

A Note About...

# Muslim Voices: Traditions and Contexts

A conference in honor of

**Barbara Daly Metcalf**

Alice Freeman Palmer Professor of History

Presented by

The Center For South Asian Studies

University of Michigan

September 11-13, 2009

This workshop is intended to both honor and debate the work of Professor Barbara D. Metcalf and, in the process, to assess the state of scholarship on the roles of Muslims and of Islam in modern South Asian history. There are few scholars who have influenced the field of South Asian Muslim history more substantially in the last 25 years than has Barbara D. Metcalf. This is a result both of the orientation and depth of her scholarship and of her active role in institution-building in the field. A review of Metcalf's career suggests three important areas in which her work has significantly influenced scholarship.

## Islamic Revival in British India

Metcalf's first significant contribution was to reorient how scholars have assessed the roles of the *ulama* [Islamic religious scholars] in modern South Asian political and intellectual history. Metcalf's doctoral dissertation on the religious scholars of Deoband, a reformist religious seminary in northern India (subsequently revised and published as, *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860-1900* (Princeton, 1982)), defined approach to Muslim history that secured Metcalf's emerging scholarly influence. Previously viewed as "traditionalists," or even as "fundamentalists," these scholars were portrayed by Metcalf as inhabiting a much more complex intellectual and institutional world, influenced by the structural and technological context of colonialism as much as by their commitments to older Islamic traditions. Characteristically, Metcalf took us inside the world-view of these religious scholars, avoiding easy categorizations

in favor of an analysis that attempted to reconstruct what was of importance to these scholars themselves. Moving from their dissemination of *fatwas* [religious rulings] to their interpretations of dreams, she emphasized first and foremost how the *ulama* made sense of their world and their work. Showing us the compelling framework of knowledge within which they operated, even as they sought to come to terms with change, Metcalf uniquely captured the voices of the men she was studying. In the process, she provided a new foundation for assessing their significance within their larger Indian, colonial, and Islamic contexts.

The initial importance of Metcalf's work thus lay in breaking the scholarship in the 1970s out of the dichotomous distinction between "tradition" and "modernity" that continued, at that time, to dominate most of the scholarship on religious reform in both India and in the Islamic world. Indeed, nowhere was the

tendency to define this dichotomy more prominent than in studies of modern Islam. Metcalf's study of a group long taken as emblems of "tradition," was all the more powerful for this reason. Rather than simply showing that religious reform movements might combine elements of the "traditional" and the "modern," as Lloyd and Suzanne Rudolph did in their classic book on *The Modernity of Tradition*, by taking seriously the language and world-view of reformers themselves Metcalf showed us a way to escape the tyranny of these categories altogether.

This approach shaped the active role that Metcalf played in the late 1970s and early 1980s in a project of the SSRC/ACLS joint committee on South Asia. Working together with a group of historians and anthropologists, Metcalf organized a series of conferences that put the term *adab* (meaning, loosely, "proper conduct") at their center. By focusing on the meanings that this term acquired in different contexts, these conferences suggested the ways that distinctive world-views could be understood through the different, but linked, meanings of a key concept in differing historical and social contexts. A concern with language as a window onto distinctive cultural perspectives marked the project as one with Metcalf's particular intellectual stamp. Metcalf brought the papers from the first conference of this project together in a highly-influential edited volume entitled, *Moral Conduct and Authority: The Place of Adab in South Asian Islam* (UC Press, 1984). The larger project helped to focus the difficulties in pinning down the "patterns of meaning and organization from within South Asia's own cultural systems" that are, of course, themselves open to contestation and change. Her work on *adab* and its related contexts exerted a significant influence on many younger scholars of South Asian Islam and also caught the attention of a number of scholars of Islam working in other parts of the Islamic world.

In the wake of this project, Metcalf, along with Ira Lapidus, William Roff and others, founded a new SSRC/ACLS joint committee on the Comparative Study of Muslim Societies and served as the first Chair of the committee. Working with scholars of various parts of the Muslim world, this committee encouraged the development of comparative scholarly studies among Muslim societies as a key to challenging many of the essentializing and Arab-centric stereotypes that shaped much of the scholarship on Islam. Metcalf played an active role in the pioneering efforts of this committee to encourage communication among doctoral students working on different parts of the Muslim world. In terms of both scholarship and institutional activity, Metcalf thus played an important role in encouraging scholars to rethink Muslim history by trying to enter into and understand the frameworks within which Muslims themselves understood and narrated their experiences.

