

JÜRGEN WASIM FREMBGEN: *The Friends of God. Sufi Saints in Islam. Popular Poster Art from Pakistan*. Karachi: Oxford University Press 2006. X, 158 pages. Five photographs, 48 colour plates. ISBN 978-0-19-547006-2. PKR 1295,-.

The worst thing that could happen to this valuable book is that it end up somewhere on the bottom shelf of a coffee table between a blood-curdling photo-exposé on Islamic terrorism and, say, the latest travel guide to the Trans-Siberian Railway. By again daring to tread the no-man's land between ethnography of material culture and history of religions, the curator of the Orient Section of the State Museum of Ethnology at Munich, JÜRGEN WASIM FREMBGEN, has made yet another substantial contribution to an important but neglected subject in the ethnography and history of South Asian religions: devotional poster-art in the cults of Muslim holy men.

The 48 posters presented in this book reflect ever-present tensions of conflicting beliefs in folk Islam in South Asia: 1) the Semitic belief that the Divine cannot be seen by mortals and (2) the indigenous Indic belief that the experience of the Divine is a visual experience, a *darśan* (<skt. *dṛś-* 'see'), (3) the orthodox Sunni Muslim belief that there should be no intermediary between God and man and (4) the ubiquitous Indic, Shia-Muslim, and Sufi belief that access to the Divine can only be gained through a 'perfect man', an *al-insān al-kāmil*, a *guru*. (It is not out of place in this context to remember that the Nizārī-Ismā'īlīs, a Shia-Muslim community with strong Indic traditions, refer to the "vision of the manifest imām", to a *dīdār*, a word related to Persian *dīdān* 'see' and skt. *dīdh-* > *dīdheti* 'see'.)

At the same time, these inexpensive poster-prints testify to the importance of what DAVID GILMARTIN has called "a sense of place in Islam in South Asia",¹ to the importance of a landscape filled with saintly *barakat* ('blessedness') where one's ancestors lived for centuries in intimate association with the blessedness of regional holy men. Devotional poster-art of Muslim saints is thus an expression par excellence of what the late ANNEMARIE SCHIMMEL perceived as "India-oriented Islam" in contrast to "Mecca-oriented Islam".²

In keeping with the two-fold nature of his study as ethnography and history of religions, FREMBGEN first gives a summary of general knowledge about the place of Sufism and the "Friends of God" in Islamic tradition and of the practices in the cults of Muslim saints in South Asia (chapters one and two). Chapter three with its eight subdivisions forms the main-body of the book, beginning with a historical sketch of early Muslim saints in the part of the world that is now Pakistan and India.

Particularly valuable in FREMBGEN's discussion of the composition of devotional poster-art are the frequent references to the heads, torsos, vehicles, and surrounding landscapes that have been borrowed from devotional poster-art of the Sikh and Christian traditions in India, e.g. the sacred image of 'Abdullāh Šāh Ġāzī of Karachi (Fig. 3, p. 20), a saint of the eighth century AD, is generated by placing an image of the black-bearded head of the fourth Sikh guru, Rām Dās, that had been cut and pasted from a devotional poster-print of the Sikhs onto the image of the torso of Muīn ud-Dīn Čišū, the great Muslim saint of Ajmer (537–633 AH, 1142–1236 AD).

In a similar fashion, Khwāja Khizr (Fig. 1, p. 15), sits like the Hindu goddess Gaṅgā on a lotos borne by a large fish wearing the crown and jewellery of a medieval Indian prince (*kaṛaṇḍa-mukuta*) while reading from a *Qur'ān* placed on a *rahl* (an x-shaped *Qur'ān*-'seat'), his sacredness being further emphasised by an Iranian halo.

¹ DAVID GILMARTIN: "South Asian history in search of a narrative." In: *Journal of Asian Studies*, November 1998, p. 1083.

² ANNEMARIE SCHIMMEL: "Some salient features of Muslim culture in the Deccan" [in press].

