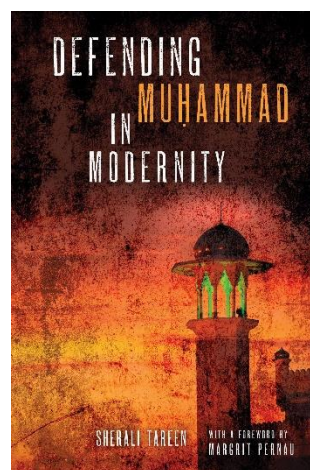


## Book Reviews

SherAli Tareen. *Defending Muḥammad in Modernity*. Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame Press, 2020. Pp. xxiv+482. Paperback. ISBN: 9780268106706.

Over roughly the past four decades, an important stream of scholarship on Islam in South Asia<sup>1</sup> has highlighted the denominational variations and contestations, as well as the creativity and vitality, of ‘ulamā’ and ‘ulamā’-cum-Sufi-led South Asian reform movements in the conditions of colonial and post-colonial modernity. Long gone are the days when secularists, modernists, nationalists, or Islamists were the only modern South Asian Muslim leaders who attracted serious scholarly attention, as important as figures categorized under these (somewhat problematic) labels remain. It is now a commonplace that many, although certainly not all, of South Asia’s Sunni Muslims identify broadly with one of three reformist orientations which have roots in classical Islam and the convulsions of modern times: Ahl-i Ḥadīth, Deobandi, and Barelvi. It is also, or at least it should be, a commonplace that, far from representing simplistic reactions to or flights from modernity, South Asian reform movements represent multi-layered and often unpredictable modes of engagement with modernity, and just as importantly, with the Islamic past and one another.

SherAli Tareen’s *Defending Muḥammad in Modernity* constitutes both a major contribution to this stream of scholarship and a fruitful disruption of some of the ruts of analysis this stream has—intentionally or



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<sup>1</sup> Associated, for instance, with scholars such as Hardy, Metcalf, Qasim Zaman, Robinson, Reetz, Sanyal, Moosa, Sikand, and others.

unintentionally—fallen into or produced. At the outset, it should be noted that no brief review will be able to capture the depth of Tareen’s monograph. He promises and delivers a “thickly textured” narrative and literary analysis, which remains attentive to “nuances, . . . ambiguities, [and] . . . hermeneutical layers” (pp. 27, 374). It is hoped, therefore, that this review will serve as an impetus to reading the book itself.

Divided into three parts and drawing on a sophisticated “conceptual architecture” (pp. 11, 37-51), the book claims to be “the first comprehensive study of the Barelvī-Deobandī controversy, a polemical battle that has shaped South Asian Islam . . . in profoundly singular ways” (p. 3). Set in the early nineteenth century, part one (chs. 1-5) offers an exposition of polemical exchanges between Shāh Muḥammad Ismā‘īl (d. 1831) and his rivals, especially Faḏl-i Ḥaqq Khairābādī (d. 1861). Chapter 1 builds on the introduction by providing a tour of the theoretical landscape in which the study is situated, including an illuminating discussion of the key concept of “political theology.” Chapters 2, 3, 4, and the beginning of chapter 5 focus on the career of Ismā‘īl. Indeed, part one is weighted towards Ismā‘īl, with Khairābādī coming into the discussion only near the end. Beginning with the ongoing impact of Ismā‘īl’s “fractured memory,” Tareen traces Ismā‘īl’s life, including a balanced discussion of his participation in the northwest frontier *jihād* of Sayyid Aḥmad of Bareilly (d. 1831). In this context, Tareen offers a pointed critique of Ayesha Jalal’s *Partisans of Allah*<sup>2</sup> and its apparent embrace of secular liberal binaries like “good *jihād*/bad *jihād*” or “good Muslim/bad Muslim” (pp. 79-82). From the introduction to the epilogue, Tareen’s quest to dismantle binaries like these is a constant companion as one reads the book. From here, *Defending Muḥammad* moves into an examination of Ismā‘īl’s reformist discourses as found in his writings. Tareen demonstrates that—whether Ismā‘īl was writing for the masses or scholars, whether on straightforward or seemingly arcane subjects (e.g., whether God could create additional Muḥammads or would accept human intercession)—what was at stake for Ismā‘īl was a particular “salvational politics” aimed at preserving divine sovereignty in the lives of ordinary Muslims.

Near the middle of chapter 5, Tareen turns to the “countermovement” which contested Ismā‘īl’s ideas (p. 133). While the chapter discusses a number of anti-Ismā‘īl *‘ulamā’*, its focus is on Khairābādī, a thinker of aristocratic background who formulated a competing political theology that was “meticulously hierarchical” (p. 143).