### Narrating Lives

Metcalf's work on the *ulama* and their milieus led to a second body of research that influenced and helped reshape her field; namely, rethinking how scholars narrated Muslim lives. This work also grew out of her efforts to analyze how Muslim scholars came to understand the self in the context of both Islamic tradition and the pressures of colonial life. Here Metcalf's thinking was clearly influenced by her translation and critical annotation of Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanawi's *Bibishti Zewar*, a large compendium of information and advice for women, written at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by one of the leading reformist scholars of Deoband (See Barbara D. Metcalf, *Perfecting Women: Maulana Ashraf 'Ali Thanawi's Bibishti Zewar* (UC Press, 1990)). As one of the most widely-disseminated books in 20th century Muslim India, a work regularly given to newly-married Muslim brides, this book was a natural

for translation. The book illustrated the ways that reformed religious ideas, the subject of Metcalf's earlier work, were transmitted to the common (literate) population, and to Muslim women in particular.

Metcalf's interest in the *Bibishti Zewar* further reveals her interest in translation and the close analysis of Urdu texts as pointers toward the changing ways that Muslims have used the narration of exemplary lives as a framework for understanding how to live in the contemporary world. In her introduction and annotations to the *Bibishti Zewar*, Barbara highlighted the distinctive vision of women's roles that shaped the thought of the reformist *ulama*, a vision influenced by the social pressures of society in India (including everyday "custom"), yet one also rooted in exemplary models from the time of the Prophet. The ways that these tensions were negotiated—not only through the re-narration of exemplary past lives but also by autobiographical writings—shaped Metcalf's subsequent interest in Haj [Muslim pilgrimage] accounts. In a series of articles based on pilgrims' personal travel accounts to Mecca she focused on how pilgrimage experiences illustrated, in all their variety, the many ways Muslims of various backgrounds sought to use the transformative expectations of the pilgrimage experience to make sense of the tensions within their own lives in the modern world.

A deep interest in "narrating lives," as she titled a review essay in the *Journal of Asian Studies*, thus provided another focal point for Metcalf's scholarly work. This focus is most immediately evident in her most recent book project, a biography of Maulana Husain Ahmad Madani.

In writing this biography, Metcalf has both implicitly and explicitly raised questions about the relationship between the act of "writing the self" by colonial and contemporary Muslims, and the roles of the modern historian in reconstructing lives within the conventions of

modern historical writing. In this area also, Metcalf's work thus raises critical questions about how we capture Muslim voices—and visions of the world—in our own historical reconstructions.

### Making Muslim Space

Perhaps no theme unites Metcalf's recent and past work more clearly than an interest in issues of migration and movement. This interest was evident in her work on Haj accounts, which suggested how migration and travel have provided critical elements for Muslims to construct relationships between Prophetic ideals and everyday life. Perhaps most noteworthy in this respect has been her research on the Tablighi Jamaat, a Muslim reformist and missionary organization with international scope. "Travel," as Metcalf has written, "is believed to encourage a state of permanent vulnerability and uncertainty in which one learns to be dependent on God, outside of one's normal moorings." While others who have worked on the Tablighi Jamaat have tended to stress its transnational political implications, Metcalf's work has seen it less in terms of politics (though that aspect too is addressed in her work) than in the Jamaat's efforts to deal creatively with the tensions of gender, race, class, and nationality, playing these off against an idealized vision of sanctity associated with the model of the Prophet. The metaphor of movement, of becoming, remains central to the ways these identities have been negotiated. By emphasizing this aspect of the movement Metcalf has shown how members of the Tablighi Jamaat are engaged in struggles to make space for themselves as Muslims within the contradictions of modern identity shared by many other groups in an era of mass migration and travel.

It is no accident that Metcalf's work on the Tablighi Jamaat thus led her into a broader

interest in modern Muslim migrations generally and to immigrant Muslim communities in Europe and America in particular. Her edited volume, *Making Muslim Space in North America and Europe* (UC Press, 1996), in fact draws the study of Muslim migration and Muslim identity-construction into the larger story of displacements and migrations that have shaped the contemporary world. “Their experiences of displacement, their negotiations of hybridity and authenticity,” she writes of the Muslims of Euro-America, “are at the heart of contemporary life.” With a firm grounding in the study of reformist Islamic ideas within the subcontinent, Metcalf has brought the study of South Asian Islam into larger scholarly discussions about the relationship between transnational movement, identity, and post-modernism in a way no other scholar has. Beyond this, her work raises questions as to how “Muslim space” is created (in all its meanings), not only in the context of largely non-Muslim societies, but also in the contexts of power, law and everyday life in Muslim societies themselves.

