Between Tradition and Transition: An Islamic Seminary, or *Dar al-Uloom* in Modern Britain

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Abstract: Based on detailed ethnographic fieldwork, this article provides an insider account of life inside a British *Dar al-Uloom*, or a traditional Islamic religious seminary, for the first time. Given that *Dar al-Ulooms* play an important role in the British Muslim landscape in providing training for religious leadership, the article argues that, far from the *Dar al-Uloom* tradition being static, it is undergoing continuous adaptation and change. After mapping the historical and geographical lineage of the modern *Dar al-Uloom*, the article explores its pedagogy. The postural tradition and *adab* (broadly translated as comportment or code of behavior) embody the notion of humility, as the classroom has become the locale for balancing a curriculum with depth and coverage, especially given the challenges young Muslims in Britain are facing. The current students of the *Dar al-Uloom* will become imams and faith leaders primarily responsible for addressing the changing needs of young Muslims. What has emerged is a traditional *Dar al-Uloom* that is in a dialogical relationship both with the modern world outside of it and within it. There is the need to embody a '*tarbiyyatic* pedagogy' that is one that emphasises the student-teacher relationship where the student is transformed in the process of learning while interpreting Islam through the lens of the Deobandi universe. Ultimately, it will be the younger generation of teachers who determine the particular trajectory of the *Dar al-Uloom*.

Keywords: Deoband; *Dar al-Uloom*; pedagogy; tradition; ethnography; Islamic education; tarbiyyah; British Muslims

1. Introduction

The 1960s and 1970s witnessed the arrival of large numbers of South Asian Muslim migrants to the U.K., primarily for economic reasons but also because of a sense of loyalty to the British Empire after the devastating impact of two World Wars (Scott-Baumann and Cheruvallil-Contractor 2017, p. 18). The migrants included those from the Deobandi, Tablighi and Barelvi movements. However, it was the Deobandis, as they are called, who have been the most active in the 'transplanting' of traditional Islamic seminaries, or *Dar al-Ulooms*, in modern Britain. The name *Dar al-Uloom* is an Arabic expression that translates into 'house of knowledge or Islamic sciences'. The generic word '*madrassa*' can also be used, though in the British Deobandi nomenclature, the *Dar al-Uloom* refers to a particular type of teaching institution: that of higher learning. Their history can be traced back to colonial India where the reformist *'ulama*, or religious scholars, sought to revive Islam by training well-educated believers to instruct the community in the true practice of Islam to create what Geertz (1968, p. 62) referred to as "scriptural Islam". They were part of a broader spectrum of revivalist movements that manifested in a visible expression during the 18th and 19th centuries in Arabia, and earlier during the 17th century in India. The most significant personality in the reform movement in India was Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi (d. 1625), who taught a reformed Sufi doctrine and practice that differed materially from the later Wahhabi movement in Arabia (Rahman 1966; Titus 1930; Lapidus 2002). During the 18th century, with the Mogul empire largely in decline, Shah Wali Allah of Delhi (d. 1762), often described as the greatest

Islamic scholar India ever produced, proposed a system with "a broad, humanistic sociological base, which is overlain by a doctrine of social and economic justice in Islamic terms and crowned by a Sufi world view" (Rahman 1966, p. 203; Moj 2015). Inspired by his philosophy, the aim of Deoband was to create an "interiorized reflexive religious consciousness" (Birt and Lewis 2011, p. 92) to create a shift from external enforcement of religious practice to personal ownership of reformation and rectification, via proper modes of behavior and conformity. The founding of the reform seminary of Deoband in North India in 1867 had a mission to "strengthen one's own identity, to internalise excellent human qualities, and to realise one's potential" (Moosa 2015, p. 4; Metcalf 1982; Rizvi 1980). For Muhammad Qasim Zaman (1999), the primary objective of Deoband has been the conservation of the classical Islamic texts and sciences, and not textual innovation. The other revival movement of significance is the Barelwi School, which follows the Hanafi School of law with the Deobandis, but places a greater emphasis on 'folk' Islam with a focus on Sufism, veneration of saints, and popular practices of festive displays (Metcalf 1982). Finally, there is the Ahle Hadith movement that shares some affinity with the teachings of the Wahhabi movement and broadly does not follow a particular school of law (*madhab*). These three movements are in contrast to the modernists, inspired by Sayyid Ahmad Khan, who argue that the only way for Muslims to reclaim their former glory is to return back to the ideas of the Qur'an that encouraged studying the universe and using the spirit of scientific inquiry, something that had to be taken from the West (Rahman 1984). In essence, what was being sought was a 'Weltanschauung' that was compatible with the Qur'an and the West but served a dual purpose of protecting Islam from Orientalism and liberating it from the religious establishment (Bakar 1999).

