

Afiya S. Zia

Faith and Feminism in Pakistan: Religious Agency or Secular Autonomy?

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Quote: "Zia considers pursuing Muslim women's rights within an Islamic framework not only futile but dangerous."

Although the subtitle of Afiya S. Zia's *Faith and Feminism in Pakistan: Religious Agency or Secular Autonomy?* sets the tone of the book, its punctuation serves merely as a rhetorical expression--as Zia has already settled for the latter. She argues that scholarship critical of the war on terror and of the secular rights-based agenda to emancipate Muslim women has in fact seriously curtailed prospects for Pakistani women's liberation. She calls such scholarship "postsecular" studies. A key aspect of "postsecular" studies is that they show Muslim women as agents who actively engage in reinterpreting Islamic teachings to empower themselves and pursue piety. However, Zia contends that even liberal readings of Islam cannot liberate women. She considers pursuing Muslim women's rights within an Islamic framework not only futile but dangerous: it hinders secular feminists' efforts to emancipate Muslim women from the misogyny of their religion, and downplays the role of "religious militancy and conservatism" that often violently usurp "all secular space and expressions in Muslim contexts" (2). Zia advocates seeking Pakistani women's liberation (and that of Muslim women in general) through a secular rights-based framework, a standpoint that defines the limits and the problematic of this book.

The book comprises seven chapters, in addition to an introduction and conclusion. The introduction begins with the statement that Pakistan is one of the last three countries where poliomyelitis is still endemic although preventable. Indeed, cases have risen since 2014, especially in the northern tribal areas of the country. Zia holds "religious militants" responsible for the persistence of the disease, as they "resisted the vaccination programme, terming it an un-Islamic practice and believing it to be an international conspiracy to sterilise Muslims" (1). She also mentions that in 2012 over a dozen Lady Health Workers (LHWs) who were administering polio vaccines to children in poorer communities were killed. In chapter 3, Zia describes the LHWs program as an example of "secular autonomy." She notes that Benazir Bhutto's government started the LHWs project to address women's reproductive health needs, particularly in inaccessible rural areas. When Bhutto was assassinated, the LHWs staged protests, demanding higher wages and that the program be continued. In September 2010, the Supreme Court of Pakistan ordered that the workers should be paid minimum wage. Although the deputy attorney pleaded that the LHWs were contractual

workers and were not entitled to the rights they were demanding, the Chief Justice reasoned that because the name of the program included the word "Workers," it should be interpreted according to the International Labor Organization convention. Since the Court "chose to interpret the case of the LHWs in this frame rather than any Islamic provision or indeed, cultural specific code or ethos" (76), Zia considers it "a performance of gendered secular virtues" (75).

The program encountered severe setbacks between 2006 and 2009, once the Taliban invaded the Swat valley and the Himalayan region of Pakistan. The Taliban issued *fatwas* (religious edicts) on the radio to kidnap LHWs, forcefully marry them, or even kill them, because the workers were transgressing religious gender norms by traveling "unaccompanied in the streets like men" and because "family planning, contraception and sex education promote 'vulgarity,' 'obscenity' and encourage extramarital sex" (78). Zia argues that some mainstream Islamists and religious fundamentalists share the Taliban's vision of the world; thus, to situate violence perpetrated in the name of Islam "as a crime-committed by individuals . . . is dangerous. Such a defensive stance defuses the criminal act as an imperative of a 'broader discourse'" (79). However, Zia admits that "non-fundamentalist" Islamic groups and Muslim scholars support polio vaccination and the use of contraceptives. They "have reached 'a consensus that the Muslim Ummah faces a serious problem of persistent polio that threatens all Muslim children . . . crippled children lead to a crippled Muslim Ummah'" (81). Yet she still finds the language of these scholars "concerning," because "polio vaccines are sanctioned by the clergy and therefore, suitable (*halal* or legitimate) for Muslims" (81).

