

Review: Muslim Becoming

Reviewed by David Waterman

Muslim Becoming: Aspiration and Skepticism in Pakistan. Naveeda Khan. Duke University Press, 2012. 262 pages. ISBN-13: 978-0-8223-5231-0.

Muslim Becoming begins with Naveeda Khan's account of a debate among four librarians in the Assembly Library in Lahore, in which she "learned how everyday expressions of religiosity simultaneously impinge upon the local, the political, and the spiritual, in the temporal register of possible pasts and futures" (1). The theological debate between a Shia and three Sunnis becomes heated, and could easily be construed as further evidence that Pakistan still has not worked through its institutional relationship with Islam. Naveeda Khan, an anthropologist at Johns Hopkins University, only partially accepts such an explanation, insisting that a Bergsonian notion of time-as-becoming leads us to consider a Pakistan "that demonstrates its inheritance of an Islam with an open future and a tendency toward experimentation," without wishing to discount the country's problems since 1947 (7). Aspiration and striving become the key elements in such a becoming-Pakistan, where the emphasis is on process rather than final forms, where Iqbal takes center stage rather than Jinnah, and where "political theology" must necessarily exist alongside the legacy of colonial administration (11; 13). The book itself is the result of ethnographic fieldwork carried out by the author, from the late 1990s to the mid-2000s, on mosques in Lahore – the link with our four librarians becomes clear in the context of "the spatialization of theological arguments" (18).

Chapter One is subtitled "Pakistan as a Mosque," and begins with the observation that contemporary mosques are in large part simply gathering-places for prayer, in contrast to their predecessors, which often functioned as schools, hostels, hospitals and courts of law. Mosque ownership is not always clear as various sects often compete for local dominance, while the State refuses to enter the fray; the term *qabza* is introduced, meaning confiscation or occupancy, referring not only to the mosques but also to the enormous migrations of Partition. Khan suggests that such ambiguity can be a useful lens through which to examine Pakistan-as-process: "one had to learn to inhabit this place, to acquire the right etiquette in sharing it with others with differing perspectives on how to be Muslim" (23). The following chapter highlights the role of Muhammad Iqbal within "A Possible Genealogy of Muslim Aspiration," including his philosophical

ties to both Bergson and Nietzsche, with a close reading of Iqbal's poems "Complaint," regretting the fall of Muslims from their previous status, and "Answer to the Complaint," calling for a continual striving toward one's destiny. Evolution, according to a Bergsonian reading of Iqbal, must take into account present time as implicated in the past and the future simultaneously, while progress is made through creative choices; perhaps even God does not yet understand how such potential will come to be realized (71; 75).

The third chapter examines Iqbal's legacy, using the precise example of the Ahmadi question and the history of the 1954 Munir Report, a report which intended to establish who might claim to be a Muslim. Contrary to most, Khan does not interpret the marginalization of the Ahmadi sect – through Constitutional amendment – as a cynical political gesture, but rather as a State which used religious and legal argument as part of the striving / aspiration process (92). Iqbal too sides with the expulsion of the Ahmadi in the quest for necessary Muslim solidarity (118). Chapter Four is more personal, an exposé of Farooq sahib, the author's Urdu teacher and research guide, and more specifically the appearance of jinn within his family and by extension an examination of jinn in Pakistani society. Jinn are vouched for in the Qur'an (Sura 72), a particular form of life created by God out of smokeless fire and generally accepted by Muslims, and for the author's purposes important in the striving of the pious (126-128). The penultimate chapter of *Muslim Becomings* is entitled "Skepticism in Public Culture," and deals with the "Other" in the person of the mulla rather than the Shia or the Ahmadi, measured by the frequency of anti-mulla jokes which are to be heard (147). After citing several examples, Khan arrives at the conclusion that most maulwi deal with the jokes in two ways, first defensively then by a desire to be part of the mainstream of Pakistani society, as representatives not only of the past but also largely forgotten as members of the present (170), which finally supports a two-prong analysis dealt with in Chapter Six, namely "Pakistan as the site of ongoing aspiration as well as widespread malaise" (172). The Deleuzien concept of symptomatology informs Khan's definition of becoming:

What I take from Deleuze, however, is that literature has great capacity to yield a diagnostics that can apprehend blockages to striving and provide therapies, much in the manner in which Iqbal's literary and philosophical writings provide us an orientation to striving. Moreover, such diagnostics may provide the imagination of political action, perhaps as an unrealistic expectation but that nonetheless births a new possibility. (174)

Such new possibilities are, for Khan, what underpin the meaning of Muslim, the "suspended opinion" which she borrows from Mufti in the context of aspiration and striving (198). An epilogue, called "Becoming Present," suggests three possible futures for Pakistan: establishment of democratic government, political

meltdown, or “a partial return to the state of turmoil and restlessness that prevailed earlier but which was not a condition of war and imminent disaster” (205). The author believes the third is most likely, and indeed the possible future most desired by many Pakistanis; restlessness must not be feared, rather it should be harnessed as a positive force, “making the law a fecund site for experimentation over what it is to be a Muslim [...] allowing Muslims opportunities to reinhabit their tradition . . .” (206).

Muslim Becoming succeeds largely because it goes against prevailing wisdom, obliging the reader to adopt a different perspective regarding present-day Pakistan by insisting that Pakistan is not a finished product – while many current difficulties are indeed the result of errors and missed opportunities, many others are the normal missteps of a country seeking its way as an Islamic republic and former British colony, its past – and indeed, future – sitting restlessly alongside its present. Readers interested in a radical departure from the typical fare served up by Washington think-tanks and talking heads will find much of interest in Naveeda Khan’s excellent book.