

THOUGHTS ON SAYYID AHMAD KHAN AND THE DILEMMAS OF HIGHER EDUCATION TODAY

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INTRODUCTION

It is difficult to imagine higher education among Muslims in South Asia – apart from an internal shift in the thinking of someone like Sayyid Ahmad Khan. The shift I am referring to is that from seeing Western Civilization in general, and British education in particular, as an asset rather than a liability. Succinctly stated, Sayyid Ahmad gradually came to see the ideas that energized Western progress in the early modern era as ones shared by Muslims. Pure Islam as taught by the Qur’ān and lived by the Prophet, he argued, was not opposed to Western civilization, but rather it provided its ultimate source and inspiration.¹ It is taken for granted that he understood there to be divinely revealed continuities shared among Jews, Christians, and Muslims – and persons of other monotheistic communities as well – as heirs of one primordial religion (*dīn*), but this is not what I am referring to here.² In Sayyid Ahmad Khan’s estimation, the Golden Age of Islamic civilization, with its manifold technological and philosophical advances, supplied the seeds of the European enlightenment, and consequently the intellectual flourishing in the modern era. Muslim intellectuals, in this view, provided the stimulus essential for the European scientific revolution.³ One consequence of this is that Sir Sayyid regarded the foundations of European learning as ultimately affirming and carrying forward ideas that were intrinsic to

1. Troll, Christian, *Sayyid Ahmad Khan: A Reinterpretation of Muslim Theology*, Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1978, p. 99.

2. Ramsey, Charles, ‘Religion, Science, and the Coherence of Prophetic and Natural Revelation: Sayyid Ahmad Khan’s Religious Writings’, in Yasmin Saikia and M. Raisur Rahman, (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2018, p. 138-158.

3. Starr, S. Frederick, *Lost Enlightenment: Central Asia’s Golden Age from the Arab Conquest to Tamerlane*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019, p. 156-193.

Islam. In this light - placing pragmatic and political reasons aside - it made perfect sense to establish a college and eventually a university that blended the ideas, resources, and teaching methods of the 'East and the West'. In essence, this is the model perpetuated today in the institutions accredited by the respective Higher Education Commissions. In many Muslim contexts, the values undergirding this model are being challenged, particularly in the fields of theology and philosophy.

In light of the challenges faced in higher education today, it is helpful to recall the decision to start the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College (MAO). Though a detailed description is beyond our scope here, it is well known that Sayyid Ahmad Khan was greatly inspired by the institutions of learning he visited in England in 1870. Aligarh, in his words, was to be the 'Oxford of the East'. However, it is important to recall that this was not a spurious decision. By the time he returned from London and proceeded with the drive to establish a new center of learning for Muslims similar in nature to a British college, he already had been involved in the field of education for thirty years. This involvement was primarily in the study and translation of European texts into Urdu and other vernacular languages.⁴

He had worked closely with the School-Book Society, which was founded in 1817 and had supported the early implementation of European-style learning in institutions like the Calcutta Madrasa, established by Maulana Aminullah, where Sayyid Ahmad Khan's polymath grandfather, Khwaja Farid, taught mathematics. The Book Society translated literally thousands of pages from English into Urdu creating resources for schools across the land. Education in the 'new sciences' required learning materials, and these materials were primarily in English, and here is where we find the first major roadblock to his educational vision. The decision to start Aligarh was made in full awareness of the difficulties

⁴. Wilder, John W., *Selected Essays by Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, Lahore: Sang-e-Meel, 2006, p. 27.

imposed by culture and politics, but also of language.⁵ It was a bold decision, and one made with confident assurance of success. But this was not a standalone decision, but rather it was one of a host of other steps to engage and to participate with the present political and social circumstances.

It is important to recall that Sayyid Ahmad Khan-like each of us today-was a man of his place and time. He inhabited a period of significant social and political change. The war of 1857, and the subsequent changes in government educational policy, caused serious disruptions to the patronage system that supported existing centers of learning. These changes encompassed both the curriculum and the pedagogy that is the content and methods of learning.⁶ Not least of these changes was the shift from Persian instruction to English, and eventually Urdu/Hindi and English bi-lingual education. It also included the introduction of a host of co-curricular activities intended to promote health and character formation as can be readily evidenced in schools today.⁷ These were changes which Sayyid Ahmad Khan sought to implement at Aligarh, a college that could develop an approach to learning that integrated the best of the East and the West.

Though frequently cited as an educationist, Sayyid Ahmad Khan is also highly esteemed as a religious thinker.⁸ He was both a product and a contributor to broad sweeping reforms that encompassed practically all

5. For greater detail on this issue, and on the foundation of the college and university see Gail Minault and David Lelyveld, 'The Campaign for a Muslim University 1898-1920', *Modern Asian Studies*, 8, 2 (1974) p. 145-189.

6. Stephen Evans, 'Macaulay's Minute Revisited: Colonial Language Policy in Nineteenth-century India', *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 23, 4 (2002) p. 260-281.

7. Moosa, Ebrahim, *What is a Madrasa?* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015, p. 77 - 107. For a lively description on the importance of co-curricular activities see Hugh Tyndale-Biscoe, *The Missionary and the Maharajas: Cecil Tyndale-Biscoe and the Making of Modern Kashmir*, London: Bloomsbury, 2019.

8. Fuchs, Simon Wolfgang, 'Casting Aside the Clutches of Conjecture: The Striving for Religious Certainty at Aligarh' in *Islamic Law and Society* 27, 4 (2020) p. 386 - 410.

facets of Muslim faith and practice in the 19th century. Muslim thinkers in this context were highly conscious of the hiatus between the practice of Islam in the time of the Prophet and the contemporary social reality. Indeed, Sayyid Ahmad Khan devoted the majority of his writing, particularly in journals like *Tadhīb al-akhlāq*, to practical issues of morality and character. By going back to the sources and principles of the various Islamic religious sciences, he attempted to evolve a new Muslim theology on the pattern of the Muslim response to Greek philosophy and science during the Abbasid renaissance.⁹

Even a brief survey of Sayyid Ahmad Khan's writings reveals the depth of his religious commitments and his desire to reconcile faith and reason, and this was at the heart of his vision for education. The biography (*sira*) and practice (*sunnah*) of the Prophet of Islam were of particular concern, and these featured prominently in Sayyid Ahmad Khan's writings as he navigated the complex challenges of his context and of being a faithful Muslim in the British Raj. It is important to remember that in the 1850s, Sayyid Ahmad Khan was closely involved with the *Tariqah-i Muhammadi*, a movement for the empowerment and revitalization of the Muslim community through the clarification and practical reification of belief. These were Sayyid Ahmad Khan's so-called 'Wahhabi days', and many leaders of the *Ahl-i Hadith* school of thought trace their intellectual heritage to these revivalists. Shah Isma'il and Sayyid Ahmad of Rae Bareilly, regarded as seminal thinkers in these changes, sought to galvanize a mass reform movement according to prescribed and tangible practices derived from their readings of *Hadīth*.¹⁰ Sayyid Ahmad Khan approached the issues of education as one who was both grounded and well informed of this tradition and confident that his nation (*qaum*), his community of

⁹ Troll, op. cit., p. 3 - 27.

¹⁰ Lawrence, Bruce B. 'Mystical and Rational Elements in the early Religious Writings of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan' in *The Rose and the Rock: Mystical and Rational Elements in the Intellectual History of South Asian Islam*, Bruce B. Lawrence ed., Durham: Duke University Programs in Comparative Study on Islamic and Arabian South Asia, 1979.

