

Sir Syed Ahmad Khan

Introduction

The British colonial world of northern India, the arrival of Christian missionaries, particularly since the 18th century, provoked a relationship between Christian, Muslims, Hindus that posed many challenges for India heading into a new modern era. Common ground among these people are places where meaningful connections and friendships can help define co-citizenship, a key concept in the early days of Sir Syed. At the same time, Islamic faith, embedded in a failing Mughal Empire, were signs that filled Sir Syed with deep concern for the fate of his people whose culture and faith were so inextricably tied together.

It is in this context I wish to present the life and legacy of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, one of the most important Muslim figures of his time where British colonialism and the enormous shifts culturally, socially, and economically in India ushered the prospect for seismic changes for indigenous Muslims and help lay the foundations for the partitioning of Pakistan. He understood the challenges of local Indian Muslims to adapt to a modern world, juggling loyalties and relationships between British power and his own faith and cultural identity that had one goal in mind: the thriving of his people.

With this in mind, I wish to present some elements of his life that shaped his contributions for his country and for his *umma*. *The Aligarh Movement* in the context of Muslim nationalism was a particularly focal point for Sir Syed, and one that lived well beyond his death for Muslims. This too shaped his relationships with Christians and Hindus, particularly as part of the Muslim minority. His conciliatory approach involved careful listening and the study of Christian and Jewish texts. He went to great lengths in an effort to stay in the conversation with Christian missionaries, and he strove to make interfaith dialogue a means to inter-cultural innovation, and a renewed sense of Islamic faith in changing times.

I hope to show how Sir Syed, pursued relationships with Christians and Hindus through his systematic theology and pluralistic approach to religion. I would then like to end with a brief reflection on how the impact of Sir Syed's legacy reflects ongoing issues in the development of Islamic relations with others in postsecular times.

A Brief Biography

The family of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan (1871-1898) claimed lineage from the prophet Muhammad himself, born from the 38th generation, bearing the name *Syed* from the 10th generation on.¹ His ancestors settled in Herat, Afghanistan and then eventually migrated to Mughal, India in the 17th century. Despite the fact that Sir Syed's family resided in India for more than 200 years, they always retained a deep perception

¹ Sir Syed Today.org: A Project of the AMU and FAAA, USA.
<http://www.sirsyedetoday.org/aboutsirsyed/Genealogy.aspx> (Accessed December 19, 2018).

of their foreign origins. In many ways this affected not only the family of Sir Syed, but generally many upper-class Muslims in the Indian context. They tended to separate themselves from the political and cultural issues of India, except in times of political crisis.²

He was born and grew up in the house of his maternal grandfather, *Khwajah Aarid al-din Ahmad Khan* (1747-1828) who was of an illustrious family of Mughal aristocrats. He held the position of *wazir* at the Mughal court and acted as ambassador to Iran and Burma for the East India Company's government in Calcutta. The family of Sir Syed held to a strong Sufi tradition. Two of his seven brothers were in fact outspoken and well-known dervishes. Syed himself relates that his grandfather spent his entire life in religious retreat, in remembering God, in renunciation, and acts of self-mortification. His mother too, *Aziz al-nissa Begam*, was regarded as an important model in the practice of *tawakkul*, or complete reliance on and trust in God.³

His education was very traditional and never completed because of the death of his father had changed their fortunes dramatically. He ended what education he did have at the age of 18. What he lacked though in formal education, he gained in his sharp wit and inquisitive mind. In the preface of his collected works, *Tasanif-i Ahmadiyah*, he wrote:

*"Although I do not possess any scholarly ability and my level scarcely surpasses that of an illiterate-yet from an earliest childhood onwards I was endowed with an inquiring mind...and yet my inquiring mind has never left me, and it was this that caused all the revolutionary changes, this made me arrive at the truth which I believe to be "pure Islam" although conventional Muslims may hold it to "Pure unbelief.""*⁴

While the lack of formal education made him a target from conservative critics on his work to modernize Islam, he was quite disciplined in personal study and independent investigations which laid the groundwork for his distinctive and modern interpretation of attitudes and practices in Islam.⁵

He was entirely loyal to the British colonial regime, appointed *sarishtahdar* (recorder) in the criminal department of the lower court. In 1839 he was assigned deputy reader in the Uttar Pradesh province, eventually rising to sub judge. In 1855 he was transferred to Bijnor, where he played a pivotal part in the mutiny of 1857, protecting expatriate families in the upheaval that led Hindus and Muslims to rebel against the government, rather than joining other Muslims in an uprising against the British government.⁶

² Esposito, John L. *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 85-86.

