

Perilous Intimacies: Debating Hindu-Muslim Friendship After Empire

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The subtitle of the book under review suggests that it deals with modern relationships between Hindus and Muslims in India, but the scope of the book is actually much wider. It deals with the general question of the various Muslim views of the relationship between Muslims and adherents of other civilizations and religions, ranging from the 9th century al-ʿĀmirī and the 11th century al-Bīrūnī, to the 18th century Mirzā Maḥzar Jān-i Jānān and thinkers of the 19th and 20th centuries, including such luminaries as Abū al-Kalām Āzād, Aḥmad Rizā Khān, Sayyid Aḥmad Khān and several Deobandī scholars.

One of the great virtues of the book is the author's use of the sources, some of them rarely mentioned in scholarly literature and certainly not to this extent and in such detail. In an academic culture in which various "narratives" have taken the pride of place, it is most welcome to have a work which is replete with theory, but also surveys and analyzes a substantial amount of hitherto unknown source material. The book is also another proof of the great variety of Muslim tradition which enables Muslim scholars to find Islamic justification for their modern

world views and policies, even if these are contradictory to each other. Because of its rich content – much of it unknown – the book deserves a detailed review.

Perilous intimacies is divided into six chapters, preceded by an extensive introduction (pp. 1-34) and followed by an epilogue (pp. 253-272). The introduction starts with analyzing the concept of friendship and includes also a semantic analysis of the Arabic root *w-l-y*, some derivatives of which carry two meanings: friendship and sovereignty. But its main purpose is to introduce the reader to the theory which the author uses in order to analyze the conditions in which Muslims found themselves after they lost political sovereignty and replaced it with feelings of superiority based on ritual distinctiveness (pp. 9-10). An additional purpose of the introduction is to introduce the reader to the intellectuals whose thought is analyzed in the following chapters and prepare them for the detailed analysis included therein.

The first chapter is devoted to a detailed consideration of the thought of Mirzā Maẓhar Jān-i Jānān (d. 1781) and his description (“translation” in the author’s parlance) of Hinduism for the Muslim audience. Tareen correctly describes Jān-i Jānān’s description of Hinduism as a “remarkably sympathetic and charitable,” considering pre-Islamic Hinduism as a “normatively coherent monotheistic tradition.” At the same time he advanced “a triumphalist Muslim narrative by maintaining Islam’s superiority over Hinduism.” He was able to do this by asserting that Islam abrogated all previous religions and therefore he categorized Hindus who lived after the emergence of Islam – but did not embrace it – as unbelievers (p. 39). It is noteworthy that similar views concerning Jews and Christians are attributed in classical *fiqh* works to some early Muslim jurists. According to these views, Islam abrogated Judaism and Christianity and it is not legitimate to convert to these two religions after the coming of Islam. According to some views, Jews and Christian who joined these religions late are not even eligible for *dhimmī* status.¹

The second chapter (pp. 79-114) includes a detailed survey and discussion of the Shāhjānpūr debate which was conducted in 1875 and 1876 and brought together Christian missionaries as well as Muslim and Hindu scholars. The debate was called “A conference on knowing God”

(*Maila-yi Khudā shināsi*), which Tareen understands – because of the polemical nature of the event – as “deciding the (true) God.” The debate consisted of attacks of one religion on the other: Nānawtwī accused Christianity of attributing divinity to Jesus who was a human being, asserted that this is an impossible “combination of opposites” (*ijtimā‘ al-diddayn*) and maintained that “Muslims are the true Christians of today”; Danayand Saraswati, the Hindu scholar and founder of the Ārya Samāj, accused the Muslims of committing idolatry when they pray in the direction of the Ka‘ba and defamed the Prophet Muḥammad, while Father Scott saw in the decrease of crime in India under British rule a proof of Christian superiority. There is also an extensive discussion of what Tareen call “the miracle wars”, in which each protagonist tries to establish which religion can present “the most miraculous miracles.” It is somewhat surprising that the Muslim side did not mention the “inimitability of the Qur’ān” (*i‘jāz al-Qur’ān*) which was the most important miracle proving the truth of Islam in classical Muslim theology.