### Workshop Organization

Using these themes as framework, this workshop will bring together scholars who have been influenced by Metcalf’s work to present papers based on their own research that engage with these themes. Each set of papers will be focused in part on building on Metcalf’s work and applying it in new directions; but also in exploring the problems and dilemmas that Metcalf’s approaches to history raise for contemporary scholars working on Islam. Metcalf herself highlighted clearly the dilemmas scholars face in her *Journal of Asian Studies* article, “Too Little and Too Much: Reflections on Muslims in the History of India.” Too little attention to Muslim tradition can lead to serious misinterpretation. Without attempting to understand the dynamics of

Muslim thinking from the perspective of Muslims themselves, historians can easily miss much of what has been most important to modern Muslims. And yet, too much fixation on Islam can be equally damaging. To encase modern Muslim history in a pervasive framework of Islamic paradigms that leaves little room for the myriad social, political and economic forces that shape Muslims’ lives, in multiple contexts, is to also destroy the possibilities of real understanding.

Such issues are all the more important in the wake of the events of September 11. Given Metcalf’s sympathetic treatment of the early history of Deoband, and given the historical connections between Deoband and the emergence of the Taliban in Afghanistan in the 1990s, Metcalf’s work has taken on a new significance (witness the reissue of her Deoband book). Metcalf has in fact been extremely active in speaking and writing publicly about the importance of South Asia’s Islamic history in framing recent events. She has made clear that sweeping generalizations about the ulama, and about the historical influence of Deoband itself are highly problematic. Deobandi influence has expressed itself in markedly different ways in different political and social contexts—in India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the broader Muslim world as a whole—as current events continue to show. In her recent work, as earlier, Metcalf’s main concern is to show us that Islamic ideas *do* matter, and must be evaluated in their own terms, while at the same time they must be analyzed outside the stereotypes that continue to shape a large body of writing on Islam. This will be the central aim of the workshop.

David Gilmartin  
*North Carolina State University*

the Center for South Asian Studies presents

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**Keynote Address**

Friday 5:00pm

*“Strategies of authority in Muslim South Asia in the 19th and 20th Centuries”*

**Francis Robinson, CBE**

*University of London*

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## Panel I

### Islamic Revival in British India

Saturday, September 12, 8:30am-12:30pm

“Socio-Economic Justice in  
Deobandi Thought and Action”

#### **Qasim Zaman**

*Princeton University*

Commentator: **Kamran Asdar Ali**

*University of Texas*

“The Sunni *Bihishti Zewar*: A  
Barelwi/Ahl-e Sunnat Guide for Women”

#### **Usha Sanyal**

*Queen's University of Charlotte*

Commentator: **Gail Minault**

*University of Texas*

“Interrogating ‘Reform’ and the Concept of  
‘Rights’ in Contemporary  
Western and Islamic Discourses”

#### **Fareeha Khan**

*Willamette University*

Commentator: **Rachel Sturman**

*Bowdoin University*

“Writing Partial Truths: Orality, Print,  
Myth and Identities”

#### **Akbar Zaidi**

*Independent Scholar, Karachi, Pakistan*

Commentator: **Farina Mir**

*University of Michigan*

## Panel II

### Narrating Lives

Saturday, September 12, 2:00-5:00pm

“Young Man Syed: The Early Life of  
Sayyid Ahmad Khan”

#### **David Lelyveld**

*William Paterson University*

Commentator: **Sandria Freitag**

*Duke University*

“Sayyid Sulayman Nadwi's (d. 1953) *Yad-i  
Raftagan*: Narrating Belief,  
Memory and Visions of the Future”

#### **Khalid Masud**

*Council of Islamic Ideology, Islamabad*

Commentator: **Anita Weiss**

*University of Oregon*

“Making the Sudanese Mahdi ‘Arab’”

#### **Lisa Pollard**

*University of North Carolina at Wilmington*

Commentator: **Kathryn Babayan**

*University of Michigan*

## Panel III

### Making Muslim Space

Sunday Sept. 13, 8:30am -12:30pm

“Journey of Faith: The Hajj from India”

#### **Mushirul Hasan**

*Jamia Millia University, New Delhi*

Commentator: **Juan Cole**

*University of Michigan*

“Painted Rituals: Space and Symbol in  
Jahangiri Art”

#### **Azfar Moin**

*University of Michigan*

Commentator: **Tom Trautmann**

*University of Michigan*



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