

## **Tradition and Modernisation in Islamic Studies in Pakistan: Continuity and Transformation**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Islamic studies in Pakistan have developed through a complex interaction between classical Islamic scholarly traditions and processes of educational modernisation shaped by the state and modern higher education systems. As a country founded upon an Islamic identity, Pakistan positions Islamic studies in a strategic role, both in the formation of religious discourse and in the construction of national identity. This article aims to analyse the dynamics of tradition and modernisation in Islamic studies in Pakistan by highlighting institutional, epistemological, and curricular continuity and transformation. The study employs a qualitative method based on library research, utilising historical and sociological approaches to examine the development of Islamic education in both madrasas and universities. The findings indicate that modernisation has not replaced traditional Islamic studies; rather, it has facilitated the emergence of hybrid models that integrate classical Islamic sciences with modern academic approaches. This transformation occurs through ongoing negotiations between the scholarly authority of the ulama and the academic demands of universities, and is further shaped by state policies and Pakistan's socio-political context. The article concludes that Islamic studies in Pakistan represent a sustained dialectical process between tradition and modernity, producing both intellectual continuity and methodological renewal in contemporary Islamic scholarship.*

**Keywords:** *Islamic Studies, Pakistan, scholarly tradition, educational modernisation, madrasa, university*

### **ABSTRACT**

Islamic studies in Pakistan developed through complex interactions between classical Islamic scholarly traditions and the process of modernisation of education influenced by the state and modern higher education systems. As a country founded on Islamic identity, Pakistan placed Islamic studies in a strategic position, both in the formation of religious discourse and in the construction of national identity. This article aims to analyse the dynamics of tradition and modernisation in Islamic studies in Pakistan by highlighting aspects of continuity and transformation in institutional, epistemological, and curricular terms. This study uses a qualitative method based on literature review with a historical and sociological approach to the development of Islamic education, both in madrasas and universities. The results of the study show that modernisation does not replace the tradition of Islamic studies, but rather encourages the formation of hybrid models that integrate classical Islamic sciences with modern academic approaches. This transformation takes place through negotiations between the scientific authority of the ulama and the academic demands of universities, and is influenced by state policy and the

socio-political context of Pakistan. This article concludes that Islamic studies in Pakistan represent an ongoing dialectical process between tradition and modernity, which results in intellectual continuity and methodological renewal in contemporary Islamic studies.

**Keywords:** Islamic studies, Pakistan, scholarly tradition, educational modernisation, madrasah, university

## A. INTRODUCTION

Islamic studies is a field of scholarship that occupies a central position in Muslim societies, both as a normative religious discipline and as an academic field of study. In Pakistan, the position of Islamic studies has become increasingly significant given that the country was founded on Islamic ideology, which makes religion not merely a system of individual belief, but also the foundation of national identity and the normative framework of public life. Therefore, the development of Islamic studies in Pakistan cannot be separated from the historical, political, and social contexts that have shaped the country since its independence.<sup>1</sup>

Historically, the tradition of Islamic studies in the region that is now Pakistan developed long before the establishment of the modern state. The traditional Islamic education system was based on madrasahs, mosques, and networks of scholars who served as centres for the transmission of classical Islamic sciences. Curricula such as *Dars-i Nizami* became the main framework for learning, emphasising mastery of the disciplines of tafsir, hadith, fiqh, Arabic grammar, logic, and theology. This tradition shaped a pattern of scholarship that emphasised the authority of scholarly sanad, continuity of tradition, and the integration of knowledge and moral formation.<sup>2</sup>

However, major changes began to occur with the arrival of British colonialism and, later, the formation of Pakistan as a modern nation-state. The modernisation of education, marked by the introduction of a university system, standardised curricula, and modern scientific methods, challenged the dominance of the traditional Islamic education system. The state of Pakistan faced a dilemma between preserving the Islamic scholarly heritage as a source of ideological legitimacy and adapting to the demands of modernity, such as scientific rationality, the professionalisation of education, and the needs of national development.<sup>3</sup>

In this context, Islamic studies are undergoing a process of redefinition. On the one hand, madrasahs continue to maintain a traditional approach that is normative and textual in nature. On the other hand, universities are beginning to develop Islamic studies as an

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<sup>1</sup> Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *Islam in Pakistan: A History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> Barbara D Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860–1900* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982).