³ Troll, Christian W, *Sayyid Ahmad Khan: A Reinterpretation of Muslim Theology*. (Atlantic Heights, NJ: Humanities Press, 1978), 28-29.

⁴ Troll, xvi.

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Esposito, John, 86.

It was from this defining time that he charged himself with the difficult task of mediator between the local Muslim community and the British government, both of whom were profoundly alienated from one another. He attempted to assure Indian Muslims that friendship with non-Muslims is crucial to coexistence, if not based on faith, then on the natural affection for one another (*liubb insani*). He insisted that this was tolerated by *Shari-a*, and that “enmity between Christians and Muslims on religious grounds is not possible...that for the exception of Islam, there is no other religion in the world which pays such respect towards Christ and his guidance.”⁷ He emerged as both a loyal subject of the British Crown and ultimately as a staunch Muslim nationalist.

After the events of the 1857 mutiny, he focused his attention on what he wanted to accomplish and undertook several key projects that would take up much of his life. The first was an interfaith movement in order to create a better understanding between Muslims and Christians. The second was to establish scientific organizations that would help Muslims in their development in modern times. And finally, he wished to analyze the causes of the 1857 revolt in his, *An Account of the Loyal Mahomedans of India*, which countered the British view that the rebellion was led by the Muslim elites. He was the only Muslim scholar ever to have created a commentary on the Old and New Testaments of the bible, in his *Mohomedan Commentary on the Holy Bible* (1862), a unique attempt in Islamic apologetics.⁸

Another turning point for Sir Syed occurred in his trip to London in May 1869 where he remained for fifteen months. It was here that he deepened and internalized certain aspects of British culture, particularly the value system of modern scientific education and the economic form of social and political *laissez-faire*. In London he published twelve essays on the life of the prophet Muhammad, *A Series of Essays on the Life of Mohammed* (1870). He also visited the universities of Cambridge and Oxford, as well as private schools. It was these educational models that equipped him to plan the *Mohammedan Anglo-Oriental College*, which he established in Aligarh in 1875. By 1920, the college became *Aligarh Muslim University*.⁹

The significance of Sir Syed as both a leader of Indian Muslims, and as an Islamic thinker and scholar is indeed extraordinary. His career as a practical social reformer began in the 1860's while he was a government servant. Sir Syed was then acutely concerned about the reluctance of Muslims to adopt to western education, given their decline in educational level and tendency toward segregation, and started the *Ghazipore Translation Society*, which was to publish works of science and literature by major western writers into Persian and Urdu, which eventually became the beginnings of the *Mohammedan Anglo-Oriental College* of Aligarh.¹⁰

⁷ Baljon, JMS. *The Reforms and Religious Ideas of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan*. (Leiden: EJ Brill, 1949), 14.

⁸ Sayyid Aḥmad Khān, *The Mohomedan Commentary on the Holy Bible*, 2 v. in 1 (Ghazeepore: Ahmad Khan, 1862), //catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/008426359.

⁹ Esposito, John, 86.

¹⁰ Graham, Major-General GFI, *The Life and Work of Sir Syed Ahmed Khan*. (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1974), ix-x.

He strove to create an educational program that would produce future leaders of the Muslim community, equipped to cope with both the east and the west. The college succeeded in educating and training men from aristocratic and wealthy families, who had lost their traditional military and governmental posts. In many ways, he was determined to draw out the best of Indian Muslims from their isolation.¹¹ Most notably, the college also accepted young men of all religions and races.¹²

His educational aims are greatly rooted in his role as an Islamic thinker. Sir Syed promoted an Islamic modernism that drew a great deal of inspiration from the writings of *Shah Wali Allah* (1703-1762).¹³ He emphasized a rational approach to Islam and social reforms in Muslim culture. The reaction to these aims were bound up in controversy that often-surrounded Sir Syed with his emphasis on a religious modernism that rejected some traditional practices of the more orthodox and the lure of Muslim young men from orthodox religious seminaries to western-style schools.¹⁴ *Altaf Husain Hali's* (1837-1914) assessment in his biography of Sir Syed, saw him as a revitalizer of the Muslim community. Not unlike the didactic relationship between secularity and religiosity played out in many ways worldwide, particularly since the 18th century, his desire to adapt Islamic faith to some extent to modernism was also a concern for the fate of Islam, that was bound up with Muslim political and economic influence.¹⁵

