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The making of Muslim dissent: hybridized discourses, lay preachers, and radical rhetoric among British Pakistanis

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Saints and scholars in South Asia

The relationship between saints and scholars in South Asian Islam is yet to be fully theorized. In the Middle East this relationship has been the focus of a good deal of interdisciplinary scholarly debate (see, for example, Keddie 1972). The theoretical thrust has been to view the Muslim encounter with modernity as precipitating a critical historical displacement: that of Sufi saints, the owners of mystical knowledge, by religious clerics, or ulama, the owners of “scripturalist” knowledge. The recent rise of fundamentalist Islam has, by the same logic, merely intensified this turn (or return) to the scriptures. In effect, it is argued, modernity has relegated Sufism to the margins of society as a locus of superstition, folk healing, syncretic “popular Islam,” or the personal pursuit of mystical experience.

As has happened for the Middle East, a wealth of scholarly literature on South Asian Islam documents the complex array of Islamic sectarian movements generated by the encounter with colonialism and modernity (for an exemplary account see Metcalf 1982). Paradoxically, this literature also reveals that South Asian Sufism—unlike Sufism in the Middle East—has never been displaced. Instead, it has thrived, caught up in internecine battles with other sectarian movements in what I intend to describe here as a religious politics of redemption.

The continued viability of South Asian Sufism as a religious movement within modernity stems, I argue, from its encompassment of scripturalism. The result, I show, is a highly creative internal argument between owners of discrete forms of knowledge—saints, scholars, and religious laymen—positioned differentially within a single religious movement. On a broader scale these protagonists of knowledge oppose each other as leaders of discrete—and competing—sectarian movements. The ensuing argument of identities in which these movements are engaged is at once pragmatic and ideological, grounded in a semiotic of redemption that both unites and divides the movements. The public field of power relations is culturally constituted

The rise of a British Islamic radicalism stressing a heterodox combination of civil rights rhetoric and Islamic values is considered as a form of “magical” religious dissent, rooted in the predicaments of migration and the peculiar structural features of South Asian Sufi orders as regional cults. Drawing on Dumont’s work, I extend recent discussions of the sited production of authoritative Islamic knowledge by exploring the dialectical interaction of ideas about ascetic practice, “worldly” orientation, and moral personhood in different South Asian religious movements and their extension into Britain. [Sufism, political Islam, ethnicity, religious movements, Britain, Pakistan]

by subtle ethical divisions surrounding ideas about salvation, moral personhood, hierarchy, dominance, and rationality.

It is an argument of identities that is highly creative and responsive to the advent of modernity, conceptualized as a historical movement promoting capitalism, liberalism, individual rationalism, and a faith in progress and change. In various ways, the new Islamic movements are grappling with what Weber recognized as the inherent ambiguity of modernity: the fact that the new certainties arising from modernization are experienced as a loss of meaning and of trust in the old certainties of faith and community (Turner 1990:6-7). The Islamic engagement with this movement has been conditioned by colonial domination and the rise of the modern nation-state along with the expansion of cities, mass education, and print capitalism. At the same time Muslims have had to contend ideologically with the disempowering supremacy of Western technology and science (see Geertz 1968; Gellner 1992; Robinson 1983).

The arguments of identity that this engagement generated are discussed here as they illuminate the processes that have given rise in contemporary Britain to a British Islamic radicalism stressing a heterodox combination of civil rights rhetoric and Islamic value. I consider this radicalism here as a form of religious dissent rooted in the peculiar structural features of South Asian Sufi orders organized as regional cults.¹

My argument starts from the fact that populist anti-Western political radicalism in South Asia has been historically motivated by irreducible structural tensions within Sufi orders. These are generated by ideological contradictions between different authoritative sources of valorized knowledge attributed to saints, to ulama (religious clerics), and to laypersons; and to their different bases of power within the orders, understood as hierarchical organizations. The dialectical complementarity between ulama and lay preachers in South Asian Sufi orders has to be set, I argue, in the context of the moral supremacy of saints as world renouncers.²

In the following analysis I draw on Weberian conceptual distinctions in order to go beyond Weber. My aim is to demonstrate that the logic of Islamic sectarian divisions in South Asia (and in Britain) does not simply mirror the logic of Christian denominational dichotomies, as disclosed so brilliantly in Weber’s analysis of the rise of Protestantism. On the contrary, Islam has its own unique grammars of salvation and redemption. These should be positioned historically both in the context of migration and, more generally, in the context of South Asian Muslims’ engagement with capitalism, postcolonialism, and modernity.

Within South Asian Sufi orders, I propose, complex ideas about moral personhood are rooted in a simultaneous emphasis on hierarchy and equality. These impel religious scholars and laypersons toward the invention of new, highly hybridized public discourses responsive to current predicaments and international political crises. Rather than an “authentic” Sufi discourse, then, the urban mosques of Sufi orders have become spaces for current political debate, incorporating new ideas and themes from the wider society into the rhetoric articulated from mosque pulpits.

I begin my discussion with an exploration of the position of Sufi mystics, heads of regional cultic orders, as controllers of divine knowledge.

otherworldly asceticism

The shift from Catholicism to Protestantism in Christianity, and particularly to Calvinism, was a shift from otherworldly asceticism to worldly asceticism (Weber 1984[1930]) and was accompanied by a rejection of the privileged intercessionary role of Catholic priests. Dumont, following Weber, contrasts the Protestant concept of the “individual-in-the-world” with the Hindu concept of the individual as world renouncer, or the “extramundane individual” (1957:52). Dumont’s analysis illuminates the symbolic logic of world renunciation in a caste-based society in which temporal and spiritual power are separated and legitimized by a

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rigid hierarchical ideology. Within this holistic system world renunciation allows space, he argues, for individual innovation. Paradoxically, then, the renouncer “finds himself invested with an individuality which he apparently finds uncomfortable since all his efforts tend to its extinction or its transcendence” (1957:46). Furthermore, Dumont emphasizes, “the renouncer does not deny the religions of the man-in-the-world”; nor, importantly, does he deny the holistic social structure associated with this worldly religion (1957:46).

This paradox is evident also in Sufism or popular Islam. The saint I studied, Zindapir (“The Living Saint”), is head of an order centered in the North West Frontier Province of Pakistan (NWFP). He is described quite explicitly, in his own words and those of his followers, as a man who has “turned his face away from the world,” and has, by virtue of this self-denying asceticism and internal purification, achieved a unique individuality. As world renouncer he is believed to have a direct connection with God that endows him with immediate and comprehensive knowledge. One of the saint’s trusted deputies—an elderly man—repeatedly emphasized whenever we met that this knowledge was not derived from the literate study of theological treatises or Islamic shari’ā law (fiqih). On the contrary, he implied that it came from an immediate mystical experience of the divine (maṣ’ūla). The saint in Islam is thus unique in being a religious innovator, not bound by the strict letter of the Islamic law, but able to interpret the “spirit” of Islam through his transcendent understanding of the inner meaning of religion.

As Dumont points out, however, this innovatory individuality having parallels with liberal ideological constructs of individualism meshes with an endorsement of worldly, shari’ā-based Islam and an acceptance of worldly hierarchies for the saint’s followers and disciples. As possessor of spiritual power, the saint’s place is at the apex of this hierarchy. He is regarded as superior to any temporal ruler, and his divinely sanctioned superiority is usually underlined by genealogical descent from the prophet Muhammad or his first Caliph (although the importance of this genealogical connection is often publicly denied). By contrast, the individuality of disciples, whether scholars, legal experts, or laymen, as autonomous decision makers is totally and utterly submerged and denied in the presence of the saint. They must obey him, with his superior inner knowledge, however absurd and irrational his directives may appear to be on the surface, since it is believed that he possesses transcendent ethical insight that recognizes the ultimate rationality of the apparently irrational.

