Introduction

O Faithful, save yourself and your family from the
torments of Hell.

—Ashraf 'Ali Thanvi, sermon in Kanpur, 13 March 1923

On a chilly evening in early 2009, I was wandering around the spartan
guest house of the Dar al-'Ulum Deoband, the renowned Islamic semi-
nary named after the city, Deoband, where it was founded in 1866. I had
just arrived from the United States to begin the research for this book.
The Dar al-'Ulum Deoband is now the central node in a network of
Deobandi seminaries that span the globe. Despite its modest size, the city
of Deoband is a bustling place, its markets teeming with life late into the
night. The circuitous paths leading through the bazaar toward the semi-
nary are lined with scores of shops selling Arabic and Urdu books, prayer
rugs, Qur'ans, and other assorted Islamic paraphernalia. At the juncture
of several of these lanes stood a dormitory for the Dar al-'Ulum's alumni
and guests, where I was staying during my sojourn in Deoband.

The rooms had multiple beds, and this night I shared my room with
some Sri Lankan Muslims undertaking preaching tours for the Tablighi
Jama'at, now the world's largest Muslim revivalist organization, one
that grew directly out of Deobandi teachings. The Sri Lankans retired
early, and so I wandered into the courtyard, where a group of young
men—alumni, it turned out—were sitting in a circle chatting in Bengali.
Curious about my presence, they summoned me toward their circle and
made a place for me to sit. In the conversation that followed, as with
many to come, I had to give an account of myself. What was I doing
there? Why had I traveled seven thousand miles from home for the sole
reason of researching the Deoband movement? As with so many

conversations I would have over the course of researching and writing this book, politics came up immediately.

Students and graduates of the Dar al-'Ulum Deoband are all too aware of the accusations against their institution in the media. They know the extent to which the global War on Terror has brought the Dar al-'Ulum Deoband and other Islamic seminaries under critical scrutiny. They know that journalists and policy makers have taken aim at the Dar al-'Ulum Deoband in particular because the Taliban emerged from Deobandi seminaries in northwestern Pakistan. As I sat with these alumni from West Bengal, one of them asked me, "Do you think we are part of the Taliban? People come here and do not want to know about us because of the scholars that come from here. No, they want to know about what the Taliban does, so many miles away. Look, let me show you." He proceeded to draw a large circle on the floor with his finger. "This space here is everything this school has done. Now take just the smallest point in this circle," he said, pointing to an imaginary, arbitrarily chosen dot in the circle. "There is the Taliban." So it is part of the Deoband movement, I asked, not just an aberration? "Sure, fine," he replied. "But you must look at the whole circle."

This book is about the whole circle. Though the book will briefly address the Deoband movement's relation to the Taliban, that relationship is only a thread of the larger fabric that makes up Deoband. The scholars, students, ideas, and texts emanating from the seminary at Deoband and from its affiliated institutions around the world, taken as a whole, constitute arguably the most influential Muslim reform and revival movement outside of the Middle East in the last two centuries. Indeed, the great scholar of Islam and comparative religions Wilfred Cantwell Smith long ago declared: "Next to the Azhar of Cairo, [Deoband] is the most important and respected theological academy of the Muslim world."[1] Thus, readers hoping for a simple diagnosis of Deoband as an "Islamist" or "fundamentalist" movement will be disappointed. However, I trust that even these readers—or *especially* these readers—will find something of value here.

Long before the Taliban, the Dar al-'Ulum Deoband and affiliated institutions were known for a number of things: their scholarly prestige, their role in the struggle for Indian independence, and—the focus of this book—their controversial stance on Sufism, the complex of beliefs and practices that is usually glossed as Islamic "mysticism." Deobandis were, and remain, critical of a range of practices—pilgrimage to Sufi saints' tombs, celebration of the saints' death anniversaries, celebration of the

Prophet Muhammad's birthday—that have been central to Sufi practice in India and elsewhere. From a Deobandi perspective, these beliefs and practices border dangerously on "worship" of the Prophet Muhammad and the Sufi saints. To counter them, Deobandi scholars have issued countless treatises, tracts, and fatwas (legal opinions) on these practices from Deoband's inception to the present day. But Deobandis were never opposed to Sufism. On the contrary, they have seen Sufism as an *essential* part of a Muslim's moral life. They sought to reorient Sufi practice around an ethics of pious self-transformation *and* to reorient veneration of the saints around their virtues, not their miracles. Nevertheless, many of Deoband's detractors have branded Deobandis as positively *anti*-Sufi.

Like many Sufis before them, the Deobandis have seen Sufism as inseparable from Islamic legal norms. These, in turn, are inseparable from Islamic ethics and politics, broadly conceived. This book, therefore, treats Deoband's interrogation of Sufism and Sufi devotions as part of several broader ways in which the movement has shaped major debates within global Islam in the modern era. By orienting the history of the Deoband movement around its understanding of Sufism, other dimensions of the movement come into focus: law (to the extent that Islamic law and Sufism were deemed inseparable, despite the fact that Deoband's critique of Sufism was made through law), ethics (to the extent that Deobandis understood Sufism as, in essence, ethical cultivation), and politics (to the extent that Sufism informed an affective attitude toward the very conditions for politics). Thus, to say that this is a book about Sufism—which in no small way it is—misses an important point: it is also about Sufism *through* law, Sufism *as* ethics, Sufism *in* politics.