Finally, after a long and illustrious life, in 1898 the St. James Gazette in London published the following short notice:

*"His long and honorable life came to an end in 1898. Throughout his life he worked for the greatest good of his fellow countrymen and co-religionists. He succeeded in being everything that we desire our Indian fellow subject to be. His great aim was to restore the Mussulmans to their former position as a dominant and forward race, and this aim he carried out by incessantly impressing on them the virtues of orderly and sober lives, liberal education, unflinching loyalty to the government, and a careful and intelligent adherence to their religion."*¹⁶

Sir Syed and Christianity

The renewal of Islam in northern India for Sir Syed meant that Muslims would no longer insulate themselves from the influences of British rule and that they would need to find multiple, innovative ways to engage the ruling powers in meaningful ways. In my reading of Sir Syed this engagement tended around three areas: political access where

¹¹ Ibid, viii.

¹² The remark of Dr. David Grafton in his feedback on this paper: "It would be interesting to know if Khan was influenced at all by another Reformer of this period, Butrus al-Bustani, a Christian from Syria, who started a Syrian national college for men of all religions or sects. Nevertheless, what this demonstrates is a broader movement during the 19th century regarding reforms."

¹³ Shah Wali Allah (Qutb al-Din Ahmad al-Rahim) (1703-62).
<http://www.muslimphilosophy.com/ip/rep/HO45> (accessed December 3, 2018).

¹⁴ Esposito, John, 86.

¹⁵ Toll, 14-15.

¹⁶ Graham, 276-278.

Muslim voices could be amplified; educational access that put Muslims on a level playing field with others; and a religious engagement that allowed opportunities for mutual understanding. Engagement with foreign powers and faith were key to his approach. The presence of Christian missionaries and the identity of Christianity with political and social power in colonial India was all the more reason he felt driven to understand Christianity more deeply. He however had only second-hand knowledge of Christian faith.¹⁷

There is a direct relation between Ahmad Khan's educational work and his apologetic efforts in order to help renew Islam. Therefore, for him, Qur'anic conception and teaching need some reformulation in the rationalist-thinking of the western world.¹⁸ This same approach was needed in order to understand Christianity as well. He held debates with Christian missionaries but found his own knowledge of their faith lacking in many ways. So, he acquired standard works of Christian scholars. This included Horne's *Introduction to the Critical study of the Holy Scriptures*, various types of commentaries, Mosheim's *Ecclesiastical History of the 2nd Century*, W. Muir's *Church History*, and the works of some Unitarians.¹⁹

In addition, he hired a translator for the more essential parts of his resources, and he also employed a Jew to teach him Hebrew. He thus began the audacious project of writing a Muslim commentary to the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, *Tabyin al-Kalam* (Commentary on the Bible). It is considered to be remarkable in its tolerant tone in order to show a Muslim audience that interfaith engagement is a good thing. His religious broad mindedness was in part the influence of his father, *Mir Muttaqi* who was a man of liberal ideas, and this set a stamp on all his children.²⁰

The Bible commentary consists of three parts. The first deals with the principle question of what attitude a Muslim should have about biblical texts. The second part is the actual commentary and notes on the first eleven chapters of Genesis. The third part is Khan's notes on the first five chapters of the Gospel of Matthew. No other volumes were written, though he had an intention to do so. Aside from tiresome details that probably may have attributed to low Muslim interest in reading the commentary, there are some points that are of interest to Christian theologians and some typical Islamic views are presented on biblical subjects.²¹

One example of this has to do with the story of Adam and Eve. He does not speak of Adam's fall as sin since in Islam it is held that Adam was from the very day of creation a prophet, and all of the Muslim prophets are infallible. He also notes that God's prohibition to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil was "merely a caution prompted by a regard for man's wellbeing, and not a prohibition by divine Law. For, if

¹⁷ Baljon, 77.

¹⁸ Ibid, 89.

¹⁹ Ibid, 77.

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Ibid, 79.

Adam and Eve should eat from the forbidden fruit, they would know of good and evil and that would be harmful to the first human couple.”²²

The Muslim-Christian Controversary

The unique character of Syed’s *Tabyin* becomes clearer when placed in the wider context of the *Muslim-Christian Controversary* in India and to his prolonged search for a new theological approach to Muslim-Christian relations. Under British rule, western presence in India led to a number of disputations between theologians of diverse religious traditions; Hindu, Christian and Muslim.²³ During the 1850’s a prolonged encounter took place in the city of Agra between the Muslim ‘ālim, Maulānā Raḥmat Allāh Kairānawī, and a German evangelical missionary, the Reverend K. G. Pfander. The early Mughal emperors had developed Agra as the capital of their expanding empire, and even after the transfer of the court in 1648 to nearby Delhi, the city had retained some importance as a center of Muslim culture and learning.

