

Review Essay

The Tragedies and Ambiguities of Islam in Pakistan

Muhammad Qasim Zaman. *Islam in Pakistan: A History*. Princeton University Press, 2018. Pp. xviii+401. Hardcover. ISBN: 9780691149226. Price: \$39.50.

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Abstract

This review essay describes and engages key themes, arguments, and interventions of a major recent monograph in the study of religion and Islam: Muhammad Qasim Zaman's "Islam in Pakistan: A History." In addition to detailing various strands of Islam in Pakistan and the ambiguities that mark those strands, this book also advances a powerful and politically productive critique of the paradoxes and tensions haunting the career of Muslim modernism in colonial South Asia and Pakistan. Despite their disagreements with and critiques of the 'ulamā', Muslim modernists of the late nineteenth century were yet quite attuned to and familiar with 'ulamā' traditions of knowledge. This situation, however, has transformed dramatically. The epistemic and social gap as well as the mistrust dividing the 'ulamā' and the modernists has considerably widened in more recent history. For Zaman, this trend represents among modernism's most profound and consequential failures. Taking my cue from this observation, in this essay, I propose and suggest that "Islam in Pakistan" can be productively read as a text imbued with a tragic sensibility that offers important and instructive historical lessons critical to refashioning futures less imprisoned to ideologically rigid and doctrinaire registers of identity and politics. I also highlight the significance of this work in the fields of religious studies, Islamic studies, and the study of South Asia.

Keywords

ambiguity, modernism, 'ulamā', ethics, Pakistan.

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Introduction

Muhammad Qasim Zaman's *Islam in Pakistan* is a landmark publication in the fields of religious studies, modern Islam, South Asian Islam, and by far the most important and monumental contribution to date in the study of Islam in Pakistan. This book showcases a great example of the way in which a historically grounded, theoretically sophisticated, and textually multilayered intervention in religious studies holds the potential of truly reorienting our understanding of the religious and political history and present of an entire region and country. What I mean by that is this: both popular and even many scholarly accounts of Pakistan approach the country through either a security-studies perspective, or with an avidly evaluative interest in determining the degree to which its democratic traditions have failed or flourished. Lately, some anthropological works¹ have asked and addressed more sophisticated questions regarding Pakistan's religious topography. But what was sorely missing was a scholarly work that situated Islam in Pakistan in a broader historical narrative that extends to colonial South Asia, and that brought into view the texts, voices, aspirations, conflicts, and tensions of the dizzying variety of actors occupying the incredibly complicated terrain of Islam in Pakistan. Zaman's book accomplishes this dual task with dazzling success.

Islam in Pakistan is an intellectual roller coaster that through mesmerisingly layered archival work, makes visible for the first time in the Euro-American academy the religious thought of a number of previously unknown yet extremely important actors, while thoroughly complicating conventional wisdom about a number of familiar religious and political actors. The main strength of *Islam in Pakistan* lies in the way it seamlessly moves between the close and unexpected analyses of complex religious texts and the careful historicising of the significance and ambiguities invested in those texts and in the careers of their authors.

But the biggest achievement, and perhaps the most critical intervention of *Islam in Pakistan* is this: it so thoroughly, and frequently, at almost every subsection, punctures the notion of any linearity or predictability to trajectories of modernism, Islamism, and 'ulamā' traditions in colonial South Asia and Pakistan. The layered ambiguities one meets on almost every page does excellent justice to the incredibly complex and corrugated terrain the book charts and describes. More specifically, the book succeeds admirably at constantly showing both the powers as well as the paradoxes of modernism as

¹ For instance, see Humeira Iqtidar, *Secularizing Islamists? Jama'at-e-Islami and Jama'at-ud-Da'wa in Urban Pakistan* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2011); Naveeda Khan, *Muslim Becoming: Aspiration and Skepticism in Pakistan* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).

an ideal, ethical commitment, mode of thought, and strategy of politics, enfolding and yet unable to regulate the contours of Islam in Pakistan. It is this argument that will teach much and will also be of great interest even to scholars of religion with expertise outside of Islamic studies or South Asian Islam.

