



Islamic Titles – What Do They Mean, and Who Is a True Scholar?

نحمده ونصلي على رسوله الكريم

The use of honorific titles for scholars and teachers has been a feature of the Muslim Ummah since the earliest days of Islam. Words such as Mawlānā, Muftī, Shaykh, Qārī, Imām, ‘Ālim, Mu‘allim, Ustādh, and even Maulvī are not merely ornamental. They carry centuries of tradition, learning, and reverence, though in some circles they have been used loosely, even carelessly. The use of some of these terms differs between the Arab world and the Indian Subcontinent, and understanding these variations is key to appreciating their proper meaning.

In our community, we often hear different titles being used for religious figures. These titles carry weight and respect, but not all are equal in meaning. At times, people are given a title out of courtesy, while in other cases the title reflects years of disciplined study and service. **Understanding these terms helps us appreciate the effort of those who dedicate themselves to the dīn, and it also protects us from blindly following individuals who may not be qualified.**

‘Ālim

The word ‘Ālim means “a person of knowledge” and comes from the root ‘ilm, knowledge. It is one of the most honoured descriptions in the Qur’ān. Allāh ﷻ says:

إِنَّمَا يَخْشَى اللَّهَ مِنْ عِبَادِهِ الْعُلَمَاءُ

“Indeed, those who truly fear Allāh among His servants are the scholars (‘Ulamā’)”
(Fāṭir 35:28)

This verse makes clear that knowledge in Islam is not mere information or memorisation; true knowledge is that which brings about fear and awe of Allāh ﷻ.

In the technical sense, an ‘Ālim is one who has studied the Islamic sciences systematically and in depth, covering Qur’ān, Sunnah, fiqh, and Arabic. This is the core qualification that underlies other titles such as Mawlānā or Muftī. An ‘Ālim is the inheritor of the Prophets, as the Prophet ﷺ said:

وَإِنَّ الْعُلَمَاءَ وَرَثَةُ الْأَنْبِيَاءِ

“And Verily, the scholars are the inheritors of the Prophets” (Tirmidhī and Abū Dāwūd).

The Prophets do not leave behind wealth, he explained, but they leave behind knowledge, and whoever takes from it has taken a great share.

In everyday speech, the word ‘Ālim is often used interchangeably with Mawlānā, but technically it is the broader and more fundamental designation.

Mawlānā / Maulvī

The title Mawlānā is perhaps the most widely used in the Indo-Pak subcontinent. Linguistically, it is derived from the Arabic word Mawlā, which itself is a compound: Mawlā + nā = “our Mawlā”. The word Mawlā can mean master, protector, guardian, or close associate, while the suffix -nā means “our”. Hence, Mawlānā literally translates as “our master/leader”.

The Qur’ān employs the term in reference to Allāh ﷻ Himself:

فَاعْلَمُوا أَنَّ اللَّهَ مَوْلَانُكُمْ ۚ نِعْمَ الْمَوْلَىٰ وَنِعْمَ النَّصِيرُ

“Know that Allāh is your Mawlā (protector); excellent is the Mawlā and excellent is the Helper”.
(al-Anfāl 8:40)

Beyond this, the Qur’ān uses the word Mawlā in various contexts, demonstrating its wide semantic range:

- For master/owner:

وَصَرَبَ اللَّهُ مَثَلًا رَجُلَيْنِ أَحَدُهُمَا أَبْكَمُ لَا يَقْدِرُ عَلَىٰ شَيْءٍ وَهُوَ كَلٌّ عَلَىٰ مَوْلَاهُ

“And Allāh presents an example of two men: one of them dumb and unable to do a thing, a burden to his Mawlā (guardian/master)”
(al-Naḥl 16:76)

- For friend and companion:

يَوْمَ لَا يُغْنِي مَوْلَىٰ عَنْ مَوْلَىٰ شَيْئًا وَلَا هُمْ يُنصَرُونَ

“the Day when a friend shall be of no avail to his friend nor shall they be helped”
(al-Dukhān 44:41)

