Sammelrez: Quest for Power. Recent Literature on Islam and State in Pakistan

bin Ibad, Umber: *Sufi Shrines and the Pakistani State. The Making of an Islamic Identity*. London: I.B. Tauris 2018. ISBN: 9781788311816; 264 S.

Fuchs, Simon Wolfgang: *In a Pure Muslim Land. Shi'ism between Pakistan and the Middle East*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press 2019. ISBN: 978-1-4696-4979-5; 376 S.

Haq, Farhat: *Sharia and the State in Pakistan. Blasphemy Politics*. Oxon: Routledge 2019. ISBN: 9780367150655; 192 S.

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The three books under review engage with the idea of a modern state as a major catalyst that shaped the contours of modern Islamic thought, and more broadly, approaches towards what constitutes religion. The authors view the state as a constellation of power aiming at homogenizing notions of belonging under the coercion of law and establishing an undisputed arbiter of claims to interpretative logics about tradition, culture and religion. Such notions about power and state authority in South Asian Islam were, in turn, shaped by a textualization of religious authority resulting from a print culture, the extent of its wide readership and the complex ways in which these influences have been constitutive of *ulema*'s power and, in return, shaped by it as well.

Ever since the publication of Francis Robinson's seminal piece on the impact of print revolution in shaping modern sensibilities, there has been a flourishing of research projects gauging the impact of colonial modernity and its institutional, epistemic and power apparatuses in the formations of a perceived binary between the secular and the sacred.[1] According to Robinson, the printing press enabled proliferation of religious literature. Scriptural texts and authoritative sources of religious guidance that were previously available to a select few, were now mass produced and reached every corner of India. For Robin-son this brought about religious democratization as believers could have a direct access to scripture and „any Ahmad, Mahmud or Muhammad [. . .] could make what they will of them." (p. 245)[2] Contrary to what Robinson had estimated, Muhammad Qasim Zaman argued that the *ulema* adopted multiple discursive strategies to ensure their own interpretative agency and role as guides for the average believer.[3] Through different texts – for instance Arabic commentaries for a specialized audience and introductory tracts for a general believer – the *ulema* were not only able to reach out to a much wider audience, they were also able to speak to these different audiences in varied idioms. The transformations brought about by print are central concerns of the books under review. They engage with questions of religious authority, community formation and centralization of (state-)power.

The imperative towards centralized power and textualization of tradition was actualized in multiple forms. As Farhat Haq has argued in her book on the politics of blasphemy in Pakistan, Ottoman Turkey's codification of Islamic law was one prominent example. Such a precedent, however, did not exist in the case of colonized parts of the Muslim world, especially British India, where the colonial state lacked moral legitimacy to enforce conformity with a singular strand of interpretation. This kind of centralization, in any case, was in violation of the spirit of Islamic *shariat*. Drawing upon Wael Hallaq's important argument about the impossibility of an Islamic state[4], Haq points out the moral practice embedded within the logic of *shariat*. In the classical understanding, *shariat* is a striving towards the unpacking of Divine guidance embodied in scriptural texts that can possibly have multiple readings in different ages. Modern imper-

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[1] Francis Robinson, Technology and Religious Change. Islam and the Impact of Print, in: Modern Asian Studies 27/1 (1993), pp. 229–251.

[2] The same could be said about more recent development of „cyber Islam" which offers easy accessibility to a range of questions that are of relevance for a believer in the modern age.

[3] Muhammad Qasim Zaman, Commentaries, Print and Patronage. „Hadith" and the Madrasas, in: Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies 62/1 (1999), pp. 60–81.

[4] Wael Hallaq, The Impossible State, New York 2014.

atives of state and law, as we especially see in the postcolonial context discussed in the reviewed books, increasingly reduced *shariat* to a defined set of legally deducible articles of criminal and civil law with universal applicability, which undermined the ethical-moral code of its operational praxis as it existed in the pre-modern period.