<sup>3</sup> Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

academic discipline that uses historical-critical, interdisciplinary, and contextual approaches. Islamic studies are no longer understood solely as the teaching of religious doctrine, but also as an object of scientific study that encompasses Islamic history, Islamic political thought, Islamic economics, and contemporary issues facing Muslims.<sup>4</sup>

The relationship between tradition and modernisation in Islamic studies in Pakistan does not follow a simple binary opposition. Instead, this relationship reflects a complex process of negotiation and adaptation. Some madrasah institutions have begun to adopt general subjects and modern methodologies, while universities are also attempting to incorporate classical Islamic scholarship into their academic curricula. This phenomenon demonstrates an effort to build a synthesis between the continuity of tradition and the demands of change.

Based on this background, this article aims to examine the dynamics of tradition and modernisation in Islamic studies in Pakistan, emphasising aspects of continuity and transformation. The research questions posed include: (1) how the traditional foundations of Islamic studies developed in Pakistan; (2) how modernisation has influenced the structure, methods, and content of Islamic studies; and (3) how forms of synthesis between tradition and modernity are realised in institutional and epistemological contexts. By answering these questions, this article is expected to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the development of Islamic studies in modern Muslim countries.<sup>5</sup>

## **B. RESEARCH METHOD**

This study employs a qualitative approach with *library research* as the primary strategy for data collection and analysis. A qualitative approach was chosen because this study focuses on a deep understanding of the intellectual, historical, and institutional dynamics of Islamic studies in Pakistan, particularly in the context of the relationship between Islamic scholarly traditions and the process of educational modernisation. This approach allows researchers to examine meanings, patterns, and processes of transformation that cannot be reduced to quantitative data alone.<sup>6</sup>

## **C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **1. The Traditional Foundations of Islamic Studies in Pakistan**

The results of the study show that the traditional foundations of Islamic studies in Pakistan are deeply rooted in the classical Islamic education system that developed in South Asia since the pre-colonial period. This system relies on madrasah institutions

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<sup>4</sup> Abdullah Saeed, *Islamic Thought: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> Ebrahim Moosa, *What Is a Madrasa?* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

<sup>6</sup> John W Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 4th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2014).

as the main centres for the transmission of Islamic knowledge, which function not only as formal educational institutions, but also as spaces for the formation of religious authority, social morality, and Muslim community leadership. This scholarly tradition formed the basic framework for Islamic studies in Pakistan before and after independence, and continues to influence the epistemological orientation of Islamic education to this day.<sup>7</sup>

Historically, madrasas in the region that is now Pakistan developed within the context of Islamic rule, particularly during the Delhi Sultanate and the Mughal Empire. During this period, Islamic education did not strictly separate religious knowledge from rational knowledge. Disciplines such as tafsir, hadith, and fiqh were taught alongside logic, philosophy, and mathematics, reflecting the classical Islamic world's holistic view of knowledge.<sup>8</sup> This pattern was later institutionalised more systematically through the development of the *Dars-i Nizami* curriculum in the 18th century.

The *Dars-i Nizami* curriculum forms the backbone of traditional Islamic education in South Asia, including Pakistan. This curriculum is designed to produce scholars who possess analytical and argumentative skills, particularly in the fields of Islamic law and theology. The emphasis on tools of knowledge such as Arabic grammar (*nahw* and *ṣarf*) and logic (*manṭiq*) shows that this tradition is not merely dogmatic, but rather promotes systematic thinking and rational reasoning in understanding religious texts.<sup>9</sup> Thus, the traditional foundation of Islamic studies cannot be reduced to being anti-intellectual or closed to rationality.

In addition to curricular aspects, the traditional foundation of Islamic studies is also supported by a distinctive scholarly authority structure. Knowledge authority in the madrasah system is not only determined by mastery of texts, but also by personal legitimacy obtained through scholarly sanad. Sanad connects a student with his teachers, all the way back to classical scholars and, symbolically, to the early sources of Islam. This mechanism builds intellectual and ethical continuity, which is a key feature of the Islamic scholarly tradition.<sup>10</sup> In this context, scholars function as *custodians of tradition*, ensuring the purity of teachings and the normative stability of Muslim society.

