

Book Review

Zaidi, Akbar. *Making a Muslim: Reading Publics and Contesting Identities in Nineteenth-Century*. 249pp. Cambridge University Press 2021.

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Zaidi's book *Making a Muslim* focuses on important Urdu-language debates on Muslim identity in the late nineteenth century, bringing to light an exciting range of primary source material in periodicals. Zaidi argues that most Muslims in the nineteenth century aside from large reformist figures like Syed Ahmed Khan, Altaf Hussain Hali, and Nazir Ahmed were more interested in defining intra-Muslim difference than in forging a single Muslim *qaum* against Hindus and Christians (24-5). He suggests that we should look much later than is previously assumed – to the early twentieth century, instead of the nineteenth century – to understand the origins of separatism.

Zaidi examines contestations around the question: Who gets to be Muslim? He highlights the paradox of identifying Islam as a community of disagreement, a tension which Talal Asad famously explored in his 1986 essay "The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam." Asad's approach in his essay was to define Islam as a discursive tradition oriented to a vision of the past accessed via the Qur'an and the Hadith. Zaidi disagrees with Asad in the latter's attempt to define Islam in any sense, and instead affirms the approach that Asad critiqued: "Islam is simply what Muslims everywhere say it is" (Zaidi quoting Asad, 33). Zaidi does not fully explain why his approach differs from that of Asad (see page 11, footnote 33), and a fuller explanation of this divergence from Asad's theoretical model would have made clearer the larger stakes of Zaidi's book for scholarship on the history of Islam. Confusingly, in some sections of the book Zaidi engages in the "tradition" language made famous by Asad by calling the concept of *umma* "a

shared tradition" (25). To further muddy the waters, in the conclusion, he acknowledges that "[of course], one cannot but recognise that a very broad entity called the 'north Indian Musalman' did exist" (212). The tension between this recognition of "the Musulman" and the necessity to acknowledge its fragmented character animates the book as a whole.

While Zaidi does not define the term public sphere in the introduction (see page 16, footnote 41), he does discuss his approach to that term and that of print capitalism in chapter 4 ("*Main majbūr hu'ā*," 128-30). While he argues that rather than one public sphere, we should allow for multiple public spheres that were competing, Zaidi does refer to "the Urdu print public sphere," in chapter 4, albeit one that is "wide and diverse" with "multiple layers and spheres of influence" (127). Emphasising that print capitalism in a colonial context "is bound to have different characteristics and consequences compared with say Europe," he successfully argues that it is important to pay attention to the role of print in fracturing community (131). The energy and high emotions of those divisions that Zaidi effectively recounts indicates the growing importance of laying claim to the category of "Muslim" in the late colonial period.

Zaidi's approach to the questions "[who] is allowed to make such a claim of being Muslim, who is excluded, and on what grounds" poses an evocative counterpoint to Shahab Ahmed's approach in *What is Islam*. Zaidi turns our attention to difficult questions about how disagreements regarding self-definition could *in*

themselves contribute to community identity in an age of political upheaval. Rather than seeing intra-Muslim fractures as red herrings to be resolved, the approach he ascribes to Shahab Ahmed, Zaidi focuses attention on the terms by which disunity is theorised among Muslims. Intra-Muslim disunity could also form a foundation for unity within a particular Muslim group. Zaidi sidesteps what he suggests is the counterproductive task of attempting to define Islam, taking for granted that Muslims will come to different conclusions in answer to this question. Instead, he turns his attention to the question of “who a Muslim is and how they *become* Muslim” (11). The emphasis of the remainder of the book is on the “how,” and in particular the ways that disagreement, divergence, and exclusion were key strategies in the process of becoming Muslim. As Zaidi observes in Chapter 3 “a complete lack of unity... was seen to be at the core of this crisis” of perceived decline in Muslim historical, political, and cultural distinctiveness (117). Debates among Muslims were vigorous. However, the discursive emphasis on decrying disunity in the source material seems to suggest the opposite of Zaidi’s argument: if many Muslims believed that disunity was one major cause of the crisis among Muslims, then by inference those same Muslims may have thought that a form of unity – in norms of comportment, in ritual, or institution building – could be a solution to the crisis.

