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Edited by Filippo Osella and Caroline Osella  
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# Islamic Reform in South Asia

*Edited by*  
Filippo Osella  
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Contents

<i>List of Contributors</i>	<i>v</i>
<i>Introduction</i>	<i>xi</i>
Filippo Osella and Caroline Osella	
<b>Part I: Reformist Journeys</b>	
1. The Equivocal History of a Muslim Reformation	3
<i>Faisal Devji</i>	
2. Islamic Reform and Modernities in South Asia	26
<i>Francis Robinson</i>	
3. Reform Sufism in South Asia	51
<i>Pinna Werbner</i>	
4. Breathing in India, c. 1890	79
<i>Nile Green</i>	
<b>Part II: Debating Reform</b>	
5. The Enemy Within: Madrasa and Muslim Identity in North India	117
<i>Arshad Alam</i>	
6. Islamism and Social Reform in Kerala, South India	139
<i>Filippo Osella and Caroline Osella</i>	
7. Piety as Politics Amongst Muslim Women in Contemporary Sri Lanka	171
<i>Farzana Haniffa</i>	
8. The Changing Perspectives of Three Muslim Men on the Question of Saint Worship over a 10-Year Period in Gujarat, Western India	202
<i>Edward Simpson</i>	
9. Women, Politics and Islamism in Northern Pakistan	230
<i>Magnus Marsden</i>	

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Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

iv / Contents

10. Violence, Reconstruction and Islamic Reform: Stories from the Muslim ‘Ghetto’	255
<i>Rubina Jasani</i>	

**Part III: Everyday Politics of Reform**

11. Reading the Qur’an in Bangladesh: The Politics of ‘Belief’ Among Islamist Women	283
<i>Maimuna Huq</i>	
12. Cracks in the ‘Mightiest Fortress’: Jamaat-e-Islami’s Changing Discourse on Women	317
<i>Irfan Ahmad</i>	
13. Islamic Feminism in India: Indian Muslim Women Activists and the Reform of Muslim Personal Law	346
<i>Sylvia Vatuk</i>	
14. Disputing Contraception: Muslim Reform, Secular Change and Fertility	383
<i>Patricia Jeffery, Roger Jeffery and Craig Jeffrey</i>	

**Part IV: Reform, State and Market**

15. Cosmopolitan Islam in a Diasporic Space: Foreign Resident Muslim Women’s Halaqa in the Arabian Peninsula	421
<i>Attiya Ahmad</i>	
16. Jamaat-i-Islami in Bangladesh: Women, Democracy and the Transformation of Islamist Politics	445
<i>Elora Shehabuddin</i>	
17. Secularism Beyond the State: The ‘State’ and the ‘Market’ in Islamist Imagination	472
<i>Humeira Iqtidar</i>	
<i>Index</i>	504

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vi / List of Contributors

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## List of Contributors / vii

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viii / List of Contributors

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## List of Contributors / ix

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## Introduction

Filippo Osella and Caroline Osella\*

The authors in this volume discuss contemporary Islamic reformism in South Asia in some of its diverse historical orientations and geographical expressions, bringing us contemporary ethnographic perspectives against which to assess claims about processes of reform and about trends such as ‘Islamism’ and ‘global Islam’.

The very use of terminology and categories is itself fraught with the dangers of bringing together what is actually substantially different under the same banner. While our authors have often found it necessary, perhaps for the sake of comparison or to help orient readers, to take on terms such as ‘reformist’ or ‘Islamist’, they are not using these as terms which imply identity—or even connection—between the groups so named, nor are they reifying such categories. In using such terms as shorthand to help identify specific projects, we are following broad definitions here in which ‘Islamic modernism’ refers to projects of change aiming to re-order Muslims’ lifeworlds and institutional structures in dialogue with those produced under colonial and post-colonial modernity; ‘reformism’ refers to projects whose specific focus is the bringing into line of religious beliefs and practices with what are held to be the core foundations of Islam, by avoiding and purging out innovation, accretion and the intrusion of ‘local custom’; and where ‘Islamism’ is a stronger position, which insists upon Islam as the heart of all institutions, practice and subjectivity—a privileging of Islam as the frame of reference by which to negotiate every issue of life; ‘orthodoxy’ is an interesting term, and is used in this collection ethnographically, according

\* We thank Edward Simpson, Benjamin Soares, Leila Zaki, John Mitchell, Kostas Retsikas, Magnus Marsden, Simon Coleman, Irfan Ahmad and Francis Robinson for commenting on this Introduction. Responsibility for the ideas expressed herein remains ours alone.

xii / Introduction

to its specific meaning in contexts in which individual authors work—in some ethnographic locales the term may be used to refer to the orthodoxy of Islamist reform, while in others it is used to disparage those who do not heed the call for renewal and reform.