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<sup>2</sup> (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008). Tareen (pp. 12-13) offers a similar strong critique of Shahab Ahmed’s *What is Islam?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

Tareen concludes chapter 5 with an important theoretical intervention, which is sure to prompt debate among scholars (pp. 157-63). He suggests that while the habit of viewing episodes like the Ismā'īl-Khairābādī debate through the lens of the ruptures/continuities of colonialism and/or through the lens of “recovering native agency” may have yielded positive analytical fruit in the past, the time has come for South Asian studies to move beyond these modes of analysis.

If part one covers proto-Deobandi and proto-Barelvi debates (not Tareen’s words) in the early nineteenth century, part two (chs. 6-11) turns to formative Deobandi and Barelvi thinkers in the late nineteenth century. Chapter 6 sets the stage by discussing the context of late-nineteenth-century India, a context which witnessed “unprecedented intrareligious and interreligious adversarial activity” (p. 170) and the emergence of the Ahl-i Ḥadīth, Barelvi, and Deobandi *maslaks*. In this chapter (as elsewhere in the book), Tareen mentions but otherwise leaves rather undeveloped the political reversals India’s Muslims endured with the rise of British colonialism. Chapter 7 studies the underpinnings of the Deobandi reform project through, first, a discussion of normativity and heresy in Islam (including instructive examinations of the concepts of *bid'ah* and *rasm*), and second, an exposition of “heretical innovation” in the thought of Ashraf ‘Alī Thānvī (d. 1943). By testing everything against the era of the earliest Muslims and framing the Prophet as “reformer-in-chief” (p. 219), Thānvī, like the earlier Ismā'īl, sought to reform the religious practice of “the masses” (a term used repeatedly in the book). Tareen is at his best at the end of chapter 7, in a section in which he shows how Thānvī’s reading of the Zayd-Zaynab episode in the Prophet’s biography deemphasized the Prophet’s everyday humanity in favour of a thoroughly “religionized” Prophet (pp. 223, 329).

Chapter 8 turns to the *maulid* (celebration of the Prophet’s birthday), the ritual which, according to Tareen, was most vigorously contested by India’s Muslim scholars in this period. Most of the chapter is devoted to a nuanced exploration of how Thānvī both justified Deobandi opposition to the *maulid* and underscored his own religious authority through his *Ṭarīqah-i Maulid Sharīf*. Chapter 8 ends with another thought-provoking intervention, a critique of what Barbara Metcalf had called the Deobandis’ nineteenth-century “inward turn.” Tareen argues that this phrase runs the risk of imposing on the reformers a public/private binary, which fails to do justice to their public/political concerns. While Metcalf’s choice of phrase might have been less than satisfactory, one wonders if the difference between Tareen and Metcalf is primarily a matter of emphasis, not of substance. As noted, Tareen pays limited attention to

colonial reversals in his narrative, while for Metcalf, they take centre stage. However, they clearly agree that—in Tareen’s words—the “the absence of Muslim political power” (p. 290) and the “demise of the prospect of restoring Muslim political sovereignty” (p. 49) are part of what led the reformers to a new focus on “the masses” and “on the realm of everyday rituals and practices” (p. 290). True, this does not mean that reformers became simplistically “apolitical,” nor that they retreated solely to the so-called “private” sphere, but rather that many pragmatically set aside explicit political activism for the restoration of Muslim rule and shifted towards gradualist education/literature/preaching-oriented approaches within emerging colonial intra- and inter-religious marketplaces.<sup>3</sup>

In chapter 9, Tareen turns to the Barelvi pioneer, Aḥmad Rażā Khān (d. 1921), and his sharp criticisms of the Deobandis. The chapter begins with Khān’s anathema (*takfir*) against his rivals and then explores his discourses. As with the earlier Khairābādī, readers encounter a prolific ‘ālim-cum-Sufi whose defence of Muhammadan devotion was shaped by a “political imaginary driven by an uncompromisingly hierarchical worldview” (p. 254). Ultimately, Khān viewed his Deobandi opponents as overly pessimistic about the Muslim masses. Because of this, the Deobandis had contravened the consensus (*ijmā’*) of the community on what were, in fact, beneficial customs. Lest readers draw the incorrect conclusion that Khān and his Deobandi rivals sat on the opposite ends of binaries such as law/Sufism, rigid/flexible, conservative/moderate (p. 298), Tareen in chapter 10 points out many “convergences” between the two schools of thought. They agreed on their allegiance to the Ḥanafī school of law, on the dangers of the Hindu context, on the “contagious threat of women” to the moral order (p. 285), on the need of ‘ulamā’-cum-Sufis to guide the masses, and indeed, on the value of *both* law and Sufism. This latter theme appears throughout the book. Although Tareen rightly demolishes the construct which views the Deobandis as austere legalists and the Barelvis as tolerant mystics, one wonders if a slightly more detailed account of the *specific types* of Sufism favoured by the two groups might have been helpful.<sup>4</sup> Chapter 11 concludes part two with an

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<sup>3</sup> On the notion of colonial “religious marketplaces,” see Matthew J. Kuiper, *Da’wa and Other Religions* (London: Routledge, 2018), 6-7, 113-21 and Kuiper, *Da’wa: A Global History of Islamic Missionary Thought and Practice* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021), 148-59.

