

## Book Review

Muhammad, Zaman. Q., *Islam in Pakistan: A History*. 432pp. Princeton University Press 2018.

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Based on an impressive synthesis of unprecedented archival research, Professor Muhammad Qasim Zaman's *Islam in Pakistan: A History* is undoubtedly the most comprehensive overview to date of the religious landscape of Pakistan.[1] Not only are we introduced to a spectrum of leading scholars, critical voices, groups, and texts (and contexts); more significantly, he situates the acclaimed "news-typecast" of Pakistani religious actors within the wider religious currents at play and away from their portraits portrayed within flashy headlines of the media. *Islam in Pakistan* is thus a serious antidote to simplistic and clichéd generalisations that often mar the study of Islam in Pakistan, while its many insights seem generalisable across other contemporary Muslim societies.

Throughout, key religious developments in Pakistan are thoroughly contextualised and illustrated through the careers of seminal Muslim figures, groups, seminal texts, and of critical moments and events in Pakistan's history.

In the introduction, Zaman clarifies what the book *isn't*. It does not attempt to encompass "the lived practice of Islam" in Pakistan (p. 2), nor does it include the religious life and worldview of ordinary Muslims there. What then does it cover? It discusses major Islamic religious orientations that crystallised during the British colonial period to become major actors within the new setting of the Muslim state. It also details their evolving dynamic with one another, especially with the Pakistani state. The persistence of these orientations is in fact one of the key takeaways of this book: ". . . [N]one of the Islamic orientations that existed or were in the process of emerging at the turn of the twentieth century had ceased to exist a hundred years later" (*Epilogue*, p. 265). So what orientations are these? Zaman lists 1) The modernist; 2) the traditionalist (i.e., the 'ulama of the Deobandi, Barelwi, and Ahl al-hadith leanings); 3) the Islamist; and finally 4) the

minority positions of the Ahmadis and the Shia. Page after page, he shows that these orientations are fluid and ambiguous; they occasionally work together, sometimes encounter serious conflicts, and on occasion even influence each other. What emerges from his reading is therefore an intricate religious landscape that often surprises. These surprises are, however, not simply intrinsic to the landscape; for many readers they are also a function of their media-inspired popular preconceptions.

**Chapter 1 ("Islamic Identities in Colonial India")** is key to all later chapters. Here we are introduced to the existing and newly emerged Islamic orientations within colonial India and their complicated relationship with one another. There were rivalries and hostilities, but confluence and cooperation as well. Islamic modernism—the orientation that Islamic core convictions are in harmony with liberal values and that once disentangled from the baggage of traditionalist misinterpretations would surely be *the* remedy for modern challenges faced by Muslims—emerges in this period. Zaman shows that the origin of its hostile and distrusting relationship with the traditionalists lies in this formative phase. This friction particularly manifested itself within the political arena and in their respective stances toward the proposal for a Muslim-majority nation state of Pakistan. Zaman demonstrates that the political visions of traditionalists and modernists—by and large an extension of their basic orientations—were relentlessly at odds with one another. Co-existence of these rival attitudes toward the new state's identity have since then endured and have played out in various arenas, e.g., in discussions about the Pakistani constitution, legislation, and legitimacy of violence.

Despite these competing visions it was the modernists (subject matter of **chapter 2, "Modernism and its Ethical Commitments"**) who would be at the helm of the new

Pakistani state and exercise state power. Indeed, it is the modernist orientation that is foregrounded in and anchors Zaman's study. In an unprecedented evaluation of Islamic modernism in Pakistan, Zaman reveals an "authoritarian streak" (p. 54): one that sought to control and regulate Islam in the new state. His analysis has immense ramifications not just for the study of modernism in Pakistan but for our understanding of modern Islam more generally.

Whereas the modernist Islamic orientation gained its most extensive articulation and peak influence during the Ayub era—demonstrated here through the career of Fazlur Rahman (d. 1988)—this is at the same time the beginning of the decline of Islamic liberalism in Pakistan and in subsequent decades it loses ground to the Islamists and the 'ulama. Zaman points out that the immense barrier between the modernists and the 'ulama is largely due to the former's downplaying of Shariah in favour of liberal values (and even within those an exclusive emphasis on social and political ethics). In turn though, Zaman also mourns the attitude of the 'ulama:

*[T]he opposition to modernism, and to modernist ethics, has also inhibited the 'ulama from venturing beyond their long-standing concern with the ethical formation of the individual toward any sustained engagement with social and political ethics. If anything, such engagement within the ranks of the 'ulama has declined in recent decades (p. 82).*

Zaman also problematizes the widely held view that it was Zia's regime that undermined the modernist strands or was solely responsible for strengthening Islamist and traditionalist orientations. The poet Parvin Shakir's case is only one illustration in this regard (pp. 82-3). There are others.