This is not of course to deny the common sense, quotidian rationality, or moral knowledge of individual Sufi followers. From a philosophical perspective, however, total obedience to the saint necessarily implies a denial of any notion of the individual as the locus of a transcendental rationality and ethical knowledge. In Sufism this universalism is displaced by an emphasis on exemplary personhood: the saint or wali (friend of Allah) is a rare individual. Followers are, as if to compensate for the saint’s unique individuality, expected to be obedient non-thinkers: “like a corpse in the hands of its washer” is the oft-cited Sufi saying. Self-denial is a crucible on the Sufi path to true knowledge, to be realized only through total submission to the guidance of the saint (see Ajmal 1984).

Perhaps a morality tale, told to me both by Zindapir and by his disciples, can serve to illustrate this:

A well-known maulvi from the Punjab, near Lahore, came to see me and asked if he could be my disciple. I said to him: “You are a scholar and when you become the disciple of a pir [saint] you will have to submit yourself absolutely to him.” I showed the maulvi my white headdressescarf, this one here, and said: “If I say it is black, will you agree that it is black? But if you say, according to your knowledge, that it is white, then you cannot be my disciple.” The maulvi accepted this condition and became my disciple and later I made him a khalifa [vicegerent, deputy].

Yet despite his elevation, the saint recognizes and acknowledges in practice temporal hierarchies “in-the-world.” Zindapir, for example, accords special treatment and respect to honored guests, government officials, politicians, top civil servants, army generals, wealthy visitors, anthropologists, and the middle class in general (see also P. Werbner 1995).
These features of Sufism, evident in my research on a Pakistani Sufi order and its extension into Britain, have been extensively documented and are often caricatured and condemned by Muslim critics of saintly traditions. Why Sufism remains attractive to apparently Westernized, high-ranking civil servants, army officers, politicians, businessmen, and professionals, as well as to large numbers of relatively uneducated villagers is less understood (but see Ewing, in press). Zindapir had begun his religious charismatic career in the army, where he had recruited a large army following, including many brigadiers and generals. Among his disciples and supplicants were also politicians and high-ranking civil servants. Sufism—or at least Reform Sufism—thus appeared to appeal to the relatively educated and powerful, as well as to the vast mass of low-ranking followers.

This continued elite attraction to Sufi orders stems from a peculiar understanding of worldly success and predestination in popular Islam. A key role of the saint is believed to be his ability to act as mediator for his disciples with God on the Day of Judgment, asking forgiveness for them and thus assuring that they go to paradise (jannat). Disciples are, in other words, dependent on the saint not only for grace in the world but for eternal salvation. This leads to the further belief that worldly achievements are divine rewards for obeying the edicts and instructions of the saint regarding religious observance and daily practice, which includes the multiple repetition of specific religious litanies (wazifa) allocated by him alone. As bringer of divine blessing (barakat), he is believed to be able to change the course of nature, to sway the will of God, and thus to affect the predestined movement of the universe. This assumption is at the root of the repeated stories by disciples about the miracles (karamat) performed by the Shaikh. Thus if, after their initiation, disciples succeed in their businesses and manage to arrange marriages for their children, obtain job promotions, pass examinations or tests, and find work as labor migrants—in short, achieve success in any of their endeavors—they interpret this as a sign of God’s blessing conferred on them via their saint. The saint’s own vast accumulation of wealth is similarly regarded. Discipleship thus constitutes a legitimation of worldly success.

For low-caste peasants or urban workers membership in the cult is a source of status. They derive their personal standing vis-à-vis others from their connection with an illustrious, important, and famous saint and regard themselves otherwise as social nonentities. In this sense the respect accorded to Zindapir by high-level politicians, civil servants, or army officers is not only useful for pragmatic purposes, but, perhaps even more significantly, it confirms the saint’s elevated status in the eyes of the many villagers who form the main body of his disciples, and brings together the high and the low in a single “family” of “disciple-brothers.” The vicarious status derived from membership in an important order of this type is seen by these disciples as conferring a meaningful and dignified gloss on their lives. They are proud of their saint and proud to be associated with him, while the daily, weekly, monthly, and annual rituals of the cult imbue the routines of daily life with a transcendent significance.

In general, then, autonomous religious individuality-cum-knowledge—the direct personal access to God valorized by the Protestant Puritan sects—is regarded as a rare achievement by Sufi disciples. Nor do they share the notion of predestination that Weber argued was so fundamental to Calvinism. As in Calvinism, however, worldly rewards and achievements are believed to be signs of divine approval and blessing and thus guarantors of election and salvation. This, I found, goes along with instructions by the saint to his disciples to practice self-denial and self-discipline in their worldly activities—in other words, to observe worldly asceticism—and with an affirmation of the value of hard work, obedience, and respect for authority, all of which tend to lead, as in the Puritan case, to worldly success. In sum, then, nonindividuality and self-denial do not entail a diminution of the will to succeed in worldly matters, and indeed facilitate and legitimize this success.

Sufi cults in both South Asia and Britain are organized as regional cults, each with a central lodge, the residence of the saint or his descendants, and branches headed by his vicegerents.
(khalīfā). Both the saint and his vicegerents require the services of ulama versed in Islamic law to perform rites of passage, lead the prayers in Arabic, deliver the sermon khutba at the mosque, and interpret the sharī'ā. These ulama also display their oratorical skills and scholarship at the annual ʿurs festival at the central lodge, which commemorates the death/rebirth of the present saint’s predecessor. It is at such ʿurs celebrations that ulama within the broader Sufi movement in South Asia gain their public reputations as powerful speakers. In the cities the more educated ulama supervise Qur’anic schools for children and lead the daily prayers at urban mosques attached to the orders. These mosques require funding, which is usually mobilized by lay members of local communities. Lay leaders and their circles are also often honored with the role of delivering sermons. In Manchester, in compliance with conditions attached to charitable foundations, the formal constitution of the Central Mosque’s Management Committees makes the role of these lay leaders even more critical.

A tripartite leadership structure thus characterizes Sufi regional cults: they are composed of, first, saints and vicegerents (the latter usually aspiring world renouncers); second, ulama trained in religious seminaries espousing Sufi cultic practices and traditions; and third, lay activists, who raise funds and provide liaison with the wider community. These lay members are themselves preachers who take an active role in speech making—of khutbas at Friday prayers, but especially during public festivals celebrating the Prophet’s birthday (ʿīd-milad-un nabi) and other commemorative ceremonials.

worldly asceticism

By contrast to Sufi orders, the rise of the South Asian reform movements marks a shift from world renunciation toward an in-worldly asceticism, and with it, as in Calvinism, a stress on rationality as individual reasoning. In Britain, two main reform movements predominate: the “Deobandi” movement and its operational extension, the tablighi jamaat, and the jamaat-i-islami and its organizational extensions, the U.K. Islamic Mission. For Deobandis and Jamaat-i-islamis the stress on individual rationality as individual self-control is accompanied by an emphasis on legal reasoning (as against the mystical knowledge of the Sufis). It is only in the case of the Jamaat-i-islami, however, that the stress on rationality becomes a total and comprehensive life project to be fulfilled for the glorification of Islam and God. In this sense Jamaat-i-islami is undoubtedly ideologically the closest to Calvinism, as analyzed by Weber. According to the views of members of the movement, Man is God’s vicegerent on earth who must protect and further its development for the fulfillment of an Islamic vision. This rational project is the responsibility of the elect, and the movement is a highly exclusive one: only those deemed to have achieved the correct moral and religious excellence are accepted as full members. At the same time the movement is a worldly one—it stresses achievements in the world. It is composed primarily of lay members in Britain although it does include a few ulama, whose position, as we shall see, is necessarily ambiguous.

