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Angels of History:

A Review Essay of Faisal Devji's Muslim Zion: Pakistan as a Political Idea

Faisal Devji, *Muslim Zion: Pakistan as a Political Idea*, Harvard University Press, 2013, \$21.95 US (hbk), 288 pp., ISBN 9780674072671.

Symbol and Abstraction

The most intriguing and provocative element in Faisal Devji's *Muslim Zion: Pakistan as a Political Idea* is not the analogy he draws between Zionism and Muslim nationalism (he is, in any case, more interested in the role that world Jewry played in the latter's imagination) but his claim that the idea of a return to Zion, of return itself, in the modern political imagination (including that manifested by Zionism) has, in fact, a Protestant dimension. This claim is an instance and an effect of Devji's project in the book, which is to present a meditation on a particular nation-state formation that is produced in a departure from what Devji calls a more typical European "blood and soil" nationalism. This new nationalism is unconcerned with questions of demography and territory; it is purely ideal, and is instantiated when it travels to and settles upon a region. The recognition of the role of Protestantism in *Muslim Zion* is also a recognition of the fundamental modernity of the nation-state form, from within which is produced a new and super ideal kind of non-national nation. In this category, then, belong America's settler society, Israel, and Pakistan.

Although the importance of Zion to Protestantism is familiar to early modernists and students of post-Reformation Europe, the meditation on the global historical consequences of that trope, which floats free of its initial historical anchor and comes to be a constitutive element in modernity, presented in this book is fascinating. It seems, though, that Devji overstates a little the role of "blood and soil" nationalism in the formation of European nation-states. Although I understand that Devji is primarily concerned with a Germanic nationalism more historically contiguous to nineteenth century Muslim nationalism and Independence and more catastrophically consequential for world Jewry, the history of the emergence of England must loom large in the development of British imperialism, and one has only to think of battles over English nationhood, and the role that Protestantism played in that emergence, to complicate things. As I read *Muslim Zion*, I find myself thinking of seventeenth century poems like "Sion Lies Waste" by the English Calvinist Fulke-Greville and, that great dissenter Blake's nineteenth century lines from *Milton: a Poem in 2 Books*:

I will not cease from Mental Fight,
 Nor shall my Sword sleep in my hand
 Till we have built Jerusalem
 In Englands green & pleasant Land.¹

Jerusalem and Zion were important even in the making of modern England. Ideality and nationalism were often hand in glove, and nationalism has always had a somewhat uneasy relation with territory and an even more uncomfortable one with those who people it. As Devji is undoubtedly aware, the alignment between people, territory, and state requires much work in nationalisms that are ostensibly more aligned with demography, which is why national narratives are defended and refined through such vigorous historical processes of exsanguination. For instance, the bloodiness of the emergence of English nationhood in the sixteenth century produced many narratives pressuring the contradictions between history, regional belonging, and the proscriptions of a new national identity. The story of a Catholic's execution could thus be told in the following way:

Lacey, now having the rope under his neck, was willed by Topcliffe to confess his treason. "For," saith he, "here are none but traitors who are of thy religion."

"Then," said Lacey, "answer me. You yourself in Queen Mary's days was a Papist, at least in show. Tell, were you also a traitor?" At which the people laughed aloud.²

The problem of the alignment of religion and nation was perhaps constitutive of the formation of the European nation-state, and its legacy continues to haunt us. Recognizing this does not, however, vitiate the force of Devji's point regarding the particular ideality of the form of nationhood, with its combinatory of displacement and settlement, which concerns him in *Muslim Zion*.

The more important point about Devji's claims regarding the Protestant dimension of the national form, for which the most potent symbol is Zion, is that they enable an examination of modernity's drive towards abstraction in its global dispersion. As Devji presents it, the abstraction of Muslim nationalism as conceived and (often contradictorily) delineated by figures ranging from Jinnah and Iqbal to the Agha Khan and Z.A. Suleri, indeed, the exit from history that attends such abstraction, is also manifest in the way that Islam itself transforms in late colonial South Asia, most clearly evident in Syed Ameer Ali's *The Spirit of Islam* (1891): it gets turned into a closed system with a "spirit" that is repeatedly invoked. It is only in British India that religion could become a:

closed and self-authorizing system removed from the interference of royal power, to be led by religious experts or laymen alone. It is not that these systems were absent in previous times, but they seem to be confined to specialized forms of learning or activity rather than pertaining to something as grand as "Islam" [...] In Islam as a

¹ William Blake, "Milton: a Poem in 2 Books," in *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David Erdman (New York: Random House, Inc., 1988), 95.

² As quoted in Arthur Marotti, "Manuscript Transmission and the Catholic Martyrdom Account in Early Modern England," in *Print, Manuscript, Performance: The Changing Relation of the Media in Early Modern England*, ed. Michael D. Bristol and Arthur F. Marotti (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2000), 184.

modern system, then, one no longer has to do what the Neoplatonists did, and move in turn from God's command to various kinds of creation, to man, the prophets, Muhammad, and the Quran, etc. Whatever their genealogies, in other words, the various aspects of Islam now stand together in a systematic and so strictly contemporary relationship with one another, and in this way they make up a totality, which is what allows Muslims to do novel things like speak about their religion as a "complete way of life." (206-207)

The paradox, then, is that the *historical* drive towards abstraction, happily Hegelian as Devji's beginning and ending with Hegel remind us, enables an erasure of historical complexity, indeed of history itself. Moreover, the modern problem of minority is produced out of this larger drive to abstraction. Attempts to resolve the problem through the creation of more nations further implicate the minority in this abstracting drive, and the transformation of the minority into a new majority proliferates new minorities. Seen in the light of this drive, the political idea of Pakistan appears merely to inhabit a particularly modern zone of convergent forces and ideas in the modern era.