By the end of the Benazir-Nawaz era, modernism was in serious decline; political developments in neighboring Afghanistan were not the least important reason for it. The post-9/11 Musharraf-era sought to reignite the dormant modernism through a state-level orchestrated "enlightened moderation." Finally, while in Ghamidi, Auj, and Khalid Masud there still exist modernist voices, they continue to fail in persuading their rivals and are either rebutted or forcefully (even violently) pushed aside. The concluding pages probe the reasons for this change in modernism's fortunes from dominance to decline. This section (pp. 92-94) is replete with unprecedented analysis and insight.

**Chapter 3 ("The 'Ulama and the State")** outlines the 'ulama's role towards the Pakistani state vis-à-vis three themes: constitution-making, Islamic legislation and madrasa reform (p. 95). In the first case, for example, despite the apparent absurdity of 'ulama's "traditionalist romanticism" in the proposals drawn up by the 'ulama-constituted Board of Ta'limat-i Islamia to help formulate state's constitution (p. 97ff), Zaman reveals the 'ulama's surprising flexibility in offering numerous accommodations to the modernists. Yet, illustrative again of the authoritarian streak of the modernists, their state committee simply rejected them all.

Reminiscent of his previous writings[2], Zaman also shows that 'ulama such as Taqi Usmani, far from the modernist caricature of them as irrelevant souvenirs of a bygone era, have immense appeal, are revered, and are still recognised by many Muslims as a "forward-looking yet authentic face of contemporary Islam" (p. 133).

Chapters two (see above) and four ("**Islamism and the Sovereignty of God**") form perhaps the foremost contribution of this study. If the former is a sympathetic delineation and critique of the shortcomings of the modernist project, the latter is an unprecedented account of the genealogy of the idea of God's sovereignty—the hallmark of Islamist thought. Zaman traces, perhaps for the first time, the fascinating and multifaceted origin and inspiration of this idea within the South Asian Islamic milieu: "(F)rom its putative New Testament origins to the leading Islamist ideologue of the twentieth century via an anti-colonial agitator, and then back not merely to the Qur'an but to what the Gospels themselves preserve of the teachings of Jesus on this crucial matter." (p. 146). Through a survey of prominent premodern Muslim exegetes of the Qur'an on the Quranic verses (e.g., 12:40 and 3:36) upon which Islamists base their unequivocal claim that "sovereignty belongs to God," Zaman argues how thoroughly modern this idea is. What remains unclear still is the idea's resonance among the 'ulama. He writes, "Once Mawdudi's formulation of the sovereignty of God had gained traction, inside and outside Pakistan, it was very difficult to argue against it" (p. 163). But why were the 'ulama unable to discern the radical departure of this slogan from their inherited tradition? In other words, despite the idea's departure from tradition (i.e., premodern exegetical works), how was it able to find currency among the 'ulama? Zaman's otherwise excellent chapter does not offer a satisfactory answer.

**Chapter 5 (Religious Minorities and the Anxieties of an Islamic Identity)** is among the weaker chapters of the book. Here Zaman examines the fate of two religious minorities (the Ahmadis and the Shi'a), and particularly "what may underlie the hostile attitudes of the 'ulama as well as of Islamist ideologues and activists toward these minority communities" (p. 165). Intriguingly though, his analysis turns quickly to a cataloguing of the various "anxieties" that these minorities have provoked for the Sunni majority, especially among its "conservative" section—a term that is rarely used in the book and is therefore generally vague in application. In the case of the Ahmadis, Zaman supplements the usual focus on the religious anxieties that led to the 1953 agitations, the 1974 Rabwah incident, and the ordinance of 1984 with an examination of broader political and economic manoeuvrings. In the case of the Shi'a, he attributes the anxieties that were provoked to the actual or perceived unrelenting capacity and active efforts to thwart the religious aspirations of the wider Sunni majority, as well as to the deep impact of the Iranian revolution in altering Sunni-Shi'a relations. In both cases, however, it is hard to discern a palpable difference between the anxieties of the Islamists and the 'ulama. What is starkly missing, though, is an attempt to study the issue from the

viewpoint of these minorities; i.e., an account of their anxieties within a Sunni-majority state.[3] Be that as it may, Zaman's account offers no sizeable comfort to liberal anxieties about the status of minorities within the Pakistani state.