The third chapter (pp. 115-152) – entitled “Friendship and sovereign fantasies” – deals with the *khilāfat* movement and the controversy which it engendered between two important Muslim thinkers, Abū al-Kalām Āzād and Aḥmad Rizā Khān Barēlwī. Āzād declared India *dār al-ḥarb*, urging the Muslims to migrate from it if they can. He wholeheartedly supported the Ottoman caliphate, maintained that Muslims who do not submit to it are beyond the pale of Islam and gave full support to Gandhi’s non-cooperation movement. He found support for his position in Qur’ān 60:8-9² which allows friendship with non-Muslims who do not fight the Muslims and do not expel them from their homes. In his view, the Hindus belong to this category because they never fought the Muslims for religious reasons. The British, on the other hand, fight the Ottoman caliphate and have designs to colonize the Arabian Peninsula; they are therefore clearly in a state of belligerency against the Muslims and must not be befriended or supported. One may add here that this attitude is comparable to the “united nationalism” (*muttaḥida qawmiyyat*) theory of Ḥusayn Aḥmad Madanī and the *Jam‘iyyat-i ‘ulamā’-i Hind* which explained the advantages which Indian Muslims would enjoy in a united India, opposed the creation of Pakistan and maintained – more generally

– that Muslims may politically belong to one nation with non-Muslims while keeping their religious identity intact.³

Aḥmad Rizā Khān Barēlwī adopted an opposite position. Similarly to Āzād, he also found Qurʾānic support for his opposition to the *khilāfat* and the non-cooperation movement.⁴ According to Tareen, he was “doggedly critical of any hint of inter religious intimacy...” (p. 139) Yet in contradistinction to Āzād, who called for severing all connections with the British and called even not to accept financial aid for Muslim religious institutions (p. 115), Rizā Khān made a distinction between *muwālāt*, translated by Tareen as “friendship/intimacy” which is forbidden, and “mere pragmatic relations” (*mujarrad-i muʿāmalāt*) which are permissible. Accepting financial aid belongs in his view to the second category (p. 141). He castigates Āzād for proffering an excessively wide interpretation of Qurʾān 60:8, asserts that Hindus cannot be considered as those who do not fight against Islam because they murdered Muslims on the cow sacrifice issue (pp. 141-142). In Rizā Khān’s view, the non-cooperation movement, the declaration that India is *dār al-ḥarb* and the consequent call to Muslims to emigrate to Afghanistan – an area ruled by Muslims – was designed by Gandhi to rob the Muslims of their positions of influence in India and to enable the Hindus to take these positions over. (p. 143).

Chapter Four, entitled “The cow and the caliphate” (pp. 153-188), is a survey of the diverse Muslim views on cow sacrifice. Scholars attached to the *Khilāfat* movement, such as Āzād and ʿAbd al-Bārī, urged Muslims to refrain from cow slaughter in order not to offend Hindu sensibilities. They argued that cow slaughter in Islam is permissible but not obligatory; refraining from it would therefore not be an infringement of an Islamic commandment. At the other end of the spectrum stood Aḥmad Rizā Khān who opined that cow slaughter in India is a symbol of Muslim distinctiveness and therefore must not be abandoned. In his view, its abandonment under Hindu pressure would be a humiliation for Islam.

Chapter Five (pp. 189-219) is a wide ranging survey of the complexities engendered by the *ḥadīth* forbidding imitation of other communities by Muslims as well as the divergent Muslim views on the issue. The modern protagonists in this chapter are Sayyid Aḥmad Khān of Aligarh, Rashid Aḥmad Gangōhī and Muḥammad Ṭayyib al-Qāsimī of Deoband.

There is also a discussion of the *lā tashabbahū* tradition in classical *ḥadīth*, in Ibn Taymiyya and in Shāh ‘Abd al-‘Azīz.⁵ The discussion makes it clear that the *tashabbuh* issue has particular significance for the Muslim minority in South Asia where there are pressures to participate in the celebration of Hindu festivals. In the British period a new issue appeared on the stage and elicited contradictory responses: imitation of European customs. This reviewer would not include here the injunction to imitate the Prophet’s customs and the Ṣūfi usages of *tashabbuh* (p. 191): these are completely different from the issues discussed in the rest of the chapter. Several of the issues related to imitation of others are taken up again in Chapter Six (pp. 220-252) in which Sayyid Aḥmad Khān and Muḥammad Ṭayyib al-Qāsimī are the main disputants.