- For heir:

وَلِكُلٍّ جَعَلْنَا مَوَالِي مِمَّا تَرَكَ الْوَالِدَانِ وَالْأَقْرَبُونَ

“And for everyone We have made Mawālī (heirs) from what the parents and near relatives leave” (al-Nisā’ 4:33)

- For relatives:

إِنِّي خِفْتُ الْمَوَالِي مِن وَّرَائِي وَكَانَتِ امْرَأَتِي عَاقِرًا فَهَبْ لِي مِن لَّدُنكَ وَلِيًّا

“I fear the Mawālī (relatives) after me, while my wife is barren, so grant me from Yourself an heir” (Maryam 19:5)

The Prophet ﷺ himself clarified the breadth of the term when he said:

مَوْلَى الْقَوْمِ مِنَ أَنْفُسِهِمْ

“The freed slave belongs to the people who have freed him” (Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī: 6761)

Ibn al-Aʿrābī further explained:

“The Mawlā is the owner - and that is Allāh. The Mawlā is also the cousin, the emancipator, the freed slave, the neighbour, the partner, the ally, the beloved, and the supporter”. (Tārīkh Dimashq, Ibn ‘Asākir)

In light of this, when Muslims call a scholar “Mawlānā,” they do not equate him with the Divine, but rather acknowledge him as their leader and guide in matters of knowledge and dīn.

Practically, the title Mawlānā is conferred upon graduates of the ‘Ālimiyyah course, a structured program of advanced Islamic education that generally takes between five and eight years to complete. This curriculum covers Qur’ān and its sciences, ḥadīth and its principles, fiqh (jurisprudence), uṣūl al-fiqh (principles of jurisprudence), Arabic grammar and rhetoric, and the foundations of Islamic belief. Those who complete this rigorous training are honoured with the title Mawlānā, signifying that they have joined the ranks of the ‘Ulamā’.

The word Maulvī shares the same root and was historically used interchangeably with Mawlānā. In earlier centuries, it was a dignified title denoting a person of knowledge. However, in later times, especially in the subcontinent, “Maulvī” began to be used in a casual or even derogatory sense - as when people dismissively say “just a Maulvī” to belittle a local teacher or preacher. Despite this unfortunate shift, in reality, both Mawlānā and Maulvī signify the same thing: a qualified ‘Ālim of Islam.

Muftī

The title Muftī denotes a higher level of specialisation within Islamic scholarship. It is derived from the Arabic verb aftā, meaning “to give a fatwā,” which itself comes from the Qur’ānic phrase: “They ask you for a fatwā concerning women. Say:

وَيَسْأَلُونَكَ فِي النِّسَاءِ قُلِ اللَّهُ يُفْتِيكُمْ فِيهِنَّ

“They ask your legal instruction concerning women, say: Allah instructs you about them”
(al-Nisā’ 4:127)

A fatwā is a formal legal opinion in response to a query, and the one who is authorised to issue such an opinion is a Muftī.

To become a Muftī, one must first complete the ‘Ālimiyyah program and then undertake an additional course of specialisation known as takhaṣṣuṣ. This is usually in fiqh and iftā’, often lasting one to two years or longer. This advanced training involves intensive study of the rulings of Qur’ān and Sunnah, mastery of the legal schools, familiarity with the positions of classical jurists, and the ability to research and apply Islamic law to new situations.

The concept of takhaṣṣuṣ is not limited to iftā’. Just as in academia one may specialise in different disciplines after a master’s degree, Islamic scholarship also allows for specialisation in various fields. For example, there is takhaṣṣuṣ fī al-ḥadīth (specialisation in ḥadīth), takhaṣṣuṣ fī al-tafsīr (specialisation in Qur’ānic exegesis), and others. The Muftī represents the scholar who has specialised in the field of fiqh and iftā’, similar to how a PhD signifies advanced specialisation in a particular subject after a master’s degree.

