

Book Review

Khan, Arsalan. *The Promise of Piety: Islam and the Politics of Moral Order in Pakistan*. 223pp. Cornell University Press 2024

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Arsalan Khan's *The Promise of Piety: Islam and the Politics of Moral Order in Pakistan* is an erudite ethnography of the Tablighi Jamaat, an important Islamic movement with roots in colonial South Asia. The Jamaat was an outcome of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century debates about Islamic reform (*islah*) and renewal (*tajdid*). In the 1920's, Maulana Muhammad Ilyas, a graduate of the influential Dar-ul-Uloom Deoband in colonial North India, started the movement to inculcate among the masses a more certain sense of being Muslim, especially among communities he thought were disconnected from authentic Islamic practices. Ilyas commissioned a series of writings about the message, ethics and rituals of Islam that could be read among ordinary people, and to that end encouraged his followers to undertake in-person, face-to-face preaching and invitation (*dawat*) as an embodied and originary Islamic practice. (32-33) Ever since, Tablighis have routinely embarked on dawat in small and large groups of volunteers journeying across cities, towns and villages. The movement now stands among the largest Islamic grassroots movements with a global membership extending beyond South Asia including in Africa, Europe and North America.

In closely examining the practice and stakes of dawat, *The Promise of Piety* intervenes to dispel lazy stereotypes about the Tablighi Jamaat, which has been labelled variously as an apolitical, parochial movement at one end, or a pathway to the so-called ladder of Islamic fundamentalism at the other. Khan's ethnographic

insights offer readers a thoughtful understanding of how everyday striving for piety might not only enable profound ethical transformation of individuals, but also the promise of broader social and political change for people at the margins of caste, class and national hierarchies. This compelling "anthropology in the space of cultural intimacy," whose stakes Khan elaborates in the introduction, allows him to write a critical yet empathetic account of the Tablighis. (7-12) It significantly brings forth his subjects' critiques of authorial class positions and privileged access as well as the general academic pursuits of exploring ordinary lives in service of ostensibly disinvested knowledge production. Many moving and often humorous ethnographic nuggets bring to text the stories of a diverse cast of characters from across the cities and towns of present day Pakistan. These include everyday folk, businessmen, shopkeepers, club-level cricketers, diaspora professionals, former hustlers, and locally influential elderly figures and families, among others. Many of them generously interacted with and invited the Pakistani professor employed in the United States to participate wholeheartedly in actually practising the piety that he aims to understand as an academic project. While Khan's RSVP to his intimate interlocutors' invitation ultimately remains somewhat in abeyance owing to his positionality, the narrative he crafts meticulously reveals the deep complexities of social and spiritual lives of Tablighis. Significantly, it also allows him to critically interrogate liberal anxieties about recognisable Muslim religiosities in the modern world.

In addition to an introduction and a conclusion, the book consists of seven core chapters distributed across three thematic parts.

Part One — The Modernity of Piety — consists of two chapters that survey the historical context in which the Tablighi Jamaat arose and developed across colonial and postcolonial South Asia. Together they set the stage for a deeper dive into ethnographic encounters in contemporary Pakistan.

Chapter 1 titled ‘Colonial Secularism and the Making of Scriptural Traditionalism in British India’ contextualises the early beginnings of the Jamaat under conditions of colonial rule in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. A combination of the loss of Muslim sovereignty, new governmental technologies such as the census, and the burgeoning of new religious print cultures created conditions for a general objectification of religion and rise of competitive sectarian formations. Khan specifically highlights such transformations for their “profound impact... on native conceptions of religion (*din*) as a distinct domain of activity associated with textual sources and the need to follow authoritative rulings of the past (*taqlid*).” (41) This led to a “scriptural traditionalism” which not only sought a purified form of Islam on its own, but also structured “boundary-making between religious communities.” (45) Even so the real impetus of Tablighi Jamaat was less to convert non-Muslims to Islam, but instead to appeal to those Muslims who were supposedly distant from the faith and practices of the religion in its true form, often on account of their being recent converts (*ajlaf*). (28)

Chapter 2 titled ‘Dawat as a Ritual of Transcendence in an Islamic Nation’ outlines a critical history to show how Pakistani nationalism was often legitimised by the elite among Muslims through exclusivist claims to caste-based genealogies regarded as inherently pious, access to the promises of modern education, and a connection with Urdu as the imposed national language of the new Islamic nation. This structure of legitimacy implied exclusion of people from lower castes, classes and ethnic backgrounds who were placed among inferior levels of hierarchy which ostensibly needed reform. Khan argues that for many such members at the margins of the national body, it is participation in the practice of dawat that allows them the possibility of transcending social and political marginalisation. Dawat provides “the ritual means

for self-reform (*islah*) and self-transformation... to people who are otherwise defined as low by virtue of caste and class and thus objects of reform in the national hierarchy... (and thus) obviates and even inverts the hierarchical structure of the Islamic nation of Pakistan.” (57) Thus, in bypassing hierarchies forged by the privileged national elite, dawat as a “sensational form” allows Tablighis to forge their own direct relationship with God as well as an intimate connection to the originary generative moment of Islam. (67-69)

Part Two — The Semiotics of Piety — also consists of two chapters that dive deeper to examine the value of sacred hierarchies and their underlying ethics to the lives of Tablighi gatherings.

