

Act in the Living Present: Muslim Voluntary Associations in Colonial Punjab and the Quest for a “Modern” Islam

My paper explores how Islam was understood and debated by members of the Anjuman-i Himayat-i Islam (AHI, Society for the Defense of Islam), the most successful Muslim voluntary association of colonial Punjab. Established in 1884 in Lahore by traditional religious scholars, the AHI was immediately taken over by the new colonial middle classes and turned into an outlet for their reformist energies. By establishing schools, colleges and welfare institutions and actively using the printing press, the AHI created a platform for public debate and civic engagement dedicated to the spread of a “modernist” Islam. My paper analyzes hitherto untapped Urdu sources, such as the association's meeting minutes and annual reports, textbooks and journals, as well as speeches and biographies of its members in order to explore debates on Islamic piety, ritual practice, religious instruction, ethics, and religious reform. By doing so, the paper attempts to deepen our understanding of Muslim religious thought in late colonial north India and local approaches to the creation of a modern Islam.