In this sense, the text has a strong argument, is theoretically sophisticated, and is grounded in a remarkable empirical data set.

In conclusion, this is an important and valuable book. Because of the structure of its scholarly argument, the text will be challenging for undergraduates and readers outside of academia. Nonetheless, the text will become an important reference for professional discussions and a signpost for future graduate work on religion in the region.

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Muhammad Qasim Zaman's latest monograph continues his work on the Sunni religious establishment as embodied by traditionally educated religious scholars (see Zaman 2002). The previous study questioned the long-standing view that the 'ulama’ had responded to the challenges of colonialism and the post-colonial nation-state by withdrawing into cloistered traditionalism. Instead, it drew attention to their important role in actively engaging with processes of socio-political transformation, providing an important corrective to the overwhelming attention given to the study of Muslim modernists’ and Islamists’ roles in that regard. Since then, several scholars have also conducted studies of the Sunni ‘ulama’ in their dual roles as agents of change and guardians of tradition, thus showing that religious scholars are important historical and political actors in their own right, warranting further research.

In this latest study, Zaman focuses on the _internal_ complexities of how the Sunni ‘ulama’ (re)produce religious tradition through a repertoire of mutually recognized discursive practices that are brought to bear on, and are at the same time embedded in, specific political and historical contexts. In doing so, he highlights the internally heterogeneous, ambiguous and paradoxical nature of the religious discourses these scholars produce, problematizing their facile categorization as conservative or progressive. He thus aims to "open a new window onto the Muslim religious and public sphere, the debates on social and legal reform that have been taking place in it since the beginning of the twentieth century, and the accompanying contestations both on religious authority and on evolving conceptions of Islam" (p. 3). Zaman’s focus on Sunni internal criticism also takes issue with the views that the critique is necessarily linked to secularism or to liberal interpretations of Islam. Rather, the author explores Islam’s endogenous heritage of critique, and shows how traditionally educated religious scholars _do_ engage critically with the Islamic religious tradition on grounds rooted within that tradition, having in the course of the twentieth century done so with growing explicitness in the face of challenges presented by new religious elites.
modernists and Islamists educated and active outside the religious establishment) and a changing Muslim public sphere, as well as by social and political developments in the colonial and post-colonial state. Moreover, he shows that internal critique has itself become part of the assertion of religious authority among the ‘ulama’, while also having the capacity to engender new conceptions of the Islamic religious tradition. The monograph thus addresses several themes relevant to the study of religion and politics: how Sunni ‘ulama’ assert and contest religious authority within the community of religious scholars, as well as among the lay intellectuals; the politics entailed in the production of religious discourse; the question of agency and how members of the ‘ulama’ are constrained with regard to the religiously grounded arguments and statements they may make, and how such constraints contribute to the ambiguous and often self-contradictory nature of religious discourse; and the impact of shifting political, historical or cultural-geographic contexts, along with the demands these have placed upon religious scholars and how in response they have positioned themselves (or been forced to position themselves) in order to assert their claims to religious authority. In other words, the study delves into the manifold ways in which the ‘ulama’ s (re)production of the Sunni religious tradition is itself profoundly political. And not least, it explores how taking an oppositional stance can potentially serve to both undermine and assert (religious) authority.