The Dar al-'Ulum Deoband emerged in 1866 in the wake of a precipitous end to Muslim political power in India. Although Muslim sultans and emperors had dominated much of the Indian subcontinent since the thirteenth century, their power had steadily declined beginning in the middle of the eighteenth. But many Muslims saw the ruthlessness with which the British quashed the uprising of 1857 and the subsequent exile of the last Mughal emperor, Bahadur Shah Zafar, as the very nadir of their political fortunes. Like others, Deoband's founders wondered how India's Muslims could move on from such a catastrophe. They responded with a relatively simple program: they would revive India's Muslims, and perhaps even the global Muslim community (the Ummah) at large, through a renewed engagement with the canons of religious knowledge that had guided Muslims for centuries. They would do so, moreover, by way of a new kind of seminary—dependent not on courtly largesse but on individual

Muslims' donations—with a central administration, a salaried faculty, and a slate of exams to gauge students' progress. This model would be easily replicated by other institutions. The graduates of these seminaries would, in time, be known as "Deobandis": students of the Qur'an, the Hadith (reports of the words and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad), and Islamic jurisprudence, many of them Sufis initiated into one or more of the four major Sufi orders of India (Chishti, Naqshbandi, Qadiri, Suhrawardi), and committed to the task of reform (*islah*). These graduates would typically go on to work as teachers, preachers, imams, writers, and publishers. Today there are Deobandi seminaries around the world, with the Dar al-'Ulum Deoband as the central node in an intricate network bound by people, texts, institutions, and ideas.

A core argument of this book is that we cannot fully understand Deoband without understanding the modalities through which it became global. As this network has become increasingly complex, it has raised questions as to what exactly constitutes "Deoband" as a tradition. What happens when the Deobandi contestation of Sufism travels into new social and political contexts beyond South Asia? To what extent is it mobile? Is mobility tantamount to portability? In other words, what forms of contestation does it meet? What accommodations does it make? If the first part of this book establishes how Deobandis articulated their reformist agenda in colonial India, the latter part explores how this agenda played out in South Africa, home to the largest and most prominent Deobandi seminaries outside of South Asia as well as to wide support for the very Sufi practices that Deobandis have most fiercely contested.[2] South Africa is by no means the only country outside of South Asia where Deobandis have settled, but it has by far the most significant Deobandi presence.[3]

Besides being the most important site of Deobandi thought outside of the Indian subcontinent, what makes South Africa crucial to understanding the Deoband movement is that Deobandi texts, scholars, and ideas became the object of extended public debate there by non-Indian Muslims who brought vastly different perspectives to them—a debate informed by the richness and depth of the Muslim presence in South Africa, where Muslims have had a continuous history for nearly three and a half centuries. It is partly through this South Asia–South Africa connection that this book also attempts to grasp how "Deoband" coheres, or occasionally fails to cohere, as a tradition.

This book proceeds, then, under the premise that traditions do not fall like manna from the sky, fully intact, fully theorized; rather, they are cre-

ated, debated, maintained, challenged, resuscitated—often retroactively. On one level, "tradition" for the Deobandis is simply the Sunna, the model for human behavior exemplified by the Prophet Muhammad and transmitted through his words and deeds. On another, "tradition" is an imagined, affective bond between scholars and students, Sufi masters and disciples—one traversing borders and boundaries, linking books and bodies. Through these very human forms of mediation, Deobandis believe, the Sunna is continuously revived and renewed. But these forms also foster and maintain a sense of what makes Deoband itself stand out as a movement—a tradition *within* Tradition, perhaps. The founders of Deoband certainly understood themselves to be doing something extraordinary, but it is only in retrospect that the full extent of what they did became clear to their successors and followers. Often these later generations reimagined their collective origins through the politics of the present. This book will regard Deoband as an Islamic tradition in its own right, one positioned at the nexus of centripetal and centrifugal forces: on the one hand, shared identities that bind this movement *as* a movement; and on the other, the inevitable fissures that emerge in a movement of such global reach.

What I explore here is not just a contestation centered on Sufism, though Sufism will be the lens through which many of these debates transpire; it is also a clash of divergent political and ethical imaginaries and the forms of authority that undergird them. One of the contentions of this book will be that religious authority cannot be defined or conceptualized apart from the spaces in, through, and upon which it is projected. In his reflections on the relationship between space and forms of rhetoric, Carl Schmitt distinguished between the "dialectics of the public square, the *agora,*" and the "dialectics of the lyceum and academy."[4] This distinction bears on the entire Deobandi project of public reform and the difference between how Deobandis addressed the public on the one hand, and how they addressed fellow classically trained scholars of Islam, known as the *'ulama,* on the other. For within the broader ambivalence of this book—Sufis critiquing Sufism—there is another, more subtle ambivalence regarding how to help the public understand the spiritual dangers of certain beliefs or practices without undermining the authority of the *'ulama* in the process. This very project entailed conveying complex legal hermeneutics in a language that the public could understand, while disabusing them of the notion that they could comprehend these issues without the *'ulama*'s help. But once Deobandis opened up the possibility of empowering the public to reform *themselves,* managing the tension between just enough knowledge but not too

much became impractical. Many readers will be intuitively familiar with the rest of the story, for in some (admittedly limited) ways, this particular story within modern Islam has parallels in the history of Protestant Christianity. To a great extent, the story of modern Islam is one in which "everyday" Muslims now debate legal, ethical, political, and theological issues that had historically been the (never exclusive) purview of *'ulama,* rulers, courtesans, and litterateurs. It is also one in which these "everyday" debates transpire in books, pamphlets, and tracts written by lay Muslims, and, more recently, in chat rooms and on online message boards and social media.

Why does any of this matter? Given Deoband's impact on global Islam, its purview encompasses tens, if not hundreds, of millions of Muslims. The debates Deobandis have initiated are a matter of utmost importance for some Muslims—a matter of choosing between salvation and damnation—and one of utter triviality for other Muslims—a fruitless theological cavil at best, and at worst, a stifling distraction from more pressing matters. At the heart of the debate is defining what Sufism *is,* how it is practiced, who gets to define it, and under what authority. A contestation over Sufism is a contestation over Islam itself, by virtue of Sufism's paramount importance in the lives of countless Muslims. It is also a debate *within Deoband* about Sufism, as well as a debate among other Muslims *about Deoband*—its ideologies, its origins, the authority of its scholars, and the legitimacy of its claims to represent Sunni Islam.