Zia's arguments regarding the LHWs project affirm a broad (and uncritical) secular/religious dichotomy. Although both the frameworks she discusses ("secular" and "Islamic") seek to promote polio vaccination, she does not take this as an occasion to examine their overlap and convergence. Rather, she herself sanctions one and condemns the other. One might ask instead: Can one draw a neat boundary between the secular and the religious realms? Second, to argue that violence perpetrated in the name of Islam is part of a "broader discourse" risks essentializing Islam itself as a violent religion. Finally, nowhere in her discussion does Zia mention the reason why the Taliban resisted the vaccination campaign, namely, the fake polio vaccination campaign that was carried out in the northern areas of Pakistan so that the CIA could hunt and kill Osama bin Laden. Only in the concluding chapter does Zia acknowledge, "The Bin Laden raid and capture in northern Pakistan has definitely contributed to a different kind of political mistrust of the routine health campaign and is unconscionable. But it does not explain or condone the historic and simultaneous oppositional strategies and violence meted out against women community workers by religious clergy and/or militants" (182). Although Zia insists such violence is not simply due to the bin Laden assault, one must yet ask why the northern areas of Pakistan never saw this kind of "religious" violence in the past. More directly, how can this analysis ignore that during the Cold War the CIA built camps along the borders of Afghanistan and Pakistan to train men (now called the Taliban) to weaken the Soviet Union? Zia critiques "postsecular" scholars but ignores such aspects of global politics that remain vital for understanding the contemporary rise of religious discourses in Pakistan and around the world.

Chapter 1 begins with a brief summary of the literature that situates Islam (especially Islamic law) as oppressive to women and minorities. From a secular feminist standpoint, "it is futile to pursue the standard pieties that some adherents to Islam repeat in order to justify inequalities" (24). Thus they simply advocate "for the reform of Islamic laws and faith-based policies towards secular principles and equality of all . . . to the total repeal of such laws and an

adherence to international human rights tenets instead" (24). From this secularist stance, she observes that it was during the military dictatorship of General Zia ul Haq (1977-88)--who was considered a "US-sponsored dictator" and encouraged militant Islamists (the *mujahideen*) to fight the Soviets in Afghanistan (28)--that women became the direct target of a misogynist state. To combat his purported "Islamisation" project (27), the Women's Action Forum (WAF) "made a conscious decision to take on the identity of a secular organization" (28). Subsequently, however, in the 1990s, debates and research projects such as Women Living Under Muslim Laws emerged to seek women's rights within an Islamic framework. This approach "diluted and ultimately weakened secular feminism" (31).

In chapter 2, Zia critiques a body of literature that has illustrated limitations of liberal-secular approaches to Muslim women's rights, especially in the post-9/11 era. In particular, since such studies (Abu-Lughod 2002; Mahmood 2005; Bano 2010; Iqtidar 2011; Abu-Lughod 2013; Jamal 2013; and so on) focus on women's agency, she views them as problematic because they do not tackle the "continuity of patriarchal norms that underscore local, religiously determined politics" (55). She also argues that "historically, traditionalist and modernist feminists in Pakistan have been differently concerned with empowerment of their gender within a 'rethought Islam' . . . but have not supported the call for a theocratic state" (45). As such studies analyze women's rights with reference to faith-based archetypes, Zia contends that "academics around the world are increasingly complicit in encouraging a kind of Muslim exceptionalism" that critiques and rejects "universalism, secularism and Enlightenment-based rights" (46). She concludes the chapter by emphasizing that "political progress for women's legal and material rights necessarily require[s] secular modes of resistance and organisation, rather than faith-based hopes and governmentality" (57).

To further problematize the idea of agency that "postsecular" studies afford to Muslim women, in chapter 4 Zia discusses the three extreme cases of Chand Bibi, Islam Bibi, and Aafia Siddiqui. In the first case, a video went viral in March 2009 showing the Taliban publicly flogging a young woman for committing adultery. There was a unanimous condemnation of the act "from the most right-wing, fundamentalist, religio-political parties to the liberal, left-leaning organisations and progressive women's movements" (89). However, the case signifies that the Muslim woman's body no longer is "a marker of the Islam-versus-the-West debate" but "a signpost over which local religious narratives compete . . . in order to construct their version of Islam as the normative one" (89). The second case predates the establishment of Pakistan, when a Hindu woman contracted a free-will marriage and converted to Islam in the 1930s. Although the colonial British Resident administration returned her to her natal family, a tribesman rescued her and is still remembered in Pakhtun folklore (90). Like the first case, Zia views this example as indicating that Islamists (even those who are not "extremists") view women's bodies as "repositories of religious and nationalist identity" (93). The final case, of US-based Pakistani scientist Aafia Siddiqui, who was incarcerated and sentenced for suspected terrorism in 2010, further demonstrates the association of women's bodies with "the normative femininity of the Islamist woman" and national identity (98). Siddiqui's veil signifies "Islamist politics" and she achieves "political status" in Pakistan as "Daughter of the Nation" (99). Since the agency of these women resides within the conceptions of Islamic, male-dominated nationalism and culture, it "marks the limits of religious agency" (104).

