

Book Review

Islam in Pakistan: A History by Muhammad Qasim Zaman,
Princeton University Press, 2018

Discursive strands evolve in a complex traditional structure, shaping and modifying the meaning of normativity itself. However, this evolution does not necessarily require a linear continuation, as Talal Asad observes in *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam* (1986), but instead an exhilarating tradition is shaped, altered, and adapted to the mounting unavoidable forces of the present, with relations to the past and future. Like the tradition itself, the process of change and adaptation is also too complex to understand. A scholar studying a religious or cultural tradition finds a variety in its discursiveness; some approaches are conservative or radical in their dealing with the past, present, and future, while others progressive. Furthermore, due to their not operating in a watertight compartment, these approaches at times overlap. Engaging in a conversation with the Islamic or Muslim traditions this way in an age of change, i.e. colonialism and post-colonialism, is a well-entertained exercise in modern scholarship, and the works of Muhammad Qasim Zaman published during the last two decades have been illustrative in this regard.

Zaman's explorations in the religio-political history of Muslims in modern South Asia are expansive and ingenious in their conclusions. His recent publication *Islam in Pakistan: A History* can be considered a sequel to a series of his previous publications. The book's name seems deceptive if the word 'history' in its title is understood in its crudest sense. However, as the opening of the book clarifies, it is a history of how Islam along with its different traditions and understandings came into being in Pakistan. Zaman draws a sharp line between pre-colonial and colonial as the distinctive periods signifying the two different understandings of Islam: classical and modern, and it is the modern understanding of Islam that developed in the colonial period that made its way into the newly-established state of Pakistan. He argues, "All the key facets of modern Islam worldwide were well represented in colonial India and they have continued to be so in Pakistan: Sufism; traditionalist scholars, the *úlama*, and their institutions of learning, the madrasas; Islamism; and Islamic modernism." (1) He asserts that these facets formulated and developed into well-articulated forms in the colonial period. In fact, this period facilitated a number of contributing factors to this development that Zaman does not highlight. However, other recent researches on South

Asian Islam, such as Nile Green's *Bombay Islam: The Religious Economy of the West Asian Ocean, 1840-1915* (2011), and *Islamic Reform and Revival in Nineteenth-century India: The Tariqah-i Muhammadiyah* (2008) by Harlan O. Pearson, etc., which also complements Zaman's work, discusses the dynamics of the changing Islamic landscape in the nineteenth century accelerated by the introduction of steam ships, steam engines, print, telegram, and polemics with missionaries and orientalist together with the modern education and religious freedom becomes discernible.

The book is thematically divided into seven chapters, each devoted to discussion of the 'key facts of Islam' and their relation to the knowledge-power complex in pre-partitioned India and Pakistan. Zaman begins with a cursory sketch of the religious discourses that started in the early colonial India on tradition, politics, and education. These discourses cleft into ideological, and subsequently developed into sectarian, groups. This development is perhaps not a new thing for a reader interested in the subject under discussion. Zaman, however, ingeniously succeeds in giving a fascinating account of contestations among the various groups of Muslims. For example, the Deobandīs, Barelwīs, and Ahl-I Hadith, on the one hand, contested in their approach (i.e. devotional, literalist, orthodox) to interpret tradition and the foundational texts of Islam, and on the other, the modernists (being the advocate of the adjustment of Islam within the modern conditions) insisted to bypass the authority of the traditionalist ūlama. Islamists, for their part, emerged out of the question of what would be the political status of Islam and Muslims in an absolute shifted world order. Going through the developmental process, each group underwent a painful experience of rejection, alteration and adaptation of what they inherited and what they were going to bequeath. Zaman translates this seemingly chaotic situation into a pleasant phrase 'Islamic mosaic.'

As Pakistan was created in the name of Islam, in the presence of multiple interpretations of Islam, it proved a herculean task for the new state to be anchored to a determined and specific basis of Islam. The modernists, like Fazlur Rahman and Ghulam Ahmad Parwez, who occupy the central position in Zaman's account, proved to be an important asset for the government. Sponsored by the state, the modernists set out to provide new interpretations of governance, personal laws, etc., in the light of the 'spirit' of Islam as opposed to 'traditionalist' Islam but were vehemently castigated and repudiated by traditionalist ūlama. Zaman's representation of the state shows it trapped into a triangle of

modernists, traditionalists, and Islamists. Anxious to control and direct the religious activities in the country, the state at times is forced to concede to the demands of traditionalists. There are many instances provided in the book of Pakistani political leaders who were required to prove their religious credentials in order to maintain their power and earn popular confidence.

