

Shaykh Amin Situates the ‘Ālim in Contemporary Times

In contemporary times, answering “Who is an ‘*ālim*?” requires more than just a cursory definition. Presently, the term is often loosely applied to people of various levels of Islamic scholarly training, at times even to the novice student of knowledge. However, historically, the term ‘*ālim*’ had a very precise definition. To be amongst the ‘*ulamā*’, one was required to meet a high standard of expertise in the Islamic sciences. Additionally, the historical role of an ‘*ālim*’ was profoundly different from the contemporary one, whose domain rarely extends beyond the masjid pulpit and is frequently dictated by laypersons on a dysfunctional board.

In order to understand who an ‘*ālim*’ is, one must first understand the role he historically played. During the times of flourishing Islamic empires, the ‘*ulamā*’ were amongst the most esteemed classes of society and worked in important and well-paid government positions. They served as judges, *muftīs*, ambassadors, advisors, and more. For instance, Imām Abū Yūsuf and Imām Muḥammad b. Ḥasan al-Shaybānī, the two students of Imām Abu Ḥanīfa, were high-ranking employees of the Abbasid caliph, Hārūn al-Rashīd.

Muslim leaders during these times were keenly aware of the fact that the ‘*ulamā*’ wielded authority and influence over the masses and garnered significant public support. Thus, in order to rule effectively, these leaders sought to work in collaboration with the ‘*ulamā*’ and made earnest efforts to take care of their needs and secure them as close allies. Accordingly, during the Mughal and Ottoman empires, the curriculum for the traditional *madrasa* system was designed with these aims in mind. For Muslim rulers, the institutional goal of the *madrasa* was not the creation of teachers for their *masājid*; instead, it was the creation and development of scholars *par excellence*. These scholars had comprehensive knowledge of the Islamic sciences and were thus capable of running the empire.

The content of the *madrasa* curriculum consisted of four core subjects: *Qur’ān*, *ḥadīth*, *fiqh* (Islamic law) and *usūl* (legal theory), and ‘*aqīdah*’ or *kalām* (theology). The first, *Qur’an*, is *wahy matlū*, or recited revelation, the exact words of God. *Ḥadīth* is *wahy ḡhayr matlū*, or revelation that is not recited; God’s speech is encompassed in its meanings, but it is not His exact

words. *Fiqh* and *usūl* cover the legal rulings governing every aspect of a Muslim's life and are extracted from the two aforementioned forms of *wahy*. *'Aqīdah* makes up the Islamic belief system.

An *'ālim*, then, was someone who studied these four core subjects for at least four years and attained a reasonable level of training in a structured academic program. The *'ālim* had to be able to research these subjects proficiently and independently at any level. Thus, the *'ālim* was not only capable of reading and recalling, but also was able to investigate and synthesize.

Additionally, because the *'ulamā'* had such important government positions, their training included other salient features. In addition to his expertise in the four core Islamic sciences, the *'ālim* was required to know how to fight in battle, use a sword, and ride a horse. Some also had to be proficient in Latin, for they served as the government's ambassador to the Vatican of the neighboring Roman Empire. Upon completion of this curriculum, the graduate was then promised a high paying, prestigious government position.

With regards to the specifics of the curriculum, in the Mughal empire (1526-1857), Mulla Nizām al-Dīn created what is known as the *Dars-e-Nizāmī* curriculum. In it, he emphasized the liberal arts with a focus on philosophy, grammar, logic, and Islamic law. He had a well-defined metric for all four core subjects. For *Qur'ān*, students had to master *Tafsīr Jalālayn* and had to understand every word contained in the book. For *ḥadīth*, students had to learn the text *Mishkāt al-Maṣābiḥ* and be able to locate each *ḥadīth*'s corresponding chapter in the book. For Islamic law, students had to master up to the level of *Hidāyah*, which is a four-volume *Ḥanāfi fiqh* text covering the legality of every aspect of a Muslim's life. Finally, for *'aqīdah*, students had to study *Ṭahāwīyyah* and *Sharḥ al-'Aqā'id an-Nasafīyya* by Imām Taftazanī, which was a commentary on all of the primary tenets of Islamic creed.

