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**‘Ilm and the Individual:**

**Religious Education and Religious Ideas in Pakistan**

*Being Muslim in South Asia: Diversity and Daily Life*

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## ‘Ilm and the Individual:

### Religious Education and Religious Ideas in Pakistan

*Matthew J. Nelson*

This chapter begins with a simple observation, namely, that Muslims disagree with one another about certain features of Islam. (I focus, for illustrative purposes, on differences regarding basic issues like *salat* or prayer.) I seek to understand the ways in which different educational institutions prompt individual Muslims to deal with these differences in different ways. Some teach Muslims to ignore them; some teach Muslims to acknowledge them; some embrace them; and so on. I ask: How have educational institutions in Pakistan shaped the treatment of difference within the terms of Islam? Where does the ideational influence of educational *institutions* ‘end’ and the autonomy of interpretive *individuals* ‘begin’? How much influence do institutions actually have when it comes to the thoughts (regarding ‘difference’) held by individual Muslims?

Broadly speaking, this chapter focuses on the formation of *ideas* and, within this, the formation of religious-cum-political *subjectivities*, drawing special attention to three very different approaches to the treatment of sectarian and doctrinal difference: one associated with the work of the postcolonial **state** in which the terms of difference have been, for the most part, *ignored* (Idea<sub>1</sub> or I<sub>1</sub>); one associated with the work of sectarian **madrāsas** in which the terms of difference are, somewhat reluctantly, *acknowledged* (I<sub>2</sub>); and, finally, one associated with a rather unusual group of **individuals** amongst whom the terms of difference are, occasionally, *embraced* (I<sub>3</sub>). My question is: Where do these three different approaches to the issue of sectarian and doctrinal difference actually come from? And, ultimately, what are their political effects (within the prevailing distribution of ‘ideas’)?

## Theory

We are all familiar with the notion that specific institutions are devoted to the production of specific religious ideas. Indeed, following Talal Asad, we are all familiar with the notion that particular expressions of Islam are ‘produced’ by particular expressions of power.<sup>1</sup> It is, in fact, quite common to read that different types of schools in Pakistan (public schools, private schools, madrasas, and so on) engage the terms of Islam in ways that produce alternative (and competing) sets of ideas.

Within the existing literature the most common argument has three parts. The most common argument—in every sense an ‘institutionalist’ argument—suggests that (a) madrasas, catering to the rural poor, produce ‘sectarian’ students who are particularly intolerant of difference, that (b) public-sector schools, catering to the lower-middle classes, produce a slightly higher level of tolerance, and, finally, that (c) Pakistan’s elite English-medium academies produce the most tolerant students of all. This argument, combining Talal Asad’s attention to specific forms of ‘power’ (vis-à-vis the formation of ideas) with a more explicit form of ‘class’ analysis, can be found in the work of scholars like Tariq Rahman at the Quaid-e-Azam University in Islamabad. This work derives its understanding of ‘ideas’ about difference (in this case ‘tolerance’) from a class-based analysis of institutions involved in the production of norms. In short: your class determines your school; your school defines your norms.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Talal Asad, ‘Anthropological Conceptions of Religion: Reflections on Geertz’, *Man* 18:2 (1983), pp. 237-59 (252); also *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1993); and ‘Reading a Modern Classic: W. C. Smith’s “The Meaning and End of Religion”’, *History of Religions* 40:3 (2001), pp. 205–22.

<sup>2</sup> Rahman, *Denizens of Alien Worlds: A Study of Education, Inequality, and Polarization in*

In recent years, however, this rather simple class-based approach has been challenged by those with an interest in the expansion of educational markets and, within this, the expansion of ‘school choice’. In particular, some have begun to stress the extent to which local parents (including middle and upper-class parents) actually *choose* a madrasa-based education for their children: some send their children to a madrasa full time; some send them early in the morning before shifting them over to a government school later in the day; some call the mullah from their local madrasa to provide their children with a religious education at home; some enrol their children in a madrasa until they can afford another type of school (for example a private school); and so on.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, full-time madrasa enrolments are seen as being quite rare. ‘Hybrid enrolments’ are, by now, quite common.

Of course those with an interest in the power of educational ‘markets’ are still very much invested in a form of institutional analysis. But, over time, the drivers of one’s ‘institutional’ location (and, thus, one’s ‘ideas’) have spilled over from class into choice.

Even within this growing interest in ‘the marketplace of ideas’, however, the World Bank has pushed to dismiss (or downplay) the institutional role of madrasas, arguing that, today, very *few* parents actually *choose* a madrasa-based religious education for their children.<sup>4</sup>

Unfortunately, the data underpinning this World Bank view—still tied to an appreciation for the ideational influence of particular institutions—are deeply flawed. In its own widely cited empirical research, for instance, the World Bank opted to document only full-time madrasa enrolments—indeed, full-time *residential* madrasa enrolments—noting that

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*Pakistan* (Karachi: Oxford, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, C. Christine Fair, *The Madrassah Challenge: Militancy and Religious Education in Pakistan* (Washington: USIP, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> See Tahir Andrabi et al., ‘Religious School Enrolment in Pakistan’, World Bank Policy Research Working Paper No. 3521 (March 2005), p. 4.

‘fewer than 2%’ of all Pakistani children actually *live* in a residential madrasa. (Hence their rather surprising conclusion, namely, that the ideas articulated in local madrasas—I<sub>2</sub>—were statistically unimportant.)

Needless to say this conclusion was profoundly misleading. It was misleading because, as I will explain, the fraction of those enrolled in local madrasas on a part-time (non-residential) basis is actually more than 70%. Indeed, if ‘institutions’ play a role in shaping local ‘ideas’ (including ideas about difference)—and they do—it is essential to know something about which institutions students encounter. The World Bank completely failed to illuminate this issue.