The analysis also shows that madrasas not only serve as educational institutions, but also as significant social actors. In Pakistan, especially in rural areas and poor urban communities, madrasas provide free education, shelter, and social networks for

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<sup>7</sup> Francis Robinson, *Islamic Culture in South Asia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>8</sup> Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860–1900*.

<sup>9</sup> Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam: Custodians of Change* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002).

<sup>10</sup> Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003).

groups that are underserved by the state education system. This social function strengthens the legitimacy of madrasas and explains why the tradition of Islamic education has persisted despite the pressures of modernisation.<sup>11</sup>

In the context of post-independence Pakistan, the continuity of Islamic studies through madrasas took on new political and ideological dimensions. The state of Pakistan, which was built on the basis of Islamic identity, ambivalently positioned madrasas: on the one hand, it recognised their role in preserving Islamic identity, and on the other, it viewed them as a system that needed to be reformed in order to align with the national development agenda. However, the results of the study show that the traditional foundations of Islamic studies have not experienced a significant decline, but rather demonstrate a high degree of adaptability through the diversification of madrasah networks and the strengthening of the role of scholars in public discourse.<sup>12</sup>

From an epistemological perspective, the tradition of Islamic studies in Pakistan displays a strong pattern of continuity. Knowledge is understood as something that is passed down, learned gradually, and practised in social life. This normative orientation distinguishes traditional Islamic studies from modern academic approaches, but at the same time provides an important basis for dialogue and negotiation with modernisation. In other words, the traditional foundations of Islamic studies provide a framework of values and methodologies that serve as a starting point for further transformation.

Thus, the results and discussion in this section confirm that the tradition of Islamic studies in Pakistan is not merely a legacy of the past, but a living and ongoing scholarly structure. This foundation shapes the intellectual identity of Islamic studies while also serving as a meeting ground with the modernisation of education. An understanding of this traditional foundation is an important prerequisite for analysing how the modernisation and institutionalisation of Islamic studies at universities has developed, which will be discussed in the next section.

## **2. Modernisation and University-Based Islamic Studies in Pakistan**

The results of the study indicate that the modernisation of Islamic studies in Pakistan has accelerated significantly through the development of higher education institutions and state intervention in the national education system. This process did not occur suddenly, but was a continuation of structural changes that had begun during the colonial period and were then consolidated in the post-independence period. Universities became the main arena where Islamic studies were redefined

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<sup>11</sup> Yoginder Sikand, *Bastions of the Believers: Madrasas and Islamic Education in India* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2005).

<sup>12</sup> Zaman, *Islam in Pakistan: A History*.

from normative religious transmission practices to academic disciplines subject to the methodological and epistemological standards of modern science.<sup>13</sup>

The role of universities in the modernisation of Islamic studies is evident in the establishment of faculties and departments of Islamic studies at various state universities. Punjab University in Lahore, one of the oldest educational institutions in Pakistan, has been a pioneer in integrating Islamic studies into the modern academic structure. At this institution, Islamic studies were developed as a field of study that combines philological, historical, and philosophical approaches, with the aim of producing Muslim scholars who not only understand Islamic teachings normatively, but are also able to analyse them critically in historical and social contexts.<sup>14</sup>

Similar developments can be seen at the International Islamic University Islamabad (IIUI), which was established with a specific mandate to integrate Islamic sciences with modern knowledge. IIUI represents a model of a modern Islamic university that seeks to bridge the dichotomy between religious and secular education. The Islamic studies curriculum at IIUI includes classical studies such as tafsir, hadith, and fiqh, while also introducing contemporary disciplines such as Islamic economics, modern Islamic law, Islamic political thought, and comparative religious studies. This model reflects institutional efforts to reformulate Islamic studies to be relevant to the needs of modern society without abandoning its traditional roots.<sup>15</sup>

In the university context, Islamic studies have undergone a significant epistemological shift. Whereas in the madrasah tradition knowledge was understood primarily as something that was passed down and preserved, in the academic environment of the university knowledge is positioned as an object of study that can be questioned, analysed and contextualised. A historical-critical approach to Islamic texts has become an integral part of the curriculum, enabling students to understand the development of Islamic thought as a historical process influenced by specific social, political, and cultural conditions.<sup>16</sup>

The results of the analysis also show that the modernisation of Islamic studies at universities cannot be separated from the interests of the state. The Pakistani government views Islamic studies as a strategic instrument in shaping national identity and ideological legitimacy. Therefore, national education policy includes Islamic studies as a compulsory subject and supports the development of Islamic research in higher education. However, this state involvement also creates tension between academic autonomy and ideological interests, especially on sensitive issues such as

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<sup>13</sup> Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition*.