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Having surveyed the main contents of the book, I wish to engage with some of the theories employed by the author for his analysis. In numerous places of the book under review, Tareen maintains that in modern times “we imagine world religions as competing clubs with clearly defined texts, beliefs, and practices, each possessing its own distinct history.” He attributes the development of this conception to “the political project of colonialism.” (p. 35; cf. p.45) This general statement notwithstanding, he mentions in his work a number of Muslim thinkers who preceded Western colonialism, but also maintained that there is a sharp distinction between Islam and other religions. He mentions the 9th century scholar Abū al-Ḥasan al-‘Āmirī whose *al-I‘lām bi-manāqib al-islām* (“Proclamation of Islamic virtues”) he considers “close to the modern genre of ‘comparative religion’” (p. 13).⁶ He also mentions Abū Rayḥān al-Bīrūnī (d. 1050) who drew a sharp distinction between Islam and Hinduism and asserted that “we believe in nothing that they believe and *vice versa*.” Tareen observes that this seems “remarkably similar to the colonial mentality toward Indian religions that came to the forefront some eight centuries later...” (pp. 46-47). The Andalusī scholar Ibn Ḥazm (d. 1064) and his *al-Faṣl fī al-milal wa al-ahwā’ wa al-niḥal* could have been mentioned here also. The author adduces also an analysis of *Hujjat*

*al-Hind*⁷, a 17th (?) century tract by ‘Umar Mihrābī which contains a scathing criticism of Hindu traditions (pp. 55-57). About the 18th century Indian Muslim thinker Mirzā Maḏhar Jān-i Jānān (d. 1781) the author says that there is similitude between the “reifying tendencies” in his thought and the British colonial representations of Hinduism, though his political project was significantly different (pp. 75-76).

It is not difficult to expand Tareen’s examples of pre-colonial examples of sharp distinctions between Islam and other religions. It seems appropriate to start with Qur’ān 109 which denies any possibility of interaction between Islam and the polytheists of Arabia, asserts the distinctiveness of the Prophet’s faith and concludes with “To you your religion and to me mine.” There are many Qur’ānic verses which express the idea of Islamic distinctiveness in different formulations. Toshihiko Izutsu has provided an extensive analysis of the belief – unbelief dichotomy in the Qur’ānic context.⁸ Albrecht Noth has convincingly argued that part of the “Conditions of ‘Umar” (*al-shurūṭ al-‘umariyya*) were designed to differentiate between non-Muslims and Muslims in their outward appearance rather than discriminate against the non-Muslims.⁹ Muslim literature speaks also about hierarchy between the various religions.¹⁰ And Wilfred Cantwell Smith has analyzed the ways in which adherents of various religions call their respective faiths and found that the case of Islam is special: in contradistinction to other religions – the names of which were given to them by outsiders – God himself determined that Islam will be the name of this religion. Muslims were conscious from the very beginning of their history of the multiplicity of religions as well as of their own distinctiveness. They also use the noun *dīn* and its plural *adyān* in the sense of modern “religion.”¹¹ More recently, Jeffrey R. Halverson has written a reasoned and convincing article criticizing the widespread notion of the colonial invention of “religion” as far as the Islamic tradition is concerned.¹²

It is therefore difficult to agree with the author who speaks about “a new conceptual object called religion.” (p. 109). This concept has existed in the Muslim tradition since the earliest stages of its development. The prevalent idea of the distinctiveness of Islam does not mean that there were no Muslim thinkers who looked for common ground with other

religions. Indeed, Tareen himself devoted a rich section to al-Gardīzī (11th century), Amīr Khusraw (d. 1325) and Dārā Shukōh (d. 1659) (pp. 49-52).

As I mentioned above, Chapter Two of the book under review is devoted to the Shājahānpūr debate. The author correctly says that the idea of inter-religious polemics was not “a colonial invention” (pp. 109-110). Yet Tareen maintains a few pages later that the debate could not have taken place in the form which it took “prior to the colonial moment in India” (p. 112). I wonder whether the Shājahānpūr debate is substantially different from the religious debates in the Mughul Emperor Akbar’s court.¹³ And it is also well known that medieval history is replete with Jewish-Muslim and Christian-Muslim controversies.¹⁴

SherAli Tareen repeatedly asserts that the sharp distinction between religions is a colonial phenomenon. Nevertheless, he adduces plenty of examples of pre-colonial thinkers whose ideas were similar, even identical, with what he calls “the colonial discourse of world religions” (p. 35). One may be allowed to wonder: if there is such a substantial number of pre-colonial Muslim thinkers who expressed such views - why should we call the whole phenomenon “colonial”?

