or formative role. Margolis’s rich work pushes us to re-theorize and investigate anew these and other established ideas.


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*Politics of Desecularization* is primarily a study of state-religion relations in contemporary Pakistan. It is also the only academic work to theorize state-religion relations that is specifically informed by, and built on, Pakistan’s experience, as opposed to theorizing secularism and secularization based on the same stock of cases, such as the United States, India, or Turkey. The book provides a conceptual framework to understand how weak and ambiguous official ideologies concerning religion are productive of wider desecularization processes.

Saeed attempts to conceptualize messy cases like that of Pakistan, which are neither fully secular nor entirely theocratic. The book advances *unsettled-desecularization* as one of four analytical categories to capture the politics of religion in Pakistan and other cognate cases, such as Egypt and Iran, especially in light of the Arab Spring and post-2009 internal challenges to the ruling regime in Iran (27). Saeed’s primary contribution is to identify the “nature and direction” of religious change in societies where there is deep contention over the norms and principles of state-religion interaction, while politics is increasingly imbricated with religious norms and sensibilities, hence undergoing desecularization (4–5). Unsettled-desecularization is distinct from a pure theocracy, where the political is entirely subverted to the religious sphere. By contrast, unsettled-desecularization implies that there is still an autonomous secular, albeit shrinking and sequestered, political space for policy- and law-making in societies, but where religion’s imprimatur on politics, laws, and institutions gradually becomes more palpable (desecularization, then, is one possible direction of change) (25–28). Unsettled implies that
the question of religion-state relations is unstable, thus it repeatedly comes up in various guises (28). The instability of the religion question is explained by the absence of a hegemonic or “concrete” ideology that can be used to mediate competing conceptions of the role of religion (5–6, 106, 167).

The shifting contours of Pakistan’s engagement with the beleaguered Ahmadiyya minority community constitute the empirical backdrop of Saeed’s core argument. The state’s increasingly intolerant posture vis-à-vis the Ahmadis is, according to Saeed, emblematic of Pakistan’s general drift to desecularization, that is, the growing encroachment of religion and “religious talk” in the ordinary workings of the state, national discourse, and law-making (25).

The book employs diachronic analysis, i.e., tracking and analyzing changes across time, to assess the relationship between various regimes (colonial, postcolonial, democratic, authoritarian) and the Ahmadiyya movement, a missionary Muslim movement initiated by Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, originating in 19th century British India. The research is culled from government archives, vernacular print media, parliamentary debates, case law, and interviews with a variety of actors that have shaped or influenced religious politics in Pakistan. In the absence of a concrete state-religion ideology in Pakistan, the Ahmadiyya “question” has continuously cropped up, and with each successive iteration (in 1954, 1974, and 1984) it has been accompanied by rancorous demands for “othering” Ahmadis, coupled with the enactment of pernicious measures and laws against the community, and a firmer assertion of Pakistan’s Islamic identity (42, 79, 167). Chapters 3 and 4 provide the clearest articulation of unsettled-desecularization at work by demonstrating the politicization of what was originally a theological dispute concerning Mirza Ghulam Ahmad’s claim of prophethood (considered anathema by mainstream Muslims). The politicization of this issue has resulted in the state’s gradual shift from protecting to marginalizing to criminalizing the Ahmadis. More significantly, for Saeed, religion comes to play a central role in public and political life because of the compulsions and exclusions that are intrinsic to nationalist politics, which hinges on the formation of a homogenous community (6). This process depends on marking others for exclusion. In other words, the othering of Ahmadis is a natural consequence of nationalism and the indispensability of the other for the construction of the self (6–9, 208).

The book’s strength lies in its combining of political and social developments with judicial analysis. An in-depth examination of case law generates fresh insights about the repercussions of political norms, laws, and
statues on legal debates about religious freedom in courtrooms. Saeed not only consults case law and statutes, she has gathered an impressive array of interview data from lawyers, judges, state attorneys, politicians, and former ministers who actively shaped the discourse around the question of religious freedom in general, and the treatment of Ahmadis in particular. The interviews with major actors are quite revelatory, both in terms of getting a fuller sense of events and how actors recollected their own role in those defining moments.

Given Pakistan’s drift to extremism and growing conservatism, it is not a surprise that religion has become a potent force in the contemporary era. In particular, Pakistan’s treatment of the Ahmadiyya community is one illustration of this. Yet, Saeed’s analysis leaves open the question as to whether a polity could experience desecularization and secularization processes simultaneously. Put differently, Saeed does not fully address whether polities can undergo some form of secularization even if the general direction is that of desecularization. In addition, what kind of evidence would have to be marshaled to demonstrate a shift, even if fleeting, in the secularization direction? Is it merely the displacement of religious logic, norms, sensibilities, and rationales by “secular” ones, which begs the further question: what does secularism mean in Pakistan and what kind of secularity can we expect? And does that need to be accompanied by concomitant shifts in state practices, legal instruments, and official discourses, or could publicly sanctioned secularity coexist with a very public presence of religion? Contrariwise, is it possible to see shifts away from overtly religious vocabulary despite an officially protected majoritarian Islam? In other words, the question of multiple trajectories of secularism, as Saeed rightly emphasizes, can also be extended to domestic cases, where parallel, even contradictory, trends could emerge, either over time (as Saeed demonstrates), or in tandem within the same timeframe.

Finally, while Saeed dedicates a great portion of the book on theorizing secularization and de-secularization, it would have been helpful if we had some understanding of indigenous conceptions of secularism in contemporary Pakistani discourse, as she does with historical conceptions of secularism and alternative readings of religion. An engagement with existing narratives of secularism could have provided greater insight as to how, and in what way, can Pakistan possibly witness a shift, either in the form of (re)secularization or the crystallization of a concrete state ideology with respect to religion.