But the period of the decline of the Mughal fortunes in the 18th century culminated in the capture of Agra in 1803 by the forces of the East India Company, and the next half-century saw the transformation of the city into a key administrative center in the expansion of British control over north India. In 1836 Agra was made the headquarters of a new unit of administration—the North-Western Provinces, and the center of the controversy.²⁴

Pfander spent two years in Calcutta learning Hindustani and preparing an Urdu version of the *Mizan*. He went to Agra in December 1841 to join the Church Missionary Society (CMS). At that very time, Sir Syed passed the newly introduced *munsifi* examination in Agra. By 1839 Sir Syed was appointed *Na’ib Munshi* at the Commissioner’s Office in Agra. He easily moved among the Muslim aristocracy, and at the same time he was familiar with many distinguished European expatriates serving the local government. He was well acquainted with Rev. James John Moore of the CMS and it seems he was an important formative influence on Sir Syed.²⁵

Intense missionary activity in Agra and elsewhere ranged from written and oral debates, to preaching in bazaars and the distribution of copies of the Bible in the vernacular. Pfander notes in his diary of 1843 that the question of the corruption of the scriptures became the center of debate among the Ulama. It is in the 1840s that Rev. William Muir (1819-1905) was taking a keen interest in the “Mohammedan Controversary” as he chose to call it, was noticed by Sir Syed as they walked in the same circles and discussed the same matters.

In Muir’s publications, one in particular stands out, *The Testimony borne by the Coran to the Jewish and Christian Scriptures*. Muir sought to prove that the “believer in

²² Ibid, 80.

²³ Troll, 58-59.

²⁴ Powell, A. A. “Maulānā Raḥmat Allāh Kairānawī and Muslim-Christian Controversary in India in the Mid-19th Century.” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain & Ireland* 108, no. 1 (1976): Abstract.

²⁵ Troll, 62-63.

the Coran is bound to be equally believer in the Old and New Testaments.” It is a striking fact that Sir Syed had taken up the ideas of Muir regarding Muslim relationship to the Jewish and Christian scriptures. Other more moderate missionary voices than that of Muir also contributed to the context of the controversy. Rev. JP Menge wrote *On the Relationship of Islam to the Gospel* (Calcutta: Ostell and Lepage, 1847), which was a translation of the German Catholic theologian JA Moehler’s (1796-1838) treatise on Islam.²⁶

It is in this context that Sir Syed, when stationed in Bijnor (1855-57), wrote a number of matters defending Islam against Christian missionary objections. But it was after the mutiny of 1857 that he thought it possible to interpret the Bible according to what he regarded as some basic principles in Islam. He, unlike other Muslim scholars, no longer held the claim that of *tahrif-I lafzi* (textual corruption) as comparable to *tahrif-I ma’nawi* (corruption of meaning). While stationed in Ghazipur, Sir Syed started planning his commentary on the Bible.

His main aim was to go right to the source of Christian faith, the Bible, and explain them in terms of Islam. He assumed that the Biblical texts of Jews and Christians are generally reliable and of a specially revealed character. He was prepared to accept Christian scriptures as relevant to the faith of a Muslim, as a revelation on the same path toward the final revelation of the Qur’an. His method was attention to Christian sources in the original language, study of the earliest Christian doctrines, and then, like Pfander and Muir, respond positively, in order to call for a Muslim historical study of the Bible and early Church.²⁷

Sir Syed’s Systemic Theology

Dr. Charles M. Ramsey, assistant professor of Religious Studies at Forman Christian College in Lahore, examined Sir Syed’s *Tabyin* along with some other principle works in the original Urdu language to discover how he conceptualized revelation in the Bible. For Ramsey, Sir Syed employs a systematic paradigm to categorize all prophetic revelation within the Abrahamic faiths. This shows a clearer understanding of Khan’s exceptionally positive regard for the Bible.²⁸

Kahn’s inter-textual classification comes from the science of tradition (*‘ilm-I hadith*) that is inspired by the works of *Idris al-Shafi’I* (d. 820), and which continues today in scriptural hermeneutics. This categorization classifies the revealed word of God as either *matlu* or *ghayr matlu*. The term *matlu* is derived from the Arabic *tilawh*, literally meaning to repeat in succession, or authoritatively rehearse. Unlike other ways for describing the interrelation of the Qur’an and Hadith, this was applied specifically to show the organic equivalence of the Qur’an and Sunnah. This recognizes the Qur’an and

²⁶ Ibid, 67-68.