It is surprising, given their obsessions with the ideational impact of particular institutions, that, even now, scholars continue to suffer from a pervasive lack of data regarding existing educational enrolment patterns in Pakistan, including, above all, ‘part-time’ enrolment patterns involving several different types of institutions mixed together: ‘[There are] no data ... on the part-time utilization of religious schools’, notes Chris Fair, based in the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown, drawing attention to the importance of this gap for those with an interest in charting the distribution of ideas. ‘Research on this [part-time enrolment] issue is urgently needed’, she noted, holding fast to the ‘institutionalist’ orientation of so many scholarly colleagues, because ‘encouraging parents to opt out of the madrasa system ... could help [to] discourage the production of “intolerant worldviews”’.<sup>5</sup>

Of course, even apart from her disagreement with the class-based arguments developed by scholars like Tariq Rahman, choice-based scholars like Chris Fair continue to echo the work of Talal Asad, particularly when it comes to their appreciation for the role of power and, especially, the power of institutions vis-à-vis the competitive ‘production’ of

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<sup>5</sup> Fair, *The Madrassah Challenge*, p. 11.

Islam (up to and including competing ideas about the treatment of doctrinal difference). There is, in fact, a persistent tendency to believe that ‘what you think’ (about the treatment of difference) is related to ‘where you study’. And, yet, having said this, there is also a tendency to ignore the possibility of any distinction between (a) the ideas articulated within institutions and (b) the ideas of the individuals who study in them.

This rather narrow focus on the productive power of alternative institutions is problematic. Indeed, what happens to the productive power of institutions when, owing to the prevalence of hybrid enrolments, the ideational ‘products’ of different institutions overlap?

The challenge does not lie in drawing attention to the ideational ‘gap’ between (a) schools (I<sub>1</sub>: ignore difference) and (b) madrasas (I<sub>2</sub>: acknowledge difference). The challenge lies in realizing that, at the level of existing enrolments, most children encounter at least *two* very different sets of religious-cum-political ideas *simultaneously*. In the context of their local madrasa, they learn to ‘recognize’ the terms of doctrinal difference. And, in the context of their local school, they learn to ‘ignore’ those terms altogether.<sup>6</sup>

Naturally, all of this hybridity at the level of existing (part-time) enrolments makes it difficult to link the production of particular sets of ideas to discrete forms of institutional power. In fact a deeper understanding of existing enrolments has a remarkable tendency to push us beyond a one-dimensional *institutional* explanation for alternative expressions of ‘tolerance’ (I<sub>1</sub>, I<sub>2</sub>, I<sub>3</sub>) in favour of an appreciation for the interpretive agency of educated

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, the Urdu language textbook for Class 10. As Pakistanis, the book explains, ‘we have faith in one God, one Prophet, and one [holy] book, ... so it’s binding on us that we should be one as a nation also. We are all Pakistanis now: not Balochis ... not Sindhis ... not Pathans’ (I<sub>1</sub>). Or, as one of my research assistants pointed out after reviewing hundreds of similar textbooks, ‘sectarian differences are never mentioned’, despite being one of the most important issues facing Pakistan today (I<sub>1</sub>).

Muslim *individuals*.<sup>7</sup> ‘Who thinks what’ (about the treatment of sectarian and doctrinal difference) is no longer a question that can be answered with reference to class- or market-based analyses focused on the work of isolated *institutions*. Moving forward, such analyses must be combined with a greater appreciation for the interpretive faculties of what might be described, departing from the work of Louis Althusser, as ‘multiply interpellated’ *individuals*.<sup>8</sup>

To develop this appreciation, I argue that scholars should begin to move away from some of the work of Talal Asad in favour of some of the work that Asad himself rejected, including, above all, the foundational work on ‘ideology’ and ‘religion’ undertaken by Asad’s *bête noire* Clifford Geertz.

I begin with the interpretive underpinnings of Geertz’s early work on ideas (including his work on culture, ideology, and religion). And, then, agreeing with Talal Asad’s initial critique of Geertz, including Geertz’s reliance on a rather ahistorical account of symbolic structures, I move forward with an effort to bring historical contingency back in to the programme that Geertz himself initiated.<sup>9</sup> I do not turn to the Foucaultian (genealogical / structural) work of Talal Asad: ideas are a product of (contested) ‘power’. Instead, I turn to the more thoroughly *historical* sensibility of those with an interest in the formation of ideas on the ground—scholars like Quentin Skinner, focusing on the underlying historical

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<sup>7</sup> Matthew Nelson, ‘Religious Education in Non-Religious Schools: A Comparative Study of Pakistan and Bangladesh,’ *Journal of Commonwealth and Comparative Politics* 46:3 (2008), pp. 271-95.

<sup>8</sup> See Louis Althusser, ‘Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses’ in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review, 1971), pp. 127-88. Althusser does not stress the autonomous agency of multiply interpellated *individuals*.