‘Reformism’ is particularly troublesome as a term, in that it covers broad trends stretching back at least 200 years, and encompassing a variety of positions which lay more or less stress upon specific aspects of processes of renewal; still, it is useful in helping us to insist upon recognition of the differences between projects named as—and such contemporary obsessions about—‘political Islam’, ‘Islamic fundamentalism’, ‘revivalism’, and so on. Authors here generally follow local usage in the ways in which they describe the movements discussed (thus, Kerala’s Mujahid movement claims itself as part of a broader *Islahi*—renewal—trend and is identified here as ‘reformist’).<sup>1</sup> But while broad terms are used, what the papers are actually involved in doing is addressing the issues of how specific groups deal with particular concerns. Thus, not, ‘What do reformists think about secular education?’, but, ‘What do Kerala’s Mujahids in the 2000s think? How has this shifted from the position taken in the 1940s? How does it differ from the contemporary position of opposing groups? And how is it informed by the wider socio-political climate of Kerala?’ The essays here powerfully demonstrate the historical and geographical specificity of reform projects, and act as a challenge to discourse structured through popular mainstream perspectives (such as ‘clash of civilizations’), where such embeddedness is ignored.

With the terms ‘reform’ and ‘reformism’, then, we are not implying a Weberian teleology of modernization, and concomitant processes of rationalization and disenchantment that, spurred by a middle class vanguard, would lead to an inevitable turn towards scriptural Islam and the abandonment of ‘superstitions’. Taking ‘modernity’ here as a folk category—entailing an ambivalent relation with ‘tradition’ and an orientation towards ‘progress’ in the present and future (following Osella and Osella 2006), we refer instead to the outcomes of complex articulations and intersections between long-term processes of religious renewal and the specific configurations of the political and economy shaping social relations in colonial and post-colonial South Asia. So, the apparent ‘protestantization’ of Islam taking shape in nineteenth century India is as much the upshot of debates concerning religious practice animating Islam throughout its history (Robinson, this

<sup>1</sup> We do not find any of our authors here discussing Islamism in terms of *salafism*; while individual papers discuss the deeply problematic term *wah’habism*.

volume), as it is a reaction to public critiques of Muslims and Islam moved by Christian missionaries and colonial administration (Green 2011; Reetz 2006). Transformations thus engendered—by no means limited to South Asian Islam (see for example Chatterjee 1993; Osella and Osella 2001; Van der Veer 2001)—are neither linear and predictable, nor circumscribed to self-styled ‘reformists’, as testified, for instance, by a generalized enthusiastic adoption of new means of communication (Green 2011), a concern about (religious and secular) education (Robinson 2001; Zaman 1999), demands for greater individual responsibility (Sanyal 1996) and wider interrogations about relationships between Muslim self and non-Muslim other. ‘Customary’ Islam—the realm of devotional practices broadly associated to sufism and veneration of saints—does not simply wither away to the advantage of a rationalized, or disenchanted Islam, but, as argued by Nile Green, from the nineteenth century onwards we witness a ‘pluralization of types of Islam available, each of which was perpetuated and sustained through its particular appeal to different sections of the population’ (2011:43). While there might be difficulties in maintaining a close fit between religious practice and class status—middle-class Pakistanis, for instance, continue to approach living sufi saints and to shift between orientations and practices (Ewing 1997; Werbner 2003)—sufism and the veneration of Muslim saints have not disappeared with the advent of modernity. To the contrary, some have proved adept at engaging with the demands of modern life and with engendering reform (see for example Ewing 1997; Green 2011; McGilvray 2011; Rozario 2011; Werbner 2003).