Foregrounding the impact of modernity and imperative of state power, I read the recent interventions of Umber bin Ibad, Simon W. Fuchs and Farhat Haq as key contributions in the history of state management of Islam in South Asia – particularly Pakistan – and the varied types of conversations and contestations that it has generated. Ibad's focus is on the transformation of the shrine as a scared space from the late nineteenth century onward. Shrines were largely conceived as a pluralistic space which allowed for invocation of the Divine in multiple forms, diverse ritual practices and fluidity of religious identities and boundaries. They were transformed, initially under reformist currents of Islamic thought, and later also by the postcolonial state that sought to enforce a rationalized version of Islam for the purposes of state making and nation building. In Pakistan, Ibad's scholarship suggests, both these currents „converged on a singular conception of Islam" which required disconnecting Islam from the customary practices and connecting it with non-pluralistic Islamic teachings and symbolic ethos – a process that he refers to as reterritorialization (p. 24). This reterritorialization was embedded in the idea of Pakistan itself that pretended a universalization of the notion of *ummah* as an abstract category as opposed to, what Ibad calls, „a soil based ideological identity" (p. 39).

Such an ideational basis, Ibad argues, was inherently exclusionary at two levels: politically, it allowed for exclusion of religious minorities, such as Ahmadis as the Other that became the object of the state's sanctioning of what ought to be Islamic; spiritually, it sought to „cleanse" the shrines of what were perceived as un-Islamic practices. In both these manifestations, it was state power that sought to instrumentalize Islam in the name of purification of belief and sanitization of praxis to enhance the scope of its authority. The

best example of these processes, that are the main focus of Ibad's study, is to be found in the working of the Auqaf department.[5] Although *waqfs* or endowments had existed since the colonial period, the institutionalized state control of selected shrines and mosques was enforced by General Ayub Khan when he set up the Auqaf department in 1961. This was part of his modernist vision for Pakistan whereby Islam could be used as an agent of change and making of an ideal, de-ethnicized citizen.

As Ibad shows, there are multiple examples to be found in Pakistan's history of the state repurposing shrine spaces. Ghafir Shehzad, an architect and a historian who has worked for the Auqaf department since the 1990s, has given details of policies adopted by the Auqaf department to implement a specific vision associated with shrines. During the Bhutto period, writes Shehzad, the idea was to transform shrines into cultural arenas where theatre and music could be performed as well.[6] With the advent of Zia, the vision changed altogether. One good example is the shrine of Madho-Lal Husain. Home to Lahore's famous poet, Shah Husain, and his young, Hindu devotee, Madho, the shrine has historically been a major attraction and the site for Lahore's most popular festival, *mela chiraghan* – the festival of lights. Under the renovations carried out by the Auqaf, the shrine's premises gained a huge mosque – bigger than the old structure of the shrine itself – which subsumes the shrine within a different kind of genealogy altogether. Unlike the shrine that historically allowed for diverse range of ritual practices and drew crowds from different religious backgrounds – and sexualities – the mosque is, by its very definition and constitution, sectarian. It is specific to Muslims and requires strict ritual performances. Similar structural transformations have taken place in all major shrines across Pakistan. That despite such interventions, shrines continue to

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[5] The Auqaf department manages historical shrines and mosques that have been „nationalized" by the Pakistani state. It regulates their finances by overseeing collection of donations on daily basis and leasing out lands and shops attached with these sites as part of an endowment.

[6] Ghafir Shehzad, Punjab mai Khanqahi Culture, Lahore 2009.

remain outside of strict state control or hold on to practices that are deemed un-Islamic, is a different story. One major shortcoming of Ibad's work is that he does not tell these stories. An additional chapter on practices that continue to flourish despite state's intervention would have complicated our understanding of processes whereby the postcolonial state tries to appropriate religious authority in the name of rationality and reform. This would also have brought to view the resistance it encounters from believers and devotees in their everyday interaction with shrine spaces.

Regardless of the extent of state power's success in transforming shrines, the major development, according to Ibad, has been in the legal basis of shrines and its custodianships. Ibad cites several court cases whereby judges have defined *waqf* property in the light of private property, but, at the same time, equated „public" with the state. This undermined the concept of shrine as a community space with the claims of local neighborhoods to its utilization and modeling. In other words, the postcolonial state „stretched universal Muslim ideology to such a point that no difference of locality is recognized." (p. 98) According to Ibad, this is a step that goes beyond the colonial era legalization of mosques and shrines whereby the former embodied a universalized notion of Islamic solidarity – thus necessitating access to premises despite differences in ritual performances – while the latter were left to local communities. Such an idea of the local community, says Ibad, cannot exist in a postcolonial state like Pakistan with its pretense to universalized Islamic citizenry.