This book is the first extended study of Deoband outside of South Asia, of Deoband's complicated and often vexed relationship to Sufism, and of Deobandi scholars' attempts to remake Muslim public life. It engages a veritable efflorescence of work on the Deobandis and the South Asian *'ulama* in recent years. Above all, it builds especially on the pioneering work of Barbara Daly Metcalf and Muhammad Qasim Zaman.[5] Though Metcalf ably reconstructed the social milieu of Deoband's origins, she spent little time looking at the actual texts composed by its scholars. And whereas Metcalf limited her scope to South Asia in the nineteenth century, this book explores Deoband as a global phenomenon in the twentieth. Likewise, whereas Zaman masterfully positioned Deoband within the normative Islamic textual tradition, this book pivots away from those intra-*'ulama* debates and toward the Deoband movement's attempt to remake the public itself.

Let me also outline some of what, for reasons of space, this book will not do. Insofar as the book focuses on what I call Deoband's "public texts"—texts composed mostly in Urdu and primarily for lay Muslims—

it does not look in depth at Deobandis' Qur'an and Hadith commentaries, though it refers to them as needed to flesh out various arguments. And while it occasionally positions Deoband within classical Sufi discourses in the subcontinent and beyond, we begin in the late nineteenth century and narrate forward. It will leave to other scholars the project of situating Deoband vis-à-vis the (mostly) precolonial scholarship its adherents inherited, especially the endlessly fecund legacy of Shah Wali Allah (d. 1762), whom many Deobandis see as their most important progenitor.

Second, although the last two chapters discuss the Barelvi movement, the Deobandis' historic archrivals, as essential to understanding the Deoband movement's trajectory in South Africa, the bulk of the book does not focus on the Barelvis. This is not because I deem Barelvi arguments as somehow unimportant or irrelevant for understanding this history (indeed, they are vitally important). Rather, it is because there are already major studies of Barelvi thought,[6] and, more importantly, prevailing assumptions already treat Barelvis as the "true" Sufis.[7] Deobandis and Barelvis are, for all intents and purposes, identical to one another: Sunni Muslims, Hanafi in law, Ash'ari or Maturidi in theology, adhering to multiple Sufi orders, and sustained institutionally through madrasa networks. Deobandi and Barelvi seminaries, too, have common features, including fixed curricula, annual examinations, and salaried teachers and staff.[8] In truth, the real fault lines between Deobandis and Barelvis have mostly to do with their divergent views on three theological concepts advanced by some Deobandis and which the Barelvis saw as a profound slight toward the dignity of the Prophet Muhammad: the possibility of God creating another Prophet, or many prophets, on par with the Prophet Muhammad (known as *imkan-i nazir,* "possibility of an equal"); the possibility of God telling a lie (known as *imkan-i kizb,* "possibility of lying"); and the question of whether the Prophet has suprahuman knowledge (known as *'ilm-i ghayb,* "knowledge of the unseen"). Though it refers to these debates, too, they are not the focus of this book, partly because they are somewhat peripheral to Deoband's contestation of Sufi devotions and its remaking of Sufi ethics, and partly because they have been explored in depth elsewhere. Where this book *does* discuss these debates, it does so with reference to their bearing on Muslim publics, for as we will see, some Deobandis castigated Barelvis for inserting into public life what they saw as arcane theological puzzles that should be debated only by trained scholars. (Barelvis insisted, in turn, that the reformist firebrand Muhammad Isma'il (d. 1831), discussed in chapter 2, who inspired the

first generation of Deobandis, was the real culprit for initiating these debates in the first place.) In recent decades, both sides have taken defensive postures, attempting to push back against their respective stereotypes. Thus, Deobandis have penned treatises detailing how much love they have for the Prophet,[9] while Barelvis have catalogued all the ways that Ahmad Raza Khan (d. 1921), founder of the Barelvi movement, despised illicit innovation in religious matters (*bid'a*).[10]

One of the myths this book hopes to dispel is a persistent stereotype that Deobandis represent the stern, inflexible Islam of the urban middle classes while the Barelvis represent the popular "folk" Sufism—the "real" Sufism—of rural South Asia. Even a cursory look at the sources for both the Deobandis and Barelvis shows this dichotomy to be utterly untenable, yet it persists within the academy and beyond it. Surely, for instance, the contrast that Marc Gaborieau draws between "reformed" (*réformés*) Deobandis and "unreformed" (*non-réformés*) Barelvis is too neat.[11] The discursive overlap between the Deobandis and Barelvis—legal, juristic, theological, and otherwise—belies facile categorizations of Deobandis as law-centered "reformists" and Barelvis as mystical "counterreformists." Ahmad Raza Khan, to take just one example, shared the Deobandis' revulsion toward popular practices surrounding Sufi saints' tombs. He forbade the lighting of incense, leaving food, taking vows in the saints' honor if they grant some specific request, circumambulating and prostrating before saints' shrines, and a host of other practices that are typically associated with Deobandis. The notion that Barelvis are somehow less concerned than Deobandis with the Shari'a is another common misconception. One of Ahmad Raza Khan's fatwas, issued in 1910, insisted on the mutual imbrication of the Shari'a and Sufism, on the *'ulama* as custodians of Sufi tradition, and on the fact that the overwhelming number of Sufis in Islamic history have meticulously followed Islamic law.[12]

Finally, although this book does not focus on the geopolitics of the Deoband movement, it aims, nevertheless, to contribute to a more nuanced conversation about madrasas—those much-maligned and poorly understood institutions of traditional Islamic learning.[13] This book sees Deobandi madrasas not as radical "terrorist factories,"[14] but as pious institutions that combine scholarship on Qur'an, Hadith, and Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) with a dynamic mobility that has propelled Muslim scholars across the globe. Historically, far from facilitating militancy, madrasa networks were engines behind Islam's global cosmopolitanism, compelling students to travel across continents long before the era of "globalization."[15]