It is therefore correct to say that every Muftī is a Mawlānā, but not every Mawlānā is a Muftī. The Muftī’s role is weighty, for he provides guidance in matters of Sharī’ah that affect people’s lives directly. The Prophet ﷺ himself received questions and gave fatwā, and after him, his companions fulfilled this responsibility. Thus, the Muftī continues a legacy of careful, responsible guidance that safeguards the dīn in changing times.

Shaykh

The word Shaykh is one of the most widely used in the Arab and broader Muslim world. Linguistically, it simply means “elder” or “respected one.” The Qur’ān uses it in this literal sense, as when the wife of Prophet Ibrāhīm (AS) exclaimed:

قَالَتْ يَوِئَسْتَ ءَالِدٌ وَأَنَا عَجُوزٌ وَهَذَا بَعْلِي شَيْخًا

“Shall I bear a child when I am an old woman, and my husband is an elderly man?” (Hūd 11:72)

Over time, however, the term came to signify not only age but wisdom, authority, and scholarship.

In the discipline of ḥadīth, a Shaykh refers to a teacher from whom narrations are taken. In fact, the chains of transmission (isnāds) that form the backbone of ḥadīth literature are full of phrases such as ḥaddathanā shaykhu-nā - “our Shaykh narrated to us”.

Beyond the scholarly classroom, the word Shaykh also took on a spiritual dimension, coming to denote a guide in the sciences of the heart, tazkiyah and taṣawwuf. To call someone a Shaykh in this sense is to acknowledge him as a mentor in purifying the soul and drawing nearer to Allāh ﷻ.

In the modern Arab world, Shaykh is the common word for an Islamic scholar, often equivalent to Mawlānā in the Indo-Pak tradition. At the same time, the title is also used more broadly for respected elders, chiefs, or even heads of tribes. This wide range of meaning reflects the deep respect that Muslim cultures have always had for age, wisdom, and learning.

From the above, it becomes clear that the word Shaykh does not necessarily refer only to a knowledgeable person. Unlike ‘Ālim, Mawlānā, or Muftī - which are titles reserved specifically for those who have spent several years acquiring knowledge of the dīn - Shaykh is a flexible term that can be applied in multiple contexts and with varied meanings.

Imām

The word Imām literally means “leader,” someone who stands in front. The Qur’ān uses this word in both positive and negative senses. On the one hand, Allāh ﷻ praises leaders of righteousness:

وَجَعَلْنَاهُمْ أَئِمَّةً يَهْدُونَ بِأَمْرِنَا

“And We made them leaders guiding by Our command” (al-Anbiyā’ 21:73)

On the other hand, He condemns leaders of misguidance:

وَجَعَلْنَاهُمْ أَئِمَّةً يَدْعُونَ إِلَى النَّارِ

“And We made them leaders inviting to the Fire” (al-Qaṣaṣ 28:41)

In daily life, Muslims are most familiar with the Imām as the one who leads congregational prayer. The Prophet ﷺ said: “The Imām is appointed to be followed. So when he says the takbīr, then say the takbīr”. (Bukhārī and Muslim). This shows the sacred responsibility of the Imām in worship, for the congregation follows his recitation and actions.

Even Beyond prayer, history has bestowed the title Imām on towering figures of knowledge and piety, such as Imām Abū Ḥanīfah, Imām Mālik, Imām al-Shāfi‘ī, and Imām Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal. These Imāms were not merely prayer leaders; they were founders of schools of law, preservers of Sunnah, and guides for generations.

Thus, the word Imām can signify both the local leader of ṣalāh and the great leaders of the Ummah’s intellectual heritage. However, in contemporary usage the term is rarely applied in this lofty sense, since there is no one equivalent to these great Imāms today; in most communities the word “Imām” simply refers to the one who leads the daily prayers, often without implying broader scholarly authority.