The Ambiguities of Islam in Pakistan

Let me turn to briefly explaining *Islam in Pakistan*'s central themes and arguments. If there is one keyword that captures the thrust of Zaman's voluminous book, it will have to be "ambiguity." In a certain sense, this book is a detailed account of the ambiguities surrounding the relationship between multiple claimants to Islam in Pakistan: the modernist political elite and their sympathetic modernist scholars, the traditionally educated religious scholars or the '*ulamā*', the Islamists, and a range of other groups including religious minorities such as the Shī'ah and the Aḥmadīs. The individual chapters in this book examine a particular theme of significance including the career and ethical commitments of modernism in Pakistan, '*ulamā*'-state relations, shifting views on religious minorities, Islamist conceptions of divine sovereignty, the complicated place of Sufism's religious history, and the nuances involved in understanding *jihād* and militancy in Pakistan.

In each of the chapters, Zaman demonstrates not only the fluidity marking such categories as modernist, traditionalist, Islamist etc., but also the ambiguities surrounding their understanding of the role, place, and future of Islam in Pakistan. A closer look into the content and arguments of the individual chapters will serve to elucidate this point. In what follows, in addition to providing readers a snapshot of the chapters in this book, I will also aim to describe their major conceptual interventions and points of particular interest, with a view to walking readers in some detail through the intellectual arcade that houses this palimpsestic labour of scholarship.

Varieties of Islam in Pakistan

Chapter one "Islamic Identities in Colonial India" (pp. 14–53) sketches, in considerable detail, the historical backdrop that informs the rest of the book focused on Pakistan. This chapter contains arguably the most engaging and thoughtful summation of the dizzying variety of Muslim intellectual and political currents that occupied late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century South Asia. It will hence make an excellent reading in seminars for instructors wishing to provide students a broad overview of modern South Asian Muslim thought. Two main arguments and themes dominate this chapter. The first argument has to do with a critical shift in the career of Muslim modernism in

South Asia. Despite some tensions, earlier Muslim modernists like the founder of the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College (later Aligarh Muslim University) Sayyid Ahmad Khan (d. 1898) were quite comfortable with and well versed in the *'ulamā'* milieu of knowledge production. But in the transition from the nineteenth to the twentieth century, an increasingly Westernised crop of Muslim modernists found themselves more distant and more suspicious of the *'ulamā'*. This shift bore profound implications for the trajectory of modernist-*'ulamā'* relations and for the discursive and political career of Islam in Pakistan more generally. The second argument concerns the power imbalance that has informed and oriented the relationship between the modernists and the *'ulamā'*. Even when the *'ulamā'* have contributed to public debates on religion and Islam, it is the modernists who have held the levers of power to frame and decide on the outcomes of such debates. This last argument is central to the overall architecture of the book; I will return to it towards the conclusion of this essay.

Chapter two “Modernism and Its Ethical Commitments” (pp. 54–94) presents a chronological account of major modernist experiments in Pakistani Islam, with a focus on the thought and activities of Fazlur Rahman (d. 1988) and Javed Ahmad Ghamidi (b. 1951), two very different Muslim scholars with modernist sensibilities, during the rule of military dictators Mohammad Ayub Khan (d. 1974) and Pervez Musharraf (b. 1943). Modernist experiments with Islam in Pakistan have remained haunted by a piercing paradox: while deeply grounded in ethical commitments to such signature modernist values as tolerance, justice, equality, and liberty, the credibility of such experiments has been severely injured by their association with authoritarian rulers and regimes. Among the most fascinating aspects of this chapter is its discussion, brimming with novel insights, of Fazlur Rahman’s intellectual career, as it intersected with his influential yet ill-fated engagement with Pakistan. Also, by bringing into view the ethically charged though contradictory nature of Muslim modernism in Pakistan, Zaman astutely punctures the widely held narrative that posits liberal modernists as objective, cool, and detached agents readily available for contrast with the allegedly emotional, passionate, and normatively obdurate traditionalist *'ulamā'*. Zaman’s conceptual posture here harkens late anthropologist Saba Mahmood’s (d. 2018) memorable argument in a different context that it is precisely in the affective and ethical commitments and attachments of secular modernism that some of its most intractable paradoxes are enshrined.²