<sup>14</sup> Zaman, *Islam in Pakistan: A History*.

<sup>15</sup> Moosa, *What Is a Madrasa?*

<sup>16</sup> Saeed, *Islamic Thought: An Introduction*.

the relationship between religion and the state, Islamic law, and pluralism.<sup>17</sup>

In addition, the modernisation of Islamic studies at universities has encouraged more intensive interaction between Islamic studies and the social sciences. The study of Islam is no longer limited to normative-theological dimensions, but also includes sociological analysis of religious practices, Islamic anthropology, and the study of Islamic politics and economics. This interdisciplinary approach broadens the scope of Islamic studies and enables dialogue with global academic discourse on religion and modernity.<sup>18</sup>

Nevertheless, the modernisation of university-based Islamic studies has not completely replaced the role of madrasahs. On the contrary, research shows that the two systems coexist and even interact. Many Islamic studies academics at universities have a madrasah educational background, while some university graduates are involved in reforming madrasah curricula. This phenomenon shows that the modernisation of Islamic studies in Pakistan is taking place through a process of hybridisation, in which traditional and modern elements are intertwined.

Thus, the modernisation and institutionalisation of Islamic studies in Pakistani universities represents an important phase in the transformation of Islamic education. This process broadens the intellectual horizons of Islamic studies, increases their relevance to contemporary issues, and creates a space for dialogue between Islamic scholarly traditions and modern academic paradigms. However, this transformation also raises new challenges related to scholarly authority, religious identity, and the position of Islam in the modern state, which will be discussed further in the next section.

### **3. Continuity, Negotiation, and Transformation of Islamic Studies in Pakistan**

The results of the study indicate that the relationship between tradition and modernisation in Islamic studies in Pakistan cannot be understood as a linear process of replacement or discontinuity, but rather as a dynamic continuity accompanied by negotiation and transformation. Islamic studies in Pakistan developed in the field of interaction between the madrasah education system, which is rooted in classical scientific tradition, and university institutions that represent modern academic rationality. This interaction produced hybrid forms that demonstrate the continuity of tradition as well as methodological and institutional renewal.<sup>19</sup>

Continuity in Islamic studies is particularly evident in the ongoing authority of

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<sup>17</sup> Ayesha Jalal, *Partisans of Allah: Jihad in South Asia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).

<sup>18</sup> Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*.

<sup>19</sup> Zaman, *Islam in Pakistan: A History*.

scholars and the use of classical texts as primary references. Although universities have introduced historical-critical and interdisciplinary approaches, the study of the Qur'an, hadith, and fiqh remains central to the Islamic studies curriculum. This shows that modernisation does not negate the importance of classical scholarly heritage, but rather affirms it as an epistemological foundation that cannot be ignored.<sup>20</sup> In many cases, the works of classical scholars remain the main source, even though they are read with a more contextual approach.

However, this continuity did not occur passively. The modernisation process gave rise to intense negotiations between scientific actors, particularly between traditional scholars and university academics. These negotiations included debates on the legitimacy of modern scientific methods, the position of critical rationality in religious studies, and the limits of interpretation of sacred texts. On the one hand, some scholars view the modern academic approach as a threat to traditional authority and the sanctity of religious knowledge. On the other hand, university academics argue that methodological renewal is necessary for Islamic studies to remain relevant in the face of contemporary social and intellectual challenges.<sup>21</sup>

These negotiations are also reflected in curriculum reforms in several Islamic educational institutions. A number of madrasas have begun to adopt general subjects such as social

Studies ( ), English, and information technology, while universities are seeking to strengthen the teaching of Arabic and classical texts. This process of mutual adoption demonstrates a shared awareness of the limitations of each education system and the need to develop a more integrative approach. Thus, the transformation of Islamic studies is not happening unilaterally, but through ongoing dialogue between various scholarly traditions.<sup>22</sup>

The transformation of Islamic studies in Pakistan has also been influenced by external factors, such as the globalisation of knowledge and the development of international Islamic discourse. Greater access to global literature, academic conferences and international intellectual networks has encouraged Pakistani academics to engage in global discourse on Islam and modernity. This has enriched the perspective of Islamic studies in Pakistan, but at the same time has raised challenges related to adapting global concepts to the local context. This transformation shows that Islamic studies in Pakistan did not develop in a vacuum, but rather as part of the broader intellectual dynamics of the Muslim world.<sup>23</sup>

In the context of the state, the transformation of Islamic studies is also closely

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<sup>20</sup> Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition*.

