

## Book Review

Tareen, SherAli. *Defending Muhammad in Modernity*. 506pp. Notre Dame Press 2022.

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Published: July 2023

*Defending Muhammad in Modernity* (henceforth, DMIM) is a profound monograph that has, within the span of two short years, been widely and, with the exception of one hyperbolically acerbic review,<sup>[1]</sup> positively reviewed.<sup>[2]</sup> It received the American Institute of Pakistan Studies (AIPS) Book Prize for 2020 and was shortlisted for the American Academy of Religion's (AAR) awards for Excellence in the Study of Religion in 2021.<sup>[3]</sup> Apart from these reviews, Tareen's work has been the subject of symposia at *Contending Modernities*, with contributions from Ebrahim Moosa, Faisal Devji, Jonathan Brown, and Sohaira Siddiqui, among others,<sup>[4]</sup> and at *Marginalia*, with contributions from Ali Altaf Mian, Kecia Ali, Noah Salomon, Megan Eaton Robb, and Mashal Saif.<sup>[5]</sup> It has rightly been described as "the definitive account of the most important and long-standing intra-Muslim rivalry of the Indian subcontinent",<sup>[6]</sup> and a "monumental" work on Deobandī and Barelvī polemics in colonial India that lays bare the "futility of binary categories – Sūfī/legal, inclusivist/exclusivist, etc. – in explaining the two centuries of theological dispute between the two schools".<sup>[7]</sup>

This review, then, participates in an already rich reception history, one that is likely to, and indeed should, become more multilayered over the years. As a contributor to this history, I'm going to offer two brief comments. The first concerns what Tareen refers to as a "core" task of his project (12). The point of this comment is to show how Tareen models a particular hermeneutical approach for scholars and readers of South Asian Islam. My second, more speculative and playful comment, is

about a direction of scholarship on non-European thought that Tareen opens up for scholars who work with and on non-European textual sources.<sup>[8]</sup>

Tareen notes that his project "at its core is an exercise in applying [Talal] Asad's call to approach Islam as a discursive tradition. It investigates ways in which a discursive tradition – Islam in South Asia – was invested with competing meanings and ideological projects in specific conjunctures of authoritative discourse" (12). What is at stake in this way of framing conversations about Islam in South Asia? What does it mean to painstakingly read texts of Deobandī and Barelvī scholars as constituting a "discursive tradition"?<sup>[9]</sup>

Tareen notes that "approaching Islam as a discursive tradition means attending to the forms of reasoning, argument, and citational procedures through which the question of what the embodied life of a community should look like is authoritatively engaged and debated" (12). Tareen's hermeneutic entails approaching Deobandī and Barelvī texts (or one's "source material," more broadly) with the assumption, desire, and hope that one will encounter<sup>[10]</sup> forms of rationality, reasoning, and argument therein. Stated differently, treating a textual corpus as an element of a discursive tradition means treating your corpus as suffused with and generative of *theoria*, as animated by "layered logics of life" (387). A reader's task, then, is to reveal (33), navigate (4, 14), and eagerly listen to (387) the way one's corpus theoretically crafts conceptions of time, community, authority, subjectivity, tradition, reform,

and so on. One major boon of this approach that Tareen highlights for us is that we're able to avoid the risk of reading our sources in terms of theoretical conceptions that may not be well-suited for examining them. DMIM is an exercise to listening to South Asian 'ulamā without forcing them to sound either legalistic or mystical, traditional or modern, puritan or populist. Tareen is able to achieve this because he does not forcefully graft theoretical constructs on his sources and treats them as environments where theoretical constructs are being fabricated.

I'd like to offer two important clarifications on this front, lest Tareen's project be misread. First, Tareen is no romantic in relation to his sources – he approaches them with care and for the sake of discovering the forms of rationality enacted therein, but this does not mean he approaches them hagiographically or nostalgically (33, 387).<sup>[11]</sup> Second, Tareen is no naïve empiricist either, who imagines that he is looking at his sources “directly,” “immediately,” and simply “on their own terms.” Tareen approaches his sources with rich theoretical tools, crafted by anthropologists, philosophers, and South Asianists, among others. The key thing at work in the monograph is that these approaches are employed by Tareen for the sake of clarifying, sifting through, and revealing the forms of reasoning at play in his sources. The problem with the theoretical constructs that Tareen shuns – public/private, mystical/legal etc. – isn't their “foreignness” to Tareen's source material. It's that, when they're employed by scholars of South Asian Islam, these constructs don't usually reveal and display something unique about the sources that they're used to read but, instead, carve out the source material *in their own image*.<sup>[12]</sup> The promise of constructs such as “discursive tradition” is that they allow a scholar to handle their material as a source of *theoria* and not simply data that's organized by the protocols of the scholar's theoretical constructs.