²⁷ 69-70.

²⁸ Ramsey, Dr. Charles M. “God’s Word, Spoken and Otherwise,” in *Muslim-Christian Relations: In Historical Perspective*. The Centre for Muslim-Christian Studies Research Briefings: No. 4 – Summer 2015. ISSN 2056-5003 (WEB).

the Sunnah to have equal religious and ethnic authority, thus the difference between *matlu* and *ghayr matlu* revelation is that of form and function, but not of substance.²⁹

Dr. Ramsey goes to say:

*“Syed Ahmed works within al-Shafīʿī’s framework but further subdivides the category of matlū revelation into two forms: **word** (alfāz) and **subject** (maḍmūn). In the first, the recipient rehearses the ‘pure words spoken’ by God in revelation. In the second, the recipient rehearses the ‘pure subject spoken’ by God in revelation. Ghayr matlū revelation, however, is recounted through intermediaries who serve as inspired ‘sacred historians’ (muqaddas muʿarrikh). In light of this, Sayyid Ahmad capitalized upon the fact that throughout most of interpretative history the value of Sunnah as revelation has overshadowed its difference from the Qurʾān in form and function.”³⁰*

Sir Syed’s applies these same categories to revelation in the Bible which for him contains a blend of *matlu* and *ghayr matlu* revelation. *Matlu* revelation is classified as text which is the backbone of the divine message. *Ghayr matlu* revelation contains contextualizing narrative, both being of the same substance (jawhar).

Concretely, Syed Ahmed emphasizes that Muslims must not qualify *matlu* (Qurʾan) revelation as of greater worth than *ghayr matlu* (Bible) because they are both of divine origin. The Qurʾan and Bible for Syed are equivalent in value, while other areas pertaining to doctrine (*shariah*) differ. Both testify to the central message of *tawhid*, the essential monotheistic Oneness of God. Jewish, Christian, and Muslim scriptures can be read critically and reverently to illuminate one another.³¹

Sir Syed’s Pluralistic Approach to Religion

Why would a Muslim such as Sir Syed, who accepts the Qurʾan as God’s final revelation to the Prophet Muhammad, be motivated to read pre-Qurʾanic scriptures? The reasons why he would dedicate substantial time and finances to the study of the Bible may be better understood in the value of pluralism in Syed’s religious thought. If for Syed there is an in-depth coherence of the revelation recorded in the Qurʾan and the Bible, then this view also signifies how the Creator engages with creation. This helps us understand why he wrote *Tabyin* and its subsequent use of the Bible in *Tafsir*.

The *Tabyin* is Ahmad’s theological *apologia*. The opportunity of biblical study for Sir Syed provided him the possibility of interpretive tools that were helpful for the larger modernist project by stripping away older tradition which hindered a more pure religion. The apologetic argument is that once the clutter is removed, true Islam will emerge as reconcilable to the new sciences and with the inclusion of the Bible within its canon of scripture. He demonstrated a different mode of religious and social interaction that is

²⁹ Ramsey, 9.

³⁰ Ibid

³¹ Ibid, 10.

collaborative rather than competitive, and which overtly respects existing religious identities.

In Muslim Christian engagement up until this time, Islamic tradition affirms the Gospels as *Injil* in some Islamic circles, but not the apostolic letters. For Syed, however, the New Testament writers were also recipients of revelation (*sahib al-wahy*) and that their writings are worthy of obedience (*wajib al-amal*). He insists that this paradigm remains within the bounds of Islamic history. The justification for this view lies in his insistence that the Christian apostle does not operate in his own authority, but rather under the legislative dispensation (*rusul*) of the Messiah (*Hadhrat Masih*). The apostles receive revelation under these conditions. Including the entirety of the texts revered by Jews and Christians, Sir Syed shows his orientation toward pluralism.³²