<sup>4</sup> One might consider, for instance, a distinction made by some between a more sober “Shari’a Sufism” and a more popular-level “Shrine Sufism.” Ira Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 279-80; Brannon Ingram,

examination of the debate over the Prophet's knowledge of the unknown, "the most explosive point of disagreement" between the two schools (p. 301). Tareen's analysis in this chapter allows him to probe and challenge the seepage of distinctly modern understandings of the boundaries of religion/nonreligion into the discussion.

Part three consists of a single chapter, chapter 12. Through a study of the Sufi master Ḥājjī Imdād Allāh (d. 1899)—who counted leading Deobandis and Barelvīs among his disciples—and of his work *Faiṣalah-i Haft Mas'alah*, Tareen helps the reader see the "subtle variations and attitudinal differences" among the Deobandi pioneers (p. 335). Ḥājjī Imdād Allāh emerges in Tareen's exposition as a warm-hearted figure who sought to lower the temperature of Deobandi-Barelvi polemics through "legal reasoning, mystical knowledge, and personal experience" (p. 356). The chapter goes on to show, however, that both sides took Imdād Allāh's work as a confirmation of their own positions. Most enlightening is Tareen's discussion of the ways leading Deobandis, including Thānvī, sought to honour their master, but also to subtly shield themselves from his critiques and suggestions. Along with the hermeneutical and practical factors they marshalled, Tareen brilliantly narrates and explores a dream of Maulānā Ḥāfiẓ Aḥmad—a dream which paid homage to Imdād Allāh but also confirmed the Deobandis' stances. Interestingly, Tareen performs a similar balancing act a few pages later. While Tareen is critical of Francis Robinson's apparently deterministic deployment of Weberian categories to depict the Deobandis as champions of a "cold . . . disenchanting" Islam, he also praises Robinson's many years of "erudite scholarship" on South Asian Islam (p. 371). The chapter concludes with another of Tareen's thought-provoking interventions, this time to the effect that Imdād Allāh's efforts would be badly misunderstood if interpreted through the lens of the modern liberal quest to promote a "good Islam" associated with mysticism and "moderation" (pp. 372-74). *Defending Muḥammad* concludes with a brief epilogue, which ties together the various strands of the book, a postscript, which contemplates its contemporary relevance, and a uniquely helpful final section, "Suggestions for Teaching this Book" (pp. 389-94).

In terms of its core objective, *Defending Muḥammad* succeeds wonderfully in delineating the contrasting, yet inter-related, ways the Deobandis and Barelvīs understood "the relationship between divine sovereignty and prophetic authority . . . during . . . India's transition from

Mughal to British colonialism” (p. 28). It also compellingly hammers home the point that the competing rationalities of tradition and reform (informed by competing political theologies) which the two groups represent cannot, and indeed must not, be reduced to binaries such as law/Sufism, mystical/rational, rigid/flexible, moderate/conservative, private/public, reform/anti-reform, good Muslim/bad Muslim (see, e.g., pp. 15-27, 79, 156, 163, 184, 241, 296, 298, 331). As we have seen, Tareen piles up evidence to problematize such framings. However, the boundary line separating harmful binaries from useful distinctions is not always clear, and Tareen himself utilizes and assumes a number of analytical distinctions throughout the book. One important distinction is what we might call the elite/masses distinction. Tareen’s narrative is primarily focused on Muslim elites with “the masses” mostly entering the picture as an aspect of elite discourse (i.e., as the “herd of cattle” who need the *‘ulamā*’s guidance [pp. 232, 299]). Tareen provides several glimpses of the religious practices of ordinary Muslims, but this is not a primary focus. It would seem, then, that Tareen’s important critique of binaries may be taken as a summons, not to give up distinctions or even Weberian-style categories altogether, but to use them with caution, nuance, and humility.

To sum up, *Defending Muḥammad* is a cogently argued work and a model of rigorous scholarship. Tareen’s writing is a pleasure to read, studded with delightful turns of phrase and elegant translations from Urdu, Persian, and Arabic. Scholars and students will benefit from the book for years to come. Nevertheless, readers should keep the book’s complexity in mind when settling down to read it. One can only marvel at the challenge it must have been to arrange such a rich trove of material. While the book’s organization is successful overall, there are times when it can be difficult to keep track of its thematic and chronological flow.<sup>5</sup> The point is that *Defending Muḥammad* will pay its best dividends to those who read it, not cursorily or casually, but thoroughly and thoughtfully.

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<sup>5</sup> For example, chapter 9 turns aside from the main narrative for a lengthy discussion of polemics between ‘Abd al-Samī’ and Khalīl Aḥmad Sahāranpūrī on food distribution on the occasion of death (see pp. 268-76). That said, some of my favourite moments in the book are asides where Tareen brings in comparative perspectives (e.g., p. 85).

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