Chapter one offers a welcome discussion of contrasting methods of classification and unification among colonial bureaucrats and Muslim thought leaders. Of particular interest in this chapter is a detailed recounting of the stark contrast between the different ways Muslim reformists and British colonial officials deployed the term “Wahhabi” in polemics. This discursive analysis offers additional evidence to bolster the conclusion drawn by Marcia Hermansen in her 2000 article “Wahhabis, Fakirs and Others,” that the origins of the term “Wahhabi” in South Asia were transplanted to the South Asian subcontinent by the British who drew a connection between the military action against Hijazi holy cities by Muhammad Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhab and the failed attempt at jihad by Sayyid Ahmad Barelvi in Balakot in 1831.

Chapter one also usefully distinguishes between two contrasting approaches among Muslims to unity and differentiation. This chapter grounds the debates deeply in Urdu-language source material, highlighting the key terms of *muqallid* (conformist) and *ghair muqallid* (non-conformist) as anchoring terms in nineteenth century debates about who should be counted among Muslims. Zaidi presents a portrait of Muslims as comprising two sorts of groups: there were Muslims who sought to downplay disunity and to advocate for a unity of Islam

under the over-arching concept of “*qaum*” (77-78); and there were Muslims who engaged in projects of differentiation in entirely different terms, through engaging in the term “Wahhabi” as a pejorative label, and by engaging in vocabularies specific to reformist movements or *maslaks*. Muslims “defined themselves... not simply (or only) as *musulmān* but as Sunni, Shi‘a, Wahhabi, Deobandi, Barelvi, Nechrī, Ahl-i Hadis, Ahl-i Qur’an, Ahmadi” (23). On the other hand, “some Muslims were busy trying to create a notion of a more unified community encompassing diverse sections of Muslims under an umbrella conception of *qaum*,” in contrast to British attempts to fragment that community through census categories (37). In other words, two groups of Muslims were contesting British categories: one set argued for unity, and the other set focused on a completely different terminology of *muqallid* and *ghair muqallid*.

This chapter and others depend on a distinction between religion and politics for its argumentation. For instance, Zaidi distinguishes between the “purely religious” and relationships to colonial power, with reference to discourses on Wahhabism (54). It is of course not only possible but also likely, as Zaidi later on in the same chapter acknowledges, that theological debates and denials/accusations of Wahhabism could overlap with the desire to evade colonial critique or to invite colonial critique towards competitors. For instance, when Fazal-i Rasool Badayuni, and after him Nawab Siddiq Hasan Khan, deployed the term Wahhabism, they combined theological argumentations with statements that the so-called Wahhabis were “enemies of the British” (46). This sort of anecdote undermines Zaidi’s argument that the way that the term “Wahhabi” was being used was entirely distinct between the Muslims and the British; instead, this sort of evidence suggests that the term Wahhabi served as a theological distinction with political ramifications.

Chapter two focuses on performances of the emotion of *zillat*, or humiliation, and how that emotion’s agentive force contributed to reform and revival. Zaidi’s close reading of literatures describing *zillat* illuminates how humiliation was both a “condition and a location” (86), grounding his analysis in space and place in a way that also threads through chapters three and four. He highlights three forms of humiliation that emerge in the source material: that which emanated from the supposed historical decline of Islam and Muslims; that connected to the political decline of the Mughal empire; and the humiliation that corresponded to a loss of morality and cultural distinction among Muslims, or in the words of Sayyid Muhammad ‘Abdullah in his book *Haqīqat ul-Islām* “the shamelessness... of accepting the ways and means of others” (quoted on 97). He also touches

on *zillat* as emanating from the public display of Shia-Sunni disagreements (110). Attention to discussion of *zillat* in printed sources is extremely useful in highlighting the ways Muslims conceived of themselves as agents in history, rather than only as objects of colonialism.