The monograph begins with an excellent introduction, in which the author clearly defines the key categories and terms that structure his study, outlines his methodological approach, justifies his selection of case material and sets out the main points of inquiry. The rest of the book comprises two sections. The first sketches the content, rhetoric and ambiguities of the main facets of internal criticism by looking at key debates among members of the ‘ulama’ that focused on three concepts central to the assertion of religious authority and the constitution of the religious tradition – scholarly consensus (ijma’), ijtihad, and the common good (maslaha) – and to each of which Zaman dedicates a chapter. The second section presents case studies that show how Sunni religious scholars deploy these concepts in debates over important Islamic institutions, norms and practices, and how religious authority has been asserted and contested in the playing out of these debates over the course of the last hundred years. The cases focus on high-profile issues – the reform of religious education, the status of women in Islamic law, issues of socioeconomic justice and the use of violence – and analyze the shifting historico-political, national and transnational contexts in which these debates have taken place. Zaman imparts this rich, multilayered and methodologically complex study narrative coherency by structuring it around the contributions of a select few dramatis personae who participated in all these debates in the form of a series of engagements with each other, either face-to-face or through their writings. The combination of intellectual-genealogical and network-analytical approaches allows Zaman to take a perspective that is at once diachronic, tracing out how internal critique has been articulated
in the colonial and post-colonial eras, and geographically comparative, in so far as
the dramatis personae were/are active in the Middle East, South Asia and Europe,
with their mutual engagements on occasion spanning multiple sites. Zaman is thus
able to closely examine how shifting layers of context shape Islamic discourses, the
tensions and ambiguities in Islamic thought that result from this, and the strategies
by which religious scholars are able to contest and articulate claims to (religious)
authority. Moreover, it allows him to trace the circulation of ideas and discursive
practices between scholars of different regions over the course of the twentieth
century, highlighting the cosmopolitan context in which the traditional religious elite
is active, while also accounting for the periodic recurrence of these themes in very
different contexts.

Yet, given the author’s own definition of religious authority as ‘the aspiration,
effort and ability to shape people’s belief and practice on recognizably “religious”
grounds’ (29), the key moment at which authority becomes manifest is when a
scholar’s discourse shapes believers’ views and practices. And in this regard, the
author himself admits that the study’s methodology cannot provide answers. The
reader thus learns much about how members of the ‘ulama’ jockey for scholarly
prestige and recognition, and compete with popular religious thinkers outside the
Sunni establishment (Islamist and modernist) in a battle of arguments, command
over religious sources and intellectual/theological genealogies. One also learns about
the motivations and efforts of Sunni scholars to reshape ideas and practices that
form part of the Islamic tradition; the specific ways in which they draw on Qur’an,
Sunna and classical and contemporary religious texts to bring forth authoritative
theological counter discourses or new modes of argumentation; the importance of
strategic considerations of how a scholar positions himself and his arguments with
respect to his colleagues, rival religious intellectuals, the community of believers or
the local political situation in order to trump competing theological positions; and
the impact of shifting contexts on that discourse, especially the resulting ambiguities
and tensions. However, there is no discussion of how scholars make their purported
authority manifest through the (re)shaping of lived belief and practice. Moreover,
the selection of dramatis personae to represent the Sunni ‘ulama’ is debateable.
Rashid Rida’, who worked as a journalist and was educated outside the al-Azhar
system, and ‘Ubayd Allah Sindhi, a highly controversial figure among the Deobandis,
for example, occupy rather tenuous positions among the ranks of the ‘ulama’ in
the respective religious establishments, and one might question whether they are
suitably representative of the kind of internal criticism that has, according to Zaman,
become common practice among members of the religious establishment. On the
other hand, the selection of thinkers of such controversial scholarly status highlights
the fuzziness (and political nature) of the boundary between the ‘ulama’ proper and
religious elites outside its ranks.
The study is accessibly written with a broader readership of non-specialists in mind, richly detailed and highly nuanced in its narration of the contexts and theological background to the debates discussed. In so far as it provides a wealth of insights into the practices underlying the production of theological discourse among Sunni religious scholars across different historical, political and regional contexts, it is a rewarding read for the specialist in Islamic studies as well as for advanced undergraduates in the field. For the non-specialist it provides a dense but highly readable introduction to the historical background, internal heterogeneity and contextual specificity of some of the twentieth century’s most important religious debates amongst Muslims, and how some of the most prominent Sunni religious scholars of the last century have contributed to these debates and opened new spaces for theological interpretation, or have introduced new modes of argumentation. On a more general level, the study provides a suggestive, theoretically informed inquiry into how the articulation of critique through the deployment of a specific canon of discursive practices plays into experts’ competing claims to authority.

Reference

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