Chapter 3 titled ‘Islamic Iconicity, Moral Responsibility, and the Creation of a Sacred Hierarchy’ shows how Tablighi Jamaat congregations and networks are predicated upon gendered hierarchies centered in the public space of the mosque. These nevertheless demand sustained moral and material commitments from members who seek to cultivate faith through persistent striving and practice over a period of time. The arenas of dawat both inside and beyond the mosque involve a reversal of gender roles as male Tablighis engage in service (*khidmat*) with the aim of inculcating attributes such as softness and care, otherwise associated with femininity and the domestic space. (84-85) Khan also notes how practices associated with dawat turn a sought resemblance with the Prophetic example into a contiguity. These to a significant degree entail a moral responsibility on account of their public revelation. (94-95) As such, the practice and performance of piety become intersubjective achievements potentially transforming both the Tablighis and their audiences by sacralising their public declarations of intent.

The following Chapter 4, ‘The Ethics of Hierarchy and the Moral Reproduction of Congregational Life,’ further delves into the ethics of hierarchy and their significant role in the perpetuation of congregational life. Khan frames the underlying ethics of Tablighi Jamaat as being relational, involving pious listening to more experienced elders, discursive acts of reference and citation and valuing the gaze and company (*sohbat*) of pious ulema, as mechanisms of discipline to overcome “the problem of talk.” (102-110) Such a framework especially illuminates a path towards a “slow cultivation” of piety and virtue.

Thus, on the one hand, this relational hierarchy works as a structure in which a member accepts the authority of elders. On the other, it provides a temporal frame wherein the achievement of authority for recent members is projected into the future. Together, the structure and the temporal frame not only help keep the congregation together but also ensure a “faithful replication of tradition” by protecting against potential hubris and temptations that a pious oral discourse might otherwise create through new practices beyond the originary intent. (106)

The book’s final three chapters, which together make up Part Three — The Promise of Piety — effectively engage with what are arguably the most significant interventions of the book in thinking through the dialectic between faith and doubt, the limits of individual agency and potential antidotes to religious violence from within the parameters of Islamic thought.

In Chapter 5, titled ‘Certain Faith, the Pious Home, and the Path to an Islamic Future,’ Khan builds upon his earlier arguments to show how faith also demands a struggle to navigate through doubt and anxiety, especially for those without the cushion of a ‘pious home’ environment. In addition to the hierarchical structure that moves from mosque to home and subsumes the latter’s paternal authority, the problem of radical doubt is especially managed by recognising the limits of an individual’s pious agency which is only thought to be attained in a certain yet indeterminate future. (131-132) Nurturing a pious home is especially significant to Tablighis as the potential dissolution of the family threatens broader moral chaos (*fitna*) in society. To that end, the ethics of hierarchy and dawat maintain the integrity of family alongside the wider Islamic community. (134) In fact, when the occasion demands, piety is fortified through personal and emotional sacrifices such as leaving behind past relations and friendships which are then replaced by the Jamaat as the primary social network. Other steps could involve self-control and disciplining of language and unruly male agency. (140-142) The path towards an Islamic future is therefore opened by creating a space in which being religious (*dindaar*) becomes easy, even as it demands committed, voluntary labor. (147) Nevertheless, the pious agency retains its limitations, and in the end can only be achieved through God’s will to transform the striving subjects. (151)

Chapter 6 titled ‘Pious Sovereignty in Times of Moral

Chaos’ further explores the question of individual agency and its limitations through Tablighi critiques of the politics of Islamisation. While Tablighis agree with Islamists about the need to return to true sources of religion, they only see value in doing so under the guidance of pious elders as opposed what they label as unguided, individual reason. Thus, they differentiate their commitment to a proper practice of dawat from ‘politiks’ and oppose “Islamisation of public life through the modernist institutions of the state and corporations.” Khan notes that Islamisation in Pakistan has “created intense competition over Islamic authority, which in turn has created a pervasive sense that it has become emptied of ethical substance.” In contrast, the Tablighis “aim to imbue Islamic authority with a moral force that they believe can transcend the political fragmentation and violence that characterises life in postcolonial Pakistan.” (155) Tablighis conceptualise the Islamists’ will to transform society and politics as an error that denotes a “lack of faith in God’s power and the false belief in one’s own agency” and this is often so on account of “hubris (*takkabur*)” which is “not only ineffective but also dangerous.” (157) In their view, somewhat like the newly inducted members of the Jamaat, Islamism’s “undisciplined subjects” can lead to moral chaos by indulging in unfettered talk. (162) Khan argues that it is “the logic of the pure gift... (that) anchors the Tablighi understanding of pious authority as distinct from invocations of Islam in statist and market variants of Islam that permeate Pakistani life.” (168) In a context where Islamic authority is often seen critically as emptied of ethical substance on account of state-driven Islamisation since the 1970’s and the consequent rise of corporations, banks, televangelists and NGOs, the popularity of dawat as pure sacrifice for God is posited by Tablighis as a solution to a crisis of political fragmentation. (170)