As in Calvinism, the emphasis of the movement is on a total rational project that is the responsibility of every Muslim as an individual. It denies any forms of privileged intercession—that is, of spiritual intercession by saints (implying an ability to grant forgiveness for sin) or of scholarly intercession by ulama as authoritative interpreters of Qurʾān and Hadith. Along with the rejection of spiritual intercession goes a denial of the supreme value both of otherworldly contemplation and the de facto separation of state and religion. This is indeed what makes the movement a modernist one: its members seek to transform the contemporary material and political world rather than to retreat into the private world of religious observance. The movement and especially its founder’s extensive writings have inspired many of the young Muslim associations in Britain, as well as Islamist movements worldwide, all of which also stress the international dimensions of Islam as a global religious movement.
Jamaat-i-islami is thus above all highly political, and its main agenda is a political one. It is based around the writings of Maulana Maududi, and it attempts to find an Islamic solution to the modern condition, especially to latter-day capitalism. Three dimensions of this capitalism preoccupy adherents of the movement: the apparent breakdown of the family, the foundation of modern capitalism on usury, and democratic liberalism (which denies the transcendence of God’s law over man-made laws). Unlike the other reform movements, however, the attempt is to grapple with these broader questions and resolve them in an Islamic way through a recognition, as we shall see, of a major limitation in the Qur’ân and Hadith.

The contradiction at the heart of the movement stems from a dual concept of rationality. Maududi, the founder and leader for many years, distinguished two areas of practice covered by legal reasoning: first, the area covered by Qur’ânic law and Hadith, in which rationality in the form of authoritative legal precedent (taqlid) and interpretation (ijtihad), mediated by religious experts, is totally rejected. The view is that because “the original law has been corrupted, ijtihad cannot be made free lest original law be covered by yet newer and more insidious corruptions” (see Binder 1961:75, 101). To the extent that ijtihad is needed in this area, “it is to be exercised only by highly qualified persons. Such persons are certainly not those who have been seduced by Western culture, nor by definition can they be ‘ulama’” (Binder 1961:75, emphasis added).

The second area of practice recognized by Maududi is that of permissive legislation for modern life not covered by the Qur’ân and Hadith. In this area legislation relies on various forms of interpretation, which can only be exercised by “properly qualified persons” (Binder 1961:101).

Clearly, then, having rejected individual rationality as a transcendental mode of moral reasoning, it is reconstituted, as in Sufism, as the privileged knowledge of unique individuals. Binder’s analysis of the movement, which remains the most persuasive, nevertheless reveals a gradual shift in Maududi’s thinking regarding the relationship between the unique individual innovator and the consensus arrived at by a democratic community of rational decision makers (ijmā‘). While the fundamentalist assumption remains that the Qur’ân and Hadith are known and undebatable, and thus not open to rational legal modification (Binder 1961:103), the problem of the election of the uniquely endowed leader continues to be modified. The initial view, paralleling the Sufi view, was a mystical one: “The people would ‘naturally’ elect those most suitable” (Binder 1961:105), while decision making would be by the shura (elected), not “by majority vote but rather by unanimous decisions, based on the theory of the comprehensiveness of the Islamic religion and social ethic” (Binder 1961:78).

The gradual shift in Maududi’s thought was toward arrogating greater powers to the assembly, both in matters of state administration and in the election or deposition of the leader (amīr) (Binder 1961:106–107). As Binder points out, however, Maududi still gives no authority whatsoever to the ulama (1961:107), normally regarded as the legal experts. The emphasis on the achievement of unique individuality in Sufism, for which the Punjabi poet philosopher Muhammad Iqbal found parallels in Nietzsche’s philosophy, is retained here, but in a highly modified form: as the individual rationality of select laypersons able to depose the unique individual, or to decide in matters of state beyond Qur’ânic prescriptions or proscriptions.

Like most Islamist movements Jamaat-i-islami remains vague about the exact legal forms and constitution of the perfect state—an area not covered by the Qur’ân. The underlying millenarian aspect of the movement is to be found in the belief that if all members of the society—men and women alike—can be persuaded (or coerced) into practicing individual moral perfection, the perfection of the polity will be automatically guaranteed. Rather than the state’s acting as a powerful guarantor of individual liberties and contractual relationships (the role assigned to the bourgeois, liberal nation-state), then, it is individual morality that will guarantee the morality and power of the state (see also Ayubi 1991).
What vision of personhood and society is entailed in this Islamic approach, and what impact does it have on social practice? Clearly, the movement shares a great deal with Calvinism: the emphasis laid on worldly asceticism, antihedonistic lifestyles, moral and sexual puritanism, the role of the elect, a rational, total life project, direct individual worship of God, individual responsibility, and a “disenchantment of the world”—a rejection of elaborate ritualistic practices or priestly intercession as a means of salvation. Absent, however, is the final compromise with capitalism, which for Protestants entailed an endorsement of individual accumulation as a sign of divine election, and capitulation in relation to the religious injunction against interest and usury.

Instead, the movement retains the fundamental Islamic focus on the “community of believers” united in the figure of an exemplary leader, on mutual aid, on helping the needy, and on mutual support and trust. These go with a strong rejection of monetary interest and usury, a continual emphasis on the family (rather than the individual) as the fundamental unit of society, and recognition of the key role of the elect in governing the community. There is no rejection of private property or commerce (the Prophet was a successful trader), but, if wealth and worldly success are seen fundamentally as trials to be overcome as they were for the Puritans, they are not perceived simultaneously as signs of divine election. Members of the movement are expected to give a good deal of their income to consensually determined communal works. Although they tend to be recruited, as were early Protestants, from the lower middle classes, there is no evidence that their frugality leads to spectacular personal accumulation. They are, above all, political activists concerned, as individuals, with a communal project. Much of the movement’s agenda has to do with the Islamicization of state institutions and the introduction of an “Islamic economy” not based upon usury and interest. In Britain the agenda is one of founding modern Muslim institutions and particularly schools, and of forming associations for young Muslims, thereby drawing them away from a “sinful” Western popular culture.

Although initiated by the U.K. Islamic Mission, this agenda has now been adopted by Sufi followers and Deobandis in Britain as well. The present popular Islamic radicalism in Britain thus draws on discourses formulated by groups such as the Jamaat-i-islami, but fused with an eclectic range of Western liberal discourses as well as values grounded in Sufi popular Islam. As discourses “travel” across the sectarian divide, however, they come to be imbued with new meanings (see Said 1983:226–247).

the position of the learned doctors

The intercalary position of Sufi-oriented ulama, caught between the democratic populism of ordinary lay Muslim preachers and the authoritarian absolutism of saints—and despised by both laypersons and saints—parallels the categorical dismissal of the ulama and their special domains of knowledge and discursive practices by the Jamaat-i-islami and indeed by modernists and secularists also (see Alavi 1988:80–81). It is only where ulama have historically instituted autonomous power structures entirely under their control, as have the ulama of the Deobandi movement, that their status is more fully assured and their religious rhetoric more consistent and less hybridized. Not surprisingly, it is these ulama to whom state authorities usually turn for expert religious advice on legal matters (see Malik 1989).