When discussions of Deoband appear in popular media, it is usually in reference to Deobandis' alleged antagonism to Sufism and Sufi shrines. Recent attacks on Sufi saints' shrines in Pakistan have exacerbated this tendency, with reporters labeling the attackers "Deobandi" and reasoning that the attacks stem not from local politics but from Deobandis' primordial, unflinching hatred of Sufism. After one such attack, the British newspaper *The Guardian* concluded, "Sufism is offensive to Muslims from the more ascetic Wahabbi [*sic*] and Deobandi sects, who consider worship of any saint to be heretical, and that the only access to God is through direct prayer."[16] It is worth pausing a moment to unpack this claim. Deobandis would proudly challenge the notion that Sufism is "offensive" to their religious sensibilities; most are, in fact, Sufis. They would also push back against lumping the Deobandis in with Wahhabis, followers of the archconservative reformer Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab (d. 1791). This is doubly ironic, since Wahhabis have criticized Sufism *as such* and Deobandis have explicitly denied being Wahhabis. Even the muftis of the Deobandi seminary that nurtured the Taliban have said there is no basis for calling Deobandis "Wahhabis" and have rejected that label.[17] I return to this point in the second chapter and, again, in the conclusion.

Yet there is a much older, more resilient concept that informs *The Guardian*'s analysis: that "mystical" Islam is perpetually in conflict with the "law"—a notion now thoroughly embedded in views of Sufism as "moderate" Islam, one rooted in a much older Orientalist dichotomy between scholar and Sufi. This dichotomy fueled ideas that Sufism could not have possibly come out of Islam, as Orientalists celebrated the "spirituality" of the great Sufi poets as diametrically opposed to what they deemed as the dry legalism of the Qur'an.[18] These tropes are nothing if not persistent. Many still see Sufism as intrinsically tolerant and promote it as an antidote to Islamic militancy. At the same time, Orientalists largely ignored the *'ulama*—and especially, as in this study, *'ulama* who were also Sufis—considering them outmoded relics of Islam's medieval past. This approach to the *'ulama* ignores how they are "custodians" of a tradition that has been "constantly imagined, reconstructed, argued over, defended and modified."[19]

What *is* Deoband? And who is a Deobandi? Deoband is, first and foremost, a *place:* a town of some one hundred thousand residents approximately one hundred miles northeast of Delhi. A "Deobandi" can be a graduate of the Dar al-'Ulum Deoband, or a graduate of one of the hundreds of seminaries formed on its model, or simply someone who adheres

to the set of ideologies and dispositions that Deobandis call their *maslak* (literally, "path" or "way")—in other words, someone within what Barbara Metcalf has called Deoband's "concentric circles of influence."[20] On the other hand, graduating from a Deobandi madrasa does not automatically make one a "Deobandi." Some eschew this label outright, either because they do not adhere to the *maslak,* or simply because they insist their worldview cannot be limited to a single ideological mantra. As one madrasa official in Cape Town told me, "I am not a 'Deobandi.' I have not seen Deoband with my own eyes. I am a student of the *din* [religion]."[21]

This rhetorical slippage is ubiquitous in how Deobandi scholars understand themselves. They acknowledge the unique contributions the movement has made to contemporary Islam, yet often decline to recognize it as a "movement" at all, believing it to be nothing more than Sunni Islam per se—a tacking back and forth between identifying Deoband's profound importance and assimilating it to Sunni Islam as such. Yet although Deobandis consider themselves Sunnis par excellence, they would not assert that non-Deobandis are therefore non-Sunnis. They do not claim a monopoly on Sunnism; they simply believe that they best represent it. In the words of the authoritative history of the Dar al-'Ulum Deoband, Deoband "is neither a legal school [*mazhab*] nor a sect [*firqa*], though its opponents attempt to present it as a school or sect to the public. Rather, it is a comprehensive 'edition' of the way [*maslak*] of the People of the Prophetic Model and the Community [*Ahl-i Sunnat wa-l Jama'at*]"—in other words, of Sunni Islam.[22] Yet the very fact that this history presents Deoband as an "ism" (*Deobandiyat*) foregrounds the tension in how to talk about it as a phenomenon without reifying it. Defining "Deoband" too rigidly, then, denies it its elasticity, yet defining it too loosely recapitulates how these terms are bent and stretched in a Procrustean manner within anti-Deobandi polemics, where Deobandis are conflated with groups with whom they share very little.[23] Amid such slippery discourse, we must be wary of reifying the very terms that we seek to analyze.

This task is complicated further when we seek to understand groups and organizations that have spun out of the Deoband movement, whether the Taliban, the Tablighi Jama'at, or political organizations like Jami'at 'Ulama-yi Hind or the Jami'at 'Ulama-yi Islam. These groups grew directly out of Deobandi teachings, were founded by Deobandi scholars, but cannot be reduced to those connections. The Tablighi Jama'at, for instance, has tens of millions of followers. While the Tablighi Jama'at may not be a "Deobandi" organization in the strictest sense of the word, its founder, Muhammad Ilyas, was a graduate of the Dar

al-'Ulum Deoband and studied with three of the most prominent early Deobandi scholars: Rashid Ahmad Gangohi, Mahmud Hasan, and Khalil Ahmad Saharanpuri. The Tablighi Jama'at is indisputably linked at every level with Deobandi madrasas, in South Asia, South Africa, and elsewhere. Yet not all those involved in the Tablighi Jama'at have a formal relation to a Deobandi madrasa or other institution, even as they participate, knowingly or unknowingly, in Deoband's reformist project.

If Deoband's influence fans out into an array of ancillary organizations and movements—the "edges" of Deobandi tradition, as it were—this book focuses on the center of that tradition and how it has engaged with and impacted three major aspects of modern Islam: the place of Sufism in the modern world, the position of the *'ulama* in Muslim public life, and the very notion of Islamic tradition.

