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Revolutionary Hermeneutics: Narratives of Emancipation in Muslim Colonial India

Lately, questions relating to Islam's compatibility with secular democracy, or the question of why Islam remains incompatible with Western understandings of secularism and democracy are generating a considerable amount of interest in both scholarly and journalistic communities. However, the labor of passing a verdict on whether Islam is or is not compatible with secular democracy preempts any discussion of the more pressing question of how authoritative Muslim scholars imagine and contest the very category of the "political" during moments of moral and political crises, such as the colonial moment in India. This paper addresses this question by focusing on the religious and political thought of a major late 19th/20th century Indian Muslim scholar, 'Ubaydullah Sindhi (d.1944).

'Ubaydullah Sindhi is a curious figure in the history of Islam in India. Born and raised as a Sikh, Sindhi converted to Islam in his boyhood and went on to become one of the major Muslim scholars in South Asia; he was associated with the famous North Indian Muslim seminary cum reformist movement, the Deoband Madrasa. In 1915, Sindhi left India and went to Kabul. There he spearheaded a major anti-colonial movement and established the first overseas branch of the Indian National Congress, with which he was affiliated. After spending 7 years in Kabul, Sindhi traveled extensively from 1922 to 1939, and lived for some time in Moscow (7months), Istanbul (3 years), and Mecca (14 years). In 1939, Sindhi came back to India a transformed man. From being an arch anti-colonial firebrand, the focus of his political thought had shifted to the argument that Indian Muslims must emulate the socialist ideals of economic justice and proletariat welfare.

Although Sindhi was clearly inspired by the socialist revolutionary currents he had witnessed while in exile, the revolution he imagined for Indian Muslims was not based on a rejection of religion, but rather on a thorough rethinking of Muslim normative sources and traditions of knowledge. Sindhi curated a political theology that sought to channel the revolutionary ethos of the Qur'an to catalyze a politico-economic revolution driven by the principle of social justice. Such a revolutionary program, Sindhi insisted, was urgently required for Indian Muslims to survive the vicissitudes of colonialism and secular modernity. This paper elucidates Sindhi's political imaginary as an illustration of the creative ways in which modern Muslim scholars responded to the moral crises and questions engendered by the colonial moment.