The Deobandi movement established the autonomy of the ulama as rational experts with a domain of knowledge based on scholarship. By demarcating the area of expert knowledge and dissociating themselves from secular politics, these ulama were able to institutionalize their independence from “external” saints, beyond the school itself. Yet matters are not quite so simple. The Deobandis straddle the boundary between otherworldly and worldly asceticism. Their rejection of mystical practices remains highly ambiguous since they recognize the supremacy of gnostic knowledge over expert knowledge. The relationship between teacher and
pupil in Deobandi seminaries parallels that between a living Sufi saint and his disciples, and many of the Sufi practices associated with sainthood and the achievement of gnostic knowledge are embraced as individual modes of asceticism by teachers and students. By rejecting attendance at the annual ‘urs at saints’ tombs, however, the movement denies the symbolic subordination of the ulama, experts in this-worldly knowledge, to the saints as controllers of divine, mystical knowledge. Instead, ṣilm and maˈrīfah are conflated in the figure of the pir-murshid-mufti (saint-teacher-jural expert) in the school, who possesses all three forms of knowledge simultaneously. Although otherworldly knowledge is still privileged over mere scholarship, this goes with a rejection of world renunciation in favor of this-worldly asceticism (for a full historical account see Metcalf 1982:138–197). This is also true for the Tablighi jamaat, where good works are combined along with the practice of zikr, the repetitive chanting of the name of God by Sufi adherents that is known as the “remembrance” of God (see King 1993; see also Metcalf, in press).

The emphasis on frugality and self-denial within the movement leads to communal economic accumulation. Thus, for example, the corporate financial resources of Tablighi jamaat, the lay operational arm of the movement, are vast. In Britain, the two main Islamic seminary colleges (in Dewsbury and Bury) are both owned and run by the movement. The role of laypersons is formally limited to preaching the simple verities of Islam: daily prayer, fasting, abstinence from alcohol, mosque attendance, female modesty. Nevertheless, in acknowledging the role of laypersons in preaching, the movement, although Deobandi, does somewhat challenge the monopoly and total authority of the ulama. Lay members are involved in charitable work, but the major focus is on inner reform and the avoidance of political confrontation. In Britain, however, a measure of political activism has apparently been unavoidable (see Samad 1992 on Bradford). The movement’s seminaries in India are important educational establishments for the training of ulama, and the many graduates of the school are dispersed throughout the Islamic world and the West. Despite the official rejection of ulama by the Jamaat-i-islami, for example, one of the recent elected British presidents of U.K. Islamic Mission is a Deobandi-trained maulvi, a broad-minded man of wide scholarship who is also a veteran member of the jamaat in Pakistan (both his children acted as my research assistants).

The sanctioning of individual accumulation is thus absent in principle from any of the Muslim approaches, but is legitimized in practice for the followers of Sufi orders. For Sufi disciples, as I have argued, personal wealth can be construed as a saintly blessing for good deeds, and thus as a justified objective. Second, unlike the Puritan sects, none of the reform groups call for the disestablishment of religion. On the contrary, they are struggling for its institutionalization. Here I should perhaps remark that none of the reform groups contend with a powerful, centralized organization analogous to the Catholic Church. Islam has never had an established priestly order, and Sufi cults, like the reform movements, tend to be fragmented, rising and falling periodically (see P. Werbner, in press).

The common core of beliefs shared by the three movements means that disagreements between them, while crucial, are not consistent enough to create a clear opposition between two internally coherent positions, only one of which posits the universal transcendentalism of individual moral and religious rationality. Despite a tendency in the literature, then, to regard the rise of Reform Islam as paralleling the shift from Catholicism to Protestantism, such a construction falsifies the unique features of Islamic sectarian divisions in South Asia. Instead, the ambiguity at the heart of all South Asian traditions of Islam creates fertile ground for the “romantic” radicalization of lay participants in response to political events in the modern world (see Binder 1961:70 on Gibb’s distinction between “romantics” and “legalists”). These different approaches are divided by their different practical agendas; sometimes, as in Britain, apparent opposites come together when two or more adopt a single agenda for a while.
Followers of Sufi orders are loosely united in a political-cum-religious movement known as the “Barelwi” movement. In Manchester during the 1980s it was some of the Barelwi followers focused around the religious cleric or maulvi of the Central Mosque who adopted the most radicalized public discourses. In its processions on the Prophet’s birthday this group asserted the legitimacy of the movement in general, while also attesting to the ascendency of its particular Sufi regional cult in the city. The radical rhetoric of its maulvi and lay preachers represented an attempt to mobilize support by evoking powerfully emotive images of a beleaguered Muslim world and asserting the determination of its leaders to confront this external persecution fearlessly and directly. On the whole, however, this radicalism involved no personal costs. None of the speakers were active in mainstream politics, where the votes of the wider English community or other ethnic minorities were essential for electoral success. The political battle for power in which they were involved were purely internal to the local or wider U.K. Pakistani community.

This radicalism could also be explained in terms of specific sectarian beliefs, as Modood argues (1990). In the Rushdie affair Barelwi followers were enraged by the attack on the prophet Muhammad, who is the subject of supreme adoration for Barelwis as for all Sufis; in the Gulf crisis, support for Saddam Hussein stemmed from their continuous opposition to the Wahabi movement and its Saudi rulers, regarded as the desecrators of saints’ shrines throughout Arabia, including that of the Prophet himself. Indeed, in both instances the radical position of the Barelwi encompassed followers in Pakistan as well as diasporic Pakistanis in Britain.

Yet this political radicalization of saintly followers, taken for granted by South Asian scholars, takes on a renewed significance when seen comparatively in a more global context. In the Middle East, Sufi saints and their cults have been regarded as politically dead for some time, and their very existence as a contemporary political force is denied. The accepted historical view on the Maghreb, for example, is that while anticolonial resistance was initially spearheaded by saintly tribal leaders, these were displaced by urban Islamic reform scholars whose hegemony has been irrevocably established (Colonna 1984). The cyclical process of oscillation between tribe and city, described by Ibn Khaldun in his seminal historical analysis, ceased: “Contrary to this ‘classical’ [Ibn Khaldunian oscillation] structure, the historic process observed in Algeria towards 1920 is irreversible. The pendulum comes to a halt on the left: Reformism acquires religious legitimacy for itself and outlawsc ecstatic religion” (Colonna 1984:116, emphasis added).

Colonna here follows Gellner and others in relegating to an obsolete past the opposition between tribe and city, saint and doctor, syncretism and reform, power/kingship and civilization/decadence, purity and literacy, pluralism and monism, hierarchy/intercession, and egalitarianism (see Gellner 1981:1–84, 1992:2–20; see also Geertz 1968). Although there is evidence in the Maghreb of continued Sufi urban and rural cultic activity, and even renewal of it (see Crapanzano 1973; Eickelman 1976; Gellner 1969; Gilsenan 1973, 1982; Lings 1961), the tendency has been to emphasize the decline and disempowerment of Sufism as a political force in the face of reform Islam. Since independence Islam has been state controlled in most Middle Eastern countries. Although research is scanty, the recent rise of “private” mosques is linked to the rise of radicalized (fundamentalist) reformers. Even where the new Islamic Front (FIS), fighting for control of the state (as in Algeria), appears to include in its leadership ranks men originating from saintly families, there is little evidence that these men have introduced Sufi notions of love, tolerance, and accommodation to temper the radical activism of the Islamists.9

In South Asia, in contrast to the Maghreb, the Reform Movement met with powerful organized opposition in defense of Sufi saints and the cultic practices surrounding saints’ tombs. This
counterreformation has come to be known as the Barelwi movement (see Metcalf 1982:296–14). As we have seen, it unites saints and scholars, pirs and maulwis, the charismatic elect and the knowledgeable doctors, within—and this is my key point—a single very loose organization. The scholars have their own Islamic seminaries, their own networks, their mosques, their religious establishment, and their political party.

Thus, in South Asia, at least two classes of “learned doctors” have emerged. The organizations (including mosques, seminaries, and Qur’an schools) of Reformer jurists and Saintly jurists share many formal properties and are locked in continuous religious controversy (on different types of ulama and saint see Sherani 1991). In my experience, “living” saints who are practicing mystics rarely partake in these scholarly disputations. They use the ulama to provide religious services, deliver sermons, and organize religious institutions, while they themselves concentrate on the organization of their orders, the recruitment of disciples, and the dispensing of divine blessing and healing to their devotees. Sometimes pirs are also learned men, while doctors sometimes become saints (see Malik 1990). On the whole, however, the saints disdain the ulama while relying heavily upon their services.