Insisting on the particular histories of specific reformist trajectories, as this volume does, has further import, in that it unsettles the well-rehearsed argument that religion and politics are, for Muslims, fused and inseparable. Recent research strongly suggests that impulses towards the ‘Islamization’ of the state are not simply self-generated within Islam itself, but emerge within the context of wider political events and debates. While Humeira Iqtidar (2010) and Elora Shehabuddin (2008) have charted connections between Islamist organizations and left-wing politics in Pakistan and Bangladesh respectively, Irfan Ahmad (2009a) has argued that it was the very conditions of the colonial state in India, with its unprecedented reach into the lives of colonial subjects, which propelled Maududi, the founder of the Jama’at-e-Islami, to theorize the need for an Islamic state. All three of these authors stress that reformism, in some of its organized forms, has proved open to substantial transformations, allowing wider socio-political processes to shift its strategies and goals, including moves towards participation in secular democratic processes (Ahmad 2009b).

xiv / Introduction

The articles are written at a time when employees of Euro-American state agencies appear at academic conferences whenever ‘Islam’ or ‘Muslims’ are discussed and when academics themselves have been asked to contribute directly to the so-called war on terror, for instance by spying on their Muslim students or by embedding an explicit critique of radicalism into Islamic Studies degree programmes. Academics have been called upon to produce research that would help governments and security agencies to discern ‘good Muslims’ from ‘bad Muslims’ and research funding has been diverted towards this (see Houtman 2006; Keenan 2006, 2007; cf. Appadurai 2006; Devji 2005; Hirschkind and Mahmood 2002; Mamdani 2004). What we notice of these programmes is that they generally entail a malicious refusal to acknowledge the role of Western governments’ aggressive foreign policy in producing the very thing which these governments most fear. This is part of a wider reluctance to address an issue which is animating debates among Muslims in South Asia and beyond: the role of Western ‘neo-colonialism’ or ‘neo-imperialism’ (in the terms commonly used by Indian Muslims) in what appears to many as to be deliberate—and overtly Islamophobic—attempts to undermine Muslim religion, society and culture (see for example Morey and Yaqin 2011).

In many calls for research, reformism, Islamism and radicalism are pulled together and presented as though generated exclusively from within Islam itself, perhaps as an inevitable expression of a religious tradition which is essentially inimical—and militantly opposed—to modernity (see for example Giddens 1999: 4–5). But not all Muslims are charged with being non-modern, conservative or opposed to ‘the West’ in the same way: the discourse framing calls for research presents us with a scenario in which we can (and must) identify ‘good’ and ‘bad’ Muslims. (A January 2012 search of the UK social science funding agency the ESRC using keywords ‘Islam’ and ‘radicalization’ threw up thirty funded projects.) It is here that we discern an unfortunate overlap between anti-terror rhetorics and a long tradition of sociological research on Islam.

In South Asia as elsewhere (see for example Otayek and Soares 2007) much ethnographic work celebrates sufi-inspired forms of Islam as tolerant, plural, authentic, and so on, against a maligned Other of reformist Islam. The latter is often regarded as a threat to what are argued to be culturally specific forms of South Asian popular Islam (see for example Ahmad 1981 and the following debate between Robinson 1983, 1986; Minault 1984 and Das 1984; see also Roy 2005). Reform is understood to embody practices

which are either alien to the majority of South Asian Muslims, or altogether external to South Asian traditions (see for example Gaborieu 1989<sup>2</sup>). Islamic reformism here appears almost as a mirror image of Hindu fundamentalism: polarizing identities and disrupting inclusiveness and religious toleration, but, unlike its Hindu counterpart, sinisterly not home-grown. It is of little surprise, then, if anthropologists and sociologists have paid little attention to the complex relationships and debates between ‘reformists’ and ‘traditionalists’ (for notable exceptions see Alam 2010; Blank 2001; Ewing 1997; Gardner 1995; Green 2011; Hansen 1999; Marsden 2005; Simpson 2006; Van der Veer 1992; Verkaaik 2004). Instead they have concentrated mostly on the study of popular religious practices—in particular, sufism and saints’ shrine worship (Roy 2005; see for example essays in edited collections by Ahmad 1981; Ahmad and Reilfeld 2004; Troll 1989; Waseem 2003; Werbner and Basu 1998; see also Bayly 1992; Bertocci 2006; Ewing 1997; Werbner 2003). A recurrent theme in these studies is a putative opposition between sufism’s syncretism or hybridity (cf. Assayag 2004; Van der Veer 1994 for attempts to move beyond syncretism), or what is more generally claimed as sufism’s cultural sensitivity and pluralism (Werbner 2003; cf. Ewing 1997; Mayaram 1997) positioned against what are characterized as the essentialist and purifying logics of Islamic reformism (see Anjum 2007 for a critical review of these tendencies in anthropology).