<sup>9</sup> See Clifford Geertz, ‘Ideology as a Cultural System’ in *Ideology and Discontent*, David Apter, ed. (NY: Free Press, 1964), pp. 47-76; and ‘Religion as a Cultural System’ in *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*, Michael Banton, ed. (London: Routledge, 1966), pp. 1-46.

flexibility of ideational *conventions*, and, more specifically, Mark Bevir, reinforcing this focus on ‘flexibility’ in his work on situated ideational *intentions*.<sup>10</sup>

According to Asad, ‘productive’ forms of ideational *contestation* unfold within ‘traditions’. (This emphasis on ‘contestation’ that allows him to stress the ‘productive’ capacity of said ‘traditions’.) Like Quentin Skinner, however, Asad is keen to stress the ways in which competing sets of ideas—the stuff of ideational production—are never entirely free-floating. They are, following Wittgenstein and Saussure (indeed, following Geertz himself), closely bound up with the ‘grammar’ of specific ‘semiotic’ or ‘cultural’ *traditions*. Indeed both Asad and Skinner could be said *follow* Geertz in stressing that the contestation of ‘ideas’ must be read *within* the parameters of a particular ‘culture’ (Geertz 1964), ‘convention’ (Skinner 1969), or ‘tradition’ (Asad 1983).<sup>11</sup>

(Asad is keen to stress the productive capacity of ideational competition within each tradition. But, when it comes to the *reach* of that capacity, he often goes on to contain it with reference to the oddly stable parameters of ‘tradition’ itself. ‘New’ ideas, in other words, may emerge. But, for Asad, this process is always led by *elites*—that is, following Skinner’s mentor, J.G.A. Pocock, by a narrow understanding of power.<sup>12</sup>)

Theoretically speaking, Asad is open to the creative capacity of individuals. But in practice he tends to stress the domination of powerful institutions instead. In fact, on many occasions, it is almost as if Asad believes that, ‘within’ the discursive tradition of Islam, too much emphasis on the creative capacity of Muslim *individuals* might betray a politically

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<sup>10</sup> See Peter L. Janssen, ‘Political Thought as Traditionary Action: The Critical Response to Skinner and Pocock’, *History and Theory* 24:2 (1985), pp. 115-146; Mark Bevir, ‘The Role of Contexts in Understanding and Explanation’, *Human Studies* 23:4 (2000), pp. 395-411.

<sup>11</sup> See Quentin Skinner, ‘Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas’, *History and Theory* 8:1 (1969), pp. 3-53.

<sup>12</sup> See Janssen, ‘Political Thought,’ for an account of both Skinner and Pocock.



unacceptable capitulation to the ‘alien’ ideology of *liberalism*.<sup>13</sup>

Fortunately, the models of meaning-formation articulated by Mark Bevir are much less politically fraught—much less twisted by the politics afflicting post-9/11 approaches to the study of ideas within ‘Islam’. This is particularly true owing to Bevir’s appreciation for the creative ideational capacity of individuals, and, more importantly, his interest in *the creative capacity of individuals ‘interpellated’ by multiple institutions simultaneously*. Indeed, for Bevir, ideas are not a product of ‘power’ pure and simple. Instead, ideas emerge from a situation in which multiple institutions produce what Bevir describes as cross-cutting ‘webs’ of belief. For Bevir, ideas *may* reflect the influence of particular institutions. (Individuals *may* articulate, without too much reflection, the stuff of I<sub>1</sub> or I<sub>2</sub>.) But—and this is where Bevir departs from both Asad and Bourdieu—*this is not always the case*.

For Bevir, ideas (properly understood) are *not* a ‘product’ developed and imposed by ‘the most powerful institution in town’. For Bevir, building on Geertz and Skinner, ideas are a product of individual efforts to activate particular features of their ideational ‘repertoire’ in light of their own *intentions*. Ideas, if you will, emerge at the level of individuals (both elite and non-elite) in response to the ideational dilemmas that surface when personal experience bumps into the indeterminate influence of multiple or cross-cutting institutions. Given Circumstance C, Bevir notes, people simply proceed to ask: which ideas work for me: I<sub>1</sub>, I<sub>2</sub>, ... or I<sub>3</sub>?

Of course Bevir’s approach to the formation of ideas does not amount to a crude expression of liberalism. Instead it combines an analytical appreciation for the possibility of discursive *agency* with an empirically sensitive approach to the contingent formation of grassroots (Islamic) *ideas*. Meaning is not reduced to a narrow account of elites and their

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<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*, pp. 269-306.

competitive efforts to delineate (and impose) specific notions of heresy. Instead it emerges from the confluence of discursive conventions, *overlapping* institutions, and the work of situated *intentions*.

I do not ignore the power of institutions. Working *with* Asad, I simply aim to *measure* the relative power of different institutions: ‘who studies where’ (school versus madrasa, madrasa versus mullah, etc.), ‘which ideologies tied to which institutions dominate the ideas of which individuals’, and so on? But even then, having said this, I also turn away from institutions, going on to stress the relative ideational autonomy of *individuals*. Indeed, moving *away* from Asad, I seek to measure ‘the extent to which’ individuals actually manage to challenge the institutionalised ideologies that surround them—moving away from I<sub>1</sub> or I<sub>2</sub>, if you will, towards a renegade articulation of I<sub>3</sub>.

This is the institutional-cum-ideational threshold that, I argue, demands more attention from those (like Fair) with an appreciation for the prevalence of overlapping or hybrid enrolments (and their ideational impact) in the context of Pakistan today.<sup>14</sup>

## Data

In what follows, I will move beyond an account of I<sub>1</sub> (Nelson 2009) and I<sub>2</sub> (Zaman 2007) to introduce—albeit in a preliminary fashion—the existence of I<sub>3</sub>, drawing special attention to its expression in a small group of interviews captured on film during my research.<sup>15</sup> Before I turn to these interviews, however, let me challenge two features of the

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<sup>14</sup> See also Joshua T. White, ‘Beyond Moderation: Dynamics of Political Islam in Pakistan’, *Contemporary South Asia* 20:2 (2012), pp. 179-94.

<sup>15</sup> Matthew J. Nelson, ‘Dealing with Difference: Religious Education and the Challenge of Democracy in Pakistan’, *Modern Asian Studies* 43:3 (2009), pp. 591-618. (For an account of

conventional wisdom regarding the ideas expressed in local schools (I<sub>1</sub>) and madrasas (I<sub>2</sub>).

