

**Muslim Politics Review**

Vol. 3 No. 1, 2024, 438-442

<https://doi.org/10.56529/mpr.v3i2.315>

## **Book Review**

On the Promise of Piety

***The Promise of Piety: Islam and the Politics of Moral Order  
in Pakistan* by Khan, A.**

**(Cornell University Press, 2024)**

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In an era when the dominant normative view is to confine religion to the private sphere, and when public displays of religious devotion are often perceived as an overabundance of emotion, indicating an absence of rational thought and potentially undermining social stability, an anthropologist's nuanced exploration of Islamic piety deserves social scientists' careful attention.

In *The Promise of Piety*, Arsalan Khan takes us on a journey into the world of Tablighi Jamaat, a global Islamic piety movement that has captured the hearts and minds of millions in Pakistan and beyond. Khan explains how Tablighi Jamaat's practices of *dawat* (preaching) offer a captivating promise of spiritual transformation and moral order in a fragmented modern world. At the heart of Khan's argument lies a provocative claim: that Tablighi Jamaat's vision of piety, rooted in submission to sacred hierarchy, represents a powerful alternative to the sovereign individual of liberal modernity (pp. 22-23). Yet, as Khan gets to the complex landscape of Tablighi Jamaat's ideology and practice, he uncovers a paradox that casts a shadow over the movement's pursuit of transcendence—the specter of patriarchy that molds its gendered

understanding of piety (p. 186). By combining ethnographic details with theoretical acumen, Khan beckons the reader to confront the deep-seated tensions and potentialities that breathe life into Tablighi Jamaat's promise of piety, presenting a multifaceted portrayal of an Islamic movement that simultaneously contests and perpetuates the hierarchies of our modern era.

Khan traces the emergence of Tablighi Jamaat to the early twentieth century when Muslim reformers in British India sought to purify Islam from what they perceived as corrupting influences. The movement's founder, Maulana Muhammad Ilyas, emphasized the importance of embodied practices and cultivating a pious self through *dawat*. Khan explains that *dawat* involves inviting Muslims to the mosque, where they can listen to sermons, perform prayers, and engage in spiritual self-reformation.

Central to Tablighi Jamaat's structure is the "ethics of hierarchy" (p. 5), which Khan describes as a form of relationality based on submission to religious authority. This hierarchy is enacted through ritualized practices of listening and citation (p. 17), which position the movement's elders as models of piety to be emulated. Khan argues that this sacred hierarchy becomes a means for Tablighis to transcend worldly distinctions of caste, class, and ethnicity and to imagine themselves as part of a broader Islamic community.

Khan's book is a significant contribution to the study of Islamic movements and religious practices in Pakistan. Its strength lies in its detailed analysis of how Tablighi Jamaat's conception of Islamic piety is both shaped by and responds to the challenges of modernity. Khan also discusses in detail how the British colonial state's efforts to codify and standardize Islamic law significantly shaped the development of Islamic thought. He writes, "The colonial effort to create a unified and standardized Islamic law helped convert scriptural knowledge into an autonomous and primary source of Islamic authority, severing the ties between scriptural and genealogical forms of authority" (pp. 28-29). It is pertinent to point out whether the British colonial state was solely

responsible for such processes or was a product of classical Islamic scholars, as Khan talks about the precolonial era. For example, the ulama emerged as an independent class after the eleventh century, when an “ulema-state alliance”<sup>1</sup> emerged. In other words, the discussion of colonialism raises a counterfactual question: What if there had been no colonialism? Would there not have been ulama as an independent class, an orthodox interpretation of Islam, and the rise of Islamist parties demanding an Islamic state?