This opposition between (good, authentic) sufi-inspired popular practices and (bad, inauthentic) reformism is extremely unhelpful—if not altogether wrong—on a number of counts.<sup>3</sup> First, it naively suggests a tension between ‘little’ (read popular) and ‘great’ (read *ashraf* for scriptural) traditions—a theory long discredited with reference to Hinduism (see e.g. Fuller 1992: 24–28) and Christianity (see e.g. Stewart 1991). Such a dichotomy does not bear relation to South Asian Muslims—‘traditionalists’ and ‘reformists’ alike—close appeals to scriptural traditions to guide practice. Second, it assumes ‘reformism’ and ‘traditionalism’ to be substantial categories, rather than provisional categories which are always being produced discursively—and rhetorically—in the context of public debates

<sup>2</sup>Cf. debates, following Geertz (1960), between Hefner (1985), Woodward (1988), Bowen (1989), Beatty (1996) and Howell (2001) on Indonesian ‘syncretism’.

<sup>3</sup>While the ‘bad’ Muslims (Islamists) are the same across the academic and state configurations, the ‘good’ Muslim in the sociological record—the sufi-inspired follower of ‘syncretic’ practice and local ‘custom’—is quite different from what would be the ‘good’ Muslim for Western governments. We will return to this point.

xvi / Introduction

(Asad 1986; Soares 2005; Eickelman and Piscatori 1996; Eickelman and Salvatore 2004). Of course, in public debate between groups, Muslims themselves use such antinomian labelling as a political tool. But in practice we find—unsurprisingly—doctrinal continuities, overlaps and category-blurring between sufism and Islamic ‘reformism’ (see, for example, Metcalf 1982 and 2009; Sanyal 1996; Reetz 2006; Green 2005; cf. Kresse 2007). The papers here also confirm that ideological positions are negotiated by and between *ulema* (religious scholars) and ordinary Muslims alike and are constantly subject to modifications. It is most helpful to keep in mind the idea of Islam as a discursive tradition (Asad 1986; Zaman 2002). Third, it insists on the particularism of certain practices which, in fact, are not at all particular to South Asian ‘popular’ Islam and are in no way specifically South Asian, but are found right across Muslim societies (see for example Das 1984; Manger 1998; Otayek and Soares 2007). Fourth, it attributes such practices with fluidity, negotiation and openness, while reformism is characterized as closed, rigid and dogmatic. Several papers in this collection show how reformism—with its stress on *ijtihad* (independent reasoning), and reasoned interpretation and discussion—tends to open up rather than close down debate and can sometimes produce new and unexpected possibilities of interpretation (see for example Ahmad 2009b).

Finally, academic upholding of an ideologically weighted opposition between ‘syncretic sufism’ and ‘reformism’ plays into the hands of those political forces who argue that reformism is a recent and external addition to South Asian Islam which needs to be purged back out or denounced as false consciousness. Without insinuating that academics ‘are manipulating ideas to serve extra-academic interests’ (Das 1984: 299), we note nevertheless a worrying tendency in the way substantially different traditions of reformism are all lumped together into one reified category which is then all too often inaccurately shorthand as ‘*wah’habism*’<sup>4</sup> and branded as extremist if not altogether demonized as terrorist.<sup>5</sup> In the Indian context, we are faced on the one hand with the alleged foreignness of reformism; and on the

<sup>4</sup>This move is, of course, not new: as early as 1857, Muslims accused of being the ringleaders of insurgency were routinely branded by colonial power as dangerous ‘*wah’habis*’ (Robinson 1993; Hermansen 2000; Ansari 2005).