Qārī

A Qārī is one who recites the Qur’ān with mastery of tajwīd. The word is derived from qirā’ah, meaning recitation. The Prophet ﷺ said: “The best of you are those who learn the Qur’ān and teach it”. (Bukhārī). To be a Qārī is therefore an honourable title, for it signifies deep engagement with the Qur’ān.

In its fullest sense, a Qārī is not just someone who reads beautifully but one who has studied the rules of tajwīd and, often, the science of the qirā’āt - the various authentic modes of Qur’ānic recitation. In the Indo-Pak world, the title Qārī is commonly given to those who recite melodiously, particularly in public settings or during tarāwīḥ prayers. In the Arab world, the title often implies a formal qualification in tajwīd and sometimes in the ten qirā’āt. Regardless of cultural nuance, the essence of the Qārī is his devotion to preserving and transmitting the correct recitation of the Book of Allāh.

Ustādh

The Arabic word Ustādh simply means “teacher” or “professor.” It is a general term that can be applied to instructors of both religious and worldly sciences. In modern Arabic usage, every school teacher and university lecturer is called Ustādh. In Islamic settings, Ustādh is often used for teachers of Qur’ān, Arabic, or Islamic studies, and in some communities, it is employed as a respectful form of address for any person imparting knowledge.

Mu’allim / Mu’allimah

The words Mu’allim and Mu’allimah mean teacher, one who imparts knowledge. The Prophet ﷺ described himself with this very title, saying: “Indeed, I have only been sent as a teacher”. (Ibn Mājah). This title reminds us that the core mission of the Prophet ﷺ was to teach, guide, and nurture.

A Mu’allim may not necessarily be a graduate ‘Ālim. It can refer to a Qur’ān teacher in a maktab, an Islamic school instructor, or any person engaged in passing on knowledge. The dignity of the title lies in the act of teaching itself, which the Prophet ﷺ declared to be central to his mission.

Conclusion

The variety of titles used in Muslim societies reflects the richness of the Islamic scholarly tradition. ‘Ālim captures the essence of knowledge itself, Mawlānā and Maulvī signify graduates of the ‘Ālimiyyah course, Muftī denotes specialists in Islamic law, Shaykh encompasses both scholars and spiritual guides, and it also literally means “a man of advanced age” and can be used in a generic sense of respect, Imām identifies both prayer leaders and great intellectual authorities, Qārī highlights mastery of Qur’ānic recitation, while Ustādh and Mu’allim emphasise the noble act of teaching.

An ‘Ālim is one who encompasses the qualities associated with many of these titles - particularly Imām, Ustādh, Qārī, and Mu’allim - but the presence of these four roles individually does not necessarily mean that a person has attained the level of an ‘Ālim.

Yet all of these titles, however noble, are only meaningful if they are accompanied by true scholarship, humility, and sincerity. The Prophet ﷺ declared that “the scholars are the inheritors of the Prophets”, and this inheritance cannot be reduced to mere labels. It requires deep knowledge, the fear of Allāh ﷻ, and a life lived in service of His dīn. In an age when titles are sometimes used loosely or even mockingly, Muslims must remember that respect for these designations is not about social status but about recognising those who dedicate themselves to preserving, teaching, and embodying the legacy of Islām.

In addition, it must be noted that people nowadays often throw the word “shaykh” around too casually - sometimes calling each other “shaykh” as a joke, and at other times using it mockingly. This is a serious matter that should be refrained from. Calling someone with no knowledge a “shaykh” dilutes the significance of the title, while mocking an actual shaykh strips away the respect owed to the carriers of sacred knowledge. Both practices erode the culture of dignity that Islam attaches to knowledge and its people.

References:

- Tārīkh Dimashq, Ibn ‘Asākir

Written by: Maulana Eshfaq Akbar

Editors: Mufti Umar Azhar Syed, Dr. Ikramullah Ahmed