Thus, in contrast to the Maghreb, in Pakistan the battle for spiritual love and mystical ecstasy was never lost, despite the institutionalization of religious scholarship. It is a battle conducted on both sides by Sunni, sharī‘a-trained, learned doctors. As Zindapir himself explicitly puts it, and as is repeatedly emphasized in conversations with Barelwi ulama and Sufi khāliṣa, it is a battle between the “heart” and the mind, “love” and pedantic scholarship, mystical devotion and mere religious observance. Seen from a Sufi perspective, a poetics of divine love has been displaced by a lifeless literalism (see Malik 1990) in a semiotic struggle that is, importantly, a modern, contemporary battle. In the course of this apparently purely religious dialogue, broader political issues are debated, and it is to these that I now wish to turn.

**modernity and South Asian Islam**

The sectarian fragmentation of Islam in South Asia, as elsewhere in the Muslim world, was arguably caused by two related processes: the colonial conquest of Muslim empires, which affected the role of the ulama; and the encounter with Western modernity, and especially the spread of mass education and print capitalism, which created a class of educated lay political activists with strong religious convictions. The structural transformations and semiotic struggles among the Deobandis, Barelwis, and Jamaatis are grounded in these political transformations.

During the Mughal period the Islamic clerical establishment was in general fragmented and decentralized, relying on the powerful patronage of rulers and royal courts (Metcalf 1982:16–45). As in the Ottoman Empire religious experts acted as advisers, jurists, scribes, and administrators to the Mughals. The Reform movements, which arose in the context of the erosion of Muslim power in India, tended toward isolationism and separatism, seeking religious and communal autonomy rather than external confrontation (Metcalf 1982:147–153). The British colonial regime fostered its patronage relations with powerful saints (pirs), relying upon their political influence in rural areas. These saints long tended toward accommodation with the authorities rather than confrontation (Gilmartin 1979, 1984, 1988).

Yet it is evident that the ulama have always had their radicals, going against the dominant quiescent tendency: the 1857 uprising against the British, which marked the end of Muslim hegemony in India, did apparently involve at least some ulama (Metcalf 1982:82–84); it was followed by Sayyid Ahmad of Rae Bareli’s 19th-century jihad against the British in the NWFP (Metcalf 1982:52–63); charismatic mullâhs have now and then led irredentist or revivalist movements in the Frontier (see Ahmed 1991[1983]; Barth 1985). Later, in the early 20th century, the Khilafat movement, a millenarian movement that arose to save the Sultanate in response to the collapse of the Ottoman empire (Ahmad 1967), was spearheaded by ulama of the Farangi...
Mahall school in Lucknow, who activated their scholarly networks throughout India (see Robinson 1987), even mobilizing the Deobandi ulama (see Alavi 1988; Metcalf 1982). Both the latter movements shared a millenarian misperception of the contemporary realities of power relationships.

It was only with the emergence of modern anticolonial politics, however, that religious involvement in the politics of South Asia became more sustained and broadly based. Here it needs to be said that no purely secular Muslim politics has ever existed in the Indian subcontinent. Even though the Muslim League’s fight for Pakistan was essentially secular, as Alavi (1988) has argued persuasively, it was nevertheless conducted in a religious idiom. Moreover, the league relied on alliances with religious organizations (see Ahmad 1972:258–259; Gilmartin 1979; Hardy 1972; Robinson 1974). Although some sectarian groups, most notably Maududi’s, rejected the demands for the partition of British India (see Binder 1961:70–97), once the anticolonial movement gathered pace, and as independence seemed imminent, virtually all the various religious groups from landed charismatic saints to urban puritanical scholars supported the cause of liberty against repressive, external domination. The political issues of civil rights and democratic freedoms nevertheless remained the domain of the Muslim League and the modernists.

After Partition “liberty” of the liberal kind came to be buried in conservative religious politics. Whereas large rural saints engaged in quietist patronage power politics (see Sherani 1991), the ulama, many of whom became once more employees of the state, also founded political parties. These fought alongside and against each other for greater participation and influence in the state apparatus (see Ahmad 1972; Binder 1961; Iqbal n.d.; Malik 1989, 1990; Metcalf 1987). Irrespective of political affiliation, then, it has always seemed impossible to conduct a purely secular politics in Pakistan. Even the People’s Party, which won the elections in West Pakistan on a socialist ticket, utilized an Islamic idiom and appeared to have increasingly relied on saintly patronage to mobilize political support (see Sherani 1991). Nationalism in Pakistan is inextricably intertwined with Islam, the raison d’être for the very existence of the state. It has hitherto proved impossible to separate the two.

The sectarian fragmentation in South Asian Islam created a range of religious leaders: sober and determined puritanical Deobandi Reform scholars, autodidact Jamaat laypersons, pacifist saints, and fiery, populist Barelwi scholars and lay activists. Despite the very real differences among them, however, their shared interest remains, as historically it has always been, mainly to increase their political influence in the state or local community. This is true in Britain as well, where the concern is to increase the institutional power of Islam, particularly in state education. Religious leaders across the sectarian spectrum show little interest in civil liberties, economic equality, or democratic rights. These have always been associated in Pakistani politics with secular or “modernist” groups. Hence the central processes we need to disclose here are those which have moved these religious movements both in Britain and in Pakistan beyond the narrow aim of increased institutional influence. When and why, in other words, did a “dissenting” rhetoric of civil rights, democracy, equality and socialism expand beyond narrowly elitist Muslim modernist circles to become part of a broadly based, popular South Asian religious ideology?

modernity, lay activists, and South Asian British Islam

The key to this transformation is to be found in the interests of the third social element determining public discourse—the lay preachers voluntarily involved in mosque affairs. It is they who have, in the recent British Islamic revival, articulated grass roots sentiments and played a critical role in the rise of the current British movement of Islamic radicalism. “Loyalty ultimately belongs to God, and I say there should be justice, there should be equality, there should be understanding, there should be humanity.” This extract from a very long
speech by a British Pakistani community spokesman at a meeting organized by the Barelwi leaders of the Manchester Central Mosque reveals that the move from God to liberty and equality is not deductive; it is intuitive and emotional. We love God and the Prophet; therefore, as he went on to explain, we detest autocratic greedy leaders and reject Western imperialism. Like lay Methodist preachers responding to the predicaments of the industrial revolution, the men involved in mosque affairs in late 20th-century postindustrial Britain speak for ordinary people but not necessarily for the religious establishment of their particular brand of Islam (on the role of lay preachers in the Methodist labor sects see Hobsbawm 1959:126–149; see also Thompson 1963:430–440). Indeed, it is my impression that they speak with the same political voice, whatever Muslim religious movement or sect they happen to be affiliated with.

The lay preachers of the Barelwi movement, all Sufi followers, have introduced a radical change of rhetoric, one not of Islamic authoritarianism but of Islamic love, equality, and individual liberties. Yet the underlying tension between love and authoritarianism within the movement itself is also evident (as it was in Methodism). Barelwis, followers of saintly cultic traditions, do not need to be rich, learned, educated, or prominent. All they need in order to qualify as good Muslims is to love the Prophet of Islam and his awliya (his chosen “friends”—that is, Sufi saints). The movement is essentially an egalitarian one. Yet it is fraught with contradictions. In practice, spiritually powerful saints command a hierarchical organization and acknowledge class, power, and hierarchy, while denying the legitimacy of temporal authority (see Schimmel 1975:347; see also Metcalf 1982:168–169); temporal leaders and bureaucrats are expected to treat them with the respect due only to “men of God.”