In a similar vein, images of Christian angels are juxtaposed with the *burāq*, the vehicle of the Holy Prophet Muḥammad (PBUH) on his flight to heaven (*mi‘rāğ*), to accompany ‘Abdul Qādir Ğilānī (470–561 AH/1077–1166 AD) who is seated on a flying carpet holding a string of prayer beads (*tasbīḥ*) while hovering over a landscape of lush forests and groves of date palms (an allusion to ‘Abdul Qādir’s tomb in Bagdad) and cypresses. Borrowings from Indian Christian devotional art also include the enraptured Jesus Christ with eyes turned upward to heaven and arms outstretched, who portrays the equally enraptured Lāl Šāhbāz Qalandar (Sehwān Šarīf; Fig. 24, p. 67) after having received a superimposed Muslim head-covering as “Sufication”. Or there is the Virgin Mary (Fig. 38, p. 99) accompanied by the lion of the Hindu goddess Durgā and family photos of descendants of the Muslim saint Šāh Muqīm (d. 1055 AH/1645 AD, District Kasur) shown sitting casually on European chairs. Šāh Muqīm himself is depicted as a lion-rider, albeit not so convincingly as the usual images of the lion-riding Hindu goddess.

Borrowings from Twelver Shia tradition include the superimposition of the image of ‘Abdul Qādir Ğilānī onto the battle charger of Ḥusain’s half-brother, ‘Abbās ‘Alī ‘Alamdār, who carries the famous leather water-bag, the *mašk-i-Sakīnah*, to the Euphrates in a heroic attempt to get water for the dying children in Ḥusain’s camp at Karbala (Fig. 12, p. 43). (The water-bag is still visible in the poster-print.)

In addition to the bizarre collages of crowded conclaves of saints (Figs. 8 and 9) and the posters of saintly personalities of local importance (Figs. 27, 33, 38, and 40), there are narrative poster-prints which tell stories of miracles that are widely known in South Asia, such as Fig. 14 (p. 46) in which the tears of a pious Muslim mother move ‘Abdul Qādir Ğilānī to lift a sinking ship from the sea and save those on board (who are shown kneeling in prays of gratitude on the deck of the ship that is held in ‘Abdul Qādir Ğilānī’s super-humanly enlarged hand).

A particularly striking example of historical narrative can be found in the superimposition of the image of the Mughal prince Dārā Šikōh (d. 1659) onto a modern photograph of the *dargāh* of Miān Mīr (938–1045 AH/1531/32–1635 AD) at Lahore (Fig. 36, p. 95). The poignancy of the coincidence of the themes of divine (*išq*) and human love is heightened here by the awareness that Dārā Šikōh’s wife from childhood, Nādīra Begum, lies buried outside the *dargāh* of Miān Mīr. According to pious tradition, Dārā Šikōh dispatched his last loyal troops from the Rān of Kutch to Lahore to convey the body of his beloved wife into the eternal protection of his beloved master. In keeping with a time-honoured custom in the House of Timūr, not to punish women of the family whose male relatives were on the losing side in wars of succession, the serial fratricide Aurangzīb (d. 1707) allowed a beautiful mausoleum with a delightful Mughal garden to be built for Nādīra Begum near Miān Mīr while Dārā Šikōh himself is said to lie in an unmarked grave outside the tomb of his royal ancestor Humāyūn at Delhi.

It is in this context that minor criticisms of the main body of this book can be made. While dissecting the borrowed body-parts of poster-saints with surgical precision, FREMBGEN occasionally misses the borrowed (or shared) religious themes or topoi they depict. In addition to the *mašk-i-Sakīnah* mentioned above and the grave of Nādīra Begum at the *dargāh* of Miān Mīr, one might mention that the entreaty for “safe passage to the other side” (p. 105) is a well-known, often spoken prayer at Hindu pilgrimage centres, such as at Paṇḍharpūr in Maharashtra: “O Paṇḍuraṅ! Take me over (to the other side of the Sea of Rebirths)!”