For these reasons, I have reservations about the pervasive use of the “post-colonial” theory in the book. In my view, the theory employed by Tareen runs contrary to a substantial part of the material adduced by him and diverts the reader’s attention away from the important material which he collected, analyzed and brought into focus. However, these reservations do not outweigh the book’s outstanding contribution in surveying and analyzing a very substantial amount of hitherto unknown material. The author deserves to be congratulated for providing the scholars of modern Muslim India with a treasure trove in which he surveyed and analyzed an important aspect of modern Indian Muslim history and thought.

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Endnotes

- 1 See Yohanan Friedmann, *Tolerance and Coercion in Islam: Interfaith Relations in the Muslim Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 23, 60.
- 2 “God forbids you not, as regards those who have not fought you in religion’s cause, nor expelled you from your habitations, that you should be kindly to them and act justly towards them; surely God loves the just...” Translation by Arthur J. Arberry, *The Koran interpreted*.
- 3 See Yohanan Friedmann, “The attitude of the Jam‘iyyat al-‘ulamā-‘i Hind to the Indian national movement and to the establishment of Pakistan.” *Asian and African Studies* 7 (1971), pp. 157-180, and Barbara D. Metcalf, Ḥusain Aḥmad Madani: *The jihād for Islam and India’s Freedom*. (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009). More generally, see Ali Usman Qasmi and Megan Eaton Robb, eds., *Muslims against the Muslim League: Critiques of the Idea of Pakistan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).
- 4 See Qur’ān 5:51, “O believers, take not Jews and Christians as friends; they are friends of each other. Whoever of you makes them his friends, is one of them...”
- 5 The classical material on the issue was surveyed and analyzed in M. J. Kister “Do not assimilate yourselves...”: *lā tashabbahū*; with an Appendix by Menahem Kister.” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 12 (1989), pp. 321-371 (reprinted in M.J. Kister, *Concepts and Ideas at the Dawn of Islam* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1997 no. VI).
- 6 For a brief analysis of al-‘Āmiri’s thought and a partial translation of the *al-ʿlām*, see Franz Rosenthal, “State and religion according to Abū al-Ḥasan al-Āmiri,” in *Islamic Quarterly* 3 (1956), pp. 42-52.
- 7 The author translates this as “Proof of India,” but a more appropriate translation would be “Refutation of India.” For this meaning of *ḥujja*, see Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon*, s.v.
- 8 See Toshihiko Izutsu, *Ethico-religious Concepts in the Qur’ān* (Montreal: McGill University Press: 1966), pp. 119-155 and *passim*.
- 9 Albrecht Noth, “Abgrenzungsprobleme zwischen Muslimen und nicht-Muslimen: Die “Bedingungen ‘Umars (*aš-šurūṭ al-‘umariyya*)” unter einem anderen Aspekt gelesen,” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 9 (1987), pp. 290-315. English translation in Robert Hoyland, ed., *Muslims and Others in Early Islamic Society* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), pp. 103-124.
- 10 See Friedmann, *Tolerance and Coercion*, pp. 38-39.
- 11 Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1963), pp. 75-108, especially pp. 75-77.
- 12 Jeffrey R. Halverson, “Religion before the academy: Jonathan Z. Smith, Eurocentrism, and Muslim demarcations of religion,” *The Journal of Religion* 104 (2024), pp. 26-44.

- 13 See André Wink, *Akbar* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009), pp. 97-99; Derryl N. MacLean, “Real men and false men at the court of Akbar: The *Majālis* of Shaykh Muṣṭafā Gujarāti,” in David Gilmartin and Bruce Lawrence, eds., *Beyond Turk and Hindu: Rethinking Religious Identities in Islamicate South Asia* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000), pp. 199-215.
- 14 Much information on this can be gleaned from Jacques Waardenburg, ed., *Muslim Perceptions of other Religions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) and from Camilla Adang and Sabine Schmidtke, *Muslim Perceptions and Receptions of the Bible: Texts and Studies* (Atlanta: Lockwood Press, 2019).