

„Prisoners of the Sultanate? Probing Scholarly Frameworks for the Study of Islam in South Asia“

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Few aspects of the South Asian past and present have proven to be more problematic than conceptualizing the role of Islam and Muslims in South Asian societies. Especially in the last three decades, scholarship has deliberately attempted to move beyond the depiction of Islam and Muslims as a monolithic bloc that had been the staple fare of colonial as well as Indian and Pakistani nationalist scholarship alike since more than a century. These attempts at overcoming essentializing images of South Asian Islamic traditions and Muslim societies have taken many shapes, among them a greater emphasis on the doctrinal as well as regional diversity of Muslim South Asia and ultimately, the questioning of the usefulness and propriety of the very terms ‘Islam’ and ‘Muslim’ themselves. Yet despite these well-intentioned approaches, I will argue in this talk that the essentialisms that scholarship has tried to challenge actually survive in and are perpetuated by these very approaches themselves. As I will attempt to show, contrary to the claims of academics, essentialist and essentializing ideas about ‘Islam’, and specifically, ‘Indo-Islam’, are not really dislodged, but presupposed by much of the recent literature on the study of Islam and Muslim societies in South Asia.

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