2. Deobandis in Britain

Within 30 years of its founding, Deobandi graduates had established 40 branch schools, making the Deobandi approach a distinct style, or *maslak*, of Indian Islam. Ebrahim Moosa defined the *maslak* as "a virtuous temperament embedded in an elaborate narrative, one that etched on their *madrasa* franchise a distinctive blend of theological convictions, intellectual style, and ascetic pious practice derived from 18th and 19th century predecessors." (Moosa 2015, p. 104). Its graduates have been involved in establishing seminaries all over the globe (Reetz 2007). In Britain, two of the earliest Deobandi seminaries were established at Bury in 1975 and Dewsbury in 1982 (Geaves 1996; Gilliat-Ray 2005). According to Geaves (2015), there are 30 seminaries in Britain, of which some 80% of graduates are from Deobandi seminaries (Birt and Lewis 2011). The figure is likely to be much greater since those that provide formal education to those over the age of 16 are not required to register and there are increasing numbers of part-time and online courses being provided by alumni to cater to an ever-increasing demand.

Whereas books have been published on seminaries in the Muslim world, the *Dar al-Ulooms* of Britain are the least researched from the various institutions that provide religious education in Britain (Gilliat-Ray 2005). A handful of authors have written about *Dar al-Ulooms* in Britain (Birt 2005, 2006; Birt and Lewis 2011; Geaves 1996; Gilliat-Ray 2005; Lewis and Hamid 2018), yet none of them provided a detailed ethnographic account of the *Dar al-Ulooms* and young British Muslim experiences first hand: "Few scholars have documented the origins, curriculum, or 'culture' of *Dar al-Uloom* and other Islamic colleges, let alone begun to understand the complex social and religious processes that lead a young person to their doors." (Gilliat-Ray 2006, p. 55).

Sahin (2013) remarked that any discussion to rethink Islamic education must be based on the experiences of those people who are part of the pedagogical process. However, gaining access to *Dar al-Ulooms* has been difficult. A number of explanations have been offered as to why this is the case. The socio historical milieu of the foundation of the *Dar al-Ulooms* in India and the way the migrant Muslim community became insular in order to shield themselves as a minority in an alien culture are important considerations. Gilliat-Ray (2005), in her paper, 'Closed Worlds: (Not) Accessing Deobandi *Dar al-Uloom* in Britain' provided a number of explanations during her unsuccessful attempt to negotiate access to *Dar al-Ulooms*. They include the current socio-political climate facing Muslims in Britain and the general antipathy of *'ulama* toward social scientific research. However, given the

prominent role the *Dar al-Ulooms* play in the British Muslim religious landscape, there is, to adapt a phrase from Geaves (2012), a need to uncover the narratives that contribute to "the symbolic construction of the walls of British *Dar al-Ulooms*." It is with this intent that I was the first to gain access and conduct detailed ethnographic fieldwork over the course of a year inside a British *Dar al-Uloom*. This was facilitated by my role as an 'insider' and my positionality as an alumnus. Recognising that "studying one's own culture is indeed very different from studying a foreign culture, and theoretical and even epistemological implications of such study are profound" (Ohnuki-Tierney 1984, p. 584), I adopted a reflexive approach to my research field where "only honest disclosure of the researcher's 'position' will allow the reader to assess the substance of the ethnographic report" (Salzman 2002, p. 807). The inclusion of the 'ethnographic self' (Collins and Gallinat 2010) is an important tool in mediating the contradiction between objectivity and subjectivity as "it mediates a contradiction within the discipline between personal and scientific authority" (Clifford and Marcus 1986, p. 32). Moreover, my own subjectivities in the gathering and analysis of my data required consideration, particularly as "there is a long-standing debate in ethnography about the analytical tightrope between familiarity and strangeness" (Coffey 1999, p. 47). Recognising that good educational ethnography "makes the familiar strange" (Delamont et al. 2010) and there are few studies in religious schools, for Jews, Catholics, evangelicals, or Muslims, that are not used for contrastive purposes as they should be, I spent time at two Christian theological colleges to observe how religious training occurs within that tradition. This was the first time a Muslim was immersed in such a setting in the U.K. Secondly, 'personal distancing' in the form of spending 10 years away from the *Dar al-Uloom* in various 'sites' including university, a corporate environment, and teaching in a secondary school, helped to bring greater clarity and depth to my research (Labaree 2002; Ohnuki-Tierney 1984).

An insider is able absorb what Clifford Geertz refers to as 'experience near' concepts where "ideas and the realities they disclose are naturally and dissolubly bound up together" (Geertz 1974, p. 30). This familiarity and 'cultural competence' allows one to see from the native's point of view, since insiders have experienced a degree of socialisation in their field and have emotive experiences (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Hodkinson 2005; Swisher 1996). However, outsiders "cannot have the direct, intuitive sensitivity that alone makes empathic understanding possible" (Merton 1972, p. 15). My credibility with the *Dar al-Uloom* also facilitated greater openness and candidness with my participants:

> In effect, because the wider social structure classifies the researcher and informants in a similar or identical fashion, this creates greater confidence between the parties . . . One of the results of this trust and exposure to the most intimate of details is that the insider researcher is able to appreciate the full complexity of the social world at hand. The result is a potentially accurate portrayal, rather than a simplistic caricature. (Hockey 1993, p. 405)

As Ohnuki-Tierney (1984) suggested, insiders have the advantage of informants not having to perform for them—they can "blend into situations, making them less likely to alter the research setting" (Hockey 1993, p. 204).

