



Muhammad Qasim Zaman. *Islam in Pakistan: A History*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018. 432 pp. \$39.50, cloth, ISBN 978-0-691-14922-6.

Reviewed by Justin Jones

Published on H-Asia (September, 2019)

Commissioned by Sumit Guha (The University of Texas at Austin)

How can Islam in Pakistan, with its overwhelming heterogeneity, be discussed meaningfully within a single study, if indeed it can be defined as a coherent enquiry at all? These are the questions hinted at by Muhammad Qasim Zaman in the early pages of this encyclopedic work. Trying to elucidate a subject so broad and complex is a feat so ambitious that no previous author has attempted it, and Zaman tries to make sense of this complex panorama through a series of densely detailed chapters. In doing so, he produces a rich intellectual history, focusing upon a range of Muslim thinkers and figureheads who inhabit the religious landscape of Pakistan and situating their formulations of Islam within Pakistan's evolving social and political topography.

Throughout the book, there is a tangible point of reference that informs the whole study: Pakistan's foundational identity as a would-be cradle of "Islamic modernism." The latter is a broad category that refers loosely to the kinds of religion held to by a range of Pakistani intellectuals and the governing elite, who have aspired to formulate a form of Islam defined by a particular progressive "ethic" or "spirit" that is responsive to changing conditions. Zaman argues that since Pakistan's creation, Islamic modernists—usually establishment intellectuals and stakeholders—have tried to shape the Islam known and prac-

ticed in Pakistan. Ever since the Objectives Resolution of 1949 (cited in both the opening and closing pages) proclaimed Pakistan to be a "laboratory" for developing Islam as a "progressive force in the world," Pakistan's Islamic modernists have tried to "put their ideals into practice" (pp. 5, 265) by seeking to shape this Islam: formulating its laws, articulating its social role, and governing its institutions.

While this ultimately becomes the book's core purpose, the chapters themselves cover a range of subjects reflecting the scale of the subject matter and can each be read as loosely connected stand-alone pieces. A first chapter offers a purview of the landscape of Islam in colonial South Asia and the modernist and traditionalist trends of Islamic renewal that gave rise to their later manifestations in Pakistan. Chapter 2 (perhaps the crux of the book's argument) explores Islamic modernism as a particular religious ethic held by individuals who were often affiliated with Pakistan's establishment and the project of governance. It assesses the visions of Islam propounded by Pakistan's successive rulers and explores Islamic thinkers with political connections such as Fazlur Rahman and Javed Ahmad Ghamidi. The third chapter explores *ʿulama* (Islamic scholars) within Pakistan, especially the Deobandis, focusing not only upon their relationships with the political sphere and

moments of patronage and cooption by modernists, but also on their assertions of resistance toward the state. Chapter 4 explores how Pakistan has been conceived by various Muslim thinkers as a state destined to realize God's sovereignty and to enact God-given laws: this language of divine provenance has been used especially by Islamists, but it has also been used at significant points by modernists. Chapter 5 explores two of Pakistan's religious minorities, arguing that the persecutions they have suffered derive from contentions about the wider predicament of Islam within Pakistan: Ahmadis have been targeted due to their association with modernist thought, while anti-Shia polemic reflects the accusation that this minority's protests have impeded the implementation of Islamic law in Pakistan. Chapter 6 explores Pakistani Sufism, with particular focus on how modernists have both drawn inspiration from its individualistic and progressive elements while also contributing to its current precarious position by critiquing it for superstition. The final chapter explores religio-political violence, including the Kashmir conflict, Afghan jihad, and Pakistani Taliban, to ask how far these examples can be explained by, or are linked to, the machinations of the state. Through this complex landscape, Zaman sometimes makes reference to a multifarious "religious sphere" in Pakistan (p. 265), within which all these parties interact and jostle. This religious sphere, he argues strikingly, has been notably resilient over time, with many contemporary actors being traceable back to the colonial period. It is "remarkable," he suggests in the epilogue, that the religious sphere has been so little changed over the century, despite the simultaneous turbulence of society and politics.