First, with reference to the ideas conveyed in both public and non-elite private schools using government-sanctioned curricula (I<sub>1</sub>), it is important to note that, contrary to the views held by a growing number of scholars, the homogenizing ('see-no-difference') rhetoric of the state did *not* emerge, for the first time, under General Zia-ul-Haq during the 1980s. Instead, these patterns took shape much earlier. In fact the state's aggressively 'assimilationist' approach took shape in the context of a concerted postcolonial effort to rally the Islamic nation of Pakistan against emerging forms of Bengali and Balochi 'provincialism' during the late 1940s and 1950s.<sup>16</sup>

The irony, of course, lies in the fact that initially it was the *Bengali* Chairman of Pakistan's first 'Education Conference', Fazlur Rahman, working with the *elected* governments of the late 1940s, who sought to 'homogenize' the terms of Islam in an effort to resist the threat of provincialism, whereas, during the 1960s, it was *another* Fazlur Rahman, the philosophically inclined *Punjabi* Fazlur Rahman, who pressed for the 'pluralisation' of religious interpretation under the centralizing *dictatorship* of Field Marshal Ayub Khan.

Furthermore, turning to the competitive 'recognition' of difference in the context of Pakistan's 'intolerant' madrasas (I<sub>2</sub>), it is important to challenge those who seek to trace the terms of 'tolerance' along explicitly *sectarian* lines. There is, of course, no such thing as an intrinsically tolerant Muslim sect. On the contrary, Sunnis compete with Shi'a, and, in due course, various groups of Sunnis compete (often violently) with one another—typically, with

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I<sub>1</sub> see also Nelson, 'Religious Education in Non-Religious Schools'.) For I<sub>2</sub> see Mohammad Qasim Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Pakistan: Custodians of Change* (Princeton, 2007).

<sup>16</sup> Others have identified similar trends even earlier. See, for example, Francis Robinson, *Separatism Among Indian Muslims* (Cambridge, 1974) and Farzana Shaikh, *Community and Consensus in Islam* (Cambridge, 1989).

reference to alternative forms of contemporary Sufi practice: Barelwi v. Deobandi; Deobandi v. Ahl-e-Hadith, and so on. In fact, empirically speaking, the only defensible position seems to lie in stressing the fact that each *firqa* or *maslak* (sect or sub-sect) is devoted to an understanding of ‘orthodoxy’ defined in relation to ‘others’.<sup>17</sup>

The problem, of course, lies in the fact that, precisely insofar as ‘alternative’ orthodoxies persist (as, for mere mortals, they must), the ‘mixed enrolment’ patterns I mentioned earlier begin to reflect a set of sharply cross-cutting trends. On the one hand, for instance, recalling the views articulated in local *schools* (I<sub>1</sub>), most Pakistanis insist that ‘for the sake of the nation’ there should be only one Islam—only one approach to the terms of Islamic orthodoxy. And, yet, at the same time, recalling the simultaneous influence of their local *madrassa* (I<sub>2</sub>), most Pakistanis have a tendency to believe that, insofar as there should be ‘only one’ Islam, that ‘one’ should reflect their own *sectarian* point of view. Indeed, as one of our respondents said, summing up the basic thrust of this key point with reference to his own point of view: ‘*Jab sab bilkool ek jaisay hain, tho sab baraabar hothay hain. Jagda ka matlab jaahil hai.*’ ‘When everyone is exactly the same’, in both a doctrinal and a practical sense, ‘equality itself is enhanced’. ‘Difference or disagreement implies “a deep lack of religious understanding”’ (*jahiliyya*).

This was, of course, an extremely widespread view. In fact this is precisely the view we encounter on these (otherwise sectarian) posters: ‘Why Are We Not One’ (Fig. 1)? Of course some actively seek to advance their ‘own’ understanding of Islam with violence.

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<sup>17</sup> See Talal Asad, ‘Medieval Heresy: An Anthropological View’, *Social History* 11:3 (1986), pp. 345-62. See also Muhammad Qasim Zaman, ‘Sectarianism in Pakistan: The Radicalisation of Shia and Sunni Identities’, *Modern Asian Studies* 32:3 (1998), pp. 689-716; S.V.R. Nasr, ‘The Rise of Sunni Militancy in Pakistan: The Changing Role of Islamism and the Ulama in Society and Politics’, *Modern Asian Studies* 34:1 (2000), pp. 139-80; Nelson, ‘Dealing with Difference’.

These are, broadly speaking, the (Kharijite) jihadis who have received so much attention in the literature.<sup>18</sup> But, for the most part, my project is focused on the other end of the spectrum, drawing attention to those ‘multiply interpellated’ Muslims who believe that, practically speaking, *there is never only ‘one’ Islam*.

Fig. 1. Recruitment Posters Produced by Hizb-ut-Tahrir (Pakistan)



These are the Muslims for whom the sin of ‘pride’ (that is, the notion that, as a human being, one might actually ‘know’ the Truth) is still the greatest sin of all (I<sub>3</sub>). Where does this group come from ... if, contra Talal Asad, their diversity-friendly ‘ideas’ (I<sub>3</sub>) *cannot* be tied to the influence of any one hegemonic ‘institution’? Where do their ideas come from if, for all intents and purposes, their ideas are not formally embedded in any local institution at all?

Over time, following Skinner on ‘conventions’ and Bevir on ‘intentions’, my attempt to trace the scope of these diversity-friendly ideas (I<sub>3</sub>) has taken shape in the course of two

<sup>18</sup> For an early example of this reading see Fatima Mernissi, ‘Fear of the Imam’ in *Islam and Democracy: Fear of the Modern World* (New York: Addison-Wesley, 1995), pp. 22-41.

