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Understanding the Taliban: Assessing Religious Categories of Analysis

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There is a growing body of serious academic work interrogating the diversity of religious categories in the Indian subcontinent and Central Asia. This research has focused in part on Islamic categories, with an eye toward understanding the modes of thought and practice that have produced a striking diversity of Islamic movements in the region – from Sufi mystics, to worldwide devotional movements like Tablighi Jamaat, to the Taliban. Governments, for their part, have been somewhat slower than academics to sort out divisions and debates among Muslims. Beyond a cursory understanding of the Sunni–Shia split, the most common mode of contemporary analysis casually and unhelpfully divides Muslims into ‘moderate’ and ‘extremist’ camps.

There are, however, ways in which the serious corpus of academic work on religious categorisation can and ought to be made intelligible to those outside of academia who are trying to make sense of religiously inspired movements in the subcontinent. One of the most complex and vexing of these movements is the Taliban. The ‘Taliban’ label has accrued multiple meanings over the years. It refers, most prominently, to the original Taliban movement led by Mullah Muhammad Omar, which gained ascendancy

in Afghanistan in the mid-1990s. More recently it is made to refer to the re-emergent movement in Afghanistan led by Mullah Omar, which styles itself the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. That entity, somewhat confusingly, is itself an umbrella of several different groups, the most prominent of which are (to use the titles given by political analysts) the Quetta Shura Taliban led by Mullah Omar; the Haqqani Network based in the Pakistani tribal areas and led by Jalaluddin Haqqani; and the Hizb-e-Islami Gulbuddin led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. Further afield, numerous groups using the ‘Taliban’ label rose to prominence in Pakistan’s northwest frontier beginning circa 2005. Many, but not all, of these groups adopted a confrontational posture toward the Pakistani state, and coalesced into the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in late 2007.

Apart from Hizb-e-Islami, which emerged from a modernist-Islamist school of thought dating to the mid-twentieth century, all of these Taliban groups share a common heritage: all are Sunni, Hanafi and Deobandi. But what do these labels really mean? Are they important? And in what ways should we be wary of reading too much into them as we seek to make sense of the ‘Taliban’ movement writ large?

We will start with the broadest label, ‘Sunni’. Why is this a valuable category of analysis? The Sunni character of the Taliban movement speaks, most importantly, to its decentralised hermeneutic approach and its lack of a central locus of authority on key religious and political questions. Sunnis, who represent the majority of the world’s Muslims, are inclined to show a measure of suspicion even toward the great leaders and institutions of the Sunni world: the Grand Mufti of Istanbul, the Grand Sheikh of Al-Azhar, et al. There is, in short, no central authoritative figure who can weigh in on contentious issues and expect to be followed as a leader of the entire Sunni community.

Many Sunnis are also inclined to hold a romantic vision of the caliphate, unlike their Shia cousins who more typically idealise the early imams and certain martyrs particular to the emergence of the Shia sect. A subset of Sunni writers and thinkers take this vision one step further, placing emphasis on the restoration of the caliphate as a global office and a unifying symbol of Muslim identity. In this way Sunnis incline toward the global language of the *ummah* (the worldwide community of faith) in a way that the minority Shia do not. To be sure, Shia communities around the world are connected through common traditions, pilgrimages and some organisations which span state borders; but Sunni groups can more easily play on transnational linkages and frame their agenda as one for the entire Muslim worldwide community.

What then does the Sunni label tell us about the Taliban? In short, not very much: there is a tremendous diversity within the Sunni fold and, at best, the category provides a general orientation to the decentralised way in which the movement considers religious authority.

The second label, ‘Hanafi’, refers to one of the major schools of law (*madhab* or *mazhab*) in Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), named after the famed Persian scholar Imam Abu Hanifa (d. 767 CE). In what ways might this category be helpful in understanding the Taliban? First, and most simply, the Hanafi school is dominant in particular geographic areas. Adopted by the Abbasids, the Ottomans and the Mughals, Hanafism remains the dominant tradition in the Levant, Iraq, Afghanistan, South Asia, Central Asia, Turkey, western China and the Balkans. The geographic domain of Hanafi pres-

ence thus suggests a likely domain in which the Taliban might find (and indeed, has found) sympathetic co-religionists, at least in matters of legal interpretation.

Adherence to the Hanafi school also signals that the *fiqh* interpretive tradition is likely to be a point of reference for the Taliban, at least publicly. This is in contrast both to Wahhabist thinkers, who discount much of the historical *fiqh* in favour of a reinvention of interpretation from the original sources, and to more modernist Islamist thinkers such as the Jamaat-e-Islami in Pakistan and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, who downplay the importance of the classical texts in favour of twentieth century interpreters. Such deference to the classical tradition defines in some respects the mode of authoritative argument that the Taliban are likely to find persuasive.

Beyond this, the Taliban’s acceptance of the Hanafi *fiqh* signals a particular intellectual tradition. If one wants to ask, for example, ‘What does this group of Muslims say about *jihad*?’ one should probably start by investigating that group’s particular school of Islamic law. There are differences – subtle ones, for the most part – between Hanafi interpretations and those from the other major schools (Shafi, Hanbali and Maliki). For example, each jurisprudential tradition has somewhat different readings of what constitutes the ‘abode of Islam’ (*dar-ul islam*) and how to deal with non-Muslim populations under Muslim rule. At the most basic level then, adherence to Hanafi *fiqh* simply indicates which commentators and works of interpretation the Taliban are likely to consider to be *relatively* authoritative in those circumstances when they feel compelled to turn to a religious authority for explanation, or for public legitimacy.

