

Report about conference participation

My presentation at the 44th Annual Conference on South Asia, held on Oct. 22-25, 2015 at the University of Wisconsin-Madison focused on two themes: one the one hand, it tried to explain why studying the formation of religious publics is important for understanding the history of South Asia. On the other, it attempted to highlight the role of Muslim voluntary associations in that process. So far, very few case studies exist with regard to this topic. In the past, scholars have mainly looked at the 'Indian public sphere' either through the prisms of reform and 'progress', or debates about language, print and education. Religion as a factor has been neglected, or it was merely seen as a motor for social and political changes. I believe that the concept of the 'public' has to be historicized for the context of South Asia, and that religion as an analytical category has to be taken seriously in this history. By shifting the historiographical focus to the life of Muslim associations itself, I try to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of South Asian Islam. Understanding how public space has historically been structured and claimed by different actors will also help us to understand how publics are functioning in Pakistan today and how this has shaped civil society.