Conventionally, traditionalists are seen in conflict with modernists, as is evident in this book as well. Zaman, however, deals with this contrast differently. He rejects the modernist rendition of tradition as something opposed to change. Rather, he argues, “traditionalist scholars could be flexible and pragmatic in accommodating themselves to new circumstances; to the extent that their critics have recognized this, they have attributed it to their opportunism.”(9) To substantiate his argument, he provides, for example, an account of Ashraf Ālī Thānwī (d.1943), an eminent Deobandī scholar, who responded to the Muslim marriage crisis in the late colonial India by publishing *The Consummate Stratagem for the Helpless Wife* in 1933. In this book, Thanwī, being an adherent to the Hanafī school of jurisprudence, made use of a Malikī interpretation that was considered more practical at the time, at the expense of an already-available and established Hanafī interpretation (40), thus, exhibiting a potential to change during demanding times. Though the flexibility in ūlama’s approaches is commendable, their commitment to the tradition, and sometimes in a very literal sense, put a check on their flexibility. The instances that Zaman has referred to, as the account of Thanwī’s *The Consummate*, are either not new to the tradition of ūlama or, as is obvious in the case of governance and state politics regarding Islam, ungirded intellectually by tradition itself.

As Zaman traces the genealogy of current modernist and traditionalist discourses in Islam to the colonial period, he argues in the same vein that Islamist discourse on the sovereignty of God is a modern construct as well. Medieval, and even modern, exegetes of the Quran interpreted the authority and power of God that the Quran speaks about as “the source of everything and, by that token, of political power as well.” (138) Mawdūdī, the most prominent ideologue of Islamism, adapted the idea from western political thought, and it was further developed by Sayyid Qutub (1966). This idea also found its way to the discourses of ūlama and modernists, though with different implications. Unlike the modernists and traditionalists, Islamists could not get along well in practice.

Before the emergence of the ‘key facets’ of modern Islam, Sufism was the dominant Islamic narrative in the subcontinent. Having become aware of the biting criticism from

modernist, literalist, and orthodox factions, it appears natural to ask such questions: what happened to Sufism? In what forms has it survived? What was the nature of criticism and reforms as well? He points out that modernists such as Muhammad Iqbal and Fazlur Rahman rejected Sufism due to its philosophy of otherworldliness and renunciation. Ghulam Ahmad Parwez's (d. 1985) sharp criticism is worth noting to understand the modernist resentments against Sufism. Zaman quotes Parwez, "Religion causes the blood of life to run through the dead arteries of nations. *Tasawwuf*", (standard Arabic and Urdu word for Sufism), "causes that blood to freeze the living arteries. Religion is the spark that burns every false system down to ashes. *Tasawwuf* dampens the warmth of life to put nations to the sleep of death." (197) Islamists denounce Sufism along the same lines. Nevertheless, Zaman maintains that Muslim modernists' discourse of the 'spirit' of Islam has much in common with the Sufis' ethical values. A reformed version of Sufism survived in the Deobandī tradition. Since Barelvis emerged as the defenders of devotional and Sufi Islam, they retained most of its pre-colonial practices. Contemporary Sufism (both in Deobandī and Barelvi traditions) is different from the classical one in terms of its commitment to foundational and legal texts.

Zaman's book is a comprehensive survey of Islam with its dynamic functionalities in the lives of Muslims vis-à-vis politics in Pakistan. The new state provided a fertile soil to Islam in order to flourish in different robust forms. Unlike Pakistan, the history of Islam in India is not so vibrant. If a comparison is drawn between Pakistan and India, where Islam undertook different historical paths, the results would strikingly be different. However, to fully make this case and understand its implications, another research project is needed with the same density and analysis. Muhammad Qasim Zaman's *Islam in Pakistan* is undoubtedly an important contribution to the understanding of the history of Islam in Pakistan, and it widens the scope of research on the multiple facets of Islam in South Asia.

Reviewd by **Mohammad Ali**, Ph.D research scholar, Department of Islamic Studies, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi. **Email:** mohammad91.ali@gmail.com