Khan presents Islamic piety practiced among Tablighis as an alternative to liberal-secular modernity. This is a big claim, so serious questions and concerns exist. Three points: Khan offers a noteworthy critique of Western liberalism, but it might be constructive to explore his claims in greater depth to fully appreciate the complexities of the topic. He argues that the sovereign individual, who stands apart and exercises autonomous reason to become an agent for moral order, is a product of the Western liberal-secular framework, while alternative forms of modernity, such as Tablighi Jamaat, enable the Tablighi to stand apart from and above the world to create moral order. This distinction implies that human reason—or the idea of an individual applying reason to create a moral order— belongs solely to the West. It also suggests that the Muslim tradition is primarily concerned with faith or has a hierarchical ethics as shown in the case of Tablighi Jamaat. However, the primacy of reason and rational inquiry has been a significant subject in the Muslim tradition, with debates about causality and rationality among philosophers. For example, Ibn Tufayl's<sup>2</sup> philosophical novel *'Hayy Ibn Yaqzan'* exemplifies the Islamic tradition's rich history of promoting independent reasoning, human dignity, and the primacy of rational inquiry to explore the Divine and establish a moral order. The point is that the role of reason in creating a moral order predates the Enlightenment and Western liberal ideas.

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<sup>1</sup> Kuru 2019

<sup>2</sup> Tufayl, I., & Goodman, L. E. (Trans.) 2009

Second, Khan engages deeply with the works of Talal Asad and Saba Mahmood, emphasizing that "Tablighis see hierarchy as a basis for responsibility and care, not domination and exploitation, and indeed they see their movement in converting a world of domination and exploitation into one based on the responsibility and care that they understand to be intrinsic to Islam and generated in *dawat*" (p. 5). However, it is crucial to clarify that this idea of hierarchical relationality is not a product of Tablighi Jamaat as an alternative to liberal-secular modernity. Instead, this framework was developed by Muslim philosophers after the 11th century. Influential Islamic philosophers such as al-Ghazali, Nasir al-Din Tusi, Rumi, and Jalal al-Din Davani promoted the idea of Islamic piety as hierarchical despite the Quran being an egalitarian book. These philosophers, arguably influenced by Greek philosophy, offered a patriarchal perspective institutionalized across the Ottoman, Timurid, Safavid, and Mughal empires. They believed men were intellectually superior and women should be secluded and obedient wives, while male homosocial bonds were key for spiritual growth. As a result, earlier freedoms for women were lost as gender segregation became seen as necessary for piety. Scholars like Zahra Ayubi<sup>3</sup> (2019) have argued that the texts by these philosophers concern more than just the ethical refinement of an individual; they provide the hierarchy where "elite male-centered individual virtue ethics are the building blocks of ethical society". Furthermore, the military expansion of these empires, combined with their dominant philosophies emphasizing male honor and female seclusion, entrenched gender inequality in the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia, with more egalitarian Muslim sects often facing violent repression. This history helps explain the persistence of patriarchal norms and low female labor force participation in these regions today.

Finally, Khan talks little about ideological struggles and competing notions of piety within Tablighi Jamaat. In 2018, there were reports of an ongoing internal struggle within Tablighi Jamaat, with two rival camps

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<sup>3</sup> Ayubi 2019

fighting for spiritual authority. The conflict is primarily between the followers of Maulana Saad Kandhalvi, the head of Tablighi Jamaat's advisory council based in Nizamuddin, India, and Aalmi Shura, an international advisory council led by Haji Abdul Wahab and based in Raiwind, Pakistan. The conflict appears to be between traditionalists and modernists within the movement. Maulana Saad Kandhalvi is accused of disrespecting scholars and earlier prophets and presenting 'unacceptable' new interpretations of the Quran and Sunnah. His supporters, however, argue that he is trying to modernize the group by eliminating archaic practices that have no roots in the Quran and Sunnah. The main takeaway is that internal conflict suggests differing views on the shared concept of Islamic piety within Tablighi Jamaat. The emergence of modernist ideas challenging the classical ethical framework has led to a schism within the movement, with some members adhering to the traditional understanding of Islamic piety. In contrast, others are more open to reinterpreting certain practices.

Despite these critical reflections, I recommend *The Promise of Piety* to anyone interested in Muslim politics or modern religious subjectivities. Khan's work is a masterful example of the power of ethnographic research to illuminate the complex lived realities of religious communities and to challenge our preconceptions about the role of religion in the modern world. It is a book that deserves to be widely read and debated by scholars of Islam and anthropology, and anyone concerned with the future of religion and politics in a globalized era.

## References

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