

ANOTHER VISION OF PAKISTAN: ISLAM AND SOCIETY IN A SOUTH ASIAN
ENVIRONMENT

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Michel Boivin, *Le Pakistan et l'Islam. Anthropologie d'une République Islamique*, Paris : Téraèdre, 2015, 223 pp., (ISBN 9782360850648).

In comparison with India, Pakistan has received less extensive attention from scholars. In addition to this disadvantage, there has also been the misfortune that a large part of the research dedicated to the country after 9/11 has focused on violence and terrorism. Pakistan has variously been depicted as a «failed state», a place dominated by religious fanaticism, and constantly on the verge of collapse. Without denying the complex issues relating to its political dimension, it is possible to speak of an over-representation of violence in the literature on Pakistan. Instead, very little is known of its rich culture and its society, apart from a small group of specialists. It is a curious paradox that, while the study of the «everyday» is increasingly gaining ground among historians and social scientists, in Pakistan the lives of the millions of inhabitants who lead a peaceful existence are largely neglected.

This said, nowadays a growing number of social scientists have begun to fill this vacuum. A new generation of scholars has started to engage with the lives of those human beings who call themselves Pakistanis, even re-reading the political history of the region «from below».⁸ The volume under review by Michel Boivin, *Le Pakistan et l'Islam. Anthropologie d'une République Islamique* constitutes a relevant contribution to this endeavour. The main point of strength of the volume is that not only has the author contributed to a «decentring» of the discourse on Pakistan – as the author himself declares in the introduction (p. 14) – but that he has done so in a very accessible style and synthetic form. Michel Boivin is one of the main representatives of a lively school of French scholars at the Centre d'Études de l'Inde et l'Asie du Sud in Paris, whose studies focus on various aspects of South Asian societies. This volume is based on long periods of research conducted by the

8. Some recent examples are: Elisabetta Iob, *Refugees and the Politics of the Everyday State in Pakistan: Resettlement in Punjab, 1947-62*, London & New York: Routledge, 2018; Aasim Sajjad Akhtar, *The Politics of Common Sense. State, Society, and Culture in Pakistan*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018; Naveeda Khan, *Muslim Becoming. Aspiration and Scepticism in Pakistan*, Durham & London: Durham University Press, 2012.

author in the field, mainly in the province of Sindh, especially on Sufism and popular culture.

Various important themes run through this volume. The most important – and the one around which the whole narrative is built – is the relevance of «diversity» as an essential tool for our understanding of Pakistani society. This concept is intended by the author not only as a criticism of the «essentialist» interpretation of many western observers; he also affirms that diversity, and the difficulty of accepting it, constitutes the root of a series of ambiguities in Pakistani collective identity, which the author defines as the territory of the «unsaid». The first of these issues is the plural character of Islamic religion. Paradoxically enough, for a state that calls itself an «Islamic Republic», religion is the most problematic domain. Michel Boivin points in particular to the complex coexistence of various layers of religious identity, both inside and outside the fold of Islam: *sunni/shi'i*, *deobandi/barelwi*, *ismaili/zikri* or *ahmadi*; and, of course, to the different religious communities, like Hindus, Christians, Parses, Sikhs, Buddhists, Baha'i, and Jain.

Obviously, the author's anti-essentialist approach makes direct reference to an interpretive vein that arose in the 1980s and 1990s, and that had in Mohammed Arkoun, among the francophone scholars, and in Aziz al-Azmeh, in the English-speaking world, two influential examples.⁹ However, it is a vision that has been more often applied to Middle Eastern societies than to Pakistan.