<sup>5</sup>See Faisal Devji’s critique of attempts to draw connections between Islamism, ‘*wah’habism*’ and terrorism (2005), and G.P. Makris’ discussion of how terminology tends to be either ‘emotionally loaded’ or ‘based on questionable socio-political assumptions’ (2007: 193). See also Ayesha Jalal’s discussion of transformations of notions of *jihad* in South Asia (2008).



other, with reformist insistence on the purification of un-Islamic elements (innovations/local adaptations) from practice. This leaves contemporary Indian Muslims, who cannot but be aware of reformist discourse, in an impossible double-bind: faced with a choice between being charged as ‘bad Muslims’ if they ignore the call to reform or as ‘bad Indians’ if they choose to follow reform. Mis-characterizations of popular Islam as essentially localized and containing hangovers from pre-conversion eras also allow Hindu revivalist organizations to argue that, deep down, popular Islam contains strong Hindu elements and that, hence, Indian Muslims can (and should) eventually be won back to Hinduism.

The ethnographic articles in this volume move away from facile—and obviously dangerous—generalizations, opting instead to build up on a historiography of South Asian Islam which has explored sensitively and extensively the emergence of various strands of reformism in the context of the specific political and religious circumstances of nineteenth-century British India. However, while historians have focused on formal or organized Islamic reform movements (see for example Metcalf 1982; Robinson 2001; Sikand 2002; Troll 1978; for a comprehensive overview see Reetz 2006), less attention has been paid either to regional or informal Islamic reformism (see for example Simpson 2006 for coastal Gujarat; Miller 1992 for Kerala) or to popular responses to the activities and appeals of the reformist *ulema* (Jones 2008; cf. Mayaram 1997; Minault 1998). The volume as a whole works to show how debates between ‘reformist’ and ‘traditionalist’ Muslims produce shifts in practice and work to redefine the focus of ‘reform’ and ‘anti-reform’ alike, while reminding us that, even if Muslims themselves work with a sharp binary between ‘reform’ and its other(s), this opposition is a political device and practice is always far more complex, as people reason, negotiate, compromise and shift over time.

Several contributors to this volume are also in critical engagement with recent studies which, apparently stressing the uniqueness to Muslim experience, might over-privilege the coherence and disciplinary power of contemporary piety movements (in particular, Hirschkind 2006; Mahmood 2004 but see also Brenner 1996; Deeb 2006; Henkel 2007; for critiques see Schielke 2009, 2010; Simon 2009). Magnus Marsden explores ways in which outspoken Chitrali women use their eloquence—in a context where positive value is attributed to plain speaking—to challenge both reformist and traditionalist orthodoxy. Marsden draws our attention to both the scepticism and disenchantment of some with the region’s Islamicization and

xviii / Introduction

the ways in which the ‘men of piety’ find themselves moderating their self-presentation. Maimuna Huq considers the tension amongst Bangladeshi Jama’at-e-Islami university-going women activists between a simple reproduction versus a creative interpretation of the organization’s own vision of Islam. In both Marsden and Huq’s papers, as also (and very carefully and self-consciously so) amongst the Muslim feminists discussed by Sylvia Vatuk, *ijtihad*—promoted in reformist discourse—fosters critical stances. Edward Simpson and Rubina Jasani, writing about very different Indian Gujarati Muslim communities, both stress the complex and contingent nature of people’s engagement with (reformist and not) Islam. While Jasani describes pragmatism and scepticism, Simpson offers us a study of the same three men over 10 years, which clearly shows the shifts in their opinions and practices and the ways in which wider factors impinge upon the latter. This leads Simpson to warn against privileging religion as the principal—or perhaps unique—foundation for Muslim identity and practice.

Muslim/Islamic exceptionalism is also contested in Francis Robinson’s contribution, where he reminds us that South Asian Muslims’ reformism—in all its forms—expresses one historically specific engagement with modernity. Robinson reminds us that reform is not recent, having roots in the deep Islamic past and already existing in formalized form in the eighteenth century. Pnina Werbner’s contribution meanwhile uses ethnography to unsettle assumptions that Sufism can be assimilated to ‘traditionalism’ and pitted against impulses towards reform and revival, by giving us a nuanced account of the modern and flourishing contemporary Naqshbandi movement of the saint Zindapir (d. 1999), a sufi order which builds upon Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi’s (d. 1625) programme for the transformation of self and society, a framework which has flowed through and outwards from the Punjab and Sindh from the sixteenth century to date. Nile Green and the Osellas consider the wider modern context that underpins the emergence and development of contemporary styles of reformism. Green is concerned with tracing the import of colonial shifts towards a novel discourse on breathing, meditation and the body. ‘Reform’ produced the Yogi and the Sufi both as authentic indigenes and as representatives of newly communalized communities. The Osellas discuss the rich trajectories of Kerala’s reformism, which encompass a history of links to the Arab world; 1920s and 1930s agitations to break with the nineteenth century colonial past; Kerala’s famed 1950s post-independence social activism; and a pan-Indian post-1980s religious revivalism. As these essays make clear, reform