Chapter 5 discusses the relationship between consumer capitalism and Islam in reference to gendered identities in Pakistan. Several companies have launched products like hijabs and "hijab shampoo" to target Muslim women. The profusion of such products indicates that

Islamists contribute to neoliberal capitalism, fulfilling an "Islamic bourgeois imaginary" (107). Zia also discusses the emergence of World Hijab Day and hijab conferences. In 2012, for the first time, Islamist women called for a constitutional obligation of hijab in Pakistan, though their party (*Jamaat e Islami*) maintained that it should remain a personal choice and a woman's right (112-14). Although the Islamists invoke liberal tropes (rights, choice, and so on), Zia argues that they are not committed to gender equality. Likewise, she writes, Islamists do not avail themselves of the special quotas for women in electoral procedures to advance liberal democracy but to "subvert and then, Islamise previously secular spaces" (110). She also critiques those feminist groups and NGOs that work with religious groups to empower local women because any alliance with them implies compromising women's universal human rights.

Chapter 6 outlines Islamist resistance to the secularist agenda in Pakistan over the last decade, reiterating the same analytic arguments. As Fashion Week themes focused on the "military, the veil, and nationalism as inspirations for their fashion lines . . . to reclaim Islamic culture [it] is [a] completely inadequate corrective under the current deluge of Islamist resurgence in all public expression" (132). Discussing Malala Yousufzai, who survived a Taliban attack, Zia argues that although mainstream Islamists in Pakistan condemned it, theirs was an empty denunciation because they refused to hold the Taliban responsible for this crime. Zia then discusses the practice of veiling and Islamic family laws to illustrate "religious oppression" women face. Additionally, she contends that "self-acclaimed liberals in Pakistan are not secularists" because, like Islamists, they do not support a thoroughly secularist state (146).

The final chapter offers examples of two nationwide working women's movements to illustrate secular political activism that does not rely on "docile" religious agency (155). The first movement is the *Thereeq e Nifaz e Sharia e Muhammad* (TNSM) in the Malakand district. Malakand district includes the Swat valley, an internationally famous tourist resort that became a site of armed militancy in 2001 after the US attack in Afghanistan (157). Mullah Fazlullah, who served as the leader of the TNSM, took over Swat in 2006; in addition to establishing "a Sharia court that operated [under] the Taliban interpretation of Islamic law," he regularly gives sermons on FM radio (57). Initially, without knowing what exactly Sharia law was, women in Swat, including the women who act as councilors, supported Fazlullah because he promised to deliver "justice, development, progress and peace" (161). However, they withdrew their support when the movement failed to fulfil its promises. Zia argues that the women's response suggests that "desires, motivations and resonance of such agency are in reference to pragmatic, secular needs rather than simply a reflection or expression of some aspiration for faith-based/spiritual transcendence" (164).

The second movement is the Okara Peasant Movement of 1999 that spread across Punjab when the administration tried to change the status of sharecropping tenant farmers to contract renters (172). As the police arrested and harassed men, women armed themselves with *thaps* (thick sticks used for washing clothes) and pots and pans to block police parties. They also successfully freed their men by lying down in front of police vans (174). Since the population of the peasant farmers in Okara is a mix of Muslims and Christians, Zia states that "when survival is at stake, religion can take a back seat in human affairs" (175). However, she also observes that the Christians are somewhat better educated, assuming leadership roles on account of their status, and that this did cause some resentment among Muslims (177). Thus "it was not conceivable they would bond with other women regardless of religious differences" (178). Based on this conclusion it is unclear how the Okara movement is an

example of secular autonomy, but it nevertheless illustrates the fluidity of the religious/secular realms.

It is ironic that most of the cases that Zia discusses precede the 9/11 period, yet she does not consider why Pakistan never experienced similar religious enthusiasm prior to geopolitical developments. Without considering the political and religious specificities of the local context, how can one read her position that only secular feminism can bring liberation to Muslim women? What discursive and material violence does this authorize, when a majority of Pakistani women consider themselves Muslim? Certainly secular feminists have played a role in securing women's rights in Pakistan and beyond, but limiting an emancipatory program to secularism alone is problematic--not least when directed toward a population of more than half a billion diverse Muslim women. Furthermore, Zia never discusses what inherently secures women's and minority rights in the broader framework of secular universal "Enlightenment-based rights" (46). Women and minorities also experience overwhelming violence in Western countries that declare themselves secular states. Finally, is it not a fact that the nation-state and the capitalist economy are also products of Enlightenment ideals? How can one imagine emancipation within these structures, which too are complicit in violence? Zia's unwillingness to engage such aspects is a serious limitation of her arguments, for they might illuminate the specific historical dimensions of militancy and religious practice beyond the abstract rhetoric she falls back upon (agency vs. autonomy).

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