If shrine-based practices were at the margins of a universalized ideal of homogeneity in Muslim belief aspired to by the state, the question of Shia identity posed an even bigger threat to such a conceptualization. To gain analytical depth into larger themes of community formation, impacts of modernity and changing notions of religious authority – especially in the postcolonial context discussed in this article – it is important to see how these processes were played out in case of Shia Islam. With his jaw-dropping erudition, Simon Wolfgang Fuchs, working with Arabic, Persian and Urdu sources, charts an intellectual biography of Shia religious identity formation during the colonial period, its subsequent developments in the postcolonial context of living under a Sunni majoritarian state and the influence of the Iranian revolution on intra-Shia discourses and sectarian interactions since the 1980s. Although the intellectual range of Fuchs' work is broad, it is through the prism of religious discourses that he looks at the processes of Shia identity formation during the British period and beyond. In particular, it is the wider, cross-regional connections of *madrassahs*, circulation of ideas and contestations of religious authority that is the focus of Fuchs' work.

As in the case of Sunni reformist thought, Fuchs' study shows that the notion of textual authority and claims to its interpretation have been at the heart of Shia discourses as well. He talks about the All India Shia Conference where „modernist Shiites" attempted to claim leadership of the community based on their „enlightened" outlook (chapter 1). Within the ranks of Shia *ulema* themselves, the divisions were sharp. As Fuchs tells us, the authoritative interpretation of what it meant to be Shia, how reverence for Imams was to be expressed, or the question of their divine stature was often the site of bitter contestation. The aspiration towards establishing a normative standard for belief was, therefore, as much a concern for Shiites as it was for other denominations.

In the case of Shiites, the problem was further heightened during the postcolonial period as, contrary to the earlier expectations of prominent Shiites who were at the forefront of Pakistan movement, the newly established state was, by default, Sunni/Deobandi. This gave further impetus for Shiite scholars to play an effective role as custodians of true faith and practice. They had limited resources or following to begin with. As Fuchs points out, there were only two Shia *madrassahs* in West Pakistan at the time of independence. It was rare for Shia *ulema* to get a chance to study in traditional seats of learning, such as the Iraqi city of Najaf. This became even more difficult after the Baathist revolution in 1968 and the bloodbath that followed. The earlier graduates – especially the likes of Muhammad Husain Dhakku, on whom Fuchs has de-

voted considerable energy – were confronted with a community leadership and scholars who detested his claims to authoritative readings of the scripture. For *madrassah* trained textualists like Dhakku, the cultural metaphor of Karbala and its associated practices made little sense. He discarded most of them and questioned the veracity of several events and anecdotes recounted in commemorative gatherings (*majalis*).

The Iranian revolution changed the spectrum of Shia religious discourse and politics. Thousands of Shia students from across Pakistan were now enrolled in seminaries in Iran or those set up in Pakistan with Iranian patronage. Fuchs identifies a new activist streak in Shia religious discourses – a veritable political theology of activism whereby the apolitical stance of *ulema* was shunned and they were expected to become an active political force. In this regard, Fuchs has given extensive details about the life and career of Syed Arif al-Hussaini and his brand of third-worldism.

Overall, Fuchs' work connects with and richly adds to academic debates on religious authority, community formation and state power in South Asian Islam. Fuchs, however, does not emphasize the ambivalent relationship of Pakistani Shiites towards community formation or centralized religious authority, or the fact that the imperative for homogenization can be a non-statist project as well. Community formation requires adherence to a textualized tradition, dictated by the *ulema*, at the expense of popular praxis which radically alters the cultural content of Pakistani Shiism. This has led to modes of everyday resistance at the community level as believers take exception to *ulema*'s demand for conforming ritual praxis with textual commandment. But at the same time, such a formation also provides a measure of protection against the highhandedness of a majoritarian state. The historical Shiite agitation against General Zia-ul-Haq's attempt to enforce Zakat deduction is one such example when „Shiite community" was politically mobilized to resist the imposition of Sunni Hanafi law in the country.