The Christian response to Syed was mixed. On the one hand, the 1875 missionary Conference on Urdu and Hindi Literature in Allahabad, for example, cite Syed Ahmad's "Broad Church Mohamadenism" as a direct impediment to the strategy to bringing about societal conversion to Christianity. It seems they based this judgement not on the *Tabyin*, but rather on his appeal to reason and the demystification of traditional lore.³³ Conversely, there are firsthand accounts from some of the most prominent indigenous Christians of the time, and they regard *Tabyin* in an explicitly positive manner. Pastor Thakur Dass of the Presbyterian Church in Lahore, and Rev. Rajib Ali at Allahabad Seminary both summarized sentiment in quoting Jesus' state: "Those who are not against us are for us."³⁴

The pluralism of Syed refers to a concept that was coined after Syed Ahmad's time, but his writings and ethos reflect two of its principle meaning. First, the pluralism of Syed Ahmed recognizes that other faith traditions have the potential for leading their faithful into eternal salvation. He stated that 'neither the covenants nor the legal doctrines (*shari'ah*) become superseded or abrogated, nor subsumed into the other. Salvation is accomplished through the simple faith in God.

Second, his pluralism implies active engagement with other religious traditions. Amir Hussain, building upon Diana Eck's definition, emphasizes that a pluralistic perspective does not circumvent difficult questions and profound differences, but rather is committed to engage each other in order to gain a sense of each other's commitments. The *Tabyin* created a space for Muslims, Christians, and Jews to begin to discuss competing views through the reading of sacred texts. After all, the people involved in the writing, printing, and publishing of the project were from multiple faiths.³⁵

The heart of Syed Ahmad's vision for Muslim unity hinged upon social integration with India's diverse religious communities. The inextricable connection between a pluralist vision of faith and how that plays out in the building of a religiously

³² A.R. Kidwai, ed. Chapter 16, "Sir Sayyid and the Religious Foundations for a pluralist Society" by Charles M. Ramsey, in *Sir Syed Ahmad Khan: Muslim Renaissance Man of India A Bicentenary Commemorative Volume* (India: Viva Books, 2017), 291-92.

³³ Ibid, 294.

³⁴ Ibid, 295.

³⁵ Ibid, 296-297.

diverse nation were essential for him. His calls for Muslim participation in educational and employment opportunities were consistently featured in *Mohammedan Social Reformer* and other writings, a call for active openness with those of other faiths. This not only referred to an interreligious engagement in social functions, but also at religious functions to some extent.³⁶

His belief that love can emerge and flourish through empathetic engagement is precisely the spirit that he desired. This requires an attitude of deep respect built upon a sustained dialogue and engagement with each other. The goal is not capitulation but understanding. He called for fellowship among Muslims and. As Syed Ahmed reflects in the *Tabyin*, Part 3:

*“Hadrat Masih (Honored Messiah) has required the love for our enemies ever from us (Muslims). Great people succeed in practicing this more, but to even practice this to any extent is pleasing (to God). And, if we do not enact it at all, then we are doubtlessly sitting in the boat of misfortune, set to drown in the sea of sin.”*³⁷

Islamic Modernism & Sir Syed

Modernism in more recent history impacted Islam through military and political confrontations with the Western powers in colonization drives in Muslim states. The political and economic prowess of the West was exemplified through its scientific and educational institutions. The need for an intellectual reorientation of Muslim society was envisioned by other Muslim leaders as well, such as *Shaykh Muhammad ‘Abduh* in Egypt.³⁸ Syed’s efforts to introduce modern western lay education achieved a remarkable measure of success. However, the content of his religious thought was generally rejected.³⁹

Modernism – a movement to reconcile Islamic faith with modern values such as democracy, rights, nationalism, rationality, science, equality and progress emerged around the time of Sir Syed. The decline of Muslim ascendancy precipitated the crisis that helped define the responses of Muslim intellectuals to European modernity. They did not simply wish to restore the beliefs and practices of the past; rather they asserted the need to ‘reinterpret and reapply’ the principles and ideals of Islam to formulate new responses the political, scientific and cultural challenges of the west and of modern life. At the same time, they emphasized Muslim pride, unity and solidarity in the face of the political and cultural threat of European colonialism.⁴⁰

³⁶ Ibid, 298.

³⁷ Ibid, 300.

³⁸ Ahmad N Amir et al., “Muhammad Abduh’s Contributions to Modernity” 1, no. 1 (2012): 13.

³⁹ Rahman Fazlur. “The Impact of Modernity on Islam”, in *Islamic Studies* (Islamabad) 5:2 (1966), 115-116.

