some Tablīghīs did not heed this advice and squabbled with other Muslims. Ingram discusses several aspects of this internecine conflict, arguing that "the fate of Deobandi thought in South Africa shows how a tradition interpellates multiple publics as it travels, some of which function as counterpublics militating against not just the debates themselves but the very *terms* of debate" (162). Yet, Ingram does not answer the bigger methodological question as to whether or not South Africa has exemplarity insofar as revealing the character of Deobandī Islam in other sites of the diaspora, such as the Arabian Gulf, United Kingdom, North America, and Trinidad.

Chapter 7 further examines Deobandī Islam in South Africa. The 1970s and the 1980s saw enhanced Muslim participation in the anti-apartheid movement and social justice struggles more broadly. For the most part, the South African Deobandī establishment struggled to maintain their religious authority in these decades, since most of the scholar-activists involved in the anti-apartheid struggle had lost interest in replicating the Deobandī version of the normative order in South Africa. This chapter alludes to a complex history of discursive contestations and societal tensions between the Deobandīs and Muslims who wore other theological stripes. Ingram's case study, the Deobandī scholar Ahmed Sadiq Desai, allows the author to explore the reception of Ashraf ʿAlī Thānvī's political ideas in a context different from South Asia. Ingram concludes the chapter by referencing Robinson's dichotomy of "this-worldly" and "other-worldly" Islam: "Thanvi and his spiritual descendants traversed the space between these two polarities. They sought to implement a project of ethical reform among a worldly public, beyond the madrasa and *khanqah*, but it remained a project that reminded Muslims at every step of the ultimate futility of worldly pursuits. In other words, they used 'this-worldly' means to achieve otherworldly ends" (205). It might have been more useful, however, to conclude this chapter by positing the various trajectories of politics within the Deobandī

movement as competing responses to colonial secularity and postcolonial nation-making projects. The fact that the political as such cannot be excised from even Thānvī's quietism shows how the regime of secularity has not entirely been successful in privatizing religion.

The conclusion not only wraps up the book's arguments but also introduces new aspects of Deobandī Islam that merit further research. The author first questions the reduction of the Deoband movement to violent extremism that one sometimes finds in mainstream Western media discussions of the Taliban. While many in the Taliban leadership had graduated from a single Deobandī madrasa in northwestern Pakistan, the Deoband movement as a whole cannot be reduced to one of its offshoots. Ingram urges scholars to appreciate the internal complexity of the Deoband movement, and this includes approaching its reformist relationship with Ṣūfism as an internal critique of the broader Ṣūfī tradition. The conclusion also comments on the tension between scripturalism and legal traditionalism: "the perennial challenge for the Deobandis has been how to communicate the complexity of the legal tradition to lay Muslims without diluting it or undermining their authority in the process" (213). Yet, in accounting for the transformations that have shaped Deobandī Islam over the last century, the author hastily insinuates the idea that Deobandī discourse sometimes becomes uncoupled from its particular sensibility as it travels beyond its historical origins (214). I would suggest an alternative interpretation: as they have travelled to spaces beyond South Asia, and as their tradition has developed in time beyond the fin-de-siècle colonial moment, Deobandī scholars and laypersons have nuanced their textual archives, picking up new sensibilities. In other words, every repetition of tradition might be seen as a differentiating repetition instead of an uncoupling of text and sensibility. The author also alludes to the need for ethnographic attention to "everyday arguments" about the discursive tradition made by lay Muslims and how new media, such as chat rooms—or, I would add, YouTube and Twitter—complicate the picture of this discursive tradition. The need for ethnography and the inclusion of new media as valid sources for the study of global Islam are excellent suggestions for further research, even if the author himself did not set out to attend to these methodological protocols in this book.

Let me now raise a couple of methodological questions. First, does this book adequately explain the Deoband tradition in its multiple forms of discursive and non-discursive self-articulation and reception by others? To a

large extent it does; yet, this book's "South Asia" is largely colonial and postcolonial India. There is no mention of how the partition of India in 1947 and the demands of nation-building in postcolonial South Asia have transformed this tradition of thought and practice. *Revival from Below* does not examine how Deobandīs in Pakistan and Bangladesh compete with other Islamic actors, Islamist ones included, for reviving Islam from above. Deobandī scholars compete for recognition and authority using both state and non-state institutions and exercise what I would call "soft-sovereignty" in their religious spaces. Moreover, they contest and invest in not only publics but also markets, and here I am alluding to their contributions to Islamic finance—a case in point is Muḥammad Taqī ʿUsmānī, who has written prolifically about the subject and sits on the advisory boards of several national and international financial institutions. Yet, Pakistan and Bangladesh are not the only contexts where Deobandīs have struggled to implement Islam from above. The Shah Bano case in the 1980s is just one example of how Deobandīs reform and contest public norms beyond "revival from below" in postcolonial India. Thus, I am not sure that the idea of "revival from below" captures the full scope of Deobandī public contestations and global presence.

