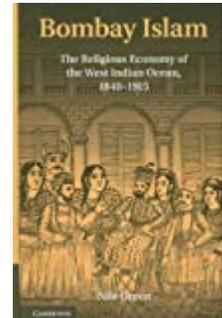


Nile Green. *Bombay Islam: The Religious Economy of the West Indian Ocean, 1840-1915.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011. xvi + 327 pp. \$90.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-521-76924-2.



Reviewed by Fahad Bishara

Published on H-Empire (September, 2011)

Commissioned by Charles V. Reed (Elizabeth City State University)

Anyone who has been to Bhindi Bazaar in South Bombay will immediately appreciate the milieu from which Nile Green's *Bombay Islam* emerges. In the world through which he takes his readers, there are no high courts, Aligarhs, or prominent barristers. Instead, the reader experiences a whirlwind tour of the shrines, festivals, myths, books, and holy men that make up what Green calls "Bombay Islam"—a polychromatic and cacophonous arena of sometimes-orthodox, often-customary, and doggedly pluralistic religious groups and practices. This, if anything, is Green's biggest accomplishment: looking beyond Reformist Islam and highlighting the religious institutions that many of the city's inhabitants chose to turn to in an era of emerging industrial capitalism, and that eventually grew to encompass a broad territorial and oceanic hinterland. In this Green's Bombay, there was no monolithic "Islam" to speak of, but multiple "Islams," all of which jostled for a growing share of a religious landscape that became more populated every year.

While some might question the logic behind exploring the nineteenth-century incarnation of a religion that had spread throughout the subcontinent centuries before, Green makes a strong case for his periodization. It was only during the mid-nineteenth-century emergence of industry in Bombay, he argues, that Christian missionaries engaged in a sustained proselytizing campaign to convert the newly arrived industrial laborers—an effort that spurred an increase in and pluralization of religious activity, Muslim and otherwise, in the city. Whether or not one accepts his explanation, what one cannot doubt is Green's ability to paint, in broad strokes, a vivid picture of a vibrant and dynamic religious landscape throughout the second half of the nineteenth century. Among the first Muslim responses to the arrival of Christian missionaries was the establishment of Reformist schools—and while Green devotes nearly half a chapter to these, they are but one stop in his long procession through the city's religious marketplace.

In chapters 2 and 3, Green walks his readers through the bustling alleyways of Bombay's bazaars, leading them through one shrine at a time while always keeping them keenly aware of the broader historical context. In chapter 2, he delves deeply into the popular consumption of Islam in the city, detailing the landmarks and practices associated with popular Islam while unpacking the myths and legends associated with them. Green devotes most of his energy to the latter, and with good reason—for rather than seeing celebratory hagiographies and two-dimensional narratives, Green teases out a textured world in which the tensions associated with migration, religious conflict, and capitalism underpin fantastical stories of saints propping up sinking steamships and vanquishing evil demons. In these often-competing accounts, the narrators each “have their distinct heroes whose loyalties represent very different visions of order and authority in the miniature world of the Bombay marketplace” (p. 88).

In chapter 3, Green illustrates how Muslims took to Bombay's emerging industrial technologies with the same zeal as their Christian counterparts. Foremost among these was the lithographic press, which Muslim shrine custodians, holy men, travelers, and entrepreneurs all made use of to print a dizzying variety of cheap publications: prayer books, pilgrimage guidebooks, travelogues, pamphlets, hagiographies, and much more. That the audiences for these texts were as varied as the texts is evident in the mediums themselves: aside from the enormous number of vernacular languages that made their way to print, literature was prepared in Arabic, Urdu, Persian, Swahili, Malay, and English for audiences as far away as the Middle East, Africa, and Southeast Asia.

In chapter 4, Green follows these circulating texts and people to the Arabian Sea, through the Gulf of Oman, into Persia, and eventually back to Bombay. What emerges from this circuitous route is a number of dense, interconnected religious and commercial networks supported by a sprawl-

ing matrix of railroads and steam routes. Green highlights how Sufi travelers were able to navigate through these networks with ease and, with the help of their merchant patrons, amass followings throughout the Iranian and Indian countryside. This “remarkable interpenetration of the spheres of mysticism and commerce” and the resulting movement of holy men, mendicants, and other figures, Green argues, is essential to understanding the spread of Bombay Islam during this period (p. 127).

