

AIPS Fellowship Final Report

Project Title: “ ‘Religion’ in Muslim South Asia: On the Colonial Pathways of a Modern Category”

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Dates for Project: July 2023-August 2023

Location: United Kingdom and Malaysia

1. Significance to Pakistan Studies

In July and August of 2023, I conducted research for my second book project at the British Library and at the Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas Library at the International Islamic University-Malaysia (IIUM). My second book examines debates among Muslims in late colonial India and postcolonial Pakistan concerned the nature of the category of “religion” and Islam’s relationship to it, focusing on those who argued that Islam is not a “religion” at all because it is a “way of life” that “religion” does not adequately describe or contain. This is significant to Pakistan Studies to the extent that, up to this point, no scholar has explored these debates and how they intersected with questions of law and politics after Partition.

The work I did at the British Library was critical for the first chapter of my book, which argues that the seeds of the idea that Islam is not a “religion” were planted in the wake of the Uprising of 1857. After quashing the uprising, the British transferred power from the East India Company to the Crown, formalized by Queen Victoria’s Proclamation of 1 November 1858. The Proclamation recast ‘religion’ as a realm of private ‘conscience’ in which the state pledged not to ‘interfere’. While this may seem unrelated to Pakistan, at first glance, I argue in my book that the Pakistan movement engaged with this colonial inheritance over the nature of “religion,” variously accepting and critiquing its privatized version of religion. Materials that I gathered at the British Library are allowing me to flesh out debates about Islam’s place in the nascent state of Pakistan and how these debates intersect with larger conceptualizations of the category of religion.

The work I did at the Al-Attas Library largely revolved around the career of Fazlur Rahman (1919-1988), a central figure in the fifth chapter of my book, which examines the debates noted above in the context of the Ayub Khan era. I was able to procure minutes from meetings that Rahman had in his capacity as director of Central Institute of Islamic Research. These minutes are revelatory in terms of Rahman’s relationship with the government and the Pakistani modernist movement. These documents are helping me understand how elite Pakistanis conceptualized the nature of the “Islamic state” in ways that are remarkably similar to emergent Islamist concepts of the same. I was also able to browse the library’s collection of recommendation letters that Rahman wrote for his students, including for one particular figure who played a central role in critiquing the “secular” Islam that, in his view, Pakistanis had inherited from the British. In this way, the research is allowing me to draw palpable connections between the material I gathered at the British Library and the material gathered in Malaysia.

2. Key Outcomes and Deliverables

- I acquired ample primary source material at the British Library that is essential to the first and fourth chapters of my book. This includes not only the material discussed above, but rare sources related to the work and career of Abu'l A'la Mawdudi (1903-1979), a central figure in the nascent Islamist contestation of "religion" in late colonial India and early Pakistan.
- In Kuala Lumpur, I procured important primary source material related to the work and career of Fazlur Rahman, as noted above. This material is essential to the fifth chapter of my book.
- The key deliverable will be the publication of my book, integrating research that I did in Pakistan in the summer of 2022 and in the United Kingdom and Malaysia in the summer of 2023. Through a fellowship from the Kaplan Institute for the Humanities at Northwestern, I have a half teaching-load for the 2023-24 academic year, and hope to finish the book by the end of summer 2024.