Afghanistan's Islam

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Glossary of Islamic Terms

All terms are of Ab (Arabic) origin except those marked P (Persian) or Pt (Pashto).

mawlawi: “My Master, honorific title given to ‘ulama (q.v.) and, less commonly, to Sufis.

milmastia (Pt): “Hospitality,” element of pashtunwali (q.v.).

mufti: “Legal-decision maker,” member of ‘ulama (q.v.) qualified to issue a religious opinion (fatwa).

Mujaddidi: “Renewers,” name of branch of Naqshbandi (q.v.) Sufi order founded by Ahmad Sirhindi (d. 1624) in Mughal India.

mullah (P from Ab): “Master,” honorific title given to a Muslim scholar or teacher who serves as a religious (and sometimes sociopolitical) leader. Shown as “Mulla” when used with a proper name.

mutawalli: “Someone entrusted,” legal term for the administrator of a waqf (q.v.) endowment; in practice the custodian of a religious property.

namus: “Virtue,” what must be defended to maintain honor, particularly the chastity and reputation of kinswomen.

nanawatai (Pt): “Sanctuary,” protection of a person from his enemies; element of pashtunwali (q.v.).

nang (Pt): “Honor,” defense of the life or reputation of relatives; element of pashtunwali (q.v.).

Naqshbandi (P): “Patterned Belt,” name of an influential Sufi order founded by Baha al-Din Naqshband (d. 1389) of Bukhara.

pashtunwali (Pt): “Way of the Pashtuns,” traditional Pashtun honor code; also known as pakhtunwali.

pir (P): “Elder,” a Sufi master.

qazi: “Magistrate,” member of ‘ulama (q.v.) formally appointed as a judge.


risala: “Treatise,” a short text or epistle on doctrinal matters.

sama’: “Listening,” Sufi practice of listening to music or sung poetry.

sayyid: “Lord,” blood descendant of the Prophet’s family.

Shari’a: “Way,” Islamic law, formulated through interpretation of the Quran and Hadith (q.v.).

shaykh: “Elder,” title of respect for a Sufi master or senior ‘alim (q.v.).

silsila: “Chain,” “Dynasty,” a Sufi line of succession, often family-based.

Sunna: “Way,” the body of traditions describing the life of Muhammad.

tafsir: “Exegesis,” a written commentary on the Quran.

talib (pl. in Ab tulaba; pl. in P taliban): “Student,” pupil of a madrasa (q.v.); as a proper noun in the Persian plural, the name given to an Islamist movement founded in mid-1990s Pakistan.

tariqa (pl. turuq): “Path,” the Sufi way; a Sufi order.

‘ulama: “Learned Ones,” exponents of Shari’a (q.v.) and other normative discourses.

wali (pl. awliya): “Friend [of God],” Muslim saint.

waqf (pl. awqaf): “Causing a thing to stand still,” an inalienable endowment of land, built property, or the revenues thereof, granted to a religious institution; regulations are covered by Shari’a.

zahid (pl. zuhhad): “Ascetic,” practitioner of zuhd (q.v.).

zikr (pl. azhkar): “Remembrance [of God],” the ritual chanting of the Sufis.

ziyarat: “Visit,” pilgrimage to a Sufi or other saintly shrine.

zuhd: “Asceticism,” self-denial and discipline of the flesh.