After a brief examination of the emergence of a new variety of Ismailism in the context of a changing religious and technological world in chapter 5, Green explores how the burgeoning arena of customary Islam interacted with—or even drew its strength from—the laboring masses at Bombay's mills and dockyards. Here, he goes down a well-trodden path, but from a different angle. Taking an approach reminiscent of E. P. Thompson, Green discusses how workers turned to a growing marketplace of saints and shrines to deal with the everyday violence of labor. Using the example of one such saint, Habib 'Ali Shah, Green further illustrates how neatly religious intermediaries fit into a world of labor that was heavily structured by middlemen: *sardars* (an Indian prince or nobleman), *serangs* (a boatswain, or native head of a Lascar crew.), and the like.

Green wraps up his tour de force by taking the reader across the Indian Ocean and into the streets of Natal in South Africa. The links between Bombay and Natal emerged out of similar historical processes that gave rise to Bombay Islam, as Bombay's laborers traversed the Indian Ocean to Natal to find work in the colony's growing sugar plantation and mine economy. As in Bombay, however, the workers did not arrive alone: their influx into Natal spurred on a rise in Christian missionary activity, which in turn prompted further proselytizing by Muslim and Hindu groups. What is particularly rich in Green's move from Bombay to Natal is his ability to trace the foot-

steps of Gulam Mohammed, one of Habib ‘Ali Shah’s followers who brought his master’s brand of Islam from Bombay to the Indian laborers in South Africa, eventually amassing hundreds of followers.

In the end, what the reader is left with is a vivid, multidimensional picture of a vibrant Islamic culture around the Indian Ocean in an era of increasing industrial activity and emergent capitalism—with all of the contradictions, tensions, and structures that it brought with it. It is this setting, rather than the nuances of everyday Islamic practice in a multicultural arena, that sets Green’s work apart from other contributions to the study of Islam in South Asia, where the importance of the changing material world is often downplayed in favor of higher-order debates. He is to be commended for his depth in exploring the under-researched frontier between economic and religious history.

Green’s appreciation of the world of sidewalk shrines, religious festivals, carnivalesque processions, myths, and factory superstitions is evident throughout the book, and is brought to life through the very material he uses. He eschews the Bombay historian’s normal stomping ground, the Maharashtra State Archives, and instead engages directly with material from the shrines themselves—pamphlets, hagiographies, and other texts. He reads this material carefully for clues and, with a dexterous combination of imagination and the historian’s craft, is able to tease out the worlds in which these materials were situated. The approach is evocative of that taken by Engseng Ho in his reading of genealogical texts from Yemen and Java, and is one that works wonderfully well in this context. For rather than dismiss these texts as unreliable data, Green’s anthropological proclivities allow him to dive headlong into the material and appreciate its texture.

Pathbreaking as it is, Green’s book is not without its shortcomings. Readers will likely feel uncomfortable with his usage of the concept of “reli-

gious economy” and all of its attendant terminology. The text is rife with references to the “religious firms” (the different religious groups operating in Bombay), attempts to “capture market share” (proselytizing activities), and “switching brand loyalty” (conversion), to name but a few examples. While the author, anticipating possible critiques of his usage of the concept, defends it as a useful heuristic device—which it undoubtedly is, illuminating as it does a range of different processes—its utility wears thin early on. The concept might have been a useful one to frame his questions with, but in the final presentation it cuts against Green’s more anthropological and humanistic inclinations.

A more substantive critique of Green’s work might be its tendency to gloss over the details of the emergence of industrial capitalism in Bombay, the bedrock to the book’s narrative. As Green himself writes, “if *Bombay Islam* is a Muslim story, it is part of a larger one of an industrialization that in its many locations fueled new forms of religious productivity” (p. 236). Although too detailed an examination of the rise of industry and the immigration of labor into Bombay might have gone beyond the aims of the book and into well-trodden territory, the reader cannot help but feel that there is something concrete missing from the book. Because so much of Green’s narrative hinges on broader infrastructural and economic transformations, a chapter, or even a long section, devoted to the details of that context would have been useful.

These, however, are but minor quibbles with what is otherwise a valuable contribution to the fields of South Asian, Islamic, and Indian Ocean history. Green’s historiographical interventions; his ability to paint a detailed picture with broad, yet precise strokes; his methodological finesse; and his broad temporal and spatial scope combine to ensure that *Bombay Islam* will be read for many years to come, and by historians far and wide.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-empire>

Citation: Fahad Bishara. Review of Green, Nile. *Bombay Islam: The Religious Economy of the West Indian Ocean, 1840-1915*. H-Empire, H-Net Reviews. September, 2011.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=33809>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.