Subsequently, in the 18th century AD (12th century *hijri*), Shāh Waliullāh Dehlawī completed his *Dars-e-Nizāmī* studies, but believed the curriculum to be incomplete. He contended that in order to be a true *'ālim*, one must know the *siḥah sitta*, or six authenticated books of *ḥadīth*. He believed that an *'ālim* must also procure a *sanad* (chain of narration), or *ijāzah* (permission to

narrate) *ḥadīth* from the Prophet ﷺ. The *sanad* is an academic link or chain that connects every ‘*ālim* back to the Prophet ﷺ, including the name of every ‘*ālim* that transmitted the Prophetic knowledge over the course of time. The *sanad* is the hallmark of Islamic scholarship, and no civilization can boast of an unbroken identifiable *sanad* that is traced back to its founding father. Thus, an ‘*ālim* with a *sanad* has religious and academic permission, or *ijāzah*, to narrate from the Prophet ﷺ. Shah Waliullāh thus added what is known as *dawrat ḥadīth* to the curriculum, which was an additional year in which the six books of *ḥadīth* were covered. This was officially added and codified into the curriculum. One could complete the *Dars-e-Nizāmī* without the *dawrah* and still become an ‘*ālim*; however, according to Shāh Waliullāh, his studies were deemed *mawquf* or incomplete.

In the 19th century AD (13th century *hijri*), Muḥammad Qāsim Nanautavī, an Indian Hanafī Islamic scholar also known as Mawlāna Qāsim, became one of the main founders of the Deobandī movement in India. He created *Darul Ulūm Deoband*, which inherited the curriculum of Shah Waliullāh; it consisted of *Dars-e-Nizāmī* plus the *siḥah sitta*. The Deobandī ‘*ulamā*’ also emphasized refinement of ethics and morals for the ‘*ālim*. They all but mandated that an ‘*ālim* should stay in the company of an accomplished Sūfī shaykh and develop familiarity with methods of self reform, piety, *dhikr* (recitation of spiritual litanies), and supererogatory acts of worship. In fact, Mawlana Thanwī is known to have said that no ‘*ālim* should be given a *sanad* until he has spent two years with a Sūfī shaykh.

However, the political milieu during the time of Mawlānā Qāsim created a very distinct aim for the graduates of *Darul Ulūm Deoband*. During his time, the Mughals were no longer in power. The Muslims were being governed by the British Empire. As a colonizing power, the British Empire had a strategic interest in summarily subjugating its colonized people; this included administrative, economic, and intellectual domains. Thus, when the British Empire identified the importance of the ‘*ulamā*’, it rolled out a calculated campaign to destroy the honor, prestige, and integrity of every ‘*ālim*. They sabotaged the *madrassa* system and eroded popular support and love for it. They forbade the ‘*ulamā*’ from taking any part in the government. Their influence upon society then was severely truncated. Without access to government funding, the ‘*ulamā*’ were now at the mercy of donations. After undermining the *madrassa* system, the British Empire

then raised the economic value of a secular education by guaranteeing anyone who learned English a well-paying office job. The overall result was a systemic subversion of ‘*ulamā*’. It was in this milieu that Mawlānā Qāsim was compelled to establish *Darul Ulūm Deoband*. His vision for his graduates was transformed from running the Muslim empire to preserving and propagating Islam in non-Muslim lands.

As such, it is Mawlānā Qāsim’s curriculum, philosophy, and aims that Darul Qasim has inherited. The mission of Darul Qasim is to create ‘*ulamā*’ who have mastered the four core Islamic sciences. While serving the *masājid* and Muslim community is a noble and admirable task, graduates of Darul Qasim are encouraged to extend their spheres of influence even further, coherently presenting Islam in an academic and scholarly fashion to Muslim professionals and non-Muslim colleagues and neighbors. They serve roles in the higher echelons of society, commanding influence in informing governmental and international policies. An ‘*ālim*’ is someone who knows how revelation relates to reality, providing guidance not only for worship, but for all aspects of life and society. The goal at Darul Qasim is to restore the meaning of ‘*alim*’, in its original, comprehensive and true sense.

This paper was originally a lecture that Shaykh Amin gave at the Darul Qasim Chapter in Dallas, Texas. It was transcribed by Nida Ahmed and edited by Abid Haseeb and Dr. Muhammed Stodolsky.