This research aimed, for the first time, to offer a detailed insider account of religious training occurring at the *Dar al-Uloom* and is underpinned by three questions: what (or who) inspires young British Muslims to acquire a deep personal understanding of their faith; what are the processes of intellectual, spiritual, and cultural formation within a British *Dar al-Uloom*; and to what extent does this training prepare students for religious leadership roles in modern Britain?

My research involved extensive fieldwork where the researcher is immersed with the people studied "in order to document and interpret their distinctive way of life, and the beliefs and values integral to it" (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007, p. 1). The aim was to capture the everyday lived reality inside a traditional *Dar al-Uloom*. This was achieved primarily through participant observation and interviews. Participant observation included lesson observation, sleeping over at the *Dar al-Uloom*, sitting in on meetings, and participating in trips and visits. The interviews, conducted toward the end of fieldwork, complemented participant observation in that they provided both an opportunity to check my inferences and explore themes that had emerged from the data. This approach was informed

by grounded-theory where theory is 'discovered' from the data (Glaser and Strauss 2017). Around 25 in-depth, face-to-face, recorded interviews were conducted with students, teachers, management staff, and Principals of other *Dar al-Ulooms* in Britain. All my data was uploaded to NVivo and coded thematically. Ultimately, 20 parent codes emerged with finer sub-codes for each entry. The data in this paper are based partly on two parent codes: knowledge and pedagogy.

For an insider, the challenges of access involved an element of negotiation with the Principal and long periods of consultation with scholars affiliated with the *Dar al-Uloom*. However, because I had an existing relationship with the teachers at the *Dar al-Uloom* and the Principal felt strongly that the outside world should come to know what actually occurs in a *Dar al-Uloom*, access was granted. Recognising the responsibility to my research participants to protect their identity, from each other as well as those outside the *Dar al-Uloom*, I decided to anonymise their names. In the interests of being completely transparent, I disclosed my researcher identity to my participants. This was achieved by presenting to all the staff at the outset my research topic and the reasons for its importance. Any participant could opt-out at any stage during the fieldwork. Before commencing my research, I gained formal approval from the School Research Ethics Committee (SREC). The presentation here sketches part of a much larger and detailed piece of research. Two points ought to be emphasised. This research substantially advances any prior research about *Dar al-Ulooms* or their graduates, which has typically been short-term and interview-based. Secondly, recognising that intra-*Dar al-Uloom* differences exist and that this research is based on ethnographic fieldwork on one *Dar al-Uloom*, it should not be taken as a general depiction of all the *Dar al-Ulooms* in the U.K. Each *Dar al-Uloom*—much like universities—is unique.

3. The *Dar al-Uloom*

Aside from offering the traditional Islamic course, the *Darul al-Uloom* offers secondary education and Advanced (A)-levels. According to its website, 1800 boys have studied at the *Dar al-Uloom* since its inception and the current roll is 465 boys with 50% being residential, while the remainder live locally. It has around 13 staff members who teach the *dars-i nizami* syllabus (details below) and a further seven school teachers. It is located in the North of England and is one of the larger *Dar al-Ulooms* in Britain. It is an independent school and is registered as a charity. At its most recent OFSTED inspection, which is an independent, non-ministerial government department that reports directly to Parliament, it was rated as 'an outstanding school' in 2017. The social care inspection report in 2015 stated that its boarding facilities were 'outstanding'. As for the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) which is a qualification normally taken by most UK students at the end of compulsory education, it has has consistently been ranked in the top three in the town despite receiving no government funding. Such drive for results and increased professionalisation are bound to impact the *Dar al-Uloom* generally and its traditional pedagogy particularly. The *Dar al-Uloom* has listed a number of aims on its website that include providing "a high quality of Islamic education and training to degree level standard, commensurate with provision of sound academic and secular education, and vocational training to Advanced Level". To apply, students must complete an application form online. This is then be followed by an assessment and an interview if they are applying for the school. For post-16 students, there is only an interview.

4. The Curriculum

The traditional curriculum taught at the *Dar al-Uloom*, the *dars-i nizami*, traces its roots back Mulla Nizam al-Din (d. 1748) and is broadly seen as following the curriculum of *Dar al-Ulooms* in South Asia. For more on the syllabus taught at Deoband, see Francis Robinson (2001) and Ebrahim Moosa (2015). It was originally a 10–15 year course, though it has been significantly altered and reduced for the British context. However, despite much western scholarship making this attribution, Nur al-Hasan Kandehlawi, a historian and scholar who I met with in Delhi, has cast doubt upon such attributions; as it is not historically verifiable that Mulla Nizam al-Din ever composed a new syllabus (Jan 2008, pp. 92–93). At this seminary, it is a six-year course with two foundation years for those who

