

Book Review

***Queer Companions: Religion, Public Intimacy, and Sainly Effects in Pakistan.* By Omar Kasmani. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press. xi + 213 pp. ISBN: 978-1478018032. \$26.95 paperback; \$25.60 eBook.**



Journal of Interreligious Studies
December 2023, Issue 40, 84-86
ISSN 2380-8187
www.irstudies.org

Omar Kasmani's *Queer Companions: Religion, Public Intimacy, and Sainly Effects in Pakistan* is a striking piece of scholarship. In a relatively short amount of space, he covers a significant amount of material across a variety of disciplines. Relying on ethnographic methods, he incorporates history, religious studies, and queer studies. The result is not only an information-rich text, but a methodologically provocative one. Despite the amount of work that he covers in a relatively short volume, the text is accessible and reads very well.

The volume is five chapters, with a strong theoretical introduction and a fascinating coda on queerness and religiosity, thinking both individually and methodologically. However, there is a line in the Acknowledgements that I think exemplifies Kasmani's commitments in his work. He says, "My greatest debt is to the fakirs of Sehwan...[they have] led me as well as this work in new and exciting directions" (xii). In a book with a subtitle referencing religion, intimacy, and saintly power, that acknowledgement positions Kasmani as moving beyond the staid binary of insider/outsider. He exemplifies the queerness towards which he calls us in our research and honors his interlocutors in ways that remind us that as scholars, we are always dealing with people.

The Introduction lays out Kasmani's methodological interventions along with how and where he is entering different conversations. His epigraph is the Arabic word *qurb*, which persists in Persian and Urdu, and means "closeness, intimacy." Although the Introduction makes me think that Kasmani intends to focus on aspects of intimacy, I think the idea of closeness also applies. In doing his work, and showing where different disciplines have not interacted, there is in fact only a thin barrier amongst them, and they are much closer than many of us working in these fields realize.

Kasmani outlines his work as considering the future as mediated through present negotiations with the past. It is a striking consideration that his interlocutors are not only in the present but are thinking about the future and the legacy they want to leave. It enmeshes the actions of these Sufis in something beyond a synchronic moment, with the temporal lineage being both backwards and forwards. Later in the Introduction, he relates this broad theorization to the intimate, when he states "sainly intimacy, even when it involves a single or dominant

figure of bonding, is always already embroiled in a historical field of diverse, mediating, or hierarchical relations, which means that for such intimacy to endure, fakirs must work with the complex ethical-political demands their plural attachments bring forth in the present” (20). This intimacy means that there is never a stable understanding of *awliyā’ Allāh* (the friends of God, i.e., the Sufis who have intimate relationships with the Divine), but that there are always multiple figurations of these individuals.

Chapter 1 addresses notions of the imaginal. Drawing on Islamic Studies, Kasmani defines imaginal as “not something unreal, imaginary, or concocted; ... it is an order of reality that for Sufis is a distinct and betwixt realm of perception, as reliable as it can be deceptive” (37). It is through imaginal engagement that Sufis are able to challenge and consider the oppressive nature of society and religion. Often described as antinomian, Kasmani’s Sufis may be better considered as visionaries, as Kasmani suggests, or to use more contemporary language, perhaps they are futurists. The chapter not only addresses the social/religious roles of the Sufis, but their relationship to the Pakistani state, and the state’s desire to control Sufi assemblages.

The next two chapters are deeply connected. They look at questions of gender: how are male and female bodies present in the spaces of Sehwan. Kasmani’s construction of gender and gender roles in his examples are nuanced and thoughtful. However, he goes beyond the questions of body and social constructions to consider seriously ideas of spiritual impact. Perhaps one of the defining statements he makes is Sehwan is a place for “less-customary publics to lay claim to a saintly figure and develop their reputations as spiritually capable bodies” (64). Although he makes this assertion in relation to the involvement of the Pakistani state, I think the chapters highlight how it is the nature of Sehwan to make space for “less-customary publics.”

The fourth chapter builds off Kasmani’s earlier exploration of gender construction and moves into addressing questions of celibacy, homosocial orders, heteronormative family structures, personal Sufi politics, and spiritual cultivation. At the core of the chapter is the question of what happens when a Sufi, presumed to practice celibacy, chooses to marry. The Sufi in question, Murad, is fairly senior within the order, so it has implications for more junior members of the order, as well for theologies of celibacy and family roles. Kasmani does an admirable job of showing how theology is constructed by individuals, often emotionally invested, without diminishing the seriousness of theology or minimizing the affective entanglements of the authors.

Kasmani’s final chapter revisits the imaginal through the idea of *ghayb*, or the world of the unseen. In Muslim theologies there are many parallel worlds wherein beings that are normally unseen reside. He shines in taking these worlds seriously and having impact in the world of humans. He says of his own experience and learnings that “I learned to appreciate that the magical was veiled by the mundane, that there were signs to look out for, and that everyday utterances and ordinary sights required mindful consideration” (133). There is an echo here from his acknowledgements of the debt he owes the Sufis of Sehwan for his learning and giving him new directions. It is a strong full-circle moment for the text.

The Coda is an important theoretical invitation to scholars in queer studies, religious studies, anthropology, and history to consider how their fields are unaware of what is happening in those other fields, when there is clear overlap. He does not want us to consider queerness only

in terms of sexuality, or to project current understandings of some of these terms into the past. Instead, he argues, “the point...is to explore whether queer theorizing can find other lives in the epistemological reserves and affective resources that religious ecologies and lifeworlds have to offer” (159). I believe his text to offer a powerful model for how these disciplines can think cooperatively and expansively.

Queer Companions is a strong piece of scholarship that works best as a book. However, some of the text does require some background knowledge. As a result, I think chapters could be taught in various introductory levels for anthropology, religious studies, gender studies, Islamic studies, and South Asian studies. However, as a complete work, it is better suited for advanced undergraduate students at a minimum.

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