THE PLACE OF SUFISM IN THE MODERN WORLD

In a foreword to one of many books on Sufism written by his father, Mufti Muhammad Shafi' (d. 1976), Muhammad Taqi 'Usmani, a prominent Deobandi scholar of contemporary Pakistan, succinctly posed the "problem" of Sufism in the modern world as many Deobandis see it: "Some believe [Sufism] to be an innovation [*bid'a*], something apart from the teachings of the Qur'an and the Sunna. Others believe Sufism to be a source of salvation in its own right, a rival to the Shari'a itself."[24] The Deobandis have positioned themselves as treading a middle way between those who would unmoor Sufism from its grounding in Islamic law and those who would reject Sufism altogether. Although this positioning has roots in early Deobandi thought, it has become especially salient in recent history, and above all in Pakistan, where Deobandis have been on the defensive because of their perceived antipathy to Sufism.

Indeed, one *can* argue that contemporary Deobandis' engagement with Sufism is not as robust as it once was. I return to this idea in the final chapter and conclusion. But for now, I stress only that the politics of Sufism have become so vexed that, in some circles, what Deobandis advocate scarcely registers as "Sufism" at all, insofar as the Sufi saints, which some of their critics believe Deobandis have maligned, have become a metonym for Sufism as a whole. Several factors aligned to create this defensive posture. For one, Deobandis' subcontinental rivalry with the Barelvi school has made the celebration of the saints' death anniversaries (*'urs*) and the Prophet Muhammad's birthday (*mawlud,* but also spelled *mawlid* or *milad*) litmus tests for Sufi authenticity.

Another is that the War on Terror has repeatedly valorized certain *forms* of Sufism as truer or more authentic than others, especially representations of Sufism as inherently peaceful, as the quintessence of "moderate" Islam.[25] Eleanor Abdella Doumato and Gregory Starrett memorably summarized this attitude as one that assumes that "if fundamentalism is the heroin of the Muslim street, Sufism is to be its methadone," even though there is no evidence that Sufis are less violent than non-Sufis or non-Sufis more violent.[26] The politics of who is a "good" Sufi is closely related to, and partly overlaps with, the politics of who is a "good" Muslim. Western governments and policy makers have a long history of shaping and intervening in these debates.[27]

This book contends that debates about which is the "real" Sufism tell us more about the politics of defining Sufism than they do about actual Sufis, let alone Deobandis' relationship to Sufism. Much of what is vaunted as true Sufism is highly "visible": the pomp of the *'urs,* the infectious energy of the *qawwali* performance, saintly relics that exude spiritual power (*baraka*). Conversely, Deobandi Sufism is largely "invisible," subsiding in the disciplinary training that a Sufi undertakes with his or her master, or in commentaries on classical Sufi texts that few read outside of highly elite scholarly circles. It may surprise some readers, therefore, that Deobandis have penned lengthy commentaries on the likes of Jalal al-Din Rumi, Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, and Ibn 'Arabi. But the fact is that the reputations of the Deobandi *'ulama* were forged through the circulation of widely read and highly public polemics. Their detractors have largely ignored what is contained in the biographies and treatises Deobandis have written for their Sufi disciples. In other words, there is a correlation between Deoband's public face and its widespread reputation for extremism.

So how *do* we know who is a Sufi? The scholar of Sufism Arthur Buehler recently argued that "if persons call themselves sufis, academics have no other choice but to take their word for it," even as he proposed a "litmus test" for recognizing Sufis: "the existence of a transformative practice that facilitates ethical development and/or furthers taming of the ego."[28] It is worth noting that, by this account at least, almost all Deobandis would qualify as Sufis. But there is another, more important, point to be made here. Buehler hints at an arguably irresolvable tension in the study of Sufism (or for that matter, Islam): scholars can attempt to avoid making normative interventions in the politics of defining Sufism, but to some degree, any attempt to conceptualize Sufism inevitably does so. That being said, this book conceptualizes Sufism as a tripartite entity,

consisting of three intersecting, mutually constitutive dimensions: *literary, interpersonal/institutional,* and *ritual/devotional.* The literary dimension is familiar to most, encompassing the great Sufi poets, but equally, the innumerable treatises on traversing the Sufi path. The interpersonal and institutional dimension concerns relations between Sufi masters and disciples, initiations into Sufi orders, and the inculcation of Sufi ethical virtues through study with, and sitting in the presence of, Sufi masters. Finally, the ritual and devotional dimension concerns the multiple forms of devotional piety that have formed around the veneration of Sufi saints, especially but not exclusively at their tombs. What will become clear is that Deobandis embraced the first two dimensions of Sufism but maintained a complicated, ambivalent relationship with the third. To say that Deobandis are not Sufis is, quite literally, to define Sufism only in terms of ritual and devotion. Their interrogation of Sufism was, in other words, an internal critique of Sufism *by Sufis.*

This "sober" Sufism has an ancient pedigree.[29] A few brief examples will suffice to suggest the scope of Deobandis' premodern Sufi antecedents—Sufis whom, we will see, the Deobandis themselves read and cite. Deobandi vocabularies of spiritual purification, especially techniques of disciplining the ego-self (*tazkiyat al-nafs*), go back to the very origins of Sufism in ninth-century Baghdad with the writings of Harith al-Muhasibi (d. 857) and others.[30] Deobandis' view that Sufism emerged from, and is contained within, Qur'anic ethics recalls Abu Nasr al-Sarraj (d. 988), who was among the first to ground Sufism firmly in the Qur'an; who regarded Sufis, alongside Hadith scholars and legal scholars (*fuqaha'*), as among the *'ulama;* and who argued that Sufis distinguished themselves from *mere* jurists through their rigorous self-interrogation— a theme we will see again and again among the Deobandis.[31] When Sufis began to narrate their history, many looked back to Junayd Baghdadi (d. 910) as a founding figure.[32] Junayd's "sobriety" (*sahw*) would become perhaps the unifying feature of Deobandi Sufism centuries later, as it was for a cofounder of the Deoband movement, Rashid Ahmad Gangohi.[33] The biographer Abu Nu'aym al-Isfahani (d. 1038) wrote Sufi history from the vantage of a legal traditionalist, including two of the eponymous founders of Sunni Islam's legal schools, Ahmad ibn Hanbal and Muhammad ibn Idris al-Shafi'i, among the Sufi saints.[34] Isfahani was not so much a Sufi who wanted to make Sufism palatable to Islamic legal scholars as he was a legal scholar who simply saw no contradiction between Sufism and Islamic law. The work of Abul Qasim al-Qushayri (d. 1072) and 'Ali al-Hujwiri (d. 1073), whom the Deobandis read and