⁴⁰ Parray, Tauseef Ahmad. “Islamic Modernist and Reformist Thought: A Study of the Contribution of Sir Sayyid and Muhammad Iqbal.” *World Journal of Islamic History and Civilization*, 1 (2), 2011, 79-78.

Modern Islamic reform, however, is not merely presented as a response to the challenges of the West. Islam possesses a rich, long tradition of Islamic revival (*tajdid*) and reform (*islah*). Down through the ages, individuals' and organizations undertook the renewal in times of weakness and decline, responding to the apparent gap between Islamic ideals and the realities of local Muslim life. In the 18th and 19th centuries, Islamic modernists were open to accommodation and assimilation, attempting to produce a new synthesis of Islam with modern sciences.⁴¹ They distanced themselves from the "rejectionist" tendencies of religious conservatives, as western secular reformers attempted to restrict religion to the private life.⁴²

Aziz Ahmad wrote of Sir Syed as Islamic modernism's first representative. He sees his theological modernism that

"can be discerned as grappling with two broadly distinct problems: the rationalization of the minutiae of nonessential dogma and the liberalization of Islamic law. In regard to the first of these he shows signs of psychological pressures which occasionally result in some easily avoidable apologetics as well as certain extreme rationalist positions which were repugnant to the traditionalists. In regard to the second, his work is dynamic and constructive and as such it has made a tremendous impression on modern Islam in general and on Indian Islam in particular. ... He tried to resolve the difficulties inherent in the four traditional sources of Muslim law by a dialectical rationalist exegesis of the Quran; by historical skepticism in scrutinizing the classical data of the hadith; by an almost unlimited emphasis on *ijtihad* as the inalienable right of every individual Muslim; and finally, by rejecting the principle of *ijma* in the classical sense which confined it to the Ulama."

The modernists adopted the term *ijtihad* (Arabic word meaning exert or effort, and generally translated as *independent reasoning*) referred to as a key feature of modern Islamic reform. This independent reasoning pervaded the work of Sir Syed in how he saw the compatibility of Islam with science, his educational reforms, and his work in interfaith dialogue, particularly with Christianity in India.⁴³

In the early thought of Sir Syed, Hindus and Muslims were considered as one *qawm* (nation). He would speak eloquently about their shared patriarchy; "O ye Hindus and Muslims! Do you live in any country other than India? Don't you get cremated on or buried under the same soil? If you do, then remember Hindu and Muslim are merely religious terms: the Hindus, the Muslims, and even the Christians constitute one nation by virtue of living in the same country."⁴⁴ For Syed, he believed that native land and the

⁴¹ A good evaluation of Islamic Modernism, or Reformism is by Youssef Chouieri. *Islamic Fundamentalism* (1990).

⁴² *Ibid*, 82.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 84-86

⁴⁴ Al Mujahid, Sharif. "Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and Muslim Nationalism in India." *Islamic Studies*, Vol. 38, no. 1 (Spring 1999), 89.

nation are not synonymous. He considered Islam as a culture-building and nation-building force. Religion constituted the very basic ingredient of the idea of nationality.⁴⁵

Sir Syed's heritage needs to be seen in the context of Muslim rule for 800 years in India. Islam had provided Muslims with the bases for a separate identity, and Muslim rule had endowed them with a distinctive Indo-Muslim identity. The lingua franca that tied Muslims and Hindus together, Urdu was born out of a fusion of Persian and Turkish with the local *Bhasha*. Sir Syed's legacy rested, in part, in building social solidarity and developing a national consciousness and personality through the Urdu language.

Things changed though during Sir Syed's time however in the middle 1860's as the Bernaras Hindus began shifting to Hindi as the exclusive language of the North Indian Hindus, at the expense of Urdu as the language of administrative levels. Undoubtedly, Sir Syed was shaken by this. Hindi's propagandists' anti-Muslim bias became more evident as they chose to be the main opposition to Sir Syed's plans for a Muslim University.⁴⁶

The Urdu-Hindi controversy became a core issue, among others⁴⁷ that helped shape Sir Syed's thinking about good relations between Hindus and Christians that depended in part on equal representation in the government for Muslims. Educational and economic stumbling blocks for Muslims would insure that they would have one vote to Hindus' four votes. He stood for equal representation for Muslims and Hindus in the North-Western. Not understood at the moment, these concerns would become the blueprint for the Muslim proposals at *Simla* in 1906,⁴⁸ and eventually sowed the seeds of the partitioning of Pakistan, for without separate electorates there would have been no Pakistan.⁴⁹

