Infallible preachers: The mullahs in Pakistan

by Robert Sampson in the October 17, 2006 issue

Mullahs in the corner of Pakistan where I live tend to be brilliant orators. They usually speak extemporaneously for an hour before Friday prayers. Their speeches are peppered with memorized quotes from the Qur'an, from narratives about the Prophet Muhammad, called Hadith, and from folk poetry. The mullahs can be persuasive, humorous, conciliatory, prayerful or bellicose. Frequently they break into song or weep for the sins of their tribe. These gifted preachers hold their audiences spellbound, displaying a masterful use of repartee and the timing of a stand-up comic. They can move listeners from tears to laughter in the time it takes you to fold your turban.

Some mullahs are famous throughout the country thanks to audiocassettes, which sell by the thousands. I've collected a number of them over the years.

The most popular preacher in my area is Bijili Gar ("Electric Mountain"), an octogenarian whose oratorical gifts were discovered while he was a teenager. He told me that his family migrated from the troubled tribal belt between Pakistan and Afghanistan when he was an infant. Like the sons of other poor families, Bijili Gar was placed in a madrassa (religious school) to study Islam because his parents could not provide for him. The normal course of study was eight years, but Bijili Gar was so precocious that he started preaching while still a student.

Once a mullah mounts the small flight of steps at the front of a mosque, whatever he says is regarded as infallible. In a sense his pulpit is an extension of the Prophet's own pulpit; his words become the very word of God.

Such confidence in the mullah's word can sometimes be misplaced. There was quite a stir in February 2005 when a Pakistani mullah announced—in a message relayed from mosque to mosque—that an earthquake was about to happen. Panic ensued. The spurious prediction led to a mass evacuation of homes. About 10 million people spent the night in the cold, waiting for an earthquake that never came.

Anti-Western harangues are regularly delivered to generate crowd support. Familiar targets are George Bush, Israel and the injustices in Palestine and Guantánamo. As their declaiming reaches an emotional crescendo the mullahs will often employ phrases such as “Islam is in danger”; “America is as proud as Pharaoh”; “Western women walk around naked”; and “Export heroin to finish off the unbelievers.”

Poetry carries enormous weight in oral-tradition cultures like those of Afghanistan and Pakistan, so mullahs often break into spontaneous verse, along the lines of “Genghis Khan and America must / Eventually come here and bite the dust.”

When the crowd is really riled up the mullah is often interrupted with loud cries of “God is greater!” (the Islamic version of “Alleluia!”). Sometimes there is even a designated cheerleader to get the chants going. The mullah uses the cheer interlude to catch his breath.

Cursing America, Christians and Jews is a safe thing to do, but mullahs can get into trouble if they insult the local government. Bijili Gar has been jailed three times for remarks of this sort. For example, he once compared a government official to “a dog that comes to the office to eat all the meat.”

The sins of the West are not the central issue, however, for preachers along the Pakistan-Afghan border. The main question is whether Islam is an Arab faith or not. Although Muslims around the globe would agree that Islam has a uniquely Arab flavor, shaped by the culture, language and traditions of seventh-century Arabia, the majority of the world’s Muslims are non-Arabs. Beginning in the seventh century Islam took root in the non-Arab cultures of Asia and North Africa. Waves of Arab traders, wandering mystics and military adventurers established outposts of the faith in lands far from the Arabian heartland. Not surprisingly, the forms of Islam that developed in Jakarta and Senegal were vibrant hybrids reflecting local traditions as well as the tradition passed on from the Arabic hub.

That diversity is now under serious threat. Modern communications, effortless travel and abundant petrodollars have brought Arab influence even to remote regions of Pakistan. Local interpretations of Islam are being directly challenged by the Arab Wahhabis, whose entourages regularly appear via land cruisers. Mullahs spend most of their pulpit time addressing the conflict between tribal traditions and austere Wahhabi (Arab-style) norms.