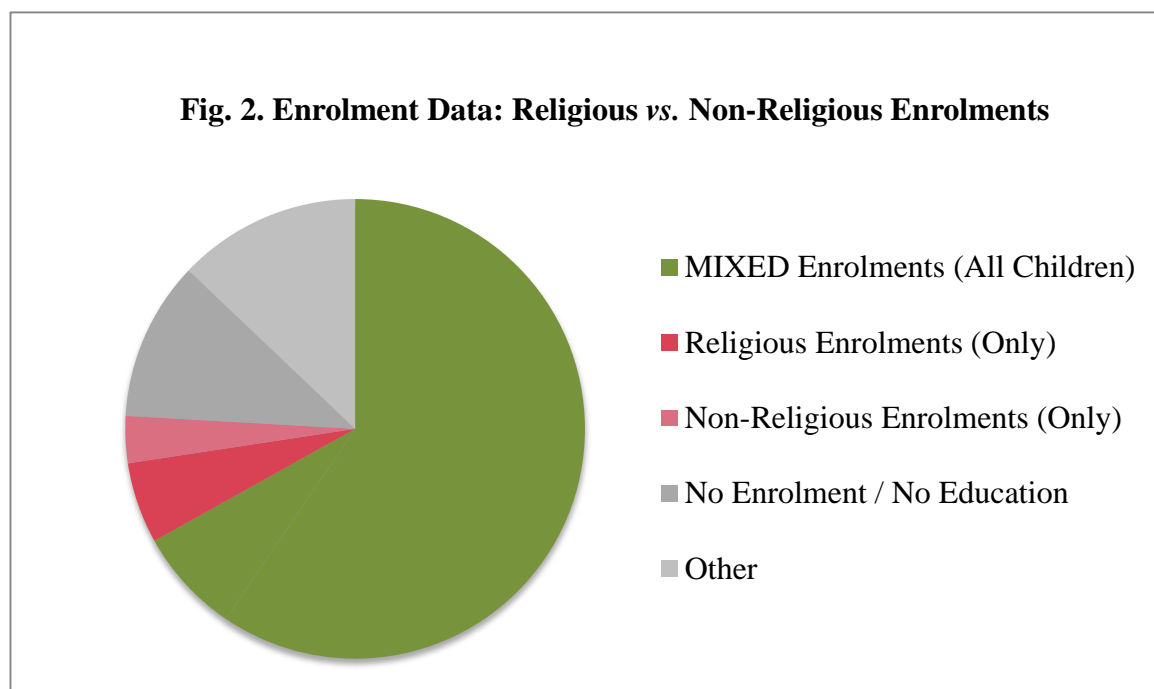
very different data-collection strategies—one largely quantitative and one broadly qualitative. In the first instance, focusing on the distribution of specific ideologies (regarding ‘difference’) *within* the discursive space of Islam, I worked with the Gallup organisation in Islamabad to identify a sample of 500 respondents across 50 different urban, peri-urban, and rural locations in the Punjab, Sindh, Balochistan, Azad Kashmir, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. My interviews allowed me to illuminate ‘who studies where’ in ways that begin to estimate the level of ‘mixed’ institutional enrolments in Pakistan. In the second instance, however, turning to the expression of *ideas*, I sought to determine ‘who thinks what’ about the terms of sectarian and doctrinal difference. Who ‘ignores’ the terms of difference (I<sub>1</sub>)? Who ‘acknowledges’ them (I<sub>2</sub>)? Who ‘embraces’ them (I<sub>3</sub>)? And so on.

The challenge lay in tying ‘diverse approaches to difference’ to variations in prior ‘educational experience’. Which enrolments ‘produced’ which ideas? And, if most enrolments were, in fact, *hybrid* enrolments, which institutions had the greatest impact within an ideational context defined by ‘overlapping interpellations’?<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> In this context it is imperative to remember the work of scholars like Pierre Bourdieu. As noted above, institutions really do matter; individuals really do ‘embody’ the ideas ‘inculcated’ by the institutions they encounter. We must simply avoid overstating Bourdieu’s argument regarding the influence of unequal institutional power (although, having said this, we must also be careful to avoid exaggerating the autonomy of those concerned). Following Bevir, the individuals involved in the process of meaning-making are not opting for the ‘freedom’ of a Friedrich Nietzsche or the conceptual ‘chaos’ of a Jacques Derrida. They are simply working to articulate their opposition to a variety of institutionalised options within what might be described, following Judith Butler, as a self-conscious ‘poetics of interpretive possibility’. Their ideas are merely the ideas of those who intervene to construct a ‘bricolage’ of religious-cum-political arguments from amongst the ideologies they have to hand—the frameworks, concepts, and logics of the multi-dimensional landscape they inhabit *within* the contested space of Islam. See Dale F. Eickelman, ‘Mass Higher Education and the Religious Imagination in Contemporary Arab Societies’, *American Ethnologist* 19:4 (1992), pp. 643-55 (653). ‘Because they are trained in both traditional and modern schools’, Eickelman notes, referring to various mullahs in Iran, ‘[they] are able to “bridge” religious styles, utilizing aspects of both forms of religious expression as [specific] circumstances warrant’. See also Gregory Starrett, ‘The Hexis of Interpretation: Islam and the Body in the Egyptian Popular