Given the fact that Islamic scholarship is rated as inferior to gnostic knowledge within these Sufi orders, it is not surprising that in Britain, as in South Asia, the practitioners of ‘ilm are regarded with disdain as either pedantic or ignorant fools. In the past many village mullahs were indeed relatively uneducated, even in Islamic studies. The mullahs tended, moreover, to originate from castes inferior to those of saints or landowners and rulers. Contemporary urban Barelwi ulama at major mosques are, however, educated and articulate and indeed are often aspiring saints. In Manchester the radical maulvi of the Central mosque, a Mughal by caste origin, was a charismatic, educated man. In his radicalism he was clearly fighting a personal battle to assert his equality with members of the wealthy business and professional elite of the community, most of whom originated from landowning castes and shared the disdain for ulama in general, and Barelwi ulama in particular, so prevalent in South Asia.

There is thus a tension within the Barelwi movement itself among the realities of strict organizational hierarchy, the ambiguous position of the more educated, high-caste ulama who run large urban mosques, and the “pir-brothers”—ordinary followers of a single saint who conceive of themselves as equal, as all Muslims are equal, irrespective of wealth or family and caste origin. The populist rhetoric of the ulama, caught in the middle, is thus explicable partly in terms of their precarious, contradictory, intercalary status. This perhaps explains why they are also the Barelwi group most active in religious politics in Pakistan and in the extension of their religious party into Britain.

At the same time it is also true that in some orders saints and their followers avoid political involvement and prefer to articulate a tolerant, encompassing ethos. This was the case for Zindapir, a Naqshbandi saint, who instructed his followers in Britain not to meddle in politics. Despite this, Sufi Abdullah, Zindapir’s khalifa in Britain and a living saint in his own right, encouraged his followers to join in the national demonstration in London at the height of the Rushdie affair, while his management committee of lay members had extensive connections to the Birmingham Labour Party. The management committee, composed of lay members with local standing, hosted public meetings during ‘urs and ‘id-milad-un nabi festivals at which politicians and community leaders debated political events of the day. The tone at one of those
meetings that I attended during the Rushdie affair was nevertheless relatively moderate (see P. Werbner 1992).

The relative moderation of Zindapir’s followers indicates that Barelwis cannot be understood as a monolithic, united movement with a single, dominant discourse. The tension between hierarchy and equality, pacifism and jihad, and Islamic tolerance and narrow myopia is played out differently in different political and cultural contexts, and in different regional cultic orders focused on particular saints.

This mixture of hierarchy and equality is, however, politically potent. It is, paradoxically, precisely because their saints are spiritually superior by birth and ascetic practice to temporal, powerful, wealthy monarchs and rulers that followers and disciples feel able to challenge the legitimacy of those leaders and to make demands for equal political and economic rights. (Thus saintly authority substitutes for scriptural authority. See Gellner 1992.)

To sum up, rather than a neat, logical, dualism positing a series of corresponding opposites—saints and scholars, and so forth—what exists empirically in Britain is a complex set of three interdependent social categories—saints, scholars, and lay preachers—conjoined within a single movement. Together they negotiate the rhetorical narratives of contemporary religious dissent. The oscillation is an internal one—between quietism or conservatism and radical populism—and it is related, above all, to the interpretations of contemporary political events and constellations as these are perceived to impinge on the actors, either directly or as members of broader Muslim communities, national and transnational.

This was evident in many of the speeches by Barelew followers I recorded. The speeches drew on a repertoire of familiar English political slogans: exploitation, racism, class oppression, injustice, liberation, civil rights, identity, integrity, as well as clearly Islamic notions and rhetorical tropes. This rhetoric of modernity is familiar to local Muslims from the Urdu, as well as from the English press and media regularly read or viewed by immigrants in what has probably become a global set of political calls for “justice” (on these speeches in detail, see P. Werbner 1994; more generally, Ahmed 1992:195–196).

The commitment to equality can generate many different discourses. The discourses I recorded at a public meeting in Manchester during the Gulf War had a peculiarly “British” ring: they denounced racism and media distortions and called for equality for women, multiculturalism, and ethnic rights. In Pakistan, Reform scholars tend to attack Islamic caste practices, ostentatious weddings, the worship of the Prophet, the adoration of saints’ tombs, the laxity of women, economic usury and interest, and political corruption, and to stress female modesty, public honesty, and the payment of the charitable zakat. These themes are taken up by some of the young Muslim associations associated with the Jamaat and Islamist tendencies in Britain. They were only secondary, however, in public speeches made by Sufi lay preachers.

Yet a similar innovatory dissenting rhetoric is evidently being generated in contemporary Pakistan also. Thus Ahmed quotes from a letter written in Urdu in 1976 by the Mullah of Wazirastan, a Barelew follower, containing similar references to “exploitation” and the “power and light of democracy,” that apparently echoed the socialist electioneering rhetoric of the Pakistan People’s Party (to which the Mullah was, ironically, opposed; see Ahmed 1991:73).

Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that the speakers at the Manchester meeting were undoubtedly appealing to a British sensibility. The conjunction between an Islamic rhetoric of love and a radical socialist rhetoric—which would not have been out of place at a Labour Party Conference—does nevertheless raise the question of whether this conjunction might not perhaps represent a step toward the future secularization of Muslims in Britain. At present, the values articulated draw their legitimacy from religious imperatives but at the same time they are also regarded as self-evident truths which need no specific scriptural references for their validation.
It thus seems likely that as long as political confrontations in the Middle East, Kashmir, and Bosnia continue, and as long as anti-Muslim or anti-immigrant sentiments and practices persist in Britain, the conjunction between Islam and socialist-liberal values will not be ideologically severed. Religion and ethics are conjoined within a single discursive formation by the ethnic and class dimensions of these confrontations. The relative autonomy of each set of arguments, the Islamic and the dissenting, does, however, point to a potential line of severance between religion and ethical values of modernity and civil society. For a younger generation of Pakistanis growing up in Britain the definition of what Islam is and means may well come to be increasingly constituted not by the Qur’an and Hadith, but by dissenting political ideologies. Just as the foundation texts of English working-class dissent combined Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress with Paine’s The Rights of Man (Hobsbawm 1959:145; Thompson 1963:34), so, too, the British Muslims’ foundation texts increasingly fuse a multicultural rhetoric of antiracism and equal opportunity with the ethical edicts of the Qur’an and Hadith.

The speeches at the Manchester meeting evoked Islamic theological tropes, especially the adoration of the Prophet and his exemplary life, with a stress on the pride of bearing an Islamic identity and the uniqueness of being Muslim. At the same time the radical challenge to the established order was unmistakable. The attack was three-pronged: against the injustice of international law and global decision making, both of which ignored Muslim national interests; against the corrupt illegitimate regimes of the Gulf states, denying the economic rights of “ordinary Muslims”; and against British legal discrimination, which denied local Muslims their basic citizenship rights. If the last item concerned immediate local interests, speakers clearly felt that their specific predicaments could only be told in a broader, more global allegory of dissent. Hence the unmitigated radicalism of participants.

Such popular sentiments, expressed by lay preachers responsive to media and antiracist discourses, necessarily come to motivate the religious rhetoric of the ulama, and the mosque clerics as well, if only because of both groups’ continuing concern to defend their vulnerable status. The result is a rising crescendo of rhetorical dissent. As public forums allowing for the formulation of these innovative dissenting ideologies, the place of urban mosques is critical.

