

Title—Islam in South Asia: In Practice

Author—Barbara D. Metcalf

Year—2009

Categories: Islam, Colonialism, Culture, Politics

Place: South Asia

Time: 800-1970

Argument Synopsis:

Metcalf's *Islam in South Asia* is a comprehensive essay collection centered on the practice of Islam in South Asia, with an eye to regional distinctiveness. She notes how the distinctive cultures of South Asia, shaped in large part by the oceanic connections, are a reminder that historical cultural and political regions do not map onto areas defined by today's nation-states. To begin the collection, Metcalf provides an overview of the long history of Islam in South Asia starting with the establishment of an Arab dynasty in the Northwest of the Indian subcontinent by the mid-seventh century. This early dynasty was not particularly interested in conversion, which helped shape the eventual distribution of the Muslim population in the region. The Mughal Empire ruled through the late sixteenth century through the seventeenth century and was the largest Muslim empire during this period. By this period, certain patterns in the distribution of the Muslim population became clear. Throughout most of the subcontinent, Muslims lived widely distributed among non-Muslims with the exceptions of the Northwest and the Northeast. The Mughals continued the patronage of the holy men of Sufi orders, continuing the importance and influence of Sufism in the region. By the early eighteenth century, Mughal power was less centralized in favor of a wide range of regional states. The end of the century was distinctly shaped by the presence of the British East India Company. The 1857 rebellion brought about the end of Company rule, in favor of direct crown rule.

During the colonial period, there was increasing importance that personal identity was linked to public identity as a Muslim or Hindu. The growing association between national culture and religious identity led to conflicting visions of what an independent India would look like. In the lead up to independence, the Muslim League was founded with the goal of being the sole spokesman for Indian Muslims, culminating in the creation of Pakistan. South Asia since 1947 has allowed the opportunity to study Islam in a wide range of political contexts: from democracy to military rule, from a majority status to that of a small minority. Metcalf notes that no single party or organization emerged in independent India to speak for Muslim interests. Many essays included in this collection point to new forms of transnationalism that link the identity issues of diasporas and home communities into reciprocal relationships that tie South Asian Muslims to Muslims of other backgrounds. The collection is organized into five sections that are organized thematically: devotion and praise; holy and exemplary lives; the transmission of learning; guidance, sharia, and law; and belonging. The collection is expansive in its timescale, covering over a millennium.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- Common pattern across national boundaries has been the growth of religiously based nationalisms
- In brutal British response to 1857 mutiny, the British in particular targeted Muslims who were stereotyped as fanatics seeking to restore Mughal rule
- Impossible to overstate the importance of Sufis, both culturally and politically, in the subcontinent