

In Good Company: Comments

Fareeha Khan

When I first walked into the living quarters of Begum Noor Jahan Zareef Thanawi (1931-2017) in Karachi, I was fatigued from jetlag and not expecting much to come of the meeting except polite verbal exchanges. But as I absorbed the functionality of every item in the sparsely furnished room, and the immense level of spiritual focus she carried within her frail (though still somehow strong!) physical frame, I realized I was sitting in the company of no ordinary woman. It was about Begum Zareef that Dr. ‘Abd al-Hayy ‘Arifi—one-time *nāzīm* of Dar al-‘Ulum Karachi and spiritual successor to Ashraf ‘Ali Thanawi—had remarked, “If we gave *khilāfat* (spiritual successorship) to women, we would have given it to her.” Though not given permission to take spiritual disciples, her sheikh had given her a general allowance to teach the religious sciences to women. She taught Qur’anic exegesis (*tafsīr*) for decades out of her home; wrote numerous pamphlets on spirituality and religious practice; and published a volume on the legal rulings of Hajj, with a special focus on related women’s issues.

If Begum Zareef were asked what was the secret that persuaded her sheikh to give her such a wide allowance to teach, I know her answer would be the pious company (of her sheikh and others) that she kept throughout her life. As Ashraf ‘Ali Thanawi clarifies in *Fawā’id al-ṣuḥba*, his famous lecture cited by Darakhshan Khan, it was the *ṣuḥba* (company) they’d kept that made the Companions (*Ṣaḥāba*) who they were. Were it not for the fact that they had sat with the Messenger of God, they would not have attained their otherwise unattainable spiritual and religious rank, and they would not be seen as a necessary source of religious knowledge for all Muslims who came after them. In my own book,¹ I argue that *ṣuḥba*, in fact, lies at the spiritual center of Sunni Islam. For one to be a “real Sunni,” one does not merely have to accept the probity of every one of the *Ṣaḥāba*; one must also accept that the preservation and continuation of true religious

Fareeha Khan is an independent scholar affiliated with Willamette University in Salem, Oregon.

teaching happens through the same type of act that made them who they were—sitting with submission at the feet of those who know.

Darakhshan Khan's article is a brilliant contribution because it highlights the concrete social reasons for how such a long-standing conception of religious attainment has subtly shifted, such that the only criteria that remains for gaining religious knowledge is one's desire to spread it. For reformist movements like the Tablighī Jamā'at, which started off in early twentieth-century north India but has now become a major global phenomenon, submitting oneself to the training of a master is no longer part of the program. One can improve oneself religiously simply by sitting with others who wish to do the same, regardless of one's religious upbringing (*tarbiya*) or vocational background. The traditional scholar, in such contexts, has been dismissed and largely disposed of.

Among the many strengths of Dr. Khan's essay, what stands out is her ability to examine at close range the social changes taking place in north India that led to the very possibility of the formation of a group like the Tablighī Jamā'at. She shows the gradual creation of a new social order, where gender, family, and economic roles for both men and women changed in ways that caused the level of domestic stress needed to push people to creatively engage with their newfound situation. The author's take on the role of famous texts like *Beheshti Zewar* as replacement for in-laws and extended family, on her use of letters and advertisements in *Tahdhib-i Niswān* to demonstrate the same, as well as on the simultaneous attraction and anxiety created by the growing importance laid on men's bureaucratic employment, all comprise a fascinating and refreshingly unique approach to examining the competing forms of religious authority that developed alongside that of traditional ulama in the modern period. Dr. Khan uses the proliferation of print in late colonial India to her advantage as a social and intellectual historian. She skillfully reads both major and minor texts of the day against the social backdrop of the time, such that she is able to clarify the human reality of the broad social roles occupied by Muslim men and women in early twentieth-century India, and how this reality affected notions of piety and religious service.

Though Dr. Khan doesn't say it this way, what stands out to me in her vivid descriptions of the itinerant family is loneliness. Being cut off from the "familial and familiar" leads any human being of sound nature to search to fill the void left behind. In late-colonial north Indian *qasba* society, so many hierarchical and codependent relations were in place that one per-

haps rarely felt the need to exert one's own religious opinion. Scholars, saints, and elders occupied an intricate network of religiosity that amply fulfilled the requirement to keep good company for anyone who wished to seek it. Becoming cut off from this network and these figures must have been profoundly alienating—one can see a glimpse of the frustration both men and women felt in the *Tahdhīb-i Niswān* quote on page 11, where women could barely now manage a home, and men had no one to remind them to take the higher road.

