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BOOK REVIEW

Pakistan and its Muslim identities: a journey in search of meaning

Naveeda Khan, *Muslim Becoming: Aspiration and Skepticism in Pakistan*, London: Duke University Press, 2012.

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Muslim Becoming is a compelling narrative tracing the evolution of the concept of what it means to be a Muslim through the history of Pakistan. Islam is at the core of Pakistani statehood; yet the Islamic republic was established on a fundamental contradiction opposing, on the one hand, local tribal loyalties and all-encompassing religion on the other. As a result, Pakistanis failed to achieve a consensus on Islam, which remains a concept in constant negotiation and striving for improvement. In her ethnographic journey that spanned over seven years of fieldwork, Naveeda Khan seeks to understand this process, offering an innovative outlook on Pakistan far removed from its usual portrayals as a failed or failing state. We owe this fresh perspective, to begin with, to the author's immense data collection. Naveeda Khan takes the readers into the neighborhood of mosque grounds, disputes among common believers, legal rulings, daily life practices, media discourses and literary and philosophical texts of Pakistani thinkers in search of Islam that is characterized by nuanced sense-construction. Thanks to such rich and eclectic data, the author uncovers the dynamism of Pakistani theological debates, the constant aspiration for religious perfectibility and the potential the present holds for future change transcending the daily lives of Pakistanis and governmental decisions alike; an analysis, which is in every respect unique. Secondly, Naveeda Khan's approach to understanding the process of becoming rests on the opposition between aspiration and skepticism. On the one hand, the Bergsonian concept of time helps explain Pakistan's aspiration. The present allows a projection towards the future, a time that is not defined yet and, as a result, has the potential of bringing any outcome, especially the desired one. This aspiration is defined as the longing for a better, more refined version of Islam that has continued to permeate in Pakistani society

since the time of Muhammad Iqbal (1877-1938), the poet, philosopher and politician who laid the spiritual foundations of the state of Pakistan. Indeed, an in-depth analysis of the writings of Pakistani thinkers, notably that of Iqbal through his engagement with Bergson's and Nietzsche's ideas, provides a backbone for understanding the origin of aspiration. Lack of consensus on Islam's role and its meaning in society is visible in the early documents of Pakistani statehood, notably in the National Resolution, adopted purposely in a vague form in order to please all. From then onwards, Pakistani government and its citizens alike sought to negotiate and re-negotiate these fundamental concepts in a perpetual state of becoming an Islamic state and becoming Muslim citizens. This striving, Navida Khan analyzes, may take exclusionary or violent forms that can be seen in the sectarian Sunni-Shi'a conflict and through the long legal rulings that made the state ultimately declare the Ahmadiyya sect as non-Muslims. Indeed, the author opposes aspiration with the concept of skepticism, which denotes disappointment with the present state of affairs, doubt and a general social malaise. Skepticism is visible in the persecution of those with divergent views as noted above but also in daily life practices of mullaism, an attitude to act in public as a religious authority and a perfect Muslim and to instruct others, while lacking such qualities in reality. Skepticism casts shadows in Pakistani society where it fosters doubts over the attempts of non-Muslims (especially those declared as such) and false mullas to influence the rightful Muslims and to damage the social fabric. Skepticism accounts for fear and intolerance. Yet, it is important to note that the author refrains from any judgment. What really matters, for Khan, is to understand why and how the process of becoming takes place. Ultimately, being in the state of becoming holds an uplifting perspective that change is possible. It is awaited by all Pakistanis who aspire as Muslims yet to come, yet these aspirations may be very different, even contradictory, for different individuals. As the book was published in 2012, it compels the readers to apply this analytical framework in retrospect to the past two years and to the continued study of Pakistan's future.

Muslim Becoming offers, in addition to its academic merit, engaging writing, a subtle analysis and it stands ultimately as a testimony to Naveeda Khan's great eye for detail. Spanning over six thematic chapters, the book blends in, among other things, anecdotes and observations of daily life and newspaper cartoons with exemplary analyses of Urdu poetry and philosophical texts. These pieces, interwoven in an intriguing manner, all fall into the framework of analysis making it particularly useful when explored from such diverse angles. Yet, they also compel the reader to discover further where the search for becoming takes the author next. Written in a nonpartisan manner, *Muslim Becoming* is a must-read text not only for those who study the intricacies of Islam on the Indian subcontinent but also those who seek to understand Muslim societies in general. The shaping of Islamic institutions and Islamic laws worldwide appears to be as much a process of becoming as it is in Pakistan.

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