² Saba Mahmood, “Religious Reason and Secular Affect: An Incommensurable Divide?” *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 4 (2009): 836–62.

If the thrust of *Islam in Pakistan* centres on exploring the tensions and ambiguities of ‘*ulama*’-modernist encounters in colonial India and Pakistan, chapter three “The ‘Ulama and the State” (pp. 95–134) brings into view the thought and career of lesser known yet hugely important scholars who nimbly traversed and bridged the ‘*ulamā*’-modernist divide. These “modernist ‘*ulamā*’,” as Zaman calls them, expanded and tested the frontiers of ‘*ulamā*’ thought by crafting readings of the tradition on pressing ethical questions that came close to modernist positions. But, their careers—Zaman focuses on the curious cases of the scholars Muḥammad Jaʿfar Phulvārvī (d. 1982) and Muḥammad Ḥanīf Nadvī (d. 1978)—also highlight the limits of such hermeneutical maneuvering, as they were unwilling to play the modernist game when it came to certain hot button issues like polygyny. Another key theme of this chapter reflected in its title is “‘*ulamā*’-state relations.” Zaman demonstrates that despite their severe misgivings about the modernist proclivities of the state, the ‘*ulamā*’ have also shown great adeptness at cultivating relations with the state and benefiting from it. Moreover, despite the constant liberal elite drumbeat of the urgency of “*madrasah* reform,” the ‘*ulamā*’ have indeed reformed *madrasahs*. But as with the rest of the book, one of the key arguments in this chapter as well centers on the power imbalances that have shaped ‘*ulamā*’-state relations, most dramatically highlighted in the domain of legislation. The Muslim Family Law Ordinance in 1961, the Women’s Protection Bill and debates on repealing the Hudood Ordinance in 2006; during all these moments, the ‘*ulamā*’ played an important role as stakeholders and at times even as critical mediators between different conflicting parties. But ultimately, they had to accept and acquiesce to the political priorities and agendas of state actors, who most often harboured a calculatingly instrumentalist if not outright mocking attitude towards the ‘*ulamā*’ and their knowledge traditions.

Chapter four “Islamism and the Sovereignty of God” (pp. 135–163) is quite different in its orientation and purposes from the other chapters in the book. Rather than chart the instabilities and tensions hovering over any particular religious movements and set of actors, this chapter accounts for the place of Islamists in the Pakistani religious marketplace by conducting a conceptual history of a critical politico-theological category at the heart of the Islamist project: that of divine sovereignty. More specifically, this chapter outlines the precise continuities and departures that have marked the career of sovereignty from premodern into modern Islam, as it assumed increasingly totalising understandings in Islamist discourse mirroring modern state sovereignty. Thus, what loosely meant God’s authority or domain (*al-ḥukm/al-mulk*) in medieval Qur’ānic commentaries for instance, in the hands

of modern Islamist political theorists like the iconic scholar and activist, and founder of the Jamā'at-i Islāmī Abū 'l-A'la Maudūdī (d. 1979), became almost synonymous to divine political sovereignty (*ḥākimiyyah*). Conceptually then, this chapter presents a wonderful theoretical case study of how new conditions, institutions, and desires inform new conceptual and political projects and vocabularies. As a terrific case-study of the intimacy of discourse and power, and of the encounter between Western and non-Western political theology, it will thus work very well as a stand-alone reading in various seminars on Muslim political thought, theology, and political theology more broadly.