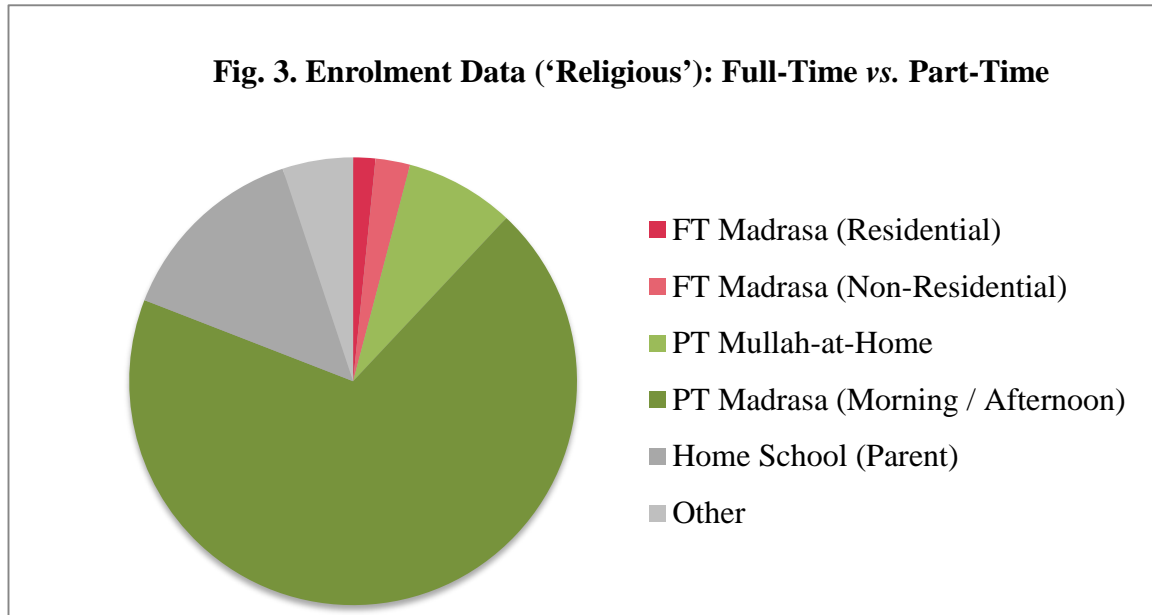
Turning first to the question of enrolments ('who studies where'), it's important to point out that, among those who *were* able to provide their children with some type of formal education (roughly 90% of my sample), a clear majority favoured some *combination* of schools *and* madrasas (see Fig. 2, below). In fact, working with three outstanding research assistants from Lahore, I discovered that this preference for 'mixed' enrolments was practically ubiquitous—rich, poor; urban, rural; Sunni, Shi'i; and so on. (Although, having said this, I must acknowledge that, among the illiterate rural poor, the statistical *minority* who sought to privilege full-time enrolments within a single madrasa was slightly larger.)



Within this context of hybridity, however, turning more specifically to the *school-*based portion of existing enrolments, we followed most of the available literature in observing that 71% attended public schools and 29% attended non-elite private schools—

although, as noted above, it is important to stress that *these two options differ very little at the level of curricular content*. Both, relying on government-sanctioned textbooks to prepare their students for government-sanctioned exams, embrace the terms of I<sub>1</sub>.<sup>20</sup>

With respect to the portion of our enrolment data regarding local *madrasas*, however, our data were actually quite revealing. In keeping with the World Bank study mentioned earlier, we found that ‘fewer than 2%’ of all madrasa enrolments were, in fact, *full-time residential* enrolments. (Although, having said this, *non-residential* enrolments brought this ‘full-time’ figure to 4.1%.) On a *part-time* basis, however, the total number of madrasa-based enrolments increased dramatically. In fact, even apart from the 8% who invited the mullah from their local madrasa to teach their children at home, fully 69% travelled *to* their local madrasa during the morning or afternoon. (See Fig. 3, below.)



Clearly, most children receive their mullah-based religious education (I<sub>2</sub>) on a ‘part-

<sup>20</sup> The margin of error is 3-6%. See also Nelson, ‘Religious Education in Non-Religious Schools’.



time' basis. Indeed, with these data in hand, there is simply no doubt that, at the level of ideas, most children are 'multiply interpellated' (suggesting a clear challenge to basic 'institutionalist' arguments regarding the production of particular ideas).

In order to study the ideational impact of this multiple interpellation, however, we went on to document the extent to which those we interviewed felt that the sectarian and doctrinal differences within Islam should be ignored (I<sub>1</sub>), acknowledged (I<sub>2</sub>), or embraced (I<sub>3</sub>). Should the existence of, say, Barelwi and Deobandi ideas regarding Sufi practice (involving or not involving attachments to local shrines) be 'mentioned' in the context of local schools? Should the simple fact that Sunnis and Shi'a employ different prayer styles be 'explained' by the mullahs ensconced in local madrasas?

Initially, in the context of each interview, we asked our respondents whether the existence of different sects should be mentioned in the context of local schools: 63%, clearly reflecting the homogenizing approach to sectarian and doctrinal difference associated with 'nationalist' schools (I<sub>1</sub>), said 'No'. We then explained that, in a purely practical sense, 'everyone is aware that Sunnis and Shi'a have different styles of prayer'. And, with this in mind, we asked people whether these differences should be 'mentioned' or 'ignored'. This time, 65% said: 'These differences should be ignored' (although, in this case, it may be worth noting that, contrary to the conventional wisdom, this 'denial of difference' was found to increase with income).<sup>21</sup>

Turning to those who said that different groups and alternative prayer styles *should* be mentioned, however, we sought to elucidate the basic 'meaning' of this patchy (and relatively