cite widely, reinforced the ethical and legal credentials of Sufism.[35] One final example may be the most important of all: many Deobandis looked to Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 1111) as the preeminent theorist of Islam at the intersection of law, ethics, and Sufi piety. For Ashraf 'Ali Thanvi (d. 1943)—the most influential Deobandi scholar in the history of the movement, and to a great extent the central personality of this book—no self-respecting Islamic scholar (*'alim*) was worthy of the name without having studied al-Ghazali's *Ihya' 'ulum al-din,* while he also urges lay Muslims to study the Urdu translation of the condensed version of the *Ihya',* which he personally commissioned.[36]

At the same time that discourses articulating Sufism in Islamic legal language began to emerge, popular Sufi devotions were also emerging—practices that Deobandis would critique in British India centuries later—such as the first organized mass pilgrimages (*ziyarat*) to Sufi saints' tombs in the early thirteenth century.[37] Just as Deobandis were by no means the first Sufis to align Sufism with Islamic legal discourses, nor the first to cast Sufism in the language of Islamic ethics, they were also not the first to critique certain Sufi devotional practices. It is important not to portray these simply as critiques of "Sufism." While Ibn al-Jawzi (d. 1200) was long considered among the first all-out critics of Sufism, George Makdisi long ago noted that, for al-Jawzi and other Hanbalis, "Sufism itself was not being brought into question."[38] If al-Jawzi was primarily concerned with "licentious" Sufi practices, his Hanbali acolyte Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328)—still considered the ultimate bête noire of the Sufis—was primarily concerned with the Sufi metaphysics of Ibn 'Arabi and certain saintly devotions, and not "Sufism" as a whole.[39]

Yet, beginning in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, one can discern a crescendo in both the scope and number of accusations against Sufi practices across the Muslim world, as well as the distinctly modern phenomenon of opposing Sufism *tout court.*[40] Up to this point, as Nile Green has put it, "Sufism was inseparable from many aspects of Islam as such," to the extent that "an immediate and wholesale rejection of everything said and done by the Sufis was hardly possible."[41] Until the colonial period Sufism was largely taken for granted as part of the fabric of daily life across Muslim societies from the Maghrib to Java.

Not only is the very notion of critiquing Sufism as a whole a modern idea, but in the modern era, anti-Sufi polemics and Sufi counterpolemics became both more frequent and more intense. Technologies of print and mass media aided Sufis' detractors, who have cast Sufis as partly responsible for the loss of Muslim political power and prestige. In the wake of

colonialism, Sufism was criticized from three angles, which we may call, broadly speaking, modernist, Islamist, and Salafi.[42] Modernist critics, like Muhammad Iqbal (d. 1938), often celebrated early Sufi mystics but saw "modern" Sufism as partly responsible for the decline of Islamic civilization. For Iqbal, Sufism had become mired in a world-denying pantheism that sapped the collective élan of Muslim societies. He called for reconstructing a revitalized Sufism around the affirmation, rather than the denial, of selfhood (*khudi*), as he expressed in a poem titled "Sufism":

> This angelic wisdom, this celestial knowledge
> Are useless in curing the Haram's pain.
> This midnight litany [*zikr*], these meditations, this intoxication:
> They will not protect the Self [*khudi*].
> They, too, are of no avail.[43]

Islamist critics, too, blamed Sufism for a host of ills, often seeing Sufis as standing in the way of the Islamization of the state. One of the twentieth century's most influential Islamists, Sayyid Abul A'la Maududi (d. 1979), the Pakistani founder of Jama'at-i Islami, once wrote that "if someone wishes and plans to revive Islam, he must shun the language and the terminology of the Sufis, their mystic allusions and metaphoric references, their dress and etiquette, the saint–disciple institution and all other things associated with it." He called for Muslims to abstain from "these abuses as a diabetic is warned to abstain from sugar."[44] Salafis, who claim to adhere only to the belief and practice of the first three generations of Muslims—*al-salaf al-salih* ("the pious predecessors")— have also been major critics of Sufism and Sufis.[45] The wide-ranging career of the Salafi activist Taqi al-Din al-Hilali (d. 1987) began with a 1921 "conversion" from Sufism to Salafism after he asked the Prophet Muhammad in a dream whether he should study "exoteric or esoteric knowledge." The Prophet replied: "exoteric knowledge."[46]

It must be noted, however, that these tropes, while influential, typically obscure a far more complex engagement with, and ambivalence toward, Sufism than they suggest at first glance. Maududi tempered his opposition to Sufism over the course of his career, taking up a newfound interest in his family's own Chishti background in the 1970s.[47] Meanwhile, scholars have tracked how Islamist political parties have aligned themselves with Sufi orders in particular contexts, such as contemporary Sudan, and how Islamist icons ranging from Ayatollah Khomeini to Sayyid Qutb adopted and adapted Sufi vocabularies.[48] Even Salafis have not been uniform critics of Sufism. The Syrian Salafi Jamal al-Din Qasimi

(d. 1914) leapt to the defense of Ibn ʿArabi, the bane of many Salafis, against the proto-Salafi hero and icon Ibn Taymiyya.[49] Nevertheless, this outline of dominant tropes in the critique of Sufism helps illuminate how Deobandis differed from these trends in their own critiques. Like Islamists, for example, they believed that Sufism had become burdened with centuries of cultural accretions; unlike them, they believed that the solution was a bottom-up revivification of Muslim subjectivities rather than the top-down reform of a Muslim state.[50] Like the Salafis, they, too, regarded the era of the Prophet's Companions as the paragon of a proper Muslim society, but unlike the Salafis, they saw that era as the very *fount* of Sufism, rather than its antithesis.

