

Defending Muhammad in Modernity

SherAli Tareen

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Defending Muhammad in Modernity establishes a profound, powerful, and well-informed narrative surrounding one of the key discourses pertaining to Sunni Islam: the ongoing debate between the Deobandi and Barelvi traditions in South Asia. These traditions have been around since the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and remain highly relevant today. This text explores and explains the everchanging dynamics of these normative orientations in the Indian subcontinent. Tareen's narrative is set in a transitional time—when Muslim/Mughal rule is in decline and British colonialism is beginning to take root—so it focuses on the discourses taking place during that time.

In his narrative, Tareen particularly underscores issues of law, political theology, normativity, and ritual practices. One of the key ideas surrounding ritual practice is the celebration of the Prophet's birthday, which remains an evocative issue today. (I would say, it often serves as a distraction from real issues/discourses between the two traditions.) Tareen's discussion essentially addresses two iterations of the Deobandi-Barelvi debate.

The first debate took place during the early nineteenth century between Fazl-Haqq Khayarabadi (1796-1861) and Shah Muhammad Isma'il (1779-1831). This debate mainly revolved around three main themes including Prophetic intercession (*shafa'at*), the capacity of God to lie (*imkan-i-kizb*), and the creation of another Prophet after the last Prophet Muhammad (*imkan-i-inzir*). Even though there is reference to Prophet Muhammad's intercession in the Quran and other Islamic sources, the scope of this intercession is a matter of serious debate. According to Isma'il, the Prophet had limited ability to intercede on behalf of sinners: because if he had a higher ability to intercede, it would undermine the sovereignty of God and would also eventually lead to heresies among people. Khayarabadi viewed this as an insult to the Prophet.

On the issue of the possibility of another prophet, according to Isma'il, since God has unlimited capacity, He could perfectly create an exception. In *Taqwiyat-al-Iman*, Isma'il makes the deeply controversial statement that God is so powerful that just by uttering 'Be', He could create millions of new prophets, angels, saints, Muhammads, etc. This, of course, engendered a response from Khayarabadi. In his book, *Taqrir-i-itirrazatbar Taqwiyat al-Islam*, he argued that according to Isma'il's argument, God could lie and betray His promise of Prophet Muhammad's finality. Since lying is a flaw, it cannot be attributed to God. In his work, *Yak Roza*, Isma'il then explicitly argued that God has the capacity to lie and contravene His promise—because God can assuredly do anything human beings can. A statement that God could not lie for Isma'il was basically equivalent to saying that human beings could exceed the divine capacity, which could not be the case. He further draws a distinction between potentiality (*imkan*) and actuality (*wuqu'*), meaning that although God has the capacity to do such things, He would never do it. By his view, then, such possibilities do not lie beyond God, but they are indirectly impossible because He would not actualize them.

The second iteration of this Deobandi/Barelvi debate took place between two renowned scholars of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: Ashraf Ali Thanvi (1863-1943) and Ahmad Raza Khan Barelvi (1856-1921). This argument focused on the Prophet's knowledge of the unseen, or the hidden realm, as well as ritual practices. Most of the discussions in this case concerned the limits of the Prophet's sunna and what constitutes exceeding/transgressing those limits. These extensions on the sunna resulted in innovations (*bid'a*), which were seen as a kind

of rivalry to God's sovereign legislation. The main issue for the religious scholars in the Indian subcontinent was the seeping-in of local customs into divine rulings (*shari'a*). The Deobandi school of thought in particular was concerned about the fact that permissible (*mubah*), seemingly spiritually rewarding, acts of worship would merge with obligatory acts of worship, which would result in a confusion for the masses who may view these supererogatory acts of worship as obligatory practices and get distracted from their primary obligations. Moreover, the Deobandis thought that there was a potential for sins to merge with these permissible practices, which was even more problematic as people would engage in sins under the guise of religion. According to Ali Thanvi, the customary practice of a 'fatiha' had lost its true essence in the modern day and took the form of a *bid'a*, which was performed for sending blessings to the deceased by feeding the poor, the community in general, and the relatives of the deceased.