Ideal and the Real

Devji is skeptical, with some justice, about the privileging of "material" history in the historiography of Pakistan, which is for him the emphasis on the "interests" (usually very localized and mildly libidinal professional motives) of major players in the Pakistan movement to be found in the scholarship. Yet, *Muslim Zion* is not at all a disembodied intellectual history. It is, rather, a meticulous study of the embodiment of an idea. It thus presents a richer conception of the relation between historical instantiations and ideas than is possible in the positivism of the historiography he critiques. Tracing the ramifications of this embodiment takes Devji to meditations on the Shia identity of figures like Jinnah, the Agha Khan, and the Raja of Mahmudabad, and how their commitment to Muslim nationalism produced what Devji calls a Shia ecumenism, a long overdue and serious engagement with the question of the relations between caste and Muslim politics, the very particular ways in which advocates for Pakistan and Israel invoked each other, and an inspired arrival at the question of sovereignty in the Pakistani constitution through a reading of "theocracy."

Moreover, an important consequence of *Muslim Zion's* claim regarding the ideality of the nation-form instantiated in Pakistan is that it opens the space for an understanding of one of the most pressing (and least globally regarded) issues in Pakistan today: the problem of provincial disaffection and the state's brutal attempts to centralize power and to create a supra-regional national identity that is, nonetheless, entirely non-inclusive. That region, nation, and state have never quite lined up is evident in Baluch, Sindhi, and Pashtun nationalisms, and in the frequent unpopularity of the descendants of the North Indian refugees who can still be called *Mohajir* (immigrant) or, the even less welcoming, Hindustani. The current Baluch insurgency is, of course, the most visible and tragically bloody instance of these challenges.

Salman Rushdie's line from *Shame* that Pakistan was "insufficiently imagined" is often quoted; less often remarked is that he opens the novel in Baluchistan, talks about the torture of someone who is accused of a very remote connection with an earlier Baluch insurgency, and suggests that Islam might have been a glue that could hold the nation together:³

³ Salman Rushdie, *Shame* (New York: Picador, 2004, reprint edition), 84.

Islam may well have been a unifying force in post-Bangladesh Pakistan, if people had not tried to make it into such an almighty big deal. Maybe Sindhis, Baluchis, Punjabis, and Pathans, not to mention the immigrants, would have sunk their differences for the sake of their common faith.⁴

But what Rushdie offers in this passage as a Jinnah-derived (he has suggested earlier this was Jinnah's vision) alternative to Zia-ul-Haq's authoritarianism is, in fact, precisely what successive regimes have sought to do in their instrumentalization and, sometimes, principled ideological use of religion: unify the nation. In this case, "unification" should also invoke the brutality of Scottish unification—especially as the language used to describe the Pashtun and their lands in particular ("wild tribals," "ungovernable," "remote," "unconquerable") is reminiscent of the descriptions of the Scots and the Scottish highlands, and probably has a genealogy traceable to that metropolitan conflict. In other words, whatever the discourses used to propel them, projects of state centralization *require* an "almighty big deal." So, by way of claims regarding the sovereignty of Islam in the constitution, laws and a constitutional amendment governing and curtailing Ahmadi citizenship, "blasphemy" laws, and the cultivation of jihadi groups, the novel "Islam" discussed by Devji has been deployed by the state as mediator, glue, and tool of the war of counterinsurgency the military has waged against the civilian population for a good bit of the country's existence. The ideality of the "Islam" in question, and the thinness of its relation with the lifeworlds of the people of the region now bounded by the map of Pakistan, is perhaps what makes these efforts so desperately violent.

Muslim Zion has opened new avenues of scholarship and discussion. Much more work is required on many of the themes in the book, especially the question of caste politics and its relation with Muslim politics in South Asia, and on the figure of J.N. Mandal, the Dalit who came to Pakistan, was made law minister and left after Jinnah's death, disillusioned by the anti-minority turn. Equally necessary, is more scholarship on the way in which the histories of the Pakistan movement, of Pakistan, and of postcolonial nation-states, more generally, inhabit and instantiate the ideas, constitutive of modernity, whose lives and afterlives continue to shape our worlds. The tendency to see postcolonial nations as pathologically or (for postcolonial nationalists) *happily* distinct from their colonial European progenitors is enabled by the paradoxical assumption of European universality and the simultaneous insistence on seeing postcolonial nations as outside this constitution. Devji's focus on this political form and on the particularities of a specific instantiation has done much to overcome that untenable bifurcation. In so doing, he has contributed to the growing project of the provincialization of Europe and to the *de*provincialization of Pakistan.⁵

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⁴ Salman Rushdie, *Shame*, 264.

⁵ My terms here are, of course, taken from Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

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