Some Concluding Reflections

The Legacy of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan as Islamic modernist in India is also shared with other Muslim modernists of this time period. Some include Jamal al-Din al Afghani (1838-1897) who also believed that Islam was compatible with science and reason. Muhammad Abuh (1849-1905) was a collaborator of Afghani. Muhammad Rashid Rida (1869-1935) was active in the Egyptian modernization movement as Abduh's disciple. Other modernists include Muhammad Iqbal (1877-1938), Mahmud Tarzi of Afghanistan, Chiragh Ali of India, Ahmad Dahlan of Java, and Wang Jingzhai of China.⁵⁰ These and more are a symbol of the dialectic relationship between Islam and modernity over the centuries.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 90-93.

⁴⁷ Al-Mujahid explains that foremost among them were the Gladstonian reforms of 1880's, the introduction of representative institutions in India beginning with the Local Board Bill (1883), and the Congress demand for representative government and elective bodies.

⁴⁸ Simla Deputation (1906). History Pak.com. <http://historypak.com/simla-deputation-1906/>. (Accessed December 19, 2018).

⁴⁹ Ibid, 94.

⁵⁰ Hourani, Albert. *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age: 1798-1939*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 103-129, 136, 140, 156. December 18, 2018.

The fundamental question remains, as it did for Sir Syed and others, can the Muslim world accede to modernity without denying some of the fundamentals of the Islamic religion? According to Tariq Ramadan, nothing in Islam is opposed to modernity and he firmly states that Muslim thinkers and ‘ulama’ (savants) who are opposed to this notion and the idea of change and evolution that it covers often confuse it with the model which is current in the West. They confuse modernity with *Westernization*. He also says that “hiding behind the drifts of the West”, they deduce that faithfulness to the Message is achieved by absolute and definitive interpretation of the sources.⁵¹

Today that same tension is the backdrop of coexistence in Muslim-majority countries as well, between Jews, Christians and Muslims, and others. These different communities have survived, and pluralism has sometimes been real and positive in the Ottoman Empire, Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco, Algeria, Iraq, Iran, etc. The challenge in contemporary times is to put reforms in motion that help draw nearer to coexistence based on pluralism, while respecting religious, linguistic, and culture identity differences. Christian Muslim dialogue is key to these reforms. Ramadan goes on to say that legislation “imported” into Muslim countries during the colonial period and “plastered” (applied with a very relative view of adaptability) on a very different social reality, have not solved at all the question of coexistence.⁵²

The confusion of modernity with westernization is not only a problematic on the Muslim side, but also for those of the west. The long history of Europe’s colonization in the world and post-colonization clings to western hegemonic thinking, Mohammad H. Tamdgidi discusses the reality of “western epistemic racisms” that leads to the *orientalization*⁵³ of Islam. Here westerners do not need to listen to the critical thinking produced by Islamic thinkers on western global foreign policy issues. He says it is the lack of historical perspective and critical sociological imagination on the part of the lay Western population, fueled by short-term memory and amnesia perpetuated by the Western media, that mischaracterizes the problems of Islam, as if they separately and independently evolved alongside the West. Subsequently, many in the west do not even consider that they have had an influence in the rise of extremisms.

It is the oversimplification of Islam as a civilizational project as being entirely bad or good. What is to be confronted and questioned head on is the common premises displayed in both tendencies that Muslims are monolithically good or bad, right or wrong. It is this presumption of uniformity and monolithic heterogeneity that is the attitudinal frame by which Islamophobia finds home.⁵⁴ It is also here where the important values and contributions of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan remind us once again that persistent and

⁵¹ Ramadan, Tariq. *Islam, the West and the Challenges of Modernity* (Leicester: Kube Publishing Ltd. Kindle location 5502-5505)

⁵² Ibid, Kindle location 1965 of 6814.

⁵³ Some interesting places to look into orientalism is in this Oxford bibliography of sources. Oxford Bibliographies. <http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780195390155/obo-9780195390155-0058.xml> (Accessed December 19, 2018)

⁵⁴ Mohammad H. Tamdgidi. *Beyond Islamophobia and Islamophilia as Western Epistemic Racisms: Revisiting Runnymede Trust’s Definition in a World-History Context*, in *Islamophobia Studies Journal*. Volume 1, Issue 1, Fall 2012, 56, 70, 78.

sustained interfaith dialogue is finding common ground in faith, culture, and identity and is at the heart of the community of our evolving civilizations.

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