THE ʿ*ULAMA* IN MUSLIM PUBLIC LIFE

The scholars of the Deoband movement are *ʿulama,* traditionally educated Muslim scholars. The contested status of Sufism in the modern world closely parallels, and intersects with, the contested status of the *ʿulama* in Muslim public life—the second major theme of modern Islam that this book explores. Like the Sufis, the *ʿulama* have been the object of scorn and ridicule in the last two centuries, indeed often from some of the same quarters. Modernists, Islamists, and Salafis blamed the *ʿulama,* too, for a plethora of intellectual and social ills (even as many *ʿulama* populated their ranks). Jamal al-Din al-Afghani famously castigated the Indian *ʿulama* for their alleged failure to solve "worldly" problems, asking, "Why do you not raise your eyes from those defective books and . . . cast your glance on this wide world?"[51] This was in part an indictment of the *ʿulama* for allegedly failing to adapt to modernity, and in part a conscientious effort to appropriate the spaces of authority that *ʿulama* had traditionally claimed.

As a range of scholars have noted, modernists and Islamists challenged the so-called monopoly that *ʿulama* are said to have claimed over the interpretation of the Qur'an, Hadith, and the Islamic legal tradition. Two immediate qualifications of this claim are in order. First, it is essential to note that many modernist and Islamist critics of the *ʿulama* were also *ʿulama;* there was never a neat demarcation between these groups. Second, scholars have challenged the presumption that the *ʿulama* ever had such a monopoly on interpreting the normative textual tradition.[52] Notwithstanding these caveats, it is generally true that before the modern era, the *ʿulama* did play a central role not only in interpreting that tradition but also in advising rulers on the basis of those interpretations—a

mutually interdependent and often vexed relationship. In the process, they variously legitimated and undermined political powers, sometimes coopting them, sometimes coopted by them.[53]

As Muslim political hegemony declined globally under the yoke of colonialism, the *'ulama* were increasingly cast as medieval relics holed up in fortress-like madrasas, writing commentaries on obsolete tomes of pre-Copernican astronomy. For their critics, the Deobandis are doubly medieval: as Sufis *and* as *'ulama*. As Fuad Naeem expressed, "A preference for originality over 'tradition' led to an overemphasis on modernist figures on the one hand, and Islamist or 'fundamentalist' figures and movements on the other, often combined with a tacit supposition that the *'ulama* and Sufis represented 'medieval' discourses that would not long survive the triumph of modernity."[54] Deobandis felt this shift acutely. Lay Muslims' cavalier dismissal of the *'ulama* is a motif throughout Deobandi texts. As Khalil Ahmad Saharanpuri (d. 1927) lamented: "In the past, the masses were in need, and the Deputies of the Message [the *'ulama*] were the ones needed. No matter how severe they were, they had an effect. The masses would become worried, repent, and turn back. But nowadays, the *'ulama* have to go begging to the masses to do the work of reform."[55] Still, they held on closely to the idea that they remained vital. Ashraf 'Ali Thanvi put it more bluntly: "It is absurd to think Muslims can dispense with the *'ulama*."[56]

One of the central discourses through which the Deobandi *'ulama* have sought to articulate and maintain that vitality is reform (*islah*), a concept crucial for understanding their role in shaping Muslim public life. The semantics of *islah* (from the Arabic root *s-l-h*) resonate with the most positive and cherished values in the Qur'an, connoting peace and reconciliation (*sulh*), what is right and proper (*salah*), and what is sound, virtuous, or devout (*salih*). The Qur'an aligns *islah* closely with prophets' missions through history. The Prophet Shuayb, for instance, tells those to whom he was sent that he has come to implement *islah* on behalf of God.[57] It is best understood not in the colloquial English sense of "reform," but in the sense of *re-form*. In many contexts, reform is understood in opposition to "tradition." For the Deobandis, the point of *islah* was not to vanquish tradition, but to *reaffirm* it.

The irony of the *'ulama* doing reform is simple: most self-styled reformers took the *'ulama* as an *object* of reform, rather than its agent. Yet *islah* is a ubiquitous term in Deobandi texts. A collection of Ashraf 'Ali Thanvi's reformist treatises is titled *Islahi nisab* (The reformist program).[58] The contemporary Deobandi scholar Mufti Taqi 'Usmani has

published a sixteen-volume collection titled *Islahi khutbat* (Reformist sermons).[59] The scope of reform includes not just the social, as in Thanvi's call to reform customs, but subjectivities, as in frequent calls to reform the heart (*islah-i qalb*) and reform the self (*islah-i nafs*). Indeed, Deobandis believed that the moral health of the individual is inseparable from the social health of the body politic, a connection that chapters 3 and 4 explore in depth.

For a range of reasons, these social and subjective iterations of *islah* have been largely ignored by scholars. Geographically, *islah* has been associated with trends in the Middle East, and thematically, with political Islam, independent reasoning (*ijtihad*) in Islamic law, and the Salafi movement.[60] Deobandis, by contrast, have advanced a revival from below, a bottom-up reform largely invisible relative to the top-down reform of Islamist political projects. Above all, the Deobandi effort to remake individual subjectivities has been part of a broader effort to carve out a role for the *'ulama* in Muslim public life.