Funds from the Saudis and others have paid for the training of mullahs who are confronting local versions of Islam (though those on each side are Sunni Muslims). One indication of the power of this new influence is the way elders are discarding their delightfully rustic tribal names (for example, “Fig Flower” and “Beetroot”) in favor of Arabic titles such as Shaykh Umar or Ibn Rusool.

In February of this year a small war broke out between followers of the Wahhabi-style preacher Mufti Munir Shakir and those loyal to his folk-style opponent, Pir Saifur Rehman. These theologically grounded tussles have already claimed many lives and could very well engulf the whole region. The contention centers on three main themes: direct access to scripture, respect for tradition, and the true nature of Muhammad.

Wahhabi preachers stress direct access to the scriptures. Listeners are encouraged to rely on the Qur’an without dependence on commentaries. One Wahhabi preacher contends that those who trust commentaries are “like animals dragged along by ropes to their death.”

The root of the issue for the Wahhabis is their deep revulsion at any thought or practice that they see as contravening the oneness of God. The danger in obeying the teachings of a commentator, they insist, is that it might lead to following a man rather than God himself. The general approach of Wahhabi mullahs is to carefully articulate rational arguments tied to proof texts from the Qur’an. This is as close as any group of Muslim preachers gets to the Protestant emphasis on text, doctrine and application.

Direct access also means that there can be no intermediaries between God and humankind. The prime target of Wahhabi mullahs is the local emphasis on saints. The graves of saints, marked with fluttering green flags, have long been a popular place for those with special prayer needs. The saint, it is held, can intercede on one’s behalf. Dismissing such belief as polytheistic nonsense, Wahhabi preachers urge their audience to see that “real intercession is righteous behavior—to dedicate your righteous deeds to God.”

Exploiting local sentiments about women, Wahhabi mullahs are quick to remind the assembled men that it is mostly women who visit saints’ graves, and they warn of the danger that women are exposed to if they uncover their faces before a stranger in such a public setting. Wahhabi preaching sometimes applies the odious label of

kafir (unbeliever) to anyone who takes part in Muslim groups that venerate saints.

The sermons of traditionalist mullahs are nothing like the carefully crafted arguments of their Wahhabi opponents. Mullahs who defend the veneration of saints utilize the emotions that surround that tradition. For them, tribal Islam is a code to be defended fiercely. Traditionalist mullahs relish depicting the Wahhabis and their supporters as wealthy outsiders who have sold their forefathers' precious faith for money.

Wahhabis are also denigrated by traditionalists for praying in the wrong way. The Muslim rite of prayer is carefully controlled down to the slightest details of hand-and-foot positions in the familiar repetitions of prostration. At one point in the prayers Wahhabis place their hands on their chest rather than their waist —a seemingly small difference that their opponents get a lot of mileage out of in their attacks.

Tradition is the glue that holds tribal society together, and it is keenly sensed in the deference with which elders are treated. Here, the traditionalist mullahs declare, is the Achilles heel of Wahhabi doctrine. Wahhabis, they say, show the ultimate disrespect by not following the learned commentaries of the faith's forefathers.

An illustration that one of the most popular anti-Wahhabi preachers uses is that of a man drinking from an irrigation ditch miles downstream from a dam. Not everyone can walk all the way to the dam and get the water directly, but the ditch water is the same water as that at the source. We are unable to go back to the source of our faith in Mecca, says this traditionalist, but the commentators have conveyed its teachings for us to drink from. Their hard work should be respected. How can we all be interpreters of the holy book when we don't all even read Arabic?

The debate about the true nature of Muhammad has some similarities to Christian debates about Christ. Wahhabi Islam regards the apostleship of Muhammad as that of a mortal unable to perform miraculous deeds. Traditionalist mullahs stress what they see as the miraculous life of the Prophet—his marvelous ascension, his role as intercessor for the believing community, and his preexistence as a great pillar of light before the creation of the world.