
Dr. Anand Vivek Taneja
Assistant Professor Of Religious Studies and Anthropology, Vanderbilt University

Questions of political theology typically explore the relation between religion and state sovereignty. But what does it mean for people to take everyday ethical and political stances—how to be a self, and how to orient oneself to an other—through engagement with religious and literary traditions? In a time of dominant Hindu nationalism and violent Islamophobia in India, Urdu poetry is the medium in which an alternative political theology finds popular articulation, questioning the “normative horizon” of the exclusionary nation state.

The political theology being articulated through Urdu poetry is one which is concerned not with the state, but with the constitution of the self through a network of thick relations to locality. This understanding of self, society, and political community constituted through thick networks of local relationality across radical differences is captured by the everyday and poetic meanings of the term watan as they are used in contemporary north-Indian Muslim discourse.

The vision articulated by this alternate political theology—which draws on both longstanding Indo-Islamic traditions as well as the lived experience of Indian democracy—calls for a radical reimagining of intimate relations as the basis of belonging and the forming of political community.

Anand Vivek Taneja is an Assistant Professor of Religious Studies and Anthropology at Vanderbilt University. He is the author of Jinnealogy: Time, Islam, and Ecological Thought in the Medieval Ruins of Delhi (Stanford University Press 2018). He is currently working on a book on Indian Muslim ethical life in the age of Hindu nationalism.

MONDAY
SEPTEMBER 28TH, 3:30 - 5:00 PM
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