are not well acquainted with the Urdu language. This remains the lingua franca of the *dars-i nizami* and in particular in the later of years, where, in most cases, the teachers do not speak English fluently, and all the texts are in Arabic. The language of instruction remains a contentious issue (Lewis and Hamid 2018). However, the dominance of Urdu has waned and undergone an accommodation with English in both the *dars-i nizami* specifically and the *Dar al-Uloom* generally, especially in the earlier years where junior teachers—who are British born and alumni—teach most of the lessons. Though staff turnover is virtually nil, new teachers are usually recruited from its own graduate pool. This is primarily because they share the vision of the *Dar al-Uloom* and have cemented a strong relationship with existing staff members. During observations, the younger teachers are comfortable switching between three languages simultaneously: Urdu, Arabic, and English. They are also the primary drivers for change at the *Dar al-Uloom*. This is because they are all British-born and comprise the school teaching staff at the *Dar al-Uloom*. Having adopted the values and ethos of the *Dar al-Uloom*, they maintain a strong bond with the Principal and are able to navigate changes. The Principal, acting as a mediator, manages a delicate balance between innovative responsiveness to current needs while being rooted in tradition. On completion of the *dars-i nizami* curriculum, students are conferred with the title 'Maulana', allowing them to become imams, if they choose to. Given that financial incentives are inadequate for imamship (Lewis 2014) and there is nowhere near as many opportunities as graduates leaving from the many *Dar al-Ulooms* in Britain, many are seeking alternative career trajectories (Makadam and Scott-Baumann 2010; Gilliat-Ray et al. 2013).

Aside from language, the *dars-i nizami* has faced criticism for its perceived lack of adaptability and emphasis on its sacrality (Geaves 2012; Reetz 2007). Similar to the case of Christian theological colleges in Britain that have faced criticism of following a "theoretically heavy and irrelevant curriculum" (Welland 2000, p. 184) the *dars-i nizami* has been criticised for being ill suited for life in modern Britain: "The emphasis in the curriculum remains on inherited knowledge and textual study, and any modification of the curriculum would necessarily involve revision of a syllabus that has been actively preserved over generations (Gilliat-Ray 2006, p. 67).

However, my research found that in this *Dar al-Uloom* there exists the teaching of a diverse set of religious disciplines and texts (Table 1). Far from the curriculum being static, there is a continuous evaluation and modification of texts being taught on a regular basis. Over the 10 years, texts have changed while others have been removed. During the course of my observation, there were regular conversations among teachers about adapting texts and changes were regularly being implemented. Reflecting on the history of the *dars-i nizami*, I found that it actually consisted of a small number of core texts and offered a careful balance between innovative responsiveness to the contemporary environment and allegiance to traditional Muslims ideas. It has been argued that the key texts were meant to be *Jalaalayn* in Quran studies, *Mishkaat* in hadith studies, and in fiqh, *Sharh al-Wiqaayah* and/or *al-Hidaayah*. Everything else was meant to be complimentary. As for being responsive to the needs of the time, it is reported that the founders and leading figures of Deoband, such as Maulana Muhammad Qasim Nanotwi, Maulana Rashid Ahmad Gangohi, and Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanawi, presented a positive view of learning English (*Majm'aal-Bahuth al-Ilmiya*, 1994, pp. 146–59). As we will see, this is exactly the tightrope the modern Dar al-Uloom is walking.

Table 1. A typical timetable for a fifth-year *dars-i nizami* student.

Time	Class	Class Content
8:00–8:45	*Mueen al-Faraaidh*	Laws of Inheritance
8:45–9:15	*Al-Hidaayah* (part one)	Classical text on Hanafi law (*fiqh*)
9:15–9:45	*Mishkaat al-Masaabih* (part one)	Collection of Prophetic traditions (*hadith*)
	Break	
10:00–10:30	*Al-Jalaalayn* (part one)	Book on Quranic exegesis (*tafsir*)
10:30–11:00	*Al-Hidaayah* (part two)	Classical text on Hanafi law (*fiqh*)
11:00–11:30	*Al-Jalaalayn* (part two)	Book on Quranic exegesis (*tafsir*)
11:30–12:00	*Mishkaat al-Masaabih* (part two)	Collection of Prophetic traditions (*hadith*)
12:00–12:30	*Mishkaat al-Masaabih* (part three)	Collection of Prophetic traditions (*hadith*)
	Lunch	
2:00–2:30	*Sab al-Qiraa'at*	Quran Elocution (*tajwid*)
2:30–3:00	*Sharh al-Aqaaid*	Theology (*aqaaid*)
3:00–3:30	*Mishkaat al-Masaabih* (part four)	Collection of Prophetic traditions (*hadith*)
3:30–4:00	*Aqidah al-Tahawiyyah*	Theology (*aqaaid*)

Note: The assessment structure is similar in all years. Each year is split into four units of similar length of around nine weeks of study. At the end of each unit, there is an exam for topics covered during that period. The weighting for each unit is 25%. There is also an oral exam. In order to progress to the following year, the student must average a score of 60% for the year.