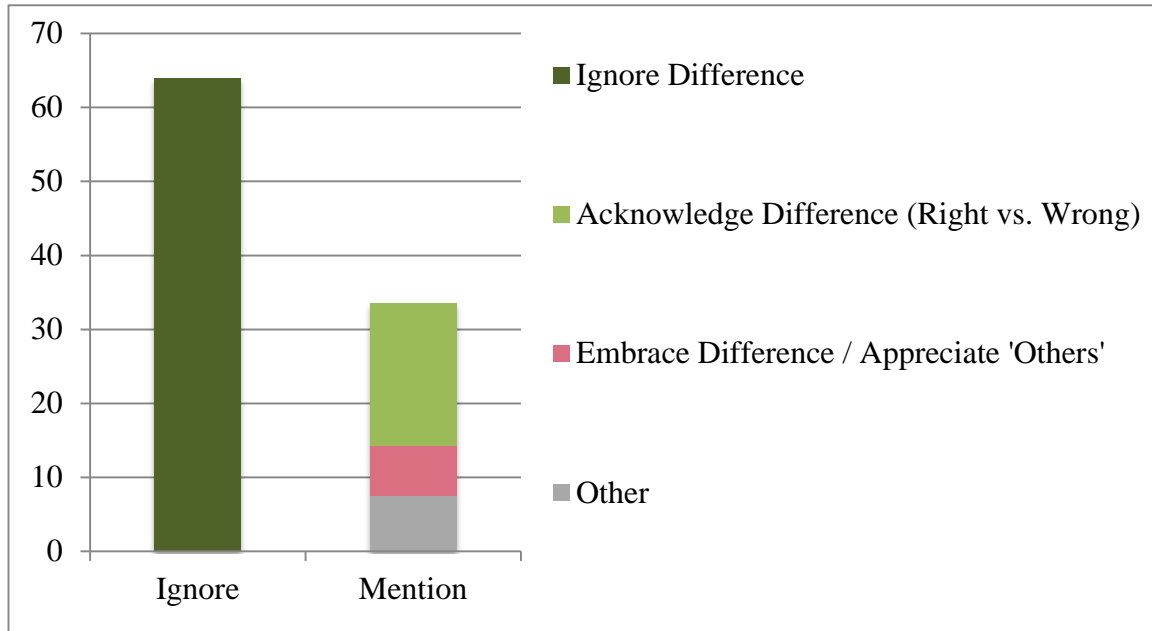
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<sup>21</sup> Within the minority Shi'i community, the fraction that sought to 'ignore' group differences dropped (slightly) to 51%. Apparently, Pakistan's government-sanctioned curriculum, committed as it is to a thoroughgoing denial of difference, is not entirely ineffective, even amongst sectarian minorities.

less common) response: I<sub>2</sub>. In particular, we asked people whether sectarian and doctrinal differences should be mentioned in an effort to ‘distinguish right from wrong’ (in a sectarian sense) or, alternatively, in a bid to promote what might be described as ‘a positive regard for others’.

At this point, drawing attention to forms of doctrinal disputation (known as *munazara*) in the context of local madrasas, 74% (that is, 19% of our total sample) said that doctrinal differences should be mentioned primarily in an effort to ‘distinguish sectarian Truths’. In fact only 26% (6.8% of our total sample) felt that differences should be mentioned in an effort to facilitate a positive regard for others—indeed, ‘a positive regard for difference’ *within* the terms of Islam (I<sub>3</sub>). (See Fig. 4, below.)

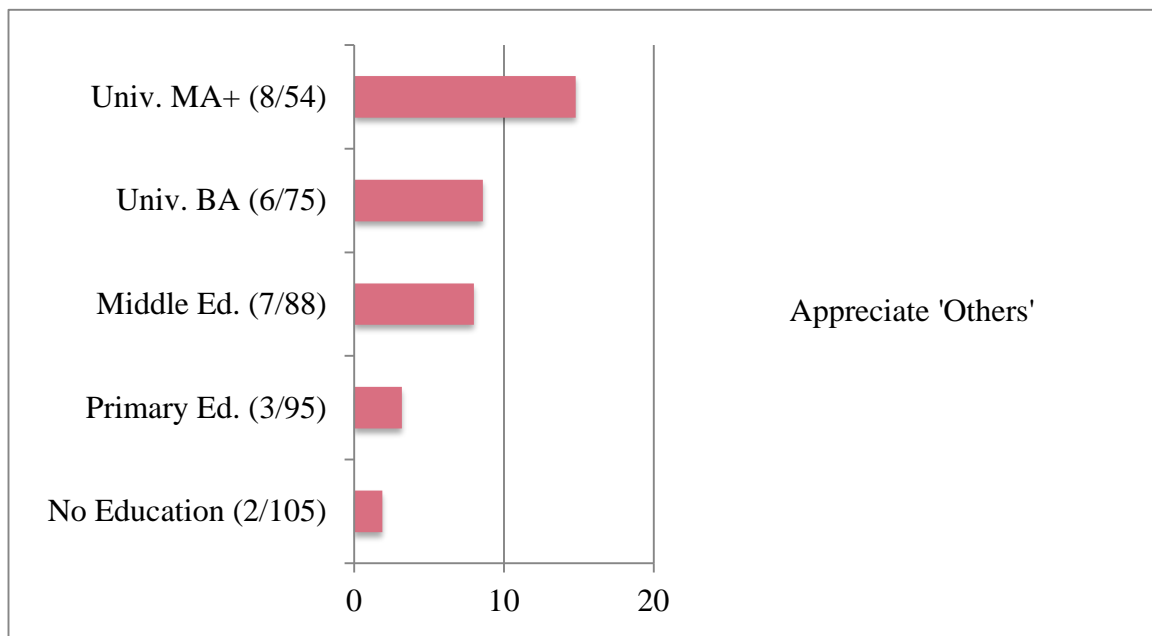
**Fig. 4. Dealing with Difference: Ignore, Acknowledge, Embrace**



It is worth pointing out that this figure has remained remarkably consistent over time, falling to a low of 6.8% in 2010 from a high of 8% in 2006. In fact it would be extremely

difficult to say that this reluctance to ‘embrace’ the terms of was ‘produced’ by a particular set of events.<sup>22</sup> I should also add that, in keeping with conventional expectations, this ‘positive regard for difference’ *was* correlated with higher levels of education. But, even among those with a university-level education, the overall size of this group seemed to challenge conventional expectations. Indeed, the prevalence of this view among Pakistan’s most highly educated citizens never exceeded 15%. (See Fig. 5 below.)