In this respect a further instructive parallel may be drawn between the late 18th- and early 19th-century Methodist “labour sects” in Britain and current Barelwi Islamic dissent. Like Methodist chapels, urban mosques in Britain are centers of communal affairs, drawing labor migrants-turned-immigrants and sojourners into communal activities. The mosque is the base for teaching collective discipline, organization, and internal fund raising, the springboard for regional and national political alliances, and a training ground in polemics and adversary politics. Mosques link town and country and constitute public arenas for political debate. Many of the lay speakers are self-employed businessmen who, as recent immigrants, are excluded from other public arenas. Their powerlessness has been underlined in recent years by the Rushdie affair, the Gulf War, Bosnia, Kashmir, Palestine, and the general increase in racial harassment.

This points also to the limitations of any approach that explains current responses by privileging differences in South Asian theological positions over emergent ideologies in Britain. Any purely culturalist approach that stresses specific “beliefs” (such as adoration of the Prophet) without considering the social organizational conditions for the production of discursive practices is in danger of reifying the past (as does Ruthven 1991, but there is also danger in pragmatic analyses; see Samad 1992).

In Britain the intercalary position of urban ulama makes them responsive to the views of their congregations, even when their salaries are externally paid. This became evident during the Gulf War. Attempts by the Saudi government to muzzle Saudi-funded ulama, the majority of whom expressed public support for Saddam Hussein, completely failed, and the Saudi government subsequently decided to withdraw its funding from British mosques. The episode high-
lighted the extent to which it is local agendas, set by lay preachers in Britain fighting local battles for power and influence, that shape the rhetoric of religious clerics.

British Muslim immigrants are caught in structural contradictions generated by their position as sojourner-strangers wishing to advance themselves economically while sustaining their autonomous culture and religion. The predicament experienced cuts across class and religious divisions and encompasses a wide range of communal leaders from different Muslim sectarian groups. Their rhetoric, conjoined with ulama interests in extending their local influence, generate, in effect, a convergence in the public rhetoric of the different Islamic sects, as oppositional discourses “travel” across sectarian divisions.

As Modood (1990) has argued, however, it is important to recognize the particular contours of Barelwi “fundamentalism” that make it quite different from that of other Islamist movements. True, the dissenting rhetoric of Barelwi lay preachers and clerics appropriates the poetics of political Islam in its fiery calls for Islamic dominance and its violent images of death and blood (see P. Werbner 1990b). Yet for Barelwis who invoke this rhetoric, vocal protest is performative, a powerful verbal “magical” utterance, an invocation of Islamic utopias, made in the sight of God, which necessitates no further, more practical organization for action. In this respect Barelwi followers differ in their political and material agenda from the Islamist movements since their narratives are to be interpreted as ritual enactments through which they reconstitute local predicaments, rooted in racist and economic exclusions, as a cosmic battle between Islam and the West. This “magical” displacement “resolves” by way of dramatic oratory the “contradictions which remain hidden and unresolved” in their positioning as sojourner-strangers in a secular-Christian state (Cohen 1980:82).17

Without doubt, the intention of lay Muslim preachers in their simultaneous incorporation and critique of Western discourses is to “disrupt paradigmatic associations and therefore to undermine the very coherence of the system contested” (Comaroff 1985:189). Thus, both in the Rushdie affair and in the Gulf War, lay preachers deconstructed Western claims to rationality by exposing the false premises of these claims and proposing an Islamic counterhegemonic rational discourse in its place (on the rhetorical dimensions of Western claims to rationality, see Herzfeld 1993; see also R. Werbner 1994). As Comaroff perceptively recognizes, however, these “purposive reconstructions invariably work with images which already bear meaning; . . . as a result, subversive bricolages always perpetuate as they change” (1985:189; see also Hebdige 1979).

Both the oratory of Barelwi followers and the symbolic gestures they deploy dramatically, from fist raising in shows of power to high-pitched shouts of “Allah-hu Akbar,” gloss over the multiple contradictions they experience as stranger-citizen-workers or economically mobile but marginalized intellectuals. Despite such apparently “fanatical” demonstrations, the pragmatic commitment to establish themselves economically and politically in Britain is evidently a paramount consideration, one endorsed by the saints who head the various orders to which they belong.18 As in the Khilafat movement in India, radical public orations, such as those following the publication of The Satanic Verses or preceding the Gulf War, are transient magically efficacious acts, reflexively symbolic performances rather than sustained political programs or new modes of social praxis. To say this, however, is to deny neither the passionate commitment they express nor their challenge to dominant symbolic codes. As Melucci argues, such movements are innovative in creating “a different way of perceiving and naming the world” (1989:75). Triggered by periodic moral panics, ethnic mobilization occurs whenever the aporias of being a stranger-immigrant are exposed beneath the opaque surface of daily life.

In the crescendo of dramatic rhetoric expressed during such periodic mobilizations, ideas of religious redemption and millennium are merged by the lay preachers of the Barelwi movement with clarion calls for equality and democracy; the moral panic then gradually fades away, leaving only traces of these rhetorical tropes as the vast majority of Sufi followers return to their
everyday concerns and activities and continue to invest in the education of their children and the expansion of their businesses.

The speeches create an imaginative identification between British Muslims' particular cause—the promotion of Islam in Britain in order to preserve an Islamic identity for future generations—with the global cause of Muslims everywhere. Similarly, the fight against religious legal discrimination in Britain is represented as an extension of a broader, international fight against Western global domination. To overcome this domination and internal decadence, the community must first change itself, a central tenet of the Islamic Modernists (see Ahmad 1967:262). Here the close connections between South Asian Sufi, Modernist, and Islamist approaches become apparent: all three groups regard the world as potentially transformable rather than immutable and divinely predetermined. The need is for hard work, adjustment, and self-reform. Globally, the national divisions within the Arab world are artificial, colonial inventions, exploited by the West in order to extend its domination. The rulers of these Arab nations are mere colonial puppets. But redemption can be achieved through individual and communal commitment to the forging of a new, unified Islamic empire that will be powerful enough to meet the West on its own grounds.

We see here how apparent oppositions between Islamic sectarian groups can only be comprehended within a single field of action and signification. The challenge is to analyze this semiotic struggle both historically and structurally and to recognize that religious and nationalist movements emerge reactively in contrast and competition to each other. This, as I have demonstrated here, requires a transformational analysis of the relations of agency, power, and ideological opposition within and between movements, as these are played out in a single semantic field. The ethical notions of redemption, personhood, sacred space, power, and morality each sectarian group holds cannot be understood as existing independently, in and for themselves, but only relationally, in creative opposition.

My approach accords with that of anthropologists who demonstrate the way religious movements within Christianity and Judaism are constituted historically through transformational grammars of individual and communal redemption. This is evident in analyses of the evolution of Christian separatist movements in Zimbabwe (see R. Werbner 1989:290–323) and of Zionist movements of redemption in Israel (Paine 1989), which both resemble the rise of South Asian Islamic movements in being the product of oppositional symbolic transformations. As a result of these processes, creative visions of millennium come to constitute arguments of identity between social groups which both mirror and oppose each other.

For some of the Islamist ("fundamentalist") groups, both in Britain and throughout the Muslim world, the rejection of capitalism and other dimensions of modernity is a sustained, long-term practical project. Not so, I have argued here, for British Sufi followers. For them, economic progress, equality, and the rights of citizenship are just as important a dream as that of reestablishing the true Muslim state. As Islamist discourses have "traveled," to use Edward Said's (1983) apt phrase, they have been appropriated by religious movements espousing quite different grammars of redemption. To use the term "fundamentalism" indiscriminately for all those deploying the rhetoric of political Islam is therefore to misrecognize the quite distinctive place and meaning such a rhetoric occupies in each movement. For followers of Sufi saints, utopian hopes are tempered by pragmatic realism, individual hard work, and personal ambition. Rather than revolution, their enunciations of liberal and Islamist ideologies, of tolerance and love, and of nationalism and protest reflect not only their devotion and faith in Islam but also their determination to claim their rightful place as full citizens in contemporary Britain.

notes

Acknowledgments. This article is based on research carried out with the assistance of ESRC(UK) and Leverhulme Trust grants. I would like to thank both bodies for their generous assistance. Earlier versions of the making of Muslim dissent
1. In Britain the political radicalization of British Pakistanis, which followed the publication of The Satanic Verses in 1988 and the Gulf crisis in 1990, has mainly been described in terms of the religious adoration of the Prophet felt by working-class, marginalized Pakistanis (Asad 1990; Fischer and Abedi 1990a; Modood 1990; Ruthven 1991). No attempt has been made to recognize the innovative conjuncture of British and religious South Asian rhetorics that the two crises revealed, and that cut across class and sectarian divisions.