In that sense, not just the *ulema* but believers and devotees as well contest postcolonial state's ability to „define, contain, and deliver Islam" (Haq, p. 4). If contestations about reordering of shrine spaces is the focus of Ibad's study on statist attempts at management of religion, Farhat Haq approaches this subject through an analysis of the politics of blasphemy in Pakistan. The major conflict, as highlighted by Haq, is that both Islamists and modernists locate the state as the site for the expression of Islamic-ness and make claims to its authoritative interpretation. The shift from *ulema*'s role as gatekeepers of Islamic *shariat* and the approximation of its meaning had been seriously challenged by the process of codification of law. To elucidate this point, Haq delves deeply into the intellectual history of Muslim scholastic and theological studies, minutely observes subtle epistemic shifts of the nineteenth century and comments on the ensuing political theology in much of the modern Muslim world as a byproduct of these complex processes. For this purpose, Haq focuses on specific effects of state policies in defining what constitutes Islam through proposed „reforms" of madrassahs, regulation of Islamic calendar and adjudicating issues of injury caused to Muslim sensibilities because of blasphemy.

Although her focus is on Pakistan, in her intellectual *tour de force*, Haq casts a wider net to pick up on the history of similar developments in Indonesia, Egypt and Turkey to offer a rigorous analysis and comparative perspective. For her, the focus is on the classical contours of Islamic *fiqh* and the complexity of its thought that allowed for multiple readings of the sacred text and interpretation of its laws. Based on her understanding of classical law and its transformations during the modern period, Haq points out glaring contradictions that emerge and the nature of ethical dilemmas and legal lacunas caused by it. For instance, she refers to the case of Abu Zayd's „apostasy" in Egypt to explain „how judicializing religious disputes may produce outcomes that violate Islamic norms and modern sensibilities" (p. 121). What could possibly have been left to the domain of inner belief – and hence unknowable in case of classical Islamic *fiqh* – had become accessible because of the „objectification of Islam" that, according to Haq, „takes sacred texts out of historical contexts and uses 'past as authority' rather

than past authorities, which fundamentally transforms the practice of sharia."(p. 122)

Haq does not mention that *ulema* too have been complicit in the process of codification despite their disregard of classical notions of *shariat* as a normative ethical-moral order. They merely insist on the authorization of the process by them. It is less about a collusion with the state, and more about making claims to state power for a transformative project of society, politics and its moral code that motors the drive towards codification of law and objectification of Islam. With this addition to Haq's rigorous analytic framework and rich empirical data, it becomes possible to understand the reasons for which *ulema* came close to cooperation with the state in some areas of reform but dug in their heels in other matters. Haq refers to the modernization project carried out by General Ayub Khan under the title of „The Fundamental Conflict". Launched by a state and its political elite that was largely perceived as „westernized", the *ulema* resorted to mass demonstrations against the modernizing project. Their movement led to the ouster of Dr. Fazlur Rahman – an advisor to the Ayub regime and one of the brilliant Islamic thinkers of modern times. On the other hand, in case of blasphemy laws where there are clear indications of a mismatch between the *shariat* and the modern law, the *ulema* have vociferously upheld the law as conforming to Islamic injunctions. It was enacted, and continues to be enforced, with their approval.

This obsession with state power and the universality of law as its primary marker reduced the understanding of Islam to its legal code. As Shahab Ahmed has argued in his classical exposition, other modes of philosophical, poetic and spiritual musings about the scripture and its civilizational expanse fall outside of the preview of „religion".[7] Such an approach is reductive and does not exhaust the limits of an intellectual history of Islam and its many strands. That the logic of state power seeks homogeneity and shuns variances of practice and complexities of belief is understandable. It is the disconnect of contemporary *ulema* from classical approaches towards jurisprudence that is more surprising. As the review of three recent publications on Islam in Pakistan shows, it is the quest for state power as a tool for community formation and command authoritative guidance of believers that is largely the reason for these modern trends in Islamic theology and scholasticism. It is, in other words, not an ignorance of the classical tradition, but a pragmatic approach towards the present. The *ulema*, as Zaman had been telling us, are not stereotypically backward and traditionalists who resist change; they are simply the custodians of change!

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[7] Shahab Ahmed, What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic, Princeton 2016.