5. Pedagogy

5.1. Postural Tradition and Adab

One of the enduring features of any *madrassa* is that of students kneeling on their knees and feet or heels, with their benches—covered with books—immediately in front of them. In Britain, the teacher is either seated on a '*gadla*'—a set of two cushions: one to sit on and the other to lean on—or a raised platform. In the first three years, teachers are seated on a *gadla* but in the final three years they can, if they choose, sit on the raised platform. The rise from the *gadla* to the raised platform signals an elevation of the authority of the teacher: as the sanctity of the text gains ascendancy, so does the teacher. However, some teachers, especially three of the most senior Muftis at the *Dar al-Uloom*, do not sit on the raised platform. For them, as they told me, sitting on a raised platform goes against the sanctity of knowledge. This is reflected in the notion that the more knowledge one inherits, the greater the level of humility one ought to embody. There is a Prophetic tradition where the Prophet is reported to have said: "no one humbles himself for the sake of God except that God raises his status." This hadith is related in *Sahih al-Muslim* where the entire text reads: "Charity does not decrease wealth, no one forgives except that Allah increases his honor, and no one humbles himself for the sake of God except that God raises his status." As one teacher put it to me: "Satan was very knowledgeable but that did not save him from becoming the most distant from God—it was his sense of pride, the idea that only he knew better, that led to his downfall." Aside from the metaphysical dimension, there were more practical reasons for the change. As classes were amalgamated from the third year onward, student numbers increased and there was a need for students to be able to see the teacher and vice versa.

In any case, sitting on the floor was seen as continuation of both a tradition and to instil a sense of humility. To acquire knowledge, one must be humble before the dispenser of knowledge: the text and the teacher. The most humbling of positions is sitting on the floor. This particular posture is that of the regular prayer. The Prophet himself sat on the floor and the famous hadith of Gabriel mentions him resting his knee against the Prophet's thighs. Often, examples of the Qur'anic archetypes were invoked by teachers to instil such humility, such as the Prophet Moses being humbled when told by God to seek out someone more knowledgeable than him, Khidr, after he had claimed to be the most knowledgeable. The particular type of 'postural tradition' (Hewes 1955, p. 233) then, was to instil a pedagogy of humility and reverence for knowledge while embodying the Prophetic role model. In the

Dar al-Uloom nomenclature, this was referred to as having *'adab'*, a code of behavior that reflected in a deep sense of respect for ones teachers and texts (Metcalfe 1984, p. 191; Moosa 2015). In some of the senior classes, sitting close to the teacher was a reflection of the zeal a student had for knowledge. Proximity to a teacher reflected a student's desire to be close as possible to the center of knowledge. They would often be the very students who would read out passages, and in some cases, it was as though they were the only ones—around a handful of them—being taught in the entire class:

> As the teacher walks in, the room becomes silent. Once the book is opened, a group of students—five of them—seated in front of the teacher take turns to read Prophetic statements (hadith) in Arabic. The rest of class, comprising of 35 students, listen attentively. Occasionally, the teacher interrupts the flow to make a comment, correct an error or to take questions from students. Students scribble notes in their exercise books when the teacher makes a point about a Prophetic practice or clarifies misconceptions. (fieldnotes from final year hadith lesson in September 2017)

5.2. Balancing Content with Depth

The class sizes are fairly large, with numbers ranging from 20 to 45 per class. Lessons last for half an hour with 12 lessons on average per day. This is intense and demanding and leaves little time to engage in in-depth discussions. Previously, senior teachers were at liberty to teach at their own pace as long as the text was completed by the end of the year. However, with the inclusion of termly targets—a change introduced by junior staff—time for discussion is limited. While more content is being covered, less time can be devoted to discussion and exploration with teachers. This was a common response, from some of the senior staff when asked, that some of the students in the advanced years often felt that they are not given the opportunity to ask questions. There is growing realisation of the need to balance a pedagogy that is pushing for more content—something of an innovation—and time for questions to be asked and critical thinking to be exercised.

It was noticeable that an increasing number of students asked questions both in and out of lessons. This is a relatively novel situation. During my time as a student, questions were usually restricted to the text and teaching was didactic. Students were empty vessels who, with pens and pencils poised in their hands, were expected to uncritically fill their books and pads with whatever the teacher said. This has now evolved as the next section will show. There are a number of factors that led to the increase in questions in class. One of the key reasons is that students, despite spending much time within the walls of the *Dar al-Uloom*, are being exposed to debates and controversies outside of the *Dar al-Uloom*, due to social media in particular. Many non-residential students are exposed to various social media platforms and WhatsApp groups where modern debates and issues are being discussed. Mobile phones are officially banned but many students have them. Those that do not have phones are still aware of what is occurring thanks to their fellow students. Though the *Dar al-Uloom* discourse constantly reminds students that their mission here is to seek knowledge and not become distracted with the outside world, social media and the world outside still finds its way into the classroom.