Against all rampant caricatures, **chapter 6 (“The Contested Terrain of Sufism”)** is a welcome insight into the intricate place of Sufism within the Pakistani religious landscape. Zaman demonstrates that despite serious and growing opposition to Sufi thought—especially devotional practices (e.g., amulets and shrine culture)—Sufism continues to undergird and influence the religious landscape in surprising ways. In this regard, genealogies of modernists and Islamists, *zīkr*-for-jihad within Jaish-i Muhammad circles (p. 213), and his discussion of an abridged translation of *Kash al-Mahjub* by a Jama'at-i Islami leader are just some of the many fascinating examples provided. Most valuable are the six points in the concluding section (pp. 216ff) that probe whether and how Sufism has declined. This section is one of the high points of this study.

The final chapter (**“Religion, Violence and the State”**) addresses most directly what has generally preoccupied interest in the Pakistani religious landscape in media, in Western discourse about the country, and even in scholarship. In Zaman's careful reading, it is the newly formed state of Pakistan that first deployed *jihad* and mobilised Islam in the service of the 1947-48, 1965 and 1971 wars with India. Zaman shows that in later decades extra-state actors would utilise the same trope and that this should not come as a surprise. The key contribution of the chapter is in the last section (“Changing the Narrative?”). Here Zaman explains (almost bemoans) “the absence or at least the tenuousness of a strategic narrative in response to such challenges [presented by militant Islamists like the Taliban]” (p. 252); having pioneered and deployed the *jihad* discourse in its wars with India and even domestically in the service of state agendas, the state could not then really recant, reorient, or eliminate it. That discourse and its further deployment by extra-state actors – as subsequent decades have shown – is now here to stay.

The *Epilogue* revisits the map of the religious landscape of Pakistan and how it has (or has not) altered in the last hundred years. In Zaman's view, when the present situation is compared to the first two decades of the Pakistani state, the starkest contrast is in the decline of Islamic modernism (p. 274). Given that Islamic modernism anchored his study, the author returns in conclusion to assess this decline and its implications for the future of Pakistan.

How successful is Zaman in undermining or dismantling the pervasive stereotypes of “Islam in Pakistan”? If read closely, the author has poked deep holes on almost every page. In lieu of the pervasive reductionist and one-dimensional analysis of “Pakistani Islam”, Zaman offers an expansive and intricate account, one that encompasses a multitude of contributory factors and religious, political, and social currents that play their part. Yet, it is also here that the difficulty of this text lies.

For a reader new to the Pakistani religious terrain, weighing these various factors and their relative magnitude and impact will be immensely challenging. That is why what remains sorely missing is a concluding chapter, one that would juxtapose, interrelate, and blend the scattered findings of the various chapters, and would help the reader discover the “big picture” takeaways. Two more surprises stand out. First, the reader may wonder about the absence of a substantial discussion of the complex dynamics of Pakistan as a nation-state (itself a colonial legacy), its repercussions, as well as various neo-colonialist tides and undercurrents. Second, this long-awaited derailing of simplistic caricatures of Islam in Pakistan through an appreciation of its ambiguities, obscurities, tragedies, and uncertainties may make the reader wonder if there is anything to be salvaged from them. Are there no blessings, beauties, contributions, or splendours of Islam in Pakistan?

### References

- [1] This review complements SherAli Tareen's review “The Tragedies and Ambiguities of Islam in Pakistan” in *Islamic Studies* 58:2 (2019), pp.245-253. The reader is encouraged to peruse that as well.
- [2] See especially his *The 'Ulama in Contemporary Islam: Custodians of Change* (2002)
- [3] How the Shi'a have grappled with these issues is admirably documented in Professor Zaman's student Simon Wolfgang Fuchs' recent study titled *In a Pure Muslim Land* (2019).