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To say that the book “Islam in Pakistan. A history” by the historian Muhammad Qasim Zaman is a perfect antidote to any essentialist vision of (political) Islam would be an understatement. It is a fascinating kaleidoscope of the multiple Islamic trends and orientations that coexisted and confronted each other ever since the “formal” establishment of colonial rule in the Indian subcontinent by the British in 1857. The author’s simple ambition to offer a “broadly illustrative view of Islam in some of its key dimensions” (8) is fulfilled without burdening itself with much theory.

Generally speaking, Pakistan as a state created in the name of Islam, is a brilliant case study of Muslim politics. The staggering diversity of conceptions of Islam and their multifarious articulations in the political sphere are superbly depicted by the author. He adopts an interactionist and comprehensive approach that is undoubtedly the most valuable addition to the existing literature. Zaman definitely has an edge in the mise en scène of the power ratio and of the tense debates between the various contending Islamic actors throughout history, may they be modernist, Islamist, traditionalist or even Sufi. Each of these expressions of Islam has evolved in constant interaction with the other and they all have been shaped by each other (8). One case in point is the often thin margin between the early modernists and the ulama, the religious scholars, in their conceptions of Islam, their education or even their ethics—despite reciprocal contempt and significant disagreements. Thus Zaman does not restrain from highlighting the ambiguities and ambivalence of one trend vis-à-vis the other and the exploration of these grey areas are thoroughly convincing. To achieve this, the author relies on a broad archival material, varied texts and diverse sources in multiple languages such as books and manuscripts written by the modernists or the ulama in Urdu and Arabic, but also government publications, commissions’ reports, letters, official discourses, written statements, cabinet files, proceedings of the courts, etc. Even those feeling familiar with the topic will find this history full of interesting discoveries.

Keywords: Islam, Pakistan, ulama, Islamic modernism, Deobandis, Barelwis
Zaman goes back in history in his first chapter in order to present all the new groups and the more distinct Islamic identities that started appearing in the colonial period until the creation of Pakistan in 1947. Colonial rule had varied effects on Islam in India, and represented both a threat and new possibilities. As a matter of fact, Muslims’ responses to British domination proved to be extremely dynamic despite marked fragmentation. And that “Islamic mosaic” (14) has survived until today despite massive upheavals. Zaman introduces us to the new theological schools such as the Deobandis and the Barelwis, but also the new sects like the Ahadis, not to mention the modernists such as Sayyid Ahmed Khan, the founder of the Aligarh College, or Muhammad Iqbal, the great poet and philosopher considered as the spiritual father of the Pakistani nation. It is these modernists who are the main proclaimed focus of Zaman’s study. The author had already published a book on the ulama as “custodians of tradition” in 2002 and, even though he does grant them significant space in his developments, notably in chapter 3, the modernists are given more light. In the framework of Pakistan, Zaman argues, modernist thought has gradually gone into decline, even though it “has continued to guide official policy on matters relating to Islam, its institutions and its practices” (5). Indeed, modernists have been at the helm of political affairs since the creation of the country but they have notably failed to efficiently regulate Islam.

In the second chapter dedicated to modernists, Zaman delineates the contours of their often harsh debates with their rivals. He describes the challenging reinterpretation of the financial interest (riba) or of the role of the Prophet in the making of the Quran by the famous modernist scholar Fazlur Rahman, and the subsequent backlash from the ulama. The description of the relations of Rahman with the powers that were (whether Ayub Khan in the 1960’s or even Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto while in exile) is also of great interest. What is at stake is nothing less than shaping Pakistanis’ sensibilities through public policies. However, under Bhutto (1971-1977), Islamic modernist thought started declining, a tendency that only intensified under the fundamentalist dictator Zia ul Haq (1977–1988), who started a top-down islamization process. The decline continued even during the subsequent transition to democracy with Benazir Bhutto’s and Nawaz Sharif’s alternate governments (1988–1999), only to know a brief rise under general Pervez Musharraf’s regime (1999–2008). Islamization policies are not the only ones to be blamed for that decline: the fact that modernists often sided with “a governing elite with a tenuous political
legitimacy” (93) might have weakened their initiatives, and so has authoritarianism. And as Zaman argues in his epilogue, the Islamic modernists’ decline also has to do with the lack of proper diffusion strategies of this trend in intellectual arenas or educational institutions.

In his third chapter, Zaman explores the role of the ulama in the State and their interactions with the modernists. From the inception of the country, the ulama wanted to take part in the political process. They fought for their religious expertise to be taken into account and even institutionalized. They proved to be much more flexible, pragmatic and prone to compromise than what is generally thought. And some could even be branded as modernist themselves, like Hanif Nadwi who, amongst others, perceived the Islamic law (sharia) as a set of norms that could evolve according to modern needs. But the more traditionalist ulama had less liking for the independent reasoning (ijtihād) displayed by the modernist initiatives. Generally delegitimized by modernists as obstacles to progress, the ulama tried to undermine some legal reforms with modernist leanings by criticizing the lack of juridical knowledge of the reformers. The minute descriptions of the debates on the marriage and family laws shed light on the power struggle between these groups of actors, each side accusing the other of contravening the injunctions of the Quran and the prophetic tradition. The Islamists, who have also been challenging the modernists, are analysed in chapter 4, with a specific focus on the idea of the sovereignty of God that is the foundation of their idea of the Islamic state and law. The following chapter, dedicated to understanding the (mostly hostile) attitudes against Muslim minorities, namely the Shias and the Ahmadis, highlights the “anxieties of an Islamic identity” (164). Both minorities have been perceived as exerting excessive influence in the religious and political fields and of being over-represented in the army. Both have been suspected of having the potential to derail the implementation of the Islamic laws or to challenge the country’s Islamic identity. Both have also been consistently accused of having more loyalty towards their religious guides than towards their own country. Besides doctrinal issues, Zaman explores the complex (often socio-political) underpinnings of the 1953 and 1974 mobilizations that led to the 1974 constitutional amendment declaring the Ahmadis to be a non Muslim minority. Shias, who have given the nation some of its most prominent politicians and constitute 15% of the population, have been much more difficult to deal with or to defeat than the Ahmadis. And the rise of sectarian tensions illustrates one of the main transformations of Islam in Pakistan. Indeed,
there has been a radicalization of religious identities. Religious boundaries are today much less porous and fluid than they used to be. But ambiguities between the different trends are still very much present: Sufism is arguably one of the most fertile grounds of Muslim politics in Pakistan where the grey areas are manifold between the Sufis and the so called anti-Sufis. Sufism has indeed been a “contested terrain” (195) in Pakistan that has generated much ambivalence. That is obvious in the way some ulama, Islamists or even modernists have appealed to Sufism despite their avowed rejection of some of its main aspects. In his last chapter, Zaman eventually analyses the relations between Islamist radicals and the state and the religious justifications of the use of violence. Zaman depicts the battle of narratives between the radical groups, notably the Pakistani Taliban, and the state. The latter has notably struggled to elaborate an efficient counter-narrative to that of its most dangerous challengers to date. However, Zaman might have failed to see the changing patterns of state patronage: Deobandis seem to have lost ground in the framework of the War on Terror in favour of the more Sufi-oriented Barelwis. And Sufism has indeed been used to elaborate a counter-narrative to extremism. No ethnographic accounts or proper qualitative research are to be found in Zaman’s analysis. It could have given a more vivid and lively flavour to an “Islam in Pakistan” that seems more interested in discourses than practices, in texts than in lived reality. That is the only reservation one could express about what remains an erudite and gripping book about a highly controversial topic.