Even though Hanifism is a particular interpretive tradition, it is by no means a key to decoding a group’s entire theological position. Most Sunnis in South Asia are Hanafi, but that does not mean that they have similar views on most – or even many – issues. It merely suggests which particular legal reference texts they are likely to pull off the shelf when confronted with a jurisprudential question. In Pakistan, for example, the liberal female political activist Sherry Rehman (now serving as Pakistan’s ambassador to the United States) is a Hanafi Sunni; but so too is Mullah Muhammad Omar,

the founder and leader of the Afghan Taliban. Their views on a host of issues could not be further apart.

That two people of such differing perspectives can both share the Hanafi tradition speaks, first of all, to the fact that some Hanafis take the textual tradition more seriously than others. The Taliban, for example, have often been accused of being ‘sloppy’ Hanafis, relying on obscure sayings of the Prophet Muhammad, and adopting Pashtun tribal traditions as part of their ‘reading’ of *fiqh*. Second, the divergence in Hanafi practices speaks to the fact that the traditional *fiqh* literature covers a relatively small range of subjects and leaves a great many political, devotional and social topics open for interpretation.

The third label, ‘Deobandism’, further narrows the scope of thought and practice that falls within its ambit. Deobandism is a nineteenth century reformist movement that has its origin in what is now the state of Uttar Pradesh in north India. Largely through its propagation of religious institutions, the *madrassahs*, it has become a widespread school of thought throughout northern India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. Deobandism has its roots in the intellectual soul-searching that resulted from the British decision to formally abolish the Mughal Empire following the failed 1857 uprising. The Deobandi movement, responding to this crisis in the Muslim community, chose to emphasise classical Islamic education and promote religious schools as a means of reforming society.

Why is Deobandism a useful category in trying to understand the Taliban? It signals, first of all, a strong and continuing orientation around the *madrassah* system, both as a mode of organisation and a vision of social and political reform. While many Deobandis have become involved in political activism and even party politics, their primary interest has typically remained the *madrassah* networks from which they came. Second, it signals (at least in theory) a reliance on the classical textual tradition as opposed to modern interpretations, or the Wahhabi hermeneutic. And third, although quite a number of the early Deobandis belonged to Sufi orders (and indeed, some still do), Deobandism has, over time, developed an austere ethic. This involves, inter alia, a commitment to simple dress; opposition to some forms of

popular and even religious music; relatively strict gender norms; and a strident opposition to the ‘shrine culture’ and mystic devotional practices associated with popular forms of Sufism in the subcontinent.

Each of these characteristics shed some insight on the Taliban as a movement: its continuing connection to the *madrassah* networks for recruiting; its scepticism about certain modernist Islamist interpretations that focus heavily on the nation-state; and its ‘conservative’ (many would say ‘deeply retrogressive’) cultural values. At the same time Deobandism cannot fully explain the Taliban’s beliefs and practices. While the *madrassahs* are indeed important to most of the movements that take the Taliban label, each of these movements has seen a widening demographic of leadership to include figures who bring no formal religious education. And while Deobandis in theory adhere closely to the textual tradition, many of the most intellectual members of the movement have been marginalised, supplanted by Taliban figures who have only the most tenuous grasp of classical *fiqh*. Deobandism has, arguably, receded from its roots as a serious educational movement.

Even the ‘ethic of austerity’ associated with Deobandism only goes so far in explaining the practices of Taliban groups. Talibanism is not synonymous with Deobandism, but is arguably a fusion of post-intellectual Deobandism with conservative Pashtun tribal norms, packaged as a normative Islamic ethic. In this sense, understanding Deobandism helpfully illuminates the ideological roots of many Taliban organisations, but does not entirely explain their current beliefs and practices. What ultimately can we conclude about these nested layers of religious categorisation? On the one hand they have some value in explaining the ‘the Taliban’, understood as a complex, multifaceted and often disjointed movement. If nothing else, these categories can help us to understand at a very basic level what kinds of groups are likely to ally with others on an ideological basis; what sources of authority they are likely to find persuasive; what kinds of values they are likely to promote in the public sphere; and what approaches to theological argumentation they are likely to adopt.

On the other hand it should be evident that these same categories can be unhelpfully broad or – worse

– anachronistic. Many Taliban groups have, arguably, refashioned the Deobandi tradition, drawing on certain aspects of its devotional ethic and educational infrastructure to create a post-Deobandi movement that is more Pashtun in character, less learned, more anti-Sufi, more austere, and more willing to embrace the use of political violence than its predecessors even three or four decades ago could have imagined. There is value to understanding the Taliban's Sunni orientation, its loosely Hanafi reasoning, and its waning Deobandi roots, but only as a guide to a movement that is too dynamic and diverse to submit neatly to any single or simple categorisation.

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RELIGION AND VIOLENCE

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