In chapter five “Religious Minorities and the Anxieties of an Islamic Identity” (pp. 164–194), Zaman convincingly makes the argument that the question of minorities in Pakistan is best approached through an analytical lens that interrogates majoritarian anxieties about these minorities. He also argues that while majority-minority tensions cannot be reduced to doctrinal disagreements, those disagreements are yet incredibly important and consequential. The focus of this chapter is on Sunni majoritarian perceptions and anxieties about the Aḥmadīs and the Shī'ah. While the controversy over the Prophet's (peace be on him) finality cannot be undermined, nonetheless, the perceived threat of the Aḥmadīs is inextricably wedded to a larger suspicion of Muslim modernism, Zaman perceptively argues. The Aḥmadīs are often seen as banner-bearers of modernism connected to foreign networks of power and thus disloyal to the Pakistani project, an abiding suspicion that manifested most stridently in the visceral reactions of opposition to notable jurist and Pakistan's first foreign minister Muhammad Zafarullah Khan (d. 1985), who of course was an Aḥmadī. Similarly, in the wake of the Iranian revolution in 1979, majoritarian Sunni narratives have also cast Pakistani Shī'ah as actors who hold loyalties “elsewhere.” For Zaman, these perceptions say less about the minority communities on which they are affixed and are more reflective of the fractures and fragilities shadowing majoritarian conceptions of Pakistani nationalism. Thus, this chapter, by exploring the question of the minorities through the lens of majoritarian anxieties, advances an analytically sophisticated and politically productive critique of modern nationalism.

Chapter six “The Contested Terrain of Sufism” (pp. 195–225) argues and demonstrates that Muslim modernism in Pakistan has been indebted to Sufism even as it is often vocally critical of its alleged “excesses.” This chapter shows the Sufi moorings of a variety of ideological actors occupying the landscape of Pakistani Islam including traditionalists like the pioneers and later luminaries of the Deoband school, modernists, and even militant and non-militant

Islamists. For each of these actors, Zaman shows that being grounded in particular visions of Sufism often coexists with being critical, at times avidly so, of certain manifestations of the Sufi tradition. Critique is thus not a zero-sum game. But perhaps the most instructive, and certainly the most entertaining segment of this chapter relates to Zaman's discussion of Qudratullah Shahab (d. 1986), a powerful modernist bureaucrat in the 1950s and 60s who despite his modernist commitments and sensibilities was also deeply rooted in a thoroughly enchanted view and practice of Sufism. Indeed, although Zaman does not quite frame it this way, among the central theoretical outcomes of this chapter is its disruption of a series of disciplinary binaries commonly employed while approaching Sufism, in Pakistan and elsewhere, such as rational-mystical, enchanted-disenchanted, modernist-Sufi etc. Human attitudes towards religion and religious phenomena are often a lot more complex than what these problematic yet powerful binaries would allow us to imagine.

And in chapter seven "Religion, Violence, and the State" (pp. 226–268), Zaman proffers the very poignant and helpful argument that reducing militant violence in Pakistan to either Islam or to long-running state patronage is inadequate. Moreover, such reductionist framings do not capture the political and theological appeal of such outfits, and hence prohibit the formulation of a counter-narrative. Among the central arguments of this chapter is that there exists no linear or clear trajectory of *'ulamā'*-state relations on the question of violence. Moreover, even among militant outfits and leaders, attitudes towards the state have varied considerably among different actors and over time. In light of recent events in Indian occupied Kashmir, and the looming specter of war between India and Pakistan earlier this year (2019), one should especially mention the extensive and shining discussion in this chapter of the religious thought of the leader of the militant outfit Jaish-i Muḥammad, Mas'ūd Azhar (b. 1968). Zaman presents a rarely available nuanced window into his worldview and conception of *jihād*. A particularly curious and novel aspect of this chapter is its analysis of the religious narratives and motifs that accompanied the 1965 war against India. As much as a triumphalist supernatural narratology was motivational and uplifting, it was resented by many of the soldiers themselves, as it undercut their authority and achievement in the battlefield, exemplifying in many ways the intractable tensions of Islam in Pakistan, ever suspended between the seductive enticements of an unfettered tradition offering the promise of sovereign power and the moderating pressures of modernism.