However, Zaidi is inaccurate in this chapter when he states that attitudes of “nostalgia and lamentation” were only characterised by “wistful sentiment.” As Eve Tignol has written in her article “Nostalgia and the City: Urdu shahr āshob poetry in the aftermath of 1857,” nostalgia was a powerful collective performance of grief with its own cultural agency, assisting in the “[re-channelling of] memory and melancholy into the urban landscape by emphasising its materiality and reinvesting it with new meanings and stakes” (Tignol, 2017). In fact, lamentation poetry helped readers conceptualise the importance of the local, urban environment as a locus of identity, something that the language of *zillat* also enabled.

Chapter three argues that historians should look earlier than the “pamphlet wars” to understand how Muslims were arguing with each other about belonging and identity. In this chapter Zaidi brings to light important material from the 1860s and 1870s that focused on debates surrounding ritual and prayer. For instance, a Deputy Collector and magistrate in Kanpur named Imdadul ‘Ali became incensed by issues surrounding the correct number of *rak‘at* to recite in *tarāvīh* prayers, a voluntary prayer performed during the month of Ramadan (122-3). He provides a useful summary of scholarship about the development of print capitalism in South Asia (128-132), and emphasises the diversity of approaches that appeared in Urdu periodicals in this early period.

Particularly useful is Zaidi’s attention to the proliferation of pamphlets by people who did not represent any formal institution or *maslak*, but were focused intensely on local issues or animated by the desire to debate with an individual, competing scholar. For instance, the voluminous exchange between Shaikh Ahmad and Maulana Muhammad Jahangir Khansahib demonstrates the time, energy, and attention given to the careful reading of individual scholarly approaches to theological issues (146-9). Zaidi points out that the many texts written by both men make no mention of the term *qaum*. This is a useful observation for a series of texts published in the late 1890s since it shows that the term was not at that point a necessity for engaging in debates on Muslim identity (150). However, elsewhere in the book Zaidi mentions that other scholars were already using the term *qaum* in *munazaras* (debates) in the early 1890s, placing in question his argument that *qaum* did not refer

to a unified Muslim community identity until the twentieth century (184). The topic of *tabarra*, the ritual cursing by Shi’a Muslims of the first three caliphs of Islam and Sunnis, and debates surrounding its permissibility animated many of the periodicals Zaidi reads. Here again, critics decried the lack of unity among Muslims as a result of the practice (170).

In this chapter Zaidi again defines religion in terms of the “solely theological,” but he acknowledges that for many Muslims the issues that mattered were not limited to grand theological narratives but were focused on matters of everyday ritual (27). The latter observation is in keeping with the observations of SherAli Tareen’s book *Defending Muhammad in Modernity*, which demonstrates how doctrinal debates were made real through their entanglement with meaningful relationships and political realities. Religious studies as a discipline has increasingly focused attention on lived religion and has challenged attempts to define religion as solely theological, which are a colonial inheritance. Tomoko Masuzawa and Talal Asad, in particular, have been influential in expanding conceptions of religion that do not reinscribe the colonial assumptions that doctrine and theology are isometric with religion. David Hall, Robert Orsi, and Catherine Bell have helped develop an approach that emphasises ritual and contradiction as sitting at the heart of religious categories, rather than those contradictions denying the presence of a religious tradition. If we acknowledge that religion is far from only a matter of doctrinal debates, Zaidi’s chapter can help us to focus our attention on intra-Muslim debates as a more important engine for religious identity formation than colonial forces. However, Zaidi does not acknowledge this large body of work in religious studies. His reification of a long-debunked division between “theology” and “politics” is a shortcoming of the book.

Chapter four focuses on the phenomenon of the *munazara* or public debate, using accounts of debates to challenge preconceptions of the “fixity of print.” Correctly denying that there should be any sense of “primitiveness” ascribed to the oral form when compared to print, Zaidi instead demonstrates that oral performances were thoroughly modern. In the tradition of C.A. Bayly and Ali Khan Mahmudabad, he points out that they allowed for an ecumene that facilitated the effective spread of ideas before and alongside the emergence of print capitalism in South Asia (176-7; 201). In analysing eight different accounts of a “celebrated” public debate, Zaidi demonstrates that print was far from a realm of stability. Instead, different accounts of the debate demonstrated the new role of the *‘ulama* whose exchanges were now “larger-than-life” (185-90; 206). This chapter touches on the aspects of the debate that acknowledged distinctions between

Hindus and Christians, but comes to the conclusion that intra-Muslim concerns and Muslim audiences reigned supreme in the minds of those printing accounts of the debates.