and the production of Muslim identities alike clearly emerge as deeply embedded in local histories and political formations, and in critical tension with Islamic reformism's universalistic orientation.

Faisal Devji troubles smooth narratives of displacement and change, by tracing complex threads at play in post-reform worlds. He uses careful consideration of the Aligarh Movement and of two Urdu novels to alert us to the presence of the other within the same, and to the conditions of possibility for the emergence of nostalgia for the world lost. He suggests some ways in which these desires continue to call to certain subjects, and are enacted through aestheticized acts of consumption and in indirect forms such as poetry or non-verbal interactions. Devji also sensitises us to the ways in which gendering and social class need to be held account of—in more subtle ways than the usual manner of acknowledging 'location'—by showing us that the double imperative to speak and to be silent about the past is played out upon the bodies of and worlds of Muslim women. There is also always potentially a multiple audience for any debate: the self, which is the object of reform; the 'unreformed' Muslim; alternative styles of reformism (for example, Tablighi versus Jama'at-e-Islami); the non-Muslim other; those in power (for example, the state, potential funders, imperial power). Many essays explore the fact that while an imagined 'global Islam' may act as one referent for specific projects of reform, actual lived relationships with other local communities are equally salient. Arshad Alam discusses the narrow orientation of two north Indian *madrasas*, concerned primarily to train students in reproducing sectarian differences between Bareilwis and Deobandis. Non-Muslims are here presented as peripheral—even irrelevant—to reformists' concerns. Farzana Haniffa makes her focus the relations between non-Muslims and reformist Muslims in Sri Lanka. Here, as in India, Muslim experience of being consistently marginalized as an alien other (cf. Hansen 2007) can accelerate reformists' urges to draw close to the imagined community of the global *umma*. Such processes of repudiation, abjection and attempts at recuperation may have unintended political consequences. Haniffa explores how processes of crafting the self-consciously pious Muslim female subject are working to recast the ethnic identity of 'Muslim' in a manner which produces it as exclusive of ethnic others. Attiya Ahmad's essay on South Asian female residents in the Gulf states and their involvement in Islamic study circles returns us to the ambivalence which Simpson and Devji have explored, by reminding us of the inevitably dialogic nature of the self. She also notes that the

xx / Introduction

eschatological sensibility and concern of pious reformist women is still—despite Mahmood's work being widely read—not being taken properly into account in analysis, which generally prefers to look elsewhere and to seek instrumental or sociological 'explanations' (a point also made in Sadaf Ahmad's recent careful ethnography of Pakistan's Al-Huda women's movement, 2009). Yet this does not lead her to isolate 'religiosity', as she also directs us towards concerns in these women's lives such as the precariousness of living in diaspora.

If reformism is not a disembedded universal, nor is it endowed with the unfettered agency so evidently dreaded by its many critical commentators. Elora Shehabuddin discusses the interesting process by which one of the apparently most ideologically robust of reformist organizations—the Jama'at-e-Islami—in practice makes compromises, shifts position and offers pragmatic concessions which take it away from its own avowed policy fundamentals (all this, too, in the Muslim majority nation of Bangladesh). Irfan Ahmad also studies Jama'at-e-Islami (here, in India) and shows us how the founder Maududi's original thoughts on women are not unequivocally antifeminist. While Maududi is, Ahmad argues, 'neopatriarchal', he also, for the first time, considers women as individuals and opens up Islamist activism to them. This paves a pathway for later Jama'at activists to make some radical ideological moves and for the movement as a whole to shift position on 'women's issues' over time. Ahmad argues strongly that Islam has no essence, hence that non-patriarchal readings of Islam are plausible, and adds that to impose a blanket label of 'right-wing' on all Islamist movements is misleading. We are also reminded by Humeira Iqtidar that political action directed towards the transformation of the state might no longer be the sole referent for supporters and militants of Islamist organizations such as Jama'at-e-Islami. In present-day Pakistan, Iqtidar argues, the neo-liberal rolling back of the state and a growing disaffection with both politics and the state machinery have created the conditions for the emergence of novel Islamic subjectivities produced by everyday engagements with the market and with processes of capital accumulation.