The celebration of the Prophet's birthday (*mawlid*), rising in his honor, and offering him salutations are all considered innovations by the Deobandis. They believe that the Prophet cannot make appearances at multiple celebrations at the same time, and that it would be equivalent to giving him some divine status. Furthermore, this is an ability that they ascribed to Satan and the angels but not to the Prophet. The Barelvis, on the other hand, wanted these practices to continue, and just be improved upon. In short, the second iteration of the discussion between the Deobandi and Barelvi schools of thought provides the substantive bases for many modern-day fatwas as well.

The book meticulously explains how the two groups perceived aspects of the Prophet's existence differently. For the Deobandis, the Prophet's perfection lay in his faultless moral-ethical qualities, but he was still considered human (albeit one who was chosen by God to receive divine revelation). The Barelvis, on the other hand, viewed the Prophet as a perfect being, possessing qualities that an ordinary human being cannot embody, and more simply as the best of creation. The current notions surrounding blasphemy and honoring him are impacted by and emerge from these diverging views. These divisions have become even more pronounced in the Muslim world today.

Another interesting and quite pertinent topic that the book discusses is that of Sufism, and how it has garnered attention especially after 9/11. Tareen clearly dispels the false binaries that have been created between Sufi Islam (considered much more peaceful and friendly, distant from the sharia) and certain other more orthodox, fanatical sects of Islam like the Deobandis, Wahabi, and Ahl-e-Hadith, which are ostensibly more focused on upholding the shari'a. There has been an attempt to promote Sufi Islam because of its perceived disengagement from the shari'a; it has been considered the good Islam by the West, while a need is felt for the other groups to be repressed for engaging the shari'a. Even though there may be many differences in interpretations within all these groups, they still may not be as stark as how they are depicted. Sufi Islam is not distinct from the sharia. Sufis do not reject Islamic law but just consider it as a first rung of the ladder to a higher spiritual path.

For Tareen, it is crucial to contextualize the debates in the past few centuries as well as the modern day. With the fall of the Mughal Empire and increasing Western influence, Muslims in South Asia were experiencing an identity crisis. These Deobandi-Barelvi debates were a way for them to practice their agency and denounce the new secular norms that were being cultivated in their native lands. Tareen's representation of this predicament can be seen as one that not only creates an intellectually stimulating narrative of this historical trajectory, but opens up a new set of problems that require more serious interrogation. The story the reader is exposed to is one that transcends simplistic binaries like legal/mystical and reformist/traditional. This contextualization

helps the reader's understanding of religion and identity in colonial times, as well as that of modern Islam. It also explains how the discourses surrounding religion are richly constructed by Muslim scholars. Indeed, a core motif provided is that analytical frameworks based on certain conceptions of secular liberalism are often unhelpful in reading and perceiving these debates within the domain of the 'Muslim sacred,' or religion as understood by its adherents. Tareen extensively discusses the diverse strategies employed by Muslim scholars in cogently advancing their visions against the backdrop of British imperialism—and the Eurocentric teleological/epistemological assumptions and ideologies that accompanied it.

The book not only provides the context which gave rise to these debates, but also gives insight into overarching themes of modern Islam, the Prophet's legacy in present times, political theology in South Asia, religion and colonialism, and debates within Muslim normative orientations. Tareen's *Defending Muhammad in Modernity* is a thoroughly researched, well-written, monumental contribution to the scholarly literature on religious construction during colonialism in South Asia. The book makes copious and scrupulous use of Persian, Urdu and Arabic sources. At the same time, the work's eloquent and methodical prose makes it accessible to non-specialists and specialists alike. There is a seamlessly powerful narrative throughout the text, with enough layers, debates, and intriguing historical complexities to keep any reader thoroughly engaged.

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