The volume is divided into four chapters. The first chapter analyses the management of religious diversity. Here the author explains in detailed, yet easily accessible style, the complex layers of the Pakistani religious scene. Central in Boivin's analysis of the local forms of Muslim belief is the concept of «vernacularisation» of the Islamic tradition; a concept that he borrows from the work of Sheldon Pollock, and that the author develops further in the concluding section. The second chapter focuses on the historical construction of the idea of Pakistan. Moving from the original elaboration of a distinct political identity among the Muslims of India, from Sayed Ahmad Khan to Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the author proceeds to discuss how, after 1947, the Pakistani state has negotiated the place of Islam with the holders of religious authority, in the first place the *'ulama*. The third chapter extends the analysis to the social structures, in particular to those of the rural society. Here, Boivin's contribution is to relate the concepts of *biradari* («brotherhood») and *zat* («caste») with the religious dimension. The author emphasises the impossibility of analysing these forms of hierarchy without taking into consideration their sacralisation. Thus, social stratification and Islam are not conceived by the author as distinct, but related areas. It is important to note that, in the analysis of the Pakistani rural society, the author offers a

9. Mohammed Arkoun, 'L'Islam et les Islams', *Hèrodote*, n. 35, 1984, pp. 19-34; Aziz al-Azmeh, *Islams and Modernities*, New York: Verso Books, 1996.

clear description of the system, without hiding the main aspects of inequality. At the same time, the reader will find a thorough analysis of the origins and social functions performed by the various figures. It is a well-balanced approach, obviously consistent with the Weberian lesson of socio-political study. Something that, unfortunately, we do not always find in other analyses on Pakistan society.

The fourth chapter, which is perhaps the most interesting of the entire volume, brings the discussion made in the preceding chapters to the elaboration of the concept of Islam as a «vernacular culture». The chapter opens with a discussion of the meaning of ethnicity in the Pakistani context, and of its relations with Islam. The author distinguishes the reality of the ethno-linguistic composition of the population from the process of ideological transformation of these identities. In particular, the chapter describes the emergence of sub-national movements from 1947 onwards, focusing in particular on the Pashtuns, and on the role of *pakhtunwali* or tribal code. In the latter part of the chapter, Boivin takes up and expands the concept of vernacularisation, defined as «the process by which agents, in particular the traditional producers and transmitters of a tradition, have appropriated notions or concepts from other linguistic and cultural areas» (p. 163). The author applies this concept to the historical process of Islamisation in the Indian subcontinent, giving ample space to non-*sunni* and popular Islam. Likewise, the author discusses the process of popularisation and syncretism between Islam and Hindu culture under the Muslim power, from the Turkish-Afghan dynasties to the Moghul Empire. Equally interesting is the discussion that the author makes of the role played by local elites during the British *Raj*.

Here, Michel Boivin is able to refer to his own vast knowledge of Islamism and on Sufi cults in Sindh. The reader finds an in-depth, yet intriguing, discussion of the religious rituals at the graves of the Muslim saints of Sindh, that attract large numbers of believers. Rituals such as the visit to the tomb (*ziarat*), the annual celebration of the death of the saint (*urs* or «marriage» to God), and the ecstatic dance (*dhamal*) are described with special attention to the cult of Lal Shahbaz Qalandar of Sehwan Sharif, perhaps the most renowned Sufi saint in the province, and one of the most celebrated in Pakistan. The author concludes the chapter with two very interesting paragraphs dedicated to iconography and material culture, an area that covers a very important space in the Pakistani popular devotion.

The first part refers to the art of drawing sacred paintings on trucks and rickshaws, and to the art of religious posters – known as *poster-e dini* – which are normally sold in *bazaars* and Sufi sanctuaries especially in Sindh and in Punjab. The second paragraph is devoted to the discussion of religious popular music, such as *qawwali*, a genre that has been popularised at international level by Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, and the Sufi poetry or *kafi*.

In conclusion, the book by Michel Boivin is an important contribution to our knowledge of Pakistani society. As the author himself admits,

the volume does not constitute a strictly historical nor a political science analysis. Nevertheless, it may certainly be considered a successful attempt at «decentring» the interpretation on Pakistan. The volume offers an in-depth and accessible analysis of Pakistan society and its religious life «from below». It is recommended reading for any academic interested in South Asia, and the non-specialist reader, who wishes to go beyond the stereotypical and superficial narratives which are frequently offered on Pakistan.