

According to a famous tradition, Prophet Muhammad is reported to have said, “Whoever imitates a people becomes one of them.” The Deobandis in Pakistan, the country’s most prominent Sunni sectarian denomination, often mobilize this tradition as a key proof-text in their elaborate discourse on the visibility of religious difference and the ethics of cultural appropriation. Being a good Muslim, the Deobandis proclaim, isn’t confined to the strength of one’s privately held beliefs and moral values but entails adopting the sartorial repertoire of a pious personhood. Growing a beard and trimming the mustache, for instance, is not only an identity marker of one’s faith community but also an admirable gesture of mimesis with the Prophet. Conversely, those who forsake visible Islamic rituals by aping Western styles and fashions become indistinguishable from those they imitate. Pious personhood, therefore, is as much a function of poesis as it is of belief and practice. But what does it mean for religious rituals to be publicly visible markers of social distinction? Do such rituals retain their religious character do they simply provide an aesthetic cover for identity politics? Rejecting the latter proposition as grounded in a problematic secular distinction between private religion and public politics, anthropologists of Islam since Talal Asad have shifted the study of rituals from symbolic interpretation to disciplinary practices of ethical self-cultivation. Recent ethnographies by Saba Mahmood, Charles Hirschkind and Hussein Agrama have studied Muslim ritualistic practices in varieties of institutional contexts, demonstrating the significance of ritual as an embodied disciplinary technique used to acquire a set of skills, aptitudes and dispositions. While there are merits to placing emphasis on disciplinary power and the care of the self in the study of Muslim rituals, I argue that anthropologists of Islam need to integrate discipline with the semiotic functions of bodily ritual and its significance as a marker of social distinction. Taking textual and conversational contestations between Pakistani Muslim modernists and Deobandi traditionalists over the normative status of the beard as an example, this paper calls for a renewed attention to the semiotics of ritual and its subversive potential in investing the public sphere with a religious aesthetic. In doing so, I introduce ‘imitation’ (*tashabbuh*) as a hitherto ignored modality of ethical practice in Islam. Ritualistic practices, in addition to serving the purpose of virtue cultivation, are animated by anxieties to register visual and aesthetic distinctions of an Islamic identity.