Similarly, the scene of Šāh Badī ud-Dīn Madār Šāh (15th century?) riding on a tiger using a cobra as a whip while Šāh Mīnā of Lucknow (d. 870 AH/1465 AD) comes to greet him riding on a running wall (Fig. 15, p. 49) has also been attributed to Šayḥ Luqmān of

Sarakhs (Saraḥs)³ and is well known in Maharashtra where the 1400 year-old *yogī* Cāṅgdev Vāṭeśvar rides on a tiger using a cobra as a whip while the young Śrī Sant Jñāneśvar (1275–1297 AD) rides on a flying wall with his brothers and sister to greet the ancient *yogī*. The point here is not to multiply the occurrences of the spiritual metaphor but to explain it: A *yogī* or Sufi who can ride on a tiger and use a cobra as a whip has reached a state of spiritual achievement in which the ‘tiger’, that is, the powers of sense and action (skt. *jñāna*- and *karmendriyas*) are under the firm control of his mental organ (skt. *manas*) which is symbolised by the normally uncontrollable cobra. But the power of a holy man who has found favour with God is far greater: even insensate objects heed his command. Whether in a Hindu or a Muslim context this famous metaphor forms part of a common spiritual idiom in folk religion in South Asia.

Regrettably, Mādhō Lāl Ḥusain (d. 1008 AH/1599 AD), one of the patron saints of Lahore, is conspicuous by his absence in FREMBGEN’s *mehfūl-i-awilyā* (‘assembly of saints’).

After enjoying the (for the most part) excellent discussion of devotional poster-art the concluding chapter comes as something of a surprise. Leaving aside the objective tone of scholarly discourse for a moment, FREMBGEN inveighs against the “... barrenness ...” of “... normative and intellectualised Islam ...” (p. 127). Now whatever one might say for or against Islamic reform movements in South Asia it is simply not true that they were (or are) “barren” in comparison to emotional fervour in the cults of Muslim saints. Moreover, Muslim reform movements in South Asia themselves often arose in Sufi milieus, e.g. Šāh Walīullāh (d. 1114–1176 AH/1703–1762 AD), who was a contemporary of ‘Abdul Wahhāb (1115–1201 AH/1703–1787 AD) at Mecca, and strictly rejected the cult of saints but, at the same time, was himself one of the most influential Sufis of his time in South Asia, or Mīr Dard (1133–1199 AH/1721–1785 AD) whose colourful mystical poetry goes hand in hand with the fundamentalist Islamic movement founded by his father, the *tarīqa Muḥammadiyya*, or, in the twentieth century, the *tablīg*-movement of Khwāja Ḥasan Nizāmī (d. 1955) of the dargāh of Nizām ud-Dīn Awliyā (634–725 AH/1236–1325 AD) in Delhi.

One might remember that the discussions of wonders described in the Holy Qur’ān (*mu‘ǧiza*), such as the Holy Prophet (PBUH) splitting the moon by pointing his finger at it (*sūra* 54), triggered rich intellectual dialogue between the followers of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan (d. 1898), the Aligarh Movement, and the numerous Muslim idealists who later emerged from the theological seminary at Deoband, e.g. Abūl Kalām Āzād (d. 1956), ‘Ubaidullāh Sindhī (d. 1944), Maulānā Ilyās (d. 1944), Maulānā Abū’l A‘lā Maudūdī (1903–1980; founder of the *Ġamā‘at-i-Islāmī*). And, certainly not least, Sir Muḥammad Iqbāl (1877–1938) attacked “pīr-ism” but praised Ḥusain ibn Mansūr al-Ḥallāg (244–309 AH/857–922 AD) and chose Ġalāl ud-Dīn Rūmī (604–672 AH/1207–1273 AD) as his spiritual mentor (as in the *Ġāwīdnāme*).

The foregoing criticisms are in no way meant to depreciate the great service FREMBGEN has done in collecting, classifying, and analysing the poster-prints reproduced in this book. For an understanding of the forms of devotion in present-day cults of Muslim saints in Pakistan the Friends of God is indispensable. It makes a fine visual companion-piece to REGULA BURCKHARDT QURESHI’s study of the auditory forms of devotion in the cults of Muslim saints.⁴

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³ *Fawā’id al-fu’ād* of Ḥasan Sijzī Dihlawī (652–728 AH/1255–1328 AD), p. 9; cited by M. MUJEEB: *The Indian Muslims*. Delhi 1967, p. 121.

⁴ REGULA BURCKHARDT QURESHI: *Sufi music of India and Pakistan. Sound, context and meaning in qawwālī*. Cambridge 1986.