During my observation, for example, there was a social media storm around a charismatic Muslim professor—who is prominent on social media—when he delivered a lecture on slavery and rape in Islamic history.[1] Students in the classroom were discussing this furor and decided to ask one of their senior teachers about the Islamic perspective on slavery. The teacher simply responded by saying that slavery was not relevant anymore so there was no discussion to be had—nor was their time to engage in such a lengthy discussion. The students' intent was to explore the moral and ethical dimension

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[1] See https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2017/02/17/georgetown-professor-under-fire-by-conservatives-for-lecture-about-slavery-and-islam/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.b98257aee42b (accessed on 2 June 2018). The subsequent article can be accessed here: https://yaqeeninstitute.org/en/jonathan-brown/slavery-and-islam-what-is-slavery/ (accessed on 2 July 2018).

of why the Prophet had not abolished slavery and why he himself had kept slaves. For the teacher, who I met up with afterward, the students were asking irrelevant questions and detracting from what needed to be taught. This incident highlighted how the teacher and students inhabited different social worlds, though they shared the same physical world. The pious teacher practiced ascetic detachment, while his students were immersed in the world around them.

Examples such as this provoked me to think about the deeper dynamics at play. The students, as they saw it, were asking a genuine question with which both Muslims and non-Muslims grapple. For them, social media and the social world they inhabit is the place where current debates are occurring and they are looking to their teachers for guidance on such matters. Many of the students, despite being in the *Dar al-Uloom*, inhabit multiple worlds both on social media and outside of it. The teacher, however, focuses on hermeneutic intricacies and ensuring sufficient content was covered while balancing the need to respond to student questions. To take another incident, one student, who was in the capstone year, had asked some of the teachers what were the underlying principles and justification for insisting on 20 units of prayer during the nights of Ramadhan. His reasoning for posing this question, as he put it to me, was that where he lived in the South England, there were a number of 'Salafi brothers' who were questioning this particular interpretation. For him, it was a genuine question. The teacher, when asked this question, told him to conduct his own research, which he did. After many months the student prepared a detailed document that he shared with me on the evidences for (and against) the 20 of units of prayer. When he eventually presented it to the teacher, it was taken from him and passed to students in the fatwa department, that is where non-binding formal rulings or interpretation on a point of Islamic law are provided to the public. The student never heard anything back. For the teacher, who I spoke with afterward, it was simply the fact that he did not have the time to discuss this topic in class and that he deemed that it was no longer a relevant discussion: there was a unanimous agreement among the scholars on the units of prayer being 20. For the teacher, time and relevance were important factors in a curriculum that was now pushing for more content. For the student, however, the question remained relevant and unresolved.

5.3. Asking Good Questions Is Half of Knowledge

Reflective of a Prophetic statement: "asking good questions is half of [one's] knowledge,"[2] during my observation, there were ample episodes of healthy debates occurring both inside and outside of the classroom. One teacher, Mufti Harris, who had only recently joined the *Dar al-Uloom*, would allocate half an hour at the end of a grueling two-hour hadith lesson to take questions from the students. For many students, this was their favorite part of the lesson. If the teacher did not know the answers, as often was the case, he would simply say so and that he would look into it. The teacher explained that we live in an age where students are bringing in questions from outside and that they need to be addressed: students should feel that they can challenge the teacher respectfully and that there was a precedent for this in Islamic scholarship. Another senior teacher, Mufti Ismail, was also open to questions. He often praised good questions and asked students to conduct their own research and to let him know if they had found anything. During my observation of the capstone year, known as Bukhaari, I witnessed healthy exchanges between students and the teacher:

> Mufti Tahir is teaching Sahih al-Bukhaari and students are asking him questions whenever he stops or explains a hadith. In fact, if there is a lull in questions, he encourages students who do not normally ask to ask questions. He tells students that the classroom is the place to ask questions and that you will not get this opportunity once you leave from here. (fieldnotes from lesson observation in October 2017)

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2   Bayhaqi relates this hadith in Shu'ab al-iman where the entire text reads: "Moderation in spending is half of [one's] sustenance, friendliness toward people is half of [one's] intelligence, and asking good questions is half of [one's] knowledge."

Toward the end of my fieldwork, I wanted to explore why asking questions was encouraged at the *Dar al-Uloom*. The Principal stated that it was a combination of a generational shift and the changing world outside. Young students simply have more questions because of their exposure to the outside world and various iterations of Islam in Britain as compared to their senior teachers:

> The approach or mind-set [of the senior teachers] was more of a confessional approach: what was said was usually final and people in the villages accepted what the Maulana or Imam said. In this country, students and laypeople are being challenged by non-Muslims and other Muslims. I think some of the [senior] teachers want to protect their identity. They are role models when it comes to piety, no doubt, but we also need to be able to answer questions posed by students and people. We must teach people to ask good questions and be prepared to do research and answer concerns people may have. (interview with the Principal, August 2017)

The Principal was aware of the broader changes that are occurring in the British Muslim landscape and was attempting to foster an environment where his students are being prepared for challenges they are likely to face. What emerges is a broad spectrum of pedagogical approaches in terms of asking questions and critical thinking: the classroom was a microcosm of the broader inter-generational challenges facing Muslims in Britain. While some understood the challenge and were willing to adapt, others were less so. What made the ultimate difference, however, was the particular orientation of the teacher. Essentially, all teachers were happy to take questions so long as they were relevant to the lesson: complete knowledge of a particular issue can only be gained by asking good questions that are relevant. In this *Dar al-Uloom*, at least, things are changing with a gradual move toward a more critical pedagogy.