<sup>21</sup> Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*.

<sup>22</sup> Moosa, *What Is a Madrasa?*

<sup>23</sup> Saeed, *Islamic Thought: An Introduction*.

related to political and ideological policies. Pakistan, as a country that defines itself as an Islamic state, has an interest in directing Islamic discourse through education. State support for Islamic studies at universities reflects efforts to produce Islamic discourse that is moderate, rational, and compatible with modern state governance. However, this state involvement often creates tension between ideological interests and academic freedom, which has an impact on the direction and limits of the transformation of Islamic studies.<sup>24</sup>

From an epistemological perspective, the transformation of Islamic studies in Pakistan shows a shift from a purely normative approach to a reflective and critical approach, without completely abandoning its religious orientation. Islamic studies at universities seek to position Islam as a living and dynamic intellectual tradition, which can be analysed scientifically while also being valued as a system of values. This approach allows Islamic studies to contribute to the global academic discourse on religion, ethics and society, while maintaining its relevance to the Muslim community.<sup>25</sup>

Thus, the findings and discussion in this section confirm that Islamic studies in Pakistan are undergoing a dialectical transformation. The continuity of tradition provides epistemological stability and moral legitimacy, while modernisation encourages methodological and institutional renewal. The negotiation between these two elements has resulted in a pluralistic and adaptive configuration of Islamic studies, reflecting the complexity of the relationship between religion and modernity in contemporary Muslim societies.

#### D. CONCLUSION

This article examines the dynamics of tradition and modernisation in Islamic studies in Pakistan by placing them within a framework of continuity and transformation. The results of the study show that Islamic studies in Pakistan did not develop through a dichotomous pattern between tradition and modernity, but rather through a dialectical process involving negotiation, adaptation, and continuous renewal. The Islamic scholarly tradition rooted in the madrasah system and classical curricula such as *Dars-i Nizami* remains the main foundation in the formation of religious authority and the epistemological orientation of Islamic studies, even as modern education systems begin to dominate the academic sphere.

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<sup>24</sup> Jalal, *Partisans of Allah: Jihad in South Asia*.

<sup>25</sup> Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam: Custodians of Change*.

The modernisation of Islamic studies in Pakistan, particularly through institutionalisation in universities, has brought about significant changes in the methods, approaches and scope of study. Islamic studies are no longer understood solely as the transmission of normative doctrine, but also as an object of scientific study that is open to historical, sociological, and interdisciplinary analysis. This development has enabled Islamic studies to respond to contemporary issues such as politics, law, economics, and pluralism, while participating in the global academic discourse on religion and modernity.

However, this modernisation did not take place without tension. Epistemological differences between the madrasah and university traditions gave rise to debates about scientific authority, methodological legitimacy, and the limits of religious interpretation. This tension actually became a productive space for the birth of forms of synthesis, in which traditional and modern elements interacted and adapted to each other. This phenomenon of hybridisation is evident in curriculum reform, academic mobility between madrasahs and universities, and the emergence of Muslim scholars who are able to bridge the two scientific traditions.

In addition, the role of the state in shaping the direction of Islamic studies in Pakistan has also influenced this transformation process. State education policy and ideology provide institutional support for Islamic studies, but also present challenges related to academic autonomy and intellectual independence. Therefore, Islamic studies in Pakistan have developed within the context of complex relations between religion, the state and society.

Overall, this article concludes that tradition and modernisation in Islamic studies in Pakistan are not mutually exclusive, but rather form a dynamic and pluralistic scholarly configuration. The continuity of tradition provides a normative basis and historical legitimacy, while modernisation opens up space for methodological renewal and social relevance. Understanding these dynamics is important not only for the Pakistani context, but also for broader studies of Islamic education and the relationship between religion and modernity in the contemporary Muslim world.

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