My second, somewhat playful comment, is that if Tareen and other contemporary scholars are successful in discovering and displaying theoretical constructs of time, subjectivity, authority etc. at work in a scholar such as Ashraf 'Alī Thānvī, then this opens up some very interesting permutations for future scholarship. It makes it possible to imagine a “Thānvīan” reading of, for instance, Talal Asad. What would it look like if the constructs of temporality and subjectivity at play in and thematised by a non-European source such as Thānvī are used to reveal, navigate, and listen to what the contemporary academy in a given discipline takes as a fecund theoretical source? It also makes it possible to imagine a non-naïvely empiricist, “Thānvīan” reading of Thānvī. A scholar might, for instance, hypothesise that a certain moral anthropology is at work in Thānvī and then

explore the theoretical purchase of reading Thānvī's corpus in light of and as inflected by the hypothesised moral anthropology. These possibilities and permutations are opened up – and Tareen masterfully opens and explores several such possibilities throughout his monograph – by a hermeneutic that takes theoretical constructs as ubiquitous in and germane to one's source material and not a species of reasoning that's restricted to the western academy.

#### Footnotes:

- [1] T. K. Gugler 2020. *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 31 (3), 359–361.
- [2] By A. Gul 2021. *Die Welt des Islams* 62 (2), 264–269; M. Yousuf 2021. *Contemporary South Asia* 29 (4), 598–599; J. S. Ahmad 2021. *American Journal of Islam and Society* 38 (1-2), 218–222; S. Baig 2022. *Islamic Law and Society* 29 (1-2), 209–212; A. Bigelow 2020. *Journal of Asian Studies* 79 (4), 1049–1050; B. Ingram 2022. *Journal of Islamic Studies* 33 (2), 269–275; R. S. Judge 2022. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*. Volume 90, Issue 2, June 2022, 497–501.
- [3] For the AIPS book award announcement, click [here](#). For the AAR short-list, click [here](#).
- [4] Click [here](#) for accessing the contributions to the symposium at *Contending Modernities*
- [5] Click [here](#) for accessing the contributions to the forum at *Marginalia*.
- [6] Ingram, op. cit. p. 269
- [7] Ahmad, op.cit. p. 222; Gul, op. cit. p.268
- [8] My second comment partly draws its inspiration from Sohaira Siddiqui's contribution to the symposium on *Defending Muhammad in Modernity* hosted by *Contending Modernities*. For Siddiqui's remarks on the monograph, click [here](#)
- [9] See Samira Haj's *Reconfiguring Islamic Tradition: Reform, Rationality, and Modernity* (2008. Stanford University Press) as another monograph that productively uses the idea of a discursive tradition to explore the thought of Muhammad Abduh (d. 1905) and Muhammad Ibn Abdul Wahhab (d. 1787).
- [10] At the end of his introduction to the monograph, Tareen notes that he hopes his reading strategies “might allow for a...thickly textured and sympathetically attuned encounter with the layered logics and projects that animate the stakeholders of a discursive tradition” (34).
- [11] Tareen notes in his introduction: “In what follows I try to honor [my sources] not through hagiography but through the procedures and protocols of the academic study of religion. This approach promises to reveal the layered complexities and tensions of tradition while also disrupting the moderating claims and assumptions of liberal secular conceptuality. That is the dual promise at the core of this book” (33). And also that his

approach involves “listening eagerly, carefully, and critically to the layered logics of life that compose ‘ulamā’ traditions of knowledge and that inform their internal debates. One does not have to agree with or embody a logic of life to be able to listen to it and learn from it sympathetically and with humility. The academic study of religion presents and promises an excellent avenue and set of tools to execute readings of a tradition that are attentive to its internal voices and logics” (387).

[12] Tareen’s analytic gestures here resonate deeply with Levinas’s critique of “the logic of the same.” See P. Ochs 2006, ‘Revised: Comparative Religious Traditions’ in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 74 (2), 483-494.

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