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► **To cite this version:**

Julien Levesque. The Story of Transnational Islam. Book review: Simon W. Fuchs, In a Pure Muslim Land: Shi'ism between Pakistan and the Middle East (U. of North Carolina Press, 2019). The Book Review, 2020, pp.7-8. hal-02868522

HAL Id: hal-02868522

<https://hal.science/hal-02868522>

Submitted on 15 Jun 2020

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Julien Levesque, “The Story of Transnational Islam”, review of: Simon W. Fuchs, *In a Pure Muslim Land: Shi’ism between Pakistan and the Middle East* (U. of North Carolina Press, 2019), *The Book Review*, 44(6), June 2020, p. 7-8, URL: <https://thebookreviewindia.org/the-story-of-transnational-islam/>

The Story of Transnational Islam

The South Asian subcontinent counts a significant Shi’i population, with Pakistan having the world’s second largest number of Shi’is. Yet it has so far received limited scholarly attention. This book, adapted from the author’s PhD dissertation, contributes to a growing literature that seeks to fill this gap (Jones 2011; Rieck 2015). Located in the field of intellectual history, Simon W Fuchs’s work focuses mainly on religious literature (in Urdu, Persian, and Arabic) produced by Shi’i ulama in Pakistan. This concentration on ideas differs from approaches that give preference to other aspects in their study of South Asian Shi’ism, such as institutions, interests, rituals and their meanings, or sectarian tensions. Instead, Fuchs argues that doctrinal debates among Shi’i scholars, or ulama, have much to tell us about Pakistani Shi’ism and its relation to both the state and global religious centres of Shi’i learning in Iraq and Iran.

The book follows a chronological outline to show how discussions among religious specialists, far from being mired in arcane technicalities, are part and parcel of the major socio-political issues that Pakistani Shi’is have faced in the twentieth century. The first chapter on the late colonial period highlights divergences among Shi’is towards the project of Pakistan, as some denounced it ‘as an oppressive vision of a Sunni Islamic state’ (p. 17). The second chapter examines post-Partition debates between reformist scholars and traditionalists, as Pakistani Shi’is were now cut off from South Asia’s main Shi’i learning centre, Lucknow, but not as sidelined as they might have feared in the new country. The third chapter discusses the relationship of Pakistani Shi’i *ulama* to central Shi’i authorities (*maraji*) and argues that debates over the Shi’i concept of ‘blind following’, or *taqlid*, can inform us on local religious agency. The fourth chapter, dedicated to the impact of the 1979 Iranian revolution on Pakistani Shi’ism, shows that Pakistani ulama maintained a crucial authority through their role in translating essential religio-political concepts like *vilayat-i faqih*, or the ‘Guardianship of the Jurists’, which confers a prominent role to Shi’i ulama in Iran’s political system. The final chapter engages with Sunni sectarian literature to show that sectarianism in Pakistan—which has led to significant Sunni-Shi’i violence—is not simply the product of external influence but also discursively produced by Pakistani religious authorities.

The main thread that runs through the book is the necessity to balance transnational connections with local agency in our understanding of Pakistani Shi’ism. Fuchs shows the constitutive role of transnational connections in the development of Shi’i thought, yet avoids seeing them as an over-determining factor. In other words, transnational connections and influences do not suppress local agency. Therefore, the author focuses on ‘how local actors employ the Islamic scholarly tradition in their arguments, how they tie their claims to centres of scholarship, and how they vow to faithfully uphold such central authority only to subtly rework arguments emanating from there’ (p. 4). For instance, while Pakistani Shi’is acknowledged the importance of adhering to the opinions of a leading jurist (*marji*), some also ‘hinted at circumstances when the knowledge of local scholars could take precedence over that of the mujtahid of the age’ (p. 107). Similarly, Fuchs shows that Pakistani Shi’i ulama who supported the Iranian revolution mediated its reception through local, familiar tropes, such as nonviolence, by presenting ‘Khomeini as a superior Muslim Gandhi’ (p. 129). Yet while the author rejects the

idea of Pakistan as a ‘Shi’i backwater with nothing to offer to the centres of the Shi’i world’ (pp. 95-6), he equally refutes arguments that overstress local particularisms. Thus he counters the idea that South Asian Shi’ism in colonial times was developing as a ‘freestanding religion’ (p. 19), insisting instead on Shi’is’ understanding and portrayal of their faith as the ‘original’ Islam.

This excellent account of the development of Shi’i thought in Pakistan, written in lucid language yet somewhat endnote-heavy, begs further questions. First, although Fuchs makes a convincing case for analysing the broader socio-political relevance of doctrinal debates among religious scholars, he leaves us rather wanting regarding the reception of these discussions by the population of Shi’i believers. For instance, while one understands that Pakistani Shi’i ulama translated the Iranian revolution in a way that helped them assert their own authority, one might wonder how this changed believers’ ‘attitude towards Iran, pilgrimage sites, or global *maraji*’.

Second, if Fuchs aptly embraces the transnational and the local scales, the regional dynamics within Pakistan get scarce attention. This is probably due to the author’s focus on texts written in Urdu, Persian, and Arabic—Urdu here being considered as the ‘vernacular’. Yet it may well be argued that Urdu works as a vehicular language within South Asian Muslim societies, while vernacular debates take place in other regional languages—Punjabi, Sindhi, Pashto, or Balochi in Pakistan. The book mentions a *pir* in Punjab (p. 90), a Pashtun scholar (p. 140), and the importance of a madrasa in the Khairpur district in Sindh, where a Shi’i Princely State existed until 1955 (p. 53). However, apart from these, Shi’i debates in regional languages make no appearance. In particular, non-Urdu speaking Sindh is left out of the picture. Paying greater attention to these dynamics would also have allowed the author to better explore Shi’i-Sufi interactions, or shrine-centred Sufi religiosity infused with Shi’ism, notably at the ritual level. For instance, the book does not help us in understanding why one of the most important Sufi pilgrimage sites in Sindh—the dargah of Lal Shahbaz Qalandar in Sehwan Sharif—receives tens of thousands of Shi’i devotees from Punjab every year. That said, this book makes a major contribution to the study of Islam in South Asia and will prove highly instructive to anyone interested in Islamic thought, religious authority, and the transnational history of ideas.