Patricia Jeffery, Roger Jeffery and Craig Jeffrey reiterate the claim that we cannot assume slavish conservatism among *ulema* or followers, focusing on one issue which has been the subject of enormous anti-Muslim polemics: contraception. They argue that 'Islamic doctrine' and clerical pronouncements alone provide a poor basis for interpreting Muslims' fertility behaviour in contemporary India, while also showing that the *ulema*

do not propose rigid or unchanging demands on Muslims, but negotiate and shift position in their practices of reasoned interpretation. Indeed, reformist *ulema* pronouncements may sometimes urge ordinary Muslims themselves to be less uncompromising. Sylvia Vatuk returns us to a focus on that emerging phenomenon of a new breed of Muslim women ‘scholar activists’ who are, she shows, seriously and critically studying the foundational texts of their religion in order to challenge received wisdom. In calling for reform of India’s Muslim Personal Law, they prefer the authority of the Qur’an rather than either the Indian Constitution or the ‘human rights’ discourse which guides Indian secular feminists’ campaigns for women’s rights (cf. Menski 2003). We are then once more pointed towards the multi-vocal and complex nature of Islamic debate, and also reminded, as we engage with Vatuk, Ahmad and Shehabuddin in this volume, that women’s relationships to Islam do not, as Bautista (2008) reminds us, necessarily follow the ‘Egyptian piety model’. Much less do they conform to the imagined homogenised un-hyphenated ‘Muslim woman’ of discourse, as identified by Cooke (2007), but are enormously varied, with some significant arenas of female religious engagement—for example the domestic—still waiting to be brought into the discussion (Peshkova 2009). Meanwhile, we note that the question of the ways in which projects of Islamic reform work upon men as gendered subjects, re-shaping masculinities, remains another open and interesting strand for future research (Samuel 2011).

Finally, we turn to discuss this volume in the context of Mahmood’s critique of knee-jerk secularism (secularity), and the ways in which it acts in wider society and among academics alike as a disciplining mechanism prescribing the limits of ‘religion’, the preferred aesthetics of religiosity and, indeed, the very existence of a stand-alone category cordoned off as ‘the religious’ (Mahmood 2006). Academic secularism insists upon a narrow understanding of ‘proper religion’ or ‘religion in its proper place’ as a privatized and interiorized question of spiritual connection. It is no surprise, then, if academics have shown an approving bias for South Asian mystic sufi styles of devotionism and an anxiety about reformist, and especially Islamist religiosity and projects of public engagement. Our position here is to urge a more nuanced approach towards all forms of reformism and to their reception in practice. Without privileging religiosity over other experiences of the everyday—eventually reducing complex social relations and subjectivities always and necessarily to specific religious orientations

and practices (Gilsenan 1990; Schielke 2009; Soares and Osella 2009)—we would hope for academic commentators on South Asian Islam to make a reflexive turn which would press them to avoid romanticizing an imagined ‘local’ and to stop framing their understandings in terms of moral or aesthetic judgements, while also refraining from assuming instrumentalism or pragmatism, rather than allowing for sincerity and giving due weight to Muslims’ projects of piety and self-transformation (cf Das 2010). Such moves also resonates with what Julius Bautista (2008) identifies as a potential within studies of Islam for scholars from outside the Western liberal tradition to liberate themselves from academic dependency. Bautista notes that Mahmood’s most interesting legacy may be her work towards what Chakrabarty called for as the ‘provincializing of Europe’ and the ways in which she thereby “embeds Islamic thinking as a source of metatheoretical insight” (p. 82). We wait with interest the possible emergence of new forms of scholarship given heart by such possibilities.

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xxiv / Introduction

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xxvi / Introduction

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xxviii / Introduction

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