The final Chapter 7 titled ‘The Ethical Affordances of Piety and the Specter of Religious Violence’ delineates how the pietist inflection of the Tablighi Jamaat might provide meaningful possibilities of Islamic thought itself tackling contentious issues such as blasphemy and the associated reactionary violence. This is especially so in the Pakistani context where blasphemy laws are weaponised against minorities and their abolition altogether may not be politically feasible. (174) Blasphemy laws do not allow repetition “in a court of law (which) makes it impossible to determine what specifically was said and the context of its utterance.” (174) The chapter contextualises the origins of

blasphemy laws in colonial reordering in South Asia wherein “law as a technique of governance that has a constitutive role in generating “religious violence” away from the reductive and commonly held notion that blasphemy politics is simply an extension of the Islamic tradition.” (175-176) Khan argues that the force of law in such a context is driven not by the disruption of a living relationship with God but on account of moral panic more explicitly related to the defence of nationhood. (174-175) As such, the Tablighis do not take up blasphemy politics with the same alacrity as other Islamic movements have done.

While the Tablighis acknowledge the proliferation of blasphemous materials, they see the widespread moral outrage in response as a sign of Muslims losing “control of their passions” wherein state laws are taken as sacred objects. Khan thus brings attention to the potentials of Islamic piety “as seen by so many Muslims as a basis of addressing the crisis of religious violence in postcolonial Pakistan.” This is particularly revealing as it highlights the limits of “liberal and secular framings of religious violence that are predicated on a division between private and public that collapses the diverse construction of religion into a single monolith, eliding the ethical affordances of religion in public life.” (177) The Tablighi critique articulates a wide gap “between the current instantiation of the Islamic state and specifically Islamic law and the future ideal that came to be the focus of ethical reflection.” (180) The idea of a moral community that has not yet come to pass allows a space for the reformulation of law which is not considered divine and can be changed according to the needs of the time and the wisdom of Islamic elders. Therefore, while Tablighi thought “retains the position that blasphemy is a moral injury and a threat to the Islamic community... (it) is recognised as an effect of the hardening of hearts and the growing sectarianism of public life... (the) goal is not to punish here and now but to work for a future where no acts of blasphemy occur.” (180) Tablighis thus aim to move towards that future through what they see as the need to soften the hearts and deescalate. (179)

Even so, Khan notes instances where, despite Tablighi critiques of the perils of politics, their work is seemingly enabled by the state as it seeks to draw upon the legitimacy bestowed by the discourse of piety. This is done, for example, by the Pakistani state’s employment of the conception

of a transcendent Islamic unity to discourage “participation in ethno-nationalist movements demanding ethnic autonomy and political rights” in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa provinces. (187) Moreover, a concerted focus on piety and individual transformation also makes Tablighis silent on questions of economic inequality and structural capitalist exploitation. Thus, the Tablighis arguably seem to pursue a version of a “moral neoliberalism” that seeks to manage and make domestic, political, and economic hierarchies more habitable rather than radically transform them. (187-188)

Finally, in his conclusion titled, ‘The Politics of Sovereign Transcendence in Modernity,’ Khan articulates his departure from other anthropological works on Islamic piety movements in interrogating the “tensions over the meaning and form of Islam” in contrast to the “tensions between the Islamic tradition and liberal secularism.” (193) In that vein, he argues that while the Tablighi differentiation between piety and politics does not entail a “commitment to secularism as such, but it does produce a certain acceptance or accommodation of secular governance” as part of the concern to reformulate Islam beyond modernist conceptions “pursued by liberals or Islamists.” (194) Noting instances of Islamic movements drawing upon “the affordances of secularism to secure religious rights and authority and lay claim to alternative forms of life and visions of moral order,” Khan calls for the recognition of “secularism as a capacious formation in which many different political and ethical stances can arise and a contested political terrain on which all manner of social and political actors, including traditionalist Muslims, lay claim.” (194-195) This is an important reminder. Nonetheless, in the same way that Khan seeks to understand the life-worlds of Tablighis on their own terms through ethnographic encounters in an intimate cultural space, it would be worthwhile to engage with and think through the intellectual archive of Islamic movements, pietist or otherwise, for their longstanding suspicion of naming secularism as a category to draw upon. This is especially because, as Khan notes, their visions of a moral order are also hegemonic and universalistic projects that lay claim to the very sovereign transcendence of modernity. (197-198) That however might be another book in further conversation with Khan’s excellent interventions.