5.4. 'Tarbiyyatic Pedagogy' in the Deobandi Cosmos

While the younger teachers were more open to taking questions and connecting with the students, there was, during a course of my fieldwork, a curious dilemma. It was generally felt that that the senior teachers were 'more knowledgeable, pious, and deserving of respect', but they were differentiated by one crucial pedagogical aspect: that they were "*tarbiyyat yaftaar*." What this means is that, aside from their mastery of the texts, they had spent many years under the watchful gaze of a personal Shaykh; they had been, as a junior teacher put it, "painted in the hue of the way of the *akaabir* (pious ancestors)"—they embodied what I refer to as a '*tarbiyyatic* pedagogy.' It was the *akabireen*, or those who were seen as the standard bearers, that made up the Deobandi cosmos (Geaves 2012). The character of *Darul al-Uloom* Deoband promoted " . . . the close relationship between teacher and student that had characterised the less formal schools of the past . . . Yet the school also offered a discipline and organisation that earlier schools had not" (Metcalf 1982, p. 110). A fatwa issued by the Deoband *Dar al-Uloom* clarified that one can only be called a Maulana if he has studied with a teacher:

> It becomes clear that notwithstanding the volume of information one may acquire from the books, their study alone cannot make a person an authority. Unless one learns the religious science from authoritative scholars of religion in a regular manner, one remains an ignorant and uneducated layman.[3]

Aside from the question of authority, the link between knowledge and practice, and the idea of *tarbiyyatic* pedagogy helps explain why there continues to be a great emphasis on developing a deep bond between the teacher and student (Sikand 2005). This was also reflective of a broader tradition of authoritative knowledge being transferred from person to person. Messick (1992) showed in Yemen, and Berkey (2014) in Cairo under Mamluk rule, that the transmission of religious knowledge is a highly personal process: teachers were responsible for the moral behavior of their students.

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[3] See Fatawa Deoband.

During fieldwork, there were moments in the lesson where senior teachers were elaborating interpretations of Islamic law and hadith through the lens of the *akaabir*. Here is an example of how one teacher elucidated the difference in opinion on whether one should break the fast immediately once the sun sets or whether one should take a more cautionary approach and wait a few minutes:

> Once Maulana Thanawi was entertaining as guest with Maulana Yahya Khandhelwi in Saharanpur. Maulana Yahya asked him: "What is your habit of ending the fast?" Maulana Thanawi replied: "when the time comes, I wait another three minutes just to be on the cautious side." Maulana Yahya then said: "my habit is to break the fast right away!" Maulana Thanawi: "you follow your habit and I will stick to mine." When the time arrived to break the fast, Maulana Thanawi saw that all food was being consumed so he broke his fast after just a minute and said, "If I followed my cautious approach there would be no food left for me!" See! Look at the mutual love and respect our *akaabir* had for one another though they disagreed! (Lesson observation from a fourth year lesson, June 2017)

In this excerpt, the *tarbiyyatic* pedagogy is being operationalised: the Shariah and the Prophetic role model is embodied through the lens of the *akaabir*. After all, the senior teachers have acquired their learning in South Asia and they act in many ways as the 'authoritative bridge' that brings both geographies together. They reproduce a narrative of a cherished past: the *akaabir* of Deoband and the notion of a distinctive Deobandi *maslak*. As Ebrahim Moosa explained:

> Muhammad Qasim Nanautvi and Rashid Ahmad Gangohi proudly embodied a *maslak*, virtuous temperament embedded in an elaborate narrative, one that etched on their *madrasa* franchise a distinctive blend of theological convictions, intellectual style, and ascetic pious practice derived from eighteenth and nineteenth century predecessors. (Moosa 2015, p. 105)

The notion of a *maslak* sustains a certain historical narrative that justifies the particular orientation of the *Dar al-Uloom*. Linguistically, the word *maslak* comes from *suluk*, which, while having Sufi connotations, alludes to practices and conduct that are rooted in the past. The *Dar al-Uloom* constructs and maintains its authority by being part of the transnational traditional Deobandi movement. The *maslak*, therefore, reflects a shared universe of behavior, attitudes, and certain modes of interpretation and practice that are particularistic. Anderson (1991) showed that the common conception of nations is in fact 'imagined communities'. The same notion applies to the *Dar al-Uloom* "because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion (Anderson 1991, p. 6).[4] However, the relative strength of this communion is not always consistent for everyone. For some students and teachers, the need to be identified with a Deobandi *maslak* was no doubt important, but the relative importance and the need for adaptation to life in Britain was a constant point of discussion. As many argued, what needed to be emphasised was that the Deobandi *maslak* is characterised by accommodation to current concerns while being rooted in a reflective tradition.