Overall Assessment

On the one hand, if Zaidi had not come out full force against Shahab Ahmed's approach, *Making a Muslim* could easily be read as fulfilling Ahmed's call for scholars "to resist our conceptual predisposition to conceptualise and categorise by the elimination of difference, and conceptualise and categorise, instead, *in terms of inclusion of difference* (*What is Islam*, 302)." After all, ultimately Zaidi's approach affirms that all Muslims who identify as Muslim should be considered as part of a study of Islam; he does not accept any *maslak* or *firqa*'s attestation that other groups should be exiled from the category of Muslim. However, Zaidi's argument is distinct from that of Ahmed: he argues that accepting all Muslims' self-appellations of "Muslim" can only happen by affirming that they belong to *different* categories of "Muslim." Zaidi highlights that multiple definitions of "Muslim" exist among the Barelwis, Deobandis, and Ahl-i Hadis (see chapter one) who refuse to acknowledge competing groups' membership in the category of "Muslim". His observation that Muslim unity may exist not just through the inclusion of difference but through exclusion, and the creation of "numerous kinds of Muslims and Muslim public spheres" in the tradition of Talal Asad is usefully provoking.

Zaidi writes that scholars working on late colonial India have over-emphasised the unity of Muslim community, influenced by the teleological demands of Partition studies. He wants us to understand the different versions of Islam as distinct, and the different public spheres created in Urdu print as separate publics. Zaidi uses the term Muslim to index all of these different versions of Muslim community, even while arguing that only "a few" of the Muslims, those who were aligned with the Aligarh school, desired unity of Muslims or sought to establish a universal Muslim community (20). As a corrective to approaches that emphasise the unity of the category of Muslim in the late colonial period, Zaidi's book is successful. However, the book is less convincing in its argument that there "was little sense of a 'collectivity' in the sense of a community, nation or identity" in the late colonial period (23). Gestures toward unity and collectivity can surely co-exist with vigorous disagreement and dramatic fragmentation; indeed, the vigor of the debate and the emotional force of disagreement indicates the new importance surrounding Muslim belonging in the late nineteenth century. The works of several scholars working on the history of Reformist movements, such as Barbara Metcalf, Usha

Sanyal, and SherAli Tareen, have illustrated debates and fissures among Muslims in the nineteenth century. Margrit Pernau has argued that Islam was polycentric in this period. All of these scholars also depend heavily on Urdu source material, which Zaidi also does to great effect. Zaidi's book, rather than being entirely innovative in its demonstration of the contestations at play among Muslims in the nineteenth century (as he argues in his introduction and throughout the book), joins an established scholarly conversation about the importance of attending to the heterogeneity of Islam. His book is a welcome addition to these conversations. Zaidi also writes that "[in] north India, print, along with other technologies of modernity, tore communities asunder rather than bringing them together" (124). Ultimately, the evidence Zaidi marshals in support of this latter assertion is not convincing. Rather, it becomes clear through the evidence that he provides that print *could* tear communities asunder.

It could *also* bring them together when insiders used print to emphasize their distinctiveness from other groups. It is important to challenge attitudes that see print as only a unifying phenomenon, as Zaidi does in his book. However, it is not correct to argue that print was only a fragmenting force, either. In fact, Zaidi acknowledges that print did have an impact in making debates about Muslim identity more "systematic" (page 18). This systemisation helped establish shared categories of debate like *muqallid* and *ghair muqallid*. This emergence of shared categories helped trace lines around modern Muslim identity that circumscribed everyday matters of ritual and laid the groundwork for grander narratives of community identity later on.

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