My second methodological question pertains to sources and reading strategies. Ingram consults many primary sources but also notes that he "does not look in depth at Deobandis' Qur'an and Hadith commentaries" (7). Does the omission of these sources impact the arguments of this book? I believe that Ingram's conclusions would have been more nuanced had he included these textual sources. For example, Deobandīs' Qurʾān and Ḥadīth commentaries show how they largely resist the *sola scriptura* turn associated with Salafī Islam, since Deobandīs conform to many traditional literary conventions of the *tafsīr* and *sharḥ al-ḥadīth* genres and also go to great lengths in defending Ḥanafī jurisprudence when writing in these genres. These works also complicate the story told about Deoband's global reach. Before the Tablīghī Jamāʿat reached South Africa, Deobandī Ḥadīth scholars had already started publishing their multi-voluminous Arabic works and exchanging productive but also polemical letters with their theological counterparts in places such as Damascus and Cairo. There is also the related issue of certain methodological problems posed by genre. Just to take one example, Ingram's discussion of Ashraf ʿAlī's views on celebrating the Prophet's birthday (*mawlūd*) is based on fragments from a range of genres, including the legal opinion (*fatwā*), Ṣūfī counsels or aphorisms (*malfūẓāt*), and the topical treatise (*risāla*) (74-75). Yet, the author does not examine how each genre

presupposes different audiences, speaking conventions, and hence varying relationships to the normative order. I venture to propose that the particular investments of the normative order change from genre to genre.

Ingram's translations from Urdu into English are accurate as well as user-friendly and he avoids both excess (*ifrāṭ*) and negligence (*tafrīṭ*) in his measured arguments.[1] The book contains extremely minor transliteration errors and biographical mischaracterizations.[2] Let me be clear that my methodological reservations and my discussion of a few limitations are in no way meant to undermine the significance of *Revival from Below* for scholarship on Muslim South Asia and global Islam more broadly. Ingram has brought remarkable clarity and theoretical nuance to contextualize the Deoband movement as a global phenomenon. He has also, to his credit, bridged the gap between the study of Sufism and the scholarship on *ʿulamāʾ* cultures in modern South Asia. Last but not least, he has alluded to the significance of affect in our understanding of Deobandī Islam as a discursive tradition.

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1. The word *tafrīṭ* does not mean excess (as stated by Ingram at 142-143). It rather means "to spoil, to forget, to reduce, to neglect, to abandon" (Muḥammad ʿAbdullāh Khān Khveshgī, *Farhang-i ʿāmirah: Urdū zabān meṉ mustaʿmil ʿArabī, Fārsī aur Turkī alfāẓ* [Delhi: Educational Publishing House, 2004], 159).
2. For example, Abū'l Kalām is wrongly given as Abdul Kalam (191), *tashīl* is misspelled as *tahsil* and then *tehsil* (229), Nisār is misspelled as Nishar (240), and it is Shahdadpur and not Shahdapur (245). Shabbīr Aḥmad ʿUsmānī (d. 1949) is listed as a disciple of Ashraf ʿAlī Thānvī (196), while he was in fact a disciple of Maḥmūd Ḥasan of Deoband (d. 1920). On page 161, the author states, "Masihullah Khan, Mahmud Hasan Gangohi, Qari Muhammad Tayyib, and Muhammad Zakariyya Kandhlavi, all of whom were students and/or disciples of Rashid Ahmad Gangohi or Ashraf 'Ali Thanvi." None of them were students or disciples of Rashīd Aḥmad Gangōhī (d. 1905). While Masīḥullāh Khān (d. 1992) and Qārī Muḥammad Ṭayyib (d. 1983) were in fact disciples of Ashraf ʿAlī Thānvī, Muḥammad Zakariyyā Kāndhlavī (d. 1982) and Maḥmūd Ḥasan Gangōhī (d. 1996) were not. Kāndhlavī was a disciple of Khalīl Aḥmad Sahāranpūrī (d. 1927). Maḥmūd Ḥasan Gangōhī, in turn, was a disciple of Muḥammad Zakariyyā Kāndhlavī.

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