2. Recent anthropological discussions of Muslim society have explored the site production of authoritative Islamic textual knowledge and rhetoric (see Antoun 1989; Eckelmann 1985; Ewing 1988; Fischer and Abedi 1990b; Galfney 1987; Lambek 1990). Scriptural knowledge is necessarily the subject of exegetical and moral debate, and this implies an essential ambiguity (see especially Bowen 1989; Ewing 1988; Fischer and Abedi 1990b). Thus a key aim of these studies has been to explore the extent to which the symbolic, moral, and political authority of expert interpretation is a socially mediated form of power. If textual knowledge is always an indexical appropriation (Lambek 1990), it follows that the rise of educated laypersons as religious interpreters has transformed the articulation between religious and secular knowledge (Eckelmann 1992), a feature particularly evident in the new Islamist movements (for a discussion of these see Ayubi 1991).

3. In this respect the cult controlled by Zindapir bore very great similarity to the guild-based Sufi cults reportedly widespread in the Ottoman Empire. It is perhaps worth noting here that while many Sufi saints amass large fortunes, the cynical manipulation of religious belief by some for economic self-interest (see Sherani 1991) should not be regarded as undermining the faith followers have in the selflessness of the saint. It also needs to be recognized that saints play a redistributive role vis-a-vis their disciples in relation to the economy.

4. An extensive literature deals with the issue of whether there are Muslim “castes” in South Asia. For a review see Lindholm 1986; on urban castes in Pakistan see Fischer 1991; and on the caste debate in Pakistan and among overseas Pakistanis see P. Werbner 1990a:81–121.

5. I use the term “cult” advisedly to refer to organizational dimensions of Pakistani Sufi orders as hierarchical associations focused on a central shrine of saint’s lodge. On sufi regional cults see Trimingham 1971. Trimingham calls such regional cults tariqa; this term was not used in Pakistan, however, where regional cults simply appended the name of the lodge or founder onto the broader tariqa name. Thus the regional cult I studied was known as “Ghamkolia Naqshbandia.” On regional cult organization and sacred centrality more generally see R. Werbner 1977 and 1989.

6. On the ramifying network of institutions and organizations affiliated to Jamaat-i-islami see Andrews 1993.

7. Iqbal studied philosophy in Cambridge, England, and in Germany and was particularly influenced by Nietzsche and Bergson. His religious ideas have been analyzed by Annemarie Schimmel (1989), the great scholar of Islamic mysticism.

8. The following sections develop an argument that appears in a more abbreviated form in P. Werbner 1994b.

9. A recent book on the rise of Islamist movements in Algeria (Roudadji 1990) seems to imply that some leaders are drawn from old maraboutic families; but if this is so, the indications are that they have abandoned the stress on mystical knowledge in favor of a “fundamentalist” orientation. Thus the tripartite division—mystic, scholar, layman—coexisting within a single organization appears to be absent in modern-day Algerian Islamist movements.

10. The counterreformation was led by Maulana Ahmed Riza Khan Barelwi, a man with connections to the Farangi Mahall family who also recognized the supremacy of innate (as against scholarly) knowledge (see Robinson 1984, 1987). Indeed, illiteracy in Islam may signal powerful knowledge. The Prophet of Islam is believed to have been illiterate. The Farangi Mahalls were followers of an illiterate saint. Robinson reports that all the members of this learned family “regarded their association with ’Abd al-Razzaq as crucial to their spiritual well-being, while the sajjadas of his shrine at Bansa some thirty miles from Lucknow were careful to pay the scholars of Farangi Mahall especial respect” (Robinson 1987:7; also 1984). This adoration of an illustrious saint has to be set against the family’s remarkable scholarly achievements. Its members were authors of literally hundreds of books on Islamic jurisprudence, logic, and philosophy, proprietors of a famous madrasa and pioneers of a new Islamic educational curriculum. Yet they continued to officiate at the annual ’urs celebrations at the saint’s tomb, as well as delivering sermons at the ’urs of many other leading saints (Robinson 1987:6, 15).

11. Thus, too, it seems evident, for example, that Ahmed Riza Khan himself achieved saintly charisma during his lifetime (see Metcalf 1982:300, 306–307). Ahmed’s account of the Mullah of Waziristan also indicates that the cleric was an aspiring saint (Ahmed 1991[1983]).

12. Interestingly, however, Ahmed Riza Khan himself virulently opposed the movement (Metcalf 1982:313), perhaps because of its Hindu and Deobandi backing. Under the British the Farangi Mahalls were divided between the Bahr ul-Ulums (tending to be pro-British) and the rest, who were anti-colonial.
Their political activism was expressed in the Khilafat movement. The family's political activism is also manifested in the fact that in 1919 its members founded the first political organization of Indian ulama, the Jamiatal-Oulama-i Hind (The Organization of the Indian Ulama).

13. On moral fabulations of current affairs and a more detailed presentation of some of the speeches, see P. Werbner 1994a.

14. Here, however, one needs also to recognize the link to a "multicultural" discourse. Equality is regarded as a matter of equal recognition and respect for Islam in the public domain in Britain, a recognition currently denied by the British Blasphemy Laws (which protect only Anglican religious sensibilities) and by the impunity with which The Satanic Verses, as interpreted by British Muslims, was allowed to ridicule Islam publicly (see Asad 1993:239–268).

15. There is a good deal of evidence that racial attacks and murders since the Rushdie affair and the Gulf War have targeted Muslims in Britain more than other ethnic minorities.

16. I suggest that parallels may be drawn to the Iranian revolution in which the urban bazaaris played an important role. There, too, analysts have shown, Shi'ah Islam shifted from a quiescent symbolic interpretation of martyrdom as suffering, to an activist view of martyrdom as personal sacrifice for the sake of a cause (see Hegland 1987:242–243). The radicalization of urban Iranians arose in response to a sense of direct attack by the state on the clergy and the urban lower-middle and working classes who had been relatively autonomous and mobile socially (Beeman 1983).

17. My usage of the term "magical" alludes to the locutionary power of words as pragmatic enactments. The notion is utilized in early work by the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies to refer to signifying practices associated with youth culture which were said to mask experienced social contradictions (see, for example, Cohen 1980:82 on working-class "magical" displacements); for an early discussion of the magical "power of words" by an anthropologist see Tambiah 1968.

18. This worldly pragmatism is also manifested in the history of the Farangi Mahall in India, who, like present-day British Barelwis, were saintly followers. The family had always preached the need for tolerance and flexibility around a "core" of Islamic custom (Robinson 1987:21–23). By the 1920s its members had begun to seek a Western education (Robinson 1987:23). In the course of the following 50 years they ceased to be Islamic scholars and became civil servants, lawyers, doctors, artists, journalists, and university teachers (Robinson 1987:241). In 1969 the madrasa finally closed its doors.

19. By contrast, the U.K. Islamic Mission has a persistent and sustained politico-religious agenda. It is also important to note that British Muslim participation in national politics has been steadily increasing (see Anwar 1991; Samad 1993).

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