Through these chapters, Zaman argues that Islamic modernists, over the decades, have tried to broker cooperative relationships with other Muslim schools and countermovements, in order to extend their reach in the religious sphere. As hinted at throughout the study, Islamic modernists have at points joined themselves pragmati-

cally with Sufis, with whom they have shared an emphasis on spirit and progression; with Islamists, with whom they have a mutual focus on the project of statehood and governance; and with the 'ulama, who have been essential for their efforts to religious legitimacy within society. However, the study insinuates, the perpetual ignominy and failures afflicting Pakistan's governing elites have tarnished the Islamic modernist project itself. In turn, the relationships between modernists and other religious groups have become characterized by suspicion, recrimination, polemic, and caricature.

In this last sense, the book is notable for its depiction of an Islamic modernism as having fallen into ever greater levels of decline. Following early promise in the 1950s-60s, the deterioration of Pakistan's intellectual and political leadership has substantially compromised Islamic modernism itself. Pakistan's state, Zaman reminds us at points, has failed to support viable Islamic modernist scholarship or institutions of learning, and has not formulated a credible educational or social policy that reflects it. Meanwhile, one of the key themes of Islamic modernist discourse—that the state of Pakistan should be guided by Islam—has had the indirect effect of giving Pakistan's many Islamic groups a common framework (i.e., the state) on which to engage and compete with one another. In turn, this has perpetuated the presence of Islam in politics.

An additional reason for the failure of Islamic modernism, alluded to several times, is that it has long carried a so-called authoritarian streak (p. 54). Allied with governing regimes, conflating God's sovereignty with the power of the state, and complicit in political interventions like the administrative takeover of *waqfs* and Sufi shrines, modernists have often been too overbearing to win acclamation beyond their immediate circles. One of the most frequently occurring figures in the book is Fazlur Rahman, Pakistan's most famous Islamic modernist pioneers: yet, he is presented here as

too abrasive and uncompromising a figure to build real influence within Pakistan itself, despite his stature elsewhere.

Admittedly, the breadth and diversity of the subject matter means that the book's core argument is not highlighted evenly throughout, and the work's central claims become most clear in the concluding sections, when Zaman summarizes this somewhat bleak assessment of the failure of Islamic modernism in Pakistan and makes an appeal for its renewal. One could also grumble that the clear preference of the study for a kind of politically oriented intellectual history means that the study cannot extensively engage much of the most exciting work to have been produced on Pakistan in recent years, especially work that is sociological or ethnographic in focus. The Islam discussed is thus, in many ways, that of an elite, male religious sphere, which leaves less room for non-elite, subaltern, female, or other participants.

Nevertheless, no study of this scale and complexity can do everything, and this work will immediately be established as essential reading for all specialists. Indeed, while notable for its overall argument, the book is perhaps especially striking for some of the vignettes included when it departs from the best-known political figures and looks at some of Pakistan's minor, often forgotten Muslim orators. At several points, we are given rich commentaries on some of the so-called intermediate intellectuals in Pakistan (p. 269): comparatively minor figures, usually working in Urdu, who have occupied a middle-ground space between modernists and conservatives. These include, for example, Khalifa Abdul Hakim, the head of the Institute of Islamic Culture in the 1950s; the literary critic Muhammad Hasan 'Askari; the poet and journalist Murtaza Ahmad Khan Maikash; the 'ulama Hanif Nadwi and Ja'far Phulwarwi, who sought to engaged with modernist ideas and called for the reformulation of laws, and Quadratullah Shahab, the government bureaucrat turned articulate Sufi philosopher. All these figures,

working chiefly in the 1950s-60s, offered fascinating and often forgotten attempts to recover religion from intellectual sterility, seeking common space between modernists and antimodernists. As remembered by Zaman, for a while they represented one possible future for Pakistan, and perhaps an alternative to the decline into which modernism has since fallen.

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

Citation: Justin Jones. Review of Zaman, Muhammad Qasim. *Islam in Pakistan: A History*. H-Asia, H-Net Reviews. September, 2019.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=53232>



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