The Tragedy of Modernism

Finally, in a moving epilogue (pp. 263–277), Zaman highlights the major continuities and ruptures that have marked the career of Islam in colonial South Asia and then later Pakistan over the last hundred years. In terms of continuities, he primarily lists the still checkered ability and record of the state to manage and regulate religion, and the fact that almost all Muslim intellectual movements with beginnings in colonial India continue to operate today and in some cases even thrive. But two major ruptures and discontinuities are also discernible. First, while competing groups of Muslim scholars have survived the last century, the battle-lines dividing them have markedly sharpened. Second, and this point is crucial to Zaman's overall argument in this book, the middle-men who could serve as intermediaries between the '*ulamā*' and the modernists have considerably dwindled. According to Zaman, this second transformation represents among the biggest failures and symptoms of decline haunting the Muslim modernist tradition in Pakistan. One moment in the epilogue deserves special mention as it exemplifies the conceptual and political stakes of this project. Zaman writes, "Contemporary '*ulama* have done better at acquiring Western learning, and at benefiting from so doing, than the [Western-educated] modernists have in developing a credible grounding in the Islamic tradition and in enhancing the religious credentials that go with any such accomplishment. . . . *Among the blind spots most damaging to the modernists' own cause has been their unwillingness to see much nuance or internal differentiation among their conservative rivals. The need to recognize such nuance and to build on it is not a matter of intellectual generosity; it is pragmatic politics* (p. 266, 277; emphasis mine).

One cannot stress enough the urgency and importance of this last statement, especially given the unyielding mantra of "*madrasah* reform" that enraptures almost every successive generation of the Pakistani modernist elite that views religious scholars and their tradition as pathological receptacles of obscurantism eagerly requiring the prophylactic of liberal secular reform. To be clear, Zaman's book is not an apologia for the '*ulamā*' that tries to conceal or sugarcoat some of its unsavoury aspects, as the chapter on minorities amply demonstrates. This would represent a grotesque misreading of this book. But by highlighting and examining some of the gaping contradictions and problems afflicting different stripes of liberal modernism in Pakistan, this book does achieve the immensely profitable and productive goal of disrupting the dominant assumption, with serious policy implications, that views modernists as the invariable subjects and the '*ulamā*' as the persistent objects of moral and social critique. One of the most profound outcomes of this book

lies in its implicit argument that it is precisely the increasing inability of the modernist elite to view the discursive universe of *'ulamā'* with confidence and sympathy that has simultaneously hardened attitudes of *'ulamā'* and catalysed varied forms of militancy and fundamentalism. Refusing to listen carefully to the worldviews and normative attachments of the internal "other," even if one viscerally disagreed with that "other," can generate catastrophic consequences.

Conclusion

Indeed, while written as a layered and rigorous intellectual history, one might read *Islam in Pakistan* as a work of mourning laced with a tragic sensibility. Throughout the book, one finds Zaman bemoaning the inability of the modernist elite, especially the governing modernist elite, to at least consider the nuances and ambiguities marking the *'ulamā'* tradition in South Asia. In a country increasingly sandwiched between competing forms of religious and liberal secular fundamentalisms, Zaman's erudite appeal for the celebration of nuance and ambiguity is both intellectually and politically pressing and vital. The historical archive that Zaman has ably documented in *Islam in Pakistan* offers both hopeful possibilities as well as sobering lessons for the curation of a future that resists both pathological inheritances of tradition and the violent operations of modern secular power.

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