For some Muslims in India and beyond, this void was filled through participation in reformist groups like the Tablighī Jamā'at. In a globalized world that has taken the Weberian workplace to the extreme, the Tablighī Jamā'at provides a new network within which one can plug in. As Dr. Khan shows, this network is broad enough that men and women can join in similar ways, unlike in previous times where more clear gender differentiation existed. But one has to consider quality along with quantity. Perhaps women (and more secularly educated men) are able to participate in these non-localized networks. But what void is actually being filled? Does one really feel as if one has come home when they attend *gash*t or go on *khu-ruj* with the Tablighī Jamā'at? Or does one simply feel better about being a somehow contributing member to an increasingly secularizing and fragmented society?

For Begum Zareef, the memory of playing as a child at the feet of Ashraf 'Ali Thanawi in Thana Bhawan was as sustaining as it was orienting. Even in bustling Karachi after a span of many miles and years, she knew where she could find home. I always was surprised to see how she would ask after every family member and distant relation, and how she would find ways to do service for loved ones even outside of her focus on teaching. Her audio *tafsīr* lessons are peppered with a female-oriented commentary, reminding women to maintain not just their worship and ritual obligations but also the ties that bond strong, loving, God-centered families together. Many contemporary South Asian ulama of various stripes tolerate the work of the Tablighī Jamā'at, because they realize that social conditions no longer encourage women and men to maintain the bonds (familial, spiritual, and otherwise) that are required by religion and that would have allowed individuals to feel nurtured and supported in their everyday practice of Islam. But these same ulama realize that a level of *islām*—submission—has been compromised. In the famous hadith of the Prophet, the work of the scholar, almsgiver, and martyr is rejected by God in the Afterlife due to their lack of pure intention. The common trope of the Tablighī Jamā'at cited by Dr. Khan

offers a perverted rearticulation of this hadith—one need not focus at all on one’s inner self (as the hadith requires), and instead divert all one’s energy externally to saving the rest of the world.

The problem in this schema for ulama like Thanawi is not the unfitness of the poor nor the democratization of religious teaching. His book *Behesh-ti Zewar* is itself a type of democratization and “empowerment” of the lay woman to learn and teach the religion. The issue instead is the need for the Muslim to be cognizant of who is fit for one to take one’s religion from, who it is that one should submit oneself pedagogically to (*islām*) on one’s journey to submit to Allah (Islam). According to Thanawi, if one simply learns the religion to be able to teach for a livelihood (or to acquire a sense of social belonging!), one will find one’s discourses being of little impact on the hearts of those listening, and one’s fatwas being deemed largely unreliable.²

In my own work, I search for the role that the concept of submission plays in the religion of Islam as a whole. Submission is not limited to simply the body, mind, and soul, where one consciously applies *fiqh*, *‘aqīda*, and *taṣawwuf* such that each of these faculties submit to God according to patterns inherited from the Prophet. I argue that the very mode of knowledge inheritance itself is a type of submission that is required of the true Muslim, and that if one probes historically and even contemporarily the Islamic tradition of religious learning, one finds that submission to a master is of fundamental importance. Submission in Islam extends to social relations as well; one cannot faithfully reject the rights of one’s spouse, parents and extended social relations (which often happens with the itinerant, even if s/he becomes a loyal member of the Tablighī Jamā‘at), and still consider oneself a Muslim fully submitted to God.

Dr. Khan’s piece offers insightful and complex sociohistorical perspective on how the idea of submission to masters was surreptitiously removed from much of modern Muslim consciousness. Such Muslims, without realizing it, now subscribe to a form of Islam that has been drastically changed from within, just as it manifests differently in its social applications without.

Endnotes

1. Fareeha Khan, *The Ethical Contours of a Fatwa: Women, Sufism and the Emergence of a Modern Muslim Minority* (forthcoming).
2. Muhammad ‘Abd al-Qawiyy, *Ṣaḥāba ke faḍā’il awr ṣuḥbat ke fawā’id [tashīl wa’dh Faḍā’il al-ṣuḥba]* (Hyderabad: Barakath Book Depot, n.d.), 74.