A term closely linked to, even "used interchangeably" with *islah*,[61] is *tajdid*, "renewal." *Tajdid* is in turn bound up with the concept of the *mujaddid*, the "renewer," who would arrive, according to an oft-cited Hadith, at the beginning of every Islamic century to renew the global community of Muslims.[62] The idea was an important feature of Indian Islamic history. Ahmad Sirhindi (d. 1624) presented himself as the *mujaddid* of the second Islamic millennium, while Shah Wali Allah (d. 1762) was deemed the renewer of the twelfth Islamic century.[63]

Deobandis' invocation of "renewal" (*tajdid*) must be distinguished from Islamists' use of the term. Sayyid Abu A'la Maududi mobilized the language of *tajdid* toward the view that, in his words, "the Islamic system of law . . . needs for its enforcement in all its details the coercive power and authority of the state."[64] As Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr elaborated, "In Maududi's formula, although individual piety featured prominently, in the final analysis, it was the society and the political order that guaranteed the piety of the individual."[65] Deobandis inverted this approach: one had to reform the individual to reform society. And in Deobandi discussions of reform and renewal, the individual and the social are often intertwined. For the founding Deobandi scholar Rashid Ahmad Gangohi (d. 1905), the centennial renewer (*mujaddid*) may not be just one individual at all. While there is no doubt that the imperative of renewal is clear—"repelling illicit innovations [*bid'at*], propagating the Sunna, and reviving long-forgotten prophetic traditions [*sunan*]"—he added that "the reviver of the century may not be a single scholar [*'alim*],

but may be, *at any time,* two, four, ten, twenty, fifty, a group of a hundred, or just one. In every century, there will be a *different group of scholars* who will exert themselves in the reformation [*islah*] of religion. *All of them have a share in renewal* [*tajdid*] according to their knowledge [*'ilm*] and rank."[66] This is a remarkable passage. Gangohi decenters the process of renewal, making it dependent not on a single person but a collection of *scholars,* who are distinguished by their *knowledge,* and for whom the act of *tajdid* is, in fact, *islah.* Ashraf 'Ali Thanvi, too, believed that centennial renewal was a process by which the various illicit innovations that emerge each century would be vanquished; but he, too, believed the *'ulama* were instrumental, individually and collectively, in carrying the task of renewal.[67] That being said, there were some who certainly believed that Thanvi himself deserved to be called one of the great "renewers" of the age. 'Abd al-Bari Nadvi (d. 1976)—a Sufi disciple of Thanvi's as well as a prolific writer and translator and a professor at Osmania University in Hyderabad—believed that Thanvi had undoubtedly "reached the highest level of the station of renewal [*mansab-i tajdid*]."[68]

The role of the *'ulama* in reform (*islah*) and renewal (*tajdid*) encapsulates Deobandis' view of the centrality of the *'ulama* in Muslim public life. But their ultimate aim was not simply reasserting the importance of the *'ulama.* Their ultimate aim was saving souls. The epigraph of this introduction is a line from one of the sermons of Ashraf 'Ali Thanvi, delivered in Kanpur in March 1923: "O Faithful, save yourself and your family from the torments of hell."[69] This is his translation, he tells his Urdu-speaking audience, of a phrase from Qur'an 66:6: "O believers, protect yourselves and your families from the fire."[70] In the sermon, and in his more extensive comments on this verse in his Qur'an commentary, *Bayan al-Qur'an,* Thanvi draws on the Sunna to amplify the verse: when even the Prophet was compelled by God to advise his family in belief and practice, "it is all the more obligatory for *you* to reform [*islah*] your family and household."[71] In this deceptively simple declaration, multiple facets of Deoband's reformist project are embedded. Saving souls from eternal punishment is the most important, but two others are noteworthy: "protect *yourselves*" is a call to the individual, an interpellation of a subject in need of reform; "and your *family*" is a call to the social, to replicate the act of self-reform in others. We will see this complementary, indeed reciprocal, relationship between self and society again and again throughout this book.

As we will see in chapter 4, Deobandis believed that an essential corpus of religious knowledge was the prerequisite for guiding others to

guide *themselves,* and that Sufism provided the ethical resources to turn that knowledge into practice. And *embodied* knowledge, they would add, is more easily transmitted than merely discursive knowledge, because of its affective power. All of this was intended to bring Muslims closer to God and, thereby, save them from perdition. It is a sentiment shared by Muhammad Shafi', perhaps Thanvi's most prominent disciple in postpartition Pakistan. Shafi' followed al-Ghazali in making an explicit connection between Sufi ethics and salvation. "What the Sufis call 'virtues' [*faza'il*], Imam Ghazali called '*munjiat,*' meaning 'that which grants salvation' [*najat*]," said Shafi'. "Opposite to these, those things that are forbidden and impermissible the Sufis call 'vices' [*raza'il*], which Imam Ghazali calls '*muhlikat,*' meaning 'that which destroys.'"[72]

debating islamic "tradition"

The third major debate within modern Islam that this book explores is how to define and conceptualize tradition. "Tradition" has been a watchword in Islamic studies in the last three decades. The word has become so ubiquitous, in fact, that one may wonder whether its analytical purchase has exhausted itself. Why revisit it here? Simply put, it is impossible to understand the Deoband movement—and, I would argue, modern Islam—without it.

There is no single word in the main languages of the Deoband movement—above all Urdu, followed by Arabic and Persian—that neatly conforms to the English word "tradition," though a constellation of words falls within its semantic range.[73] For the Deobandis, there are multiple, overlapping phenomena that the word connotes. There is, first and foremost, Islam itself, configured through divine revelation and the transmission of the prophetic Sunna. Sufism, too, is a tradition in its own right—so much so that Nile Green has argued persuasively that Sufism is best understood through the lens of "tradition" rather "mysticism."[74] And, finally, there is the tradition of Deoband itself.

Perhaps the most influential definition of tradition in Islamic studies comes from philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre. MacIntyre famously defined tradition as "an argument extended through time in which certain fundamental agreements are defined and redefined in terms of two kinds of conflict: those with critics and enemies external to the tradition, and those internal, interpretative debates through which the meaning and rationale of fundamental agreements comes to be expressed and by whose progress a tradition is constituted."[75] Although MacIntyre may help us understand