Related to the notion of *tarbiyyatic* pedagogy, other teachers were noted for what students referred to as an '*islaahi*' approach, or a focus on self-rectification. This meant that the particular lesson would, on occasion, avoid deep legal or hermeneutical exercises and focus more on rectifying the student and applying the text to immediate modern concerns. This particular pedagogy aimed to create 'a pious servant of God' or '*alim ba amal*', which meant that one ought to become a Maulana who practiced what he had learned. Reflective of a 'republic of piety' (Moosa 2015, p. 140), one particular teacher, Mufti Zakir, was noted for his focus on rectification. In a class that was being observed, he focused less on academic discussions and more on rectifying oneself. As one student put it:

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4   To read about the influence of the Dar al-Uloom of Deoband across of South Asia and beyond see The Deoband Universe: What Makes a Transcultural and Transnational Movement of Islam? By Dietrich Reetz (2007).

> Mufti Zakir teaches us how to live and become a Maulana who practices what he has learnt. For example, he reminds us constantly that once we come out of *Dar al-Uloom*, people will be watching us constantly: from the way we dress, the length of our beards, and our punctuality in prayer. If we do not practice what we have learnt, our words will have very little effect on people. They will see right through us. He reminds us that knowledge requires *amal* (action), it must be practiced to change you. (transcript from a final year student interview)

However, even the same teacher found himself having to adapt to broader changes taking place. Students were not only receiving religious instruction but were also actively engaged in negotiating the particular pedagogical techniques they were receiving. The same teacher provided the following enlightening incident:

> Mufti Zakir insists students must write down word-for-word in Urdu what he dictates in the lesson. The following day, he will pick students at random to either bring to him their textbooks or dictate what was taught the day before. Students who failed to do this would be asked to leave the classroom and are not allowed to return until they have copied it down from another student. This became a challenge for some students, who either could not write fast enough, could not write Urdu well, or that their fingers had become numb from the constant writing. Some did, in fact, not attend his class for the entire year. Students eventually went to him as a group and asked if this requirement to write ad verbatim could be dropped. To their astonishment, while their request was not fully met, he did compromise by saying to them '*English mai kar low, theek hai*?' (Write it in English, okay?). The students were ecstatic. (fieldnotes, August 2017)

What this incident reveals is that the student-teacher relationship is not one-way. Students are part of the process of negotiating the particular pedagogy adopted by their teacher. The *Dar al-Uloom* is finding itself having to ask questions on how to balance the need to maintain Urdu—a language embedded in the Deobandi universe that connects students to Deobandi maslak—and the increasing need to communicate their faith in a language that is based on their immediate context.

6. Discussion

While not quite the "second wave" (Razavian and Spannaus 2018, p. 180) of Islamic institutions in the West, this *Dar al-Uloom* is undergoing significant adaptation while attempting to maintain fidelity to a conservative tradition. There is ample evidence of questioning and critical thinking occurring, sometimes encouraged by teachers. During the course of my fieldwork, I observed many occasions where students were debating topics and undertaking their own research, where—in the spirit of research and deepening their understanding—they were challenging their teachers. The *Dar al-Uloom* holds debating sessions, or *munaazara*, where, under the guide of teachers, students debate topics ranging from whether dealing in interest should be permitted to medical issues such as under what conditions should euthanasia be allowed. Though not uniform, the *Dar al-Uloom* views this pedagogy as necessary in an increasingly pluralistic and diverse intra-religious context. Ultimately, this approach comes down to the teacher and their own particular orientation. Whereas junior staff can relate to the contemporary world, some of the senior teachers had more to share in terms of real-life work 'within their comfort zones'. Teachers who had spent more time out of their ideological comfort zones were more ecumenical and ready to engage in critical discussions, while minimising the distinction between traditional and modern forms of learning. The focus of an institution "geared to the preservation and teaching of the Islamic scholarly tradition" (Sikand 2005, p. 1) remains the anchor for the *Dar al-Uloom*. However, the younger generation of teachers and students are ensuring that it remains a 'thinking tradition', where pedagogy is not a simple act of transmission but an ongoing living process: the receiving generation decide what stays, what is modified, and what is stripped away. The key question, then, is whether the particular idea or practice receives "endorsement from the custodial generational" (Jackson 2002, p. 26).

7. Conclusions

This article has broadly shown that this particular Islamic religious tradition is undergoing significant evolution as it attempts to adapt to an environment that is placing greater demands on its particular form of education. Specifically, this was shown through its pedagogy. The *Dar al-Uloom* can no longer remain insular, since it is its very students and alumni, who, having a critical awareness of the modern British context, are driving change. Despite such changes, questions remain over the efficacy of the '*tarbiyyatic* pedagogy' that emphasises the student-teacher relationship—as opposed to the autodidact—and the effect this will have on the identity of students and the interpretation of Islam through the lens of the Deobandi universe. What is clear is that this *Dar al-Uloom* is undergoing a transition led by a young generation of graduates and teachers. It is a tradition that is in transition; it is evolving very slowly.

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