**Fig. 5. Dealing with Difference: Embrace / Appreciate ‘Others’**



Of course the main point does not lie in drawing attention to the infrequency of this view. The main point lies in drawing attention to the fact that this view was *not* derived from the government-sponsored curricula conveyed in public and non-elite private schools (I<sub>1</sub>). *Nor* was it derived from the work of ordinary madrasas (I<sub>2</sub>). On the contrary, this 6.8% was an outlier (I<sub>3</sub>)—a very *important* outlier for those with an interest in the interpretive

<sup>22</sup> See Nelson, ‘Religious Education in Non-Religious Schools’ and ‘Dealing with Difference.’

‘autonomy’ of Pakistan’s ‘multiply interpellated’ Muslims.

## Conclusion

I am currently working to develop a much deeper understanding of this rather unusual set of views (I<sub>3</sub>). For the time being, let me simply note that the challenge lies in developing a deeper appreciation for the ways in which, following some of the work undertaken by Daniel Levine in Latin America, ordinary individuals ‘take images ... from dominant [religious] institutions’ and then, simply, ‘rework’ them ‘with an eye to [their] ... immediate needs’.<sup>23</sup> What exactly are the immediate ‘needs’ that lead some of Pakistan’s ‘multiply interpellated’ Muslims to embrace the terms of I<sub>3</sub>? Indeed, if the demographic personality of this group is somewhat random—and it is (encompassing urban, rural, male, female, rich, poor, literate, illiterate, Sunni, Shi’i, Salafi, Barelwi, Punjabi, and Balochi Muslims)—what are the ‘circumstances’ or, following Bevir, the experience-based ideational ‘dilemmas’, that draw the ideas of this group together?

By and large the people we interviewed were very clear about ‘what they learned in school’ (I<sub>1</sub>) and ‘what their local mullah taught them’ (in a specific sectarian sense) (I<sub>2</sub>). But, as they began to reflect on their own experiences, *some* (6.8%) engaged in what might be described as ‘autonomous interpretive acts’. What emerges from the language of those who sought to *embrace* the terms of difference (I<sub>3</sub>) is not a language of ‘liberalism’ (for example, individual religious liberty or an attachment to the prioritization of one’s own private conscience). What emerges is, for all intents and purposes, a language of religious *movement*,

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<sup>23</sup> Daniel H. Levine, ‘Religion and Politics in Comparative and Historical Perspective’, *Comparative Politics* 19:1 (1986), pp. 95-122 (97, 99).

indeed, a language of religious ‘progress’. *Difference* as a gateway to *discussion*; discussion as the precursor of ‘progress’.

‘There should be different opinions’, noted a lower-middle-class man in his late-50s living near Sibi (Balochistan). ‘If there are no different opinions, life will become ... very difficult. And ... see ... well ... the second thing is that our religion will remain ... in one place. Difference is the reason that religion goes ahead. If there are no differences, our religion will stay in one place. It shouldn’t be like that. This is [basically akin to] being an enemy of religion’.

Or, drawing attention to a similar set of views articulated by an affluent teenager in Karachi (Sindh): ‘The religion has to remain viable; [it has] to keep on going’. ‘Each culture has its own interpretation, and for this reason there are differences. This is just part of the tradition. [Religion] is like [the inside of] a mould. It [takes shape] according to local culture. I’ll give you an example. People say to me, “when will you come [around] wearing shalwar kameez”, and I say, “why”? They say, “[because] this is an Islamic dress”. Now, you tell me. ‘Shalwar kameez is the dress according to *our* culture and tradition [here in Pakistan]. It has no connection to “Islamic” dress. There is no interpretation about this [dress] in [the context of] religion [at all]’.

Islam is constantly diversifying, constantly changing, these (very different) respondents seemed to say. And this dynamic diversity was, at least for them, defined as religiously ‘good’.

Broadly speaking scholars with an interest in the production of religious ideas, including ideas about difference (and, thus, toleration) have overplayed the importance of elite-driven institutions. I aim to bring individuals back in, without, at the same time, pushing for a sense of unlimited discursive autonomy. Moving away from Asad in favour of Bevir, I

note that ordinary Muslims inhabit something like a Poulantzian world of ideas—subordinated to, but also self-consciously manoeuvring within, the interstices of elite institutional power: ‘Institutions reach out to popular groups’, argues Daniel Levine, only to find that, as contingent dilemmas emerge, ordinary individuals *within* those groups step forward to ‘rework’ religion for themselves.<sup>24</sup>

Responding to their lived experience, ordinary Muslims simply ‘become’ Muslim in a variety of self-conscious ways. They draw upon the ideological diversity of their own educational landscape and, then, having done so, they go on to refashion that landscape according to their own circumstances. ‘[T]he whole process,’ notes Daniel Levine, ‘spills over’ and exceeds ‘formal ... institutional limits’.<sup>25</sup> What we need, he explains, anticipating some of the ideas articulated by Mark Bevir, is not an account of institutional power pure and simple. What we need is an effort to understand the ‘transformation of religious ideas’ with particular reference to the ‘religious bricolage’ unfolding at the level of individuals.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., pp. 95, 96, 99.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., pp. 119, 121.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 120.