

Indian Muslim Minorities and the 1857 Rebellion: Religion, Rebels, and Jihad

Ilyse R. Morgenstein Fuerst
London: I.B. Tauris, 2017. 228 pages.

Ilyse R. Morgenstein Fuerst's book, *Indian Muslim Minorities and the 1857 Rebellion: Religion, Rebels, and Jihad*, is a masterful exploration of how an imperial discourse of religion in the nineteenth-century defined Islam, Muslims, and jihad. Specifically, Fuerst calls attention to the significance of the 1857 Rebellion by Indians against the British East India Company, and argues that British official histories of the Rebellion fundamentally altered how colonial officials, European scholars, and Indians thought and wrote about religion. Thus she builds on the work of previous scholars of religion such as Tomoko Masuzawa, who has argued that the concept of universal religion is a constructed category, and David Chiddester, who has shown how colonialism constructed both religions and races. Additionally, Fuerst's book draws on historians such as Thomas Metacalf, who have explored the various ways the 1857 Rebellion transformed the business of empire. However, Fuerst's unique contribution lies in revealing the ways an official British discourse about Muslims and their supposed propensity for violence, and the Indian Muslim engagement with this discourse, racialized and minoritized Muslims. This discourse presented as fact that all Muslims were essentially homogenous and dangerous to imperial interests.

The book is divided into an introduction, four chapters, a conclusion and an epilogue. Fuerst states in her introduction that as British officials and historians attempted to explain the 1857 Rebellion, they utilized jihad "to signify Muslims broadly and definitionally as religious actors and as (potential) subjects of empire" (3). From this point on, jihad, interpreted by the British as a religiously-mandated war against non-Muslims, became crucial to European understandings of Islam and Muslims. Jihad became a causal explanation for Muslim behavior, and thus all Muslims were potentially violent rebels. Importantly, Fuerst emphasizes this was not simply prejudice against Muslims, but rather a discursive formation, a supposedly objective, scientific, and self-referencing body of knowledge produced by British historians, officers, and politicians. For Fuerst, evidence that "the story itself became the hegemon" (12) can be seen in the ways that Muslim

responses to the jihad-centric narrative reproduced assumptions about jihad and Islam.

Chapter one is primarily devoted to British assumptions about religion in South Asia before 1857, and how those assumptions gained greater prominence in explaining the 1857 Rebellion. Fuerst looks at parliamentary records prior to 1857 and demonstrates that Britons relied on supposed religious identities to understand Indians. Muslims were “uniquely violent and intolerant to non-Muslims” (23) and thus already viewed as a potential threat before the Rebellion. In contrast, Hindus were viewed as essentially passive. Consequently, the Rebellion affirmed “the widely held belief that religion was a viable and real threat to the Empire” (30). Fuerst examines some of the earliest British historians to write about the Rebellion and shows they all described religious offense as a cause of the Rebellion. Additionally, Fuerst notes the appearance of the belief that Muslims were united in a global jihad against Britain.

Chapters two, three, and four deal primarily with William Wilson Hunter’s book, published in 1871 and titled *The Indian Musalmans: Are They Bound in Conscience to Rebel Against the Queen?* as well as Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan’s response to it. Fuerst argues that Hunter’s book exemplified official British discourse about Islam and was instrumental in making Muslims in India a racialized minority. Muslims became “outsiders, disempowered, and both unique and uniquely problematic” (50). Portraying Muslims as a homogenous minority erased the “composite cultures of north India” (56). Fuerst highlights Hunter’s use of Muslim legal literature as a key approach to his racialization of Muslims. He believed law best defined an authentic Islam and Muslim praxis. Therefore, Hunter selectively endorsed fatwas that stated Muslims must wage jihad or emigrate from India, and delegitimized opinions that stated Muslims could be law-abiding subjects in India (71). He also drew on his interpretation of Wahhabism to argue that Muslims were fanatics and that “both the ‘fanatics’ and [non-fanatics] ... were obligated to rebel” (62). Thus, according to Hunter, even those Muslims that may seem loyal to the Empire could not be trusted.

Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan responded that the Rebellion did not constitute a legitimate jihad, but rather was contrary to Islamic teachings (90). Khan questioned Hunter’s sources, his interpretations, as well as his position of power as a British official. Fuerst emphasizes this last point, since Khan recognized the structural implications of Hunter’s connection to British power (100). Khan also questioned Hunter’s assertions about Muslim practice, such as the claim that Muslims in India can no longer legitimately

pray the communal Friday prayer because India is not a properly Islamic land (*dār al-islām*). According to Fuerst, Khan “dismantled Hunter’s over-reliance on Wahhabism” (112). Ultimately, Khan argued that the freedom granted to Muslims by the British to practice their religion meant Muslims could be loyal subjects.

In chapter four, Fuerst assesses how the British memory of the Rebellion affirmed British suspicion of Muslim subjects due to the association between Islam, jihad, and rebellion. Jihad became “the preeminent identifier of Islam” as Muslims became a racial minority (125). In the nineteenth century, a new discourse on jihad emerged among imperial powers that saw anti-imperialist movements as evidence of innate Muslim violence. Connected to the discourse on jihad were discussions of “Wahhabis.” British sources generalized Wahhabism and assumed that violent puritanism represented an authentic Islam and thus Muslims were potential rebels. Thus, Fuerst concludes that concerns about jihad reveal a debate about authentic Islam and jihad’s significance in defining it.

Finally, the conclusion and epilogue extend the key insights of the book to modern discussions of religion in India and America. Fuerst states that 1857 “is important because of the ways it is imagined and reinscribed” (150). In India, remembrance of 1857 helps define Hindus and Muslims as different and serves Hindu nationalism by continuing the discourse about Muslims as essentially foreign to India and disloyal. Fuerst further shows the same discourse being operationalized in the 2016 American presidential campaigns. Different candidates participated “in the estimation of Muslims as suspect and suspicious” because of their supposed allegiance to a foreign law, the Sharia.

Despite Fuerst’s critical analyses of primary sources, she does not directly engage with some secondary works that relate to her argument. For example, how does her assertion that Britons “first delineated Indians based upon religious identity, over and above caste, ethnic, regional, or linguistic definition” (47) compare with Gayanendra Pandey’s assertion that the idea of an essential village community was the key organizing principle of British knowledge before 1857, and that caste and religion both subsequently became the main conceptual categories of British knowledge? Similarly, C.A. Bayly famously argued that British knowledge in India relied on indigenous knowledge systems, and not only on abstract orientalist notions about religion. Fuerst however shows that British scholars ignored indigenous representations of religion and rebellion. Greater engagement with secondary sources would have better situated her book with other import-

ant and oft-cited works about religion and India, especially since she asserts that official British conceptions of religion are important for the “broader context of the development and study of religion” (47).

Relatedly, the book would have benefitted from greater engagement with Muslim primary sources, since it argues that memories of the Rebellion shaped how both Britons and Muslims conceptualized and represented Islam and Muslims. Yet while she analyzes British notions of religion both prior to and subsequent 1857 and cites no less than five British historians of the Rebellion, equal attention is not paid to Muslim ideas about religion prior to 1857 and only one Muslim author (Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan) is closely considered. Although Fuerst convincingly shows why Hunter is exemplary of a larger British discourse about Islam and jihad, the same cannot be said about Khan. Moreover, this lack of contextualization makes it difficult to see how Khan contributed to the racialization of Muslims by simply describing them as “a demographic and identifiable community” (153).

Furthermore, greater attention to Muslim sources could have deepened the discussion on Wahhabism. Fuerst mentions that Indian “Wahhabis” believed the 1857 Rebellion was not a jihad (142). Yet surprisingly it is Wahhabis that are blamed for the Rebellion. Consequently, it remains unclear why Wahhabism, a central Arabian religious movement, became a centerpiece in works about Indian Muslims. Perhaps intra-Muslim polemics may have influenced British discourse. Thus, despite Fuerst’s inclusion of Khan’s writings, her book does not sufficiently address the historical agency of Muslims.

Despite these minor criticisms, *Indian Muslim Minorities and the 1857 Rebellion* is a significant scholarly contribution in the fields of religion, history, South Asian studies, and Islamic studies. Fuerst shows with precision the origins of contemporary assumptions about jihad and Islam. Through careful analysis of historical representations of 1857, she draws connections between colonialism, anti-imperialism, and conceptions of religion that are still relevant and influential today.

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