Zaidi on Tareen, _Defending Muhammad in Modernity_

Without any doubt, this is an authoritative, forceful, and confident exposition of differentiation in Islamic theological thought amongst Muslims in colonial India in the early and late nineteenth century. The book is highly ambitious, scholarly, masterful, erudite, learned, extremely well written, and well argued. SherAli Tareen has undertaken very wide reading in three languages, Urdu, Persian, and Arabic—the latter two appropriated in the cultural and religious context of what was to become South Asia—and has used, almost exclusively, sources written by Muslim theologians debating amongst themselves over issues that might seem “trivial,” “petty,” “obscure,” or ritualistic to many, but which are, as Tareen demonstrates, deeply rooted in practice and thought. Tareen also very effectively uses key debates and discourses from the Western canon, including on sovereignty, on the distinction between potentiality and actuality, and numerous others, to examine nineteenth-century phenomena.

The platform on which Tareen builds his argument is between two debates at different formative moments of South Asian Islam, which have a bearing and, as he shows, a continuity, with the emergence of the two more formalized, “institutional” schools of thought, belief, and ritual in South Asia, which were subsequently called the Barelvi and the Deobandi schools (maslaks). Despite the high praise Tareen’s book has garnered since its publication, a view which I share, there are a few significant shortcomings in his enterprise which need to be highlighted. Moreover, there are many claims made by Tareen which are not adequately substantiated.

The first of the two debates, the one between Fazl-i Haqq Khayrabadi and Shah Waliullah’s grandson, Shah Ismail (d. 1831), predates the formation of either of the two maslaks, with the Deobandi school emerging after 1867 and the Barelvi in the 1890s. Tareen claims that the “Barelvi school was in many ways the intellectual heir” (p. 8) of Khayrabadi, who died in 1861, although he does not demonstrate how this was so, given that the debate took place six decades prior to the formation of the Barelvi maslak. The second debate took place between Ashraf Ali Thanvi, a prominent member of the Deobandi school, and Ahmad Raza Khan Barelvi, the founder of the Barelvi maslak, in the last few years of the nineteenth century. Since Tareen’s monograph raises multiple questions about a number of elements of South Asian Islam—including method, context, tradition, continuity, and so on—I want to spend
the review exploring his theoretical claims and arguments rather than the more “factual” events and contentions regarding the debates. Also, having already made the argument that this is a particularly scholarly enterprise based on a rich and thorough understanding of theological interpretation, given the limited space available here, I want to shift much of the discussion to theoretical and historical arguments and the way they have been laid out, rather than to a debate on theology.

Using theological debates as understood in the Indian Islam of the nineteenth century, Tareen argues that the Barelvi-Deobandi “polemic is centered on competing political theologies” (p. 4), and how theological discourses interlink with social and political imaginaries, a notion which he repeats endless times in the book. His arguments rest on the premise that the Barelvi and Deobandi schools are based on “competing rationalities of tradition and reform” which were “animated by competing political theologies.” His intricate understanding of the theological debates makes him, correctly, reject the notion that there is any presumed “internal clash” between Islamic law and Sufism, or so-called hard or soft, popular Islam. These disputations, for Tareen, are based on “competing rationalities of tradition and reform” or competing “imaginaries,” “competing visions of what they considered normatively coherent programs of tradition and reform” (p. 331). Yet, it is not adequately explained why these competing “visions,” “traditions,” “imaginaries,” or “rationalities” existed in the first place. For example, it is not explained why it mattered to Ahmad Raza Khan (Barelvi) that the way in which the Deoband scholars talked about the Prophet was unnecessarily provocative and outright offensive” (p. 330), or why the “competing political theologies” happened to begin with.

Tareen is highly critical of and takes strong swipes at a host of those he calls “secular liberal” South Asianists, such as Ayesha Jalal, Seema Alavi, Barbara Metcalf, and Francis Robinson, arguments which make excellent critique of their formulations and concepts. He critiques “binaries,” suggesting they are “symptomatic of the liberal secular attempt to canonize the limits of life and religion,” and finds them “conceptually simplistic and politically noisome and insidious” (pp. 4-5). He is critical of the “secular liberal conception of good religion” and believes that “good religion is religion that is amenable and useful to neoliberal interests and mobilization, as in humanitarian and human rights campaigns” (p. 17). The Pakistani historian Ayesha Jalal, in particular amongst those mentioned above, comes in for particularly rough treatment, with her distinction between religion “as faith” and religion as a “de-marcator of difference,” categories Tareen finds “the product of a liberal secular theology, [which] are vacuous as they are clumsy” (p. 79), continuing to attack Jalal for her incorrect and uninformed reading of Islam in the South Asian context. In citing another author, Tareen provides a “devastating indictment of such a self-congratulatory liberal narrative” (p. 81).

Tareen himself come across as someone who is particularly partial to Ashraf Ali Thanvi and the Deobandi viewpoint and wishes that his readers not view him as an “objective,” ‘dispassionate’ researcher uninvested in or detached from the figures he or she studies” (p. 33). I concur with Tareen when he also rightly critiques the view of Sufism as being some “soft,” politically benign Islam, where Sufism is equated with peace and to being a “good Muslim,” a view which is, as he argues, a “Western Orientalist fantasy” (p. 20), a product of US neo-imperial think tanks where Sufism is seen as some “antidote to fundamentalism” (p. 23).

As someone who is more interested in the historical nature of the debates and “competing imaginaries,” as he called them, between the Deobandis and the Barevis, I was looking for a couple of things that Tareen suggested he would do in the book and some that he did not volunteer to do,
which left me wanting for much more. Because his book focuses more on theological debates and even though he suggests that he is historicizing the debates, I found some parts to be quite unsatisfactory. While the theological disputation between the Barelv and the Deobandi imaginaries was scholarly, I don’t think Tareen locates the debates satisfactorily enough in what he calls “colonial modernity,” as he claimed he would. In his book, there is much discussion on theological disputation and debates but not enough on how and why colonial modernity mattered—except some passing references to the existing contemporary situation. His section “Competing Political Theologies” (pp. 4-5), where he displays his intention to do this, does not fully evolve in the rest of the book. Despite Tareen’s professed ambition and claim, it is very clear there is insufficient engagement with the colonial modernity of India in the nineteenth century.

The other question that the book does not adequately address is, why was it that this competition between the Barelv and Deobandis took place at this juncture? Because he places this competition in a theological context rather than a sociological or empiricist historical one, there is much that is not explained in his book. Is the competition merely about questions of theology—and if so, why is this so?—or do they have a political dimension, garnering a people, claiming a following? He seems to suggest some answers but shies away from addressing them head-on. His framework of political theology relies much more on theology than on the sociopolitical. If it is politics rather than theology that causes this competition, our reading and understanding will have to be different. Furthermore, there is another historical question for which many of us who work on Indian/South Asian Islam and Muslims of the nineteenth century are still seeking an answer: why do so many maslaks in South Asia under colonialism emerge at this juncture? Shah Waliullah mentioned moral decay; others have spoken of the loss of political power and other possible explanations, but none is anywhere adequate. Why does what Haji Imdadullah and Khayrabadi start as a debate between the two, end up predating and becoming precursors to the two maslaks as implied by Tareen, in Indian Islam? Why so many maslaks?

SherAli Tareen’s book is an excellent treatise based on the theological and religious argumentation and refutation/polemics between the Deobandis and the Barelv and those who predate them, but it is not historical, neither located nor contextualized. For this reason, it a book of theology not history, lacking contextual and historicized argumentation, belittling his claim to do the latter. What is missing is precisely what Tareen purports to be doing. He states that the question he addresses is: “How did the moment of transition from Mughal kinship to British colonialism in India’s political history inform debates and contestations surrounding the conceptual economy of sovereignty among religious scholars and communities?” (p. 50). However, his discussion is neither political nor social nor historical, but mainly internal to the theological debate in hand. He claims that his analysis “is about the interplay, the overlapping, of theological and political imaginaries” (p. 51), and that he will show how “seemingly theological questions were intimately connected to how one imagined the normative horizons of the political” (p. 51), but he does not do this, and his arguments are cocooned outside of political/historical contexts. His intention to “provide a detailed example of how the boundaries of Islam as a discursive tradition are contested in conditions of colonial modernity” (p. 5), is left wanting. While it is true that the boundaries of Islam were contested in conditions of colonial modernity, Tareen fails to deal with or adequately acknowledge the presence or impact of colonial modernity. In the two sets of debates Tareen fulfills what his intentions are—“to bring into view the depth, details, and ambiguities of their internal disputes” (p. 7)—however, barring a few general and passing mentions, the colonial is completely missing; there is no demonstrated relationship of
the two “competing political theologies” to their colonial contexts. Importantly, since both the Barelvi and the Deobandi maslaks were under the hegemony of colonialism, it would have been interesting to see how each, and their varying polemic, negotiated with or contested against, colonialism. While Tareen gives a nod to “the colonial,” his is a blurred backdrop of sovereignty in the times of colonial power, which neither he nor his interlocutors navigate or engage with sufficiently. A book of history, this is not.

Another, small, problem is a stylistic one, with the way the author presents himself and his work. While being authoritative and confident is one thing, Tareen verges on the boastful. As early as p. 3, Tareen states that this book “is the first comprehensive study of the Barelvi-Deobandi controversy,” a claim followed on p. 10 by “This book is the first sustained study of the Barelvi-Deobandi polemic—its key moments, arguments, narratives, and ambiguities.” While both Usha Sanyal and Barbara Metcalf engage with this theme, although not in as much detail as does Tareen, his book is hardly “comprehensive” in regard to the extensive Barelvi-Deobandi polemics. Tareen’s book is far more limited than the claims he makes, and is perhaps limited to, in his words, “critical moments in the career of Islam in colonial South Asia when its limits were authoritatively contested in centrally visible ways” (p. 12). As I argue above, the “critical moments” are perhaps two, albeit long, moments, and there is a failure to describe and engage with what it was that was “authoritatively contested” with, outside of the internal sets of debates.

Despite these differences and my not sharing SherAli Tareen’s ideological, theoretical or religious moorings, there is little denying the fact that through his account, one learns a huge amount, about theology, method, Islam, and much more. The thoroughness to detail and depth in his commentary and analysis and in the very wide reading that he has undertaken and conveyed to a reader is most welcome and useful and highly recommended. This is a superb book.