

Book Review

Jaffer, Amen. *The Social Life of Islam: Sufi Shrines in Urban Pakistan*. 333pp. Cambridge University Press 2025.

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How is an archipelago of shrines interwoven into a city's urban form? What affinities, affordances, and tensions do these networks bring to existing ethics of devotion and welfare? In this vivid and evocative account of Muslim mausolea in urban Lahore, Amen Jaffer engages questions like these through the study of devotional communities and modes of relating to deceased saints. The resulting text, *The Social Life of Islam*, is an empathetic account that is undoubtedly the result of sustained empirical research. We learn this from the dazzling array of compelling examples the author uses to elucidate his argument. The lucid prose is gloriously readable, particularly when engaging the "seamless switching between different affective moods" (15) that characterises shrine sociality. For his interlocutors, reading the mood of a shrine is as important as proper etiquette, and Jaffer demonstrates a real flair for evoking how both he and his interlocutors code-switch between concentrated reverence and playful irreverence.

Its four chapters focus on peripheral and marginalised shrines, rather than on the luminaries of Lahore's devotional landscape. In the first chapter, the action is situated in Lahore's sprawling Miani Sahib graveyard, in a shrine under the remit of a powerful family. This absentee patron delegates authority to a caretaker malang, a non-conforming, ascetic devotee. Through this displacement of authority, Jaffer engages the power politics within shrines and challenges a view of malangs as world-renouncers. Here, they are imbricated in a shrine's politics and social world. In another smart turn, we learn that Miani Sahib graveyard is a space of socialising and public leisure. Like shrines themselves, rather than solely an abode of the dead, the graveyard is a place of vitality and conviviality. Having established the constellation of forces that make up the shrine-as-institution, Jaffer then compares its networks of care to existing welfare institutions for those seeking mental health support in Lahore (74). Perceiving the shrine

as an alternative care network also allows Jaffer to consider how shrines accommodate and support rural-to-urban migrants, for whom relations are critical for surviving and navigating the labyrinthine, bureaucratic city.

In the second chapter, Jaffer studies neighbourhood shrines, and a type of community association known as a sangat that, in this case aims to mitigate the costs and challenges of pilgrimages to distant parts of Pakistan. Jaffer's focus on sangat organisation turns the conversation towards the social salience of food donation, communal preparation, and shared consumption; the difficult issue of profit in relation to religious organisation and exchange; and the varied kinds of professional expertise that organisers draw upon. An excellent micro-narrative tells us about an interlocutor leveraging their previous experience in the land-grabbing construction and informal economy to support the maintenance of a shrine.

Chapter three considers the intersections between shrine sociality and public leisure. An excellent opening vignette takes the reader into the dhamal – a devotional dance – and its aesthetic and affective entanglement with Lahore's Lollywood film industry. In one of the many smart ethnographic turns this book makes, Jaffer tells us that while dhamal may seem like pure release, it has norms and unwritten rules of comportment. In a particularly compelling section, Jaffer narrates the gradual arrival of "a new form of religious expression" (140–143) in the growth of the Shaam-e-Qalandar musical gatherings. The fascinating genealogy of the arrival of this regular gathering locates its origin in Lahore film studios. One of the elements of Lollywood film culture that always captivated me during my own research was the abeyance on studio production and film exhibition during the mourning period surrounding the Islamic month of Muharram. Jaffer's insights into the industry's patronage of celebratory modes

of devotion, brought home with even greater force for me the diverse ways in which Lahori ethical life and its Lollywood heritage have existed in productive friction.

In chapter four, Jaffer considers what dispossessed and minoritised groups – like the semi-nomadic pakhi waas and gender non-conforming khawaja sira communities – bring to shrine sociality. We learn that in rituals around certain shrines, khawaja sira – usually castigated – are placed at the top of the ritual hierarchy. This chapter does subtle but important analytical work. Usually seen as passive recipients of shrine care, Jaffer shows us how these groups are active contributors and generators of devotional conviviality. In turn, a repertoire of self-cultivation and self-denial in shrine sociality provide a deep resource that nourishes contemporary gender, class and caste non-conformity.

Throughout, the body of literature engaged concerns the interdisciplinary study of Pakistan, a welcome and concentrated trajectory. One wondered at times what the author felt their rich empirical insights could contribute to wider conversations in the interdisciplinary and social study of religion. I also wondered if using the category of Sufi to describe the object of study might be too capacious a term to reflect the diversity of its content. The introduction did a great job of acknowledging the wider theological stakes through discussion on messianic time and Shi'i temporality, but the category of the Sufic went largely uninterrogated. While Jaffer paints a vivid picture of the diversity of ways to interface with saints in Lahore, the hagiography of saints remained largely absent. The lack of information about the lives of these beloved figures, paired with their bundling under the category of the Sufic, might lead those reading Jaffer's insights and transducing them to other luminaries of Lahore's shrine landscape to wonder how the violently dispossessed, like Ruqayya bint Ali of Bibi Pak Daman, missionary scholars like Data Sahib, and murderers like Ilm-ud-Din can coexist under the same analytical rubric. While admittedly no better alternative seems readily at hand, complicating the salience of the Sufic would have acknowledged some of these tensions. Some attention to pre-Partition Pakistan, and a sense of how these shrines might have been used in a more multi-religious environment, would also have served to widen the frame of the Sufic beyond its contemporary form in an intra-Islamic city.

While there is much that scholars across the humanities and social sciences will find rewarding about this text, this reviewer was most interested in Jaffer's analytical contribution to the study of time and morality in Lahori devotion. In "the mixing of temporal orders" (17) in shrine life, Jaffer acknowledges a "popular conception of time... [in] the belief in the eternity of the saints." (23). In an excellent explanation – characteristic of this book's flair

for grounding complex issues in empirical examples – the author cites the belief that a saint was co-present with the arrival of the railways, even though he had died a century before. We also learn about the omnipresence of clocks in shrines, that acknowledge the mixing of historical, modern, and timeless saint time. This mixture of timelessness, transhistorical presence and capitalist clock-time assert a saint's continued imbrication in the affairs of a city, amid urban development and infrastructural changes, even if they are not perceived as contemporary with them in the chronology of linear time.

In ways closely related to this pacing and elongation of time, Jaffer examines the register of "passing things by" (19–20), in which moralising is given a backseat to the suspension of judgement, and conversational "drifting" (21) is prioritised. The author adroitly contextualises this in the notion of phaticity, as a form of communication that is comparatively empty of content compared to how full it is with moral and relational importance. Phatic communication is infrastructural in the sense that it tests the surface tension of values as they manifest in everyday speech. "Passing things by" could also be phrased, with reference to the author's interest in concepts from early anthropology, as a matter of threshold, in this case letting things remain on a threshold in shrine sociality in order to preserve what Laura Ring called the "nonresolution of tension".

While other works may come along and tell situated stories about particular shrines, and unravel discrete aspects of devotional life, it is hard to imagine reading a more holistic, engaged and empathetic account of Muslim shrines in urban Pakistan. As a deeply evocative empirical study and classroom text for the interdisciplinary study of South Asia, urban form and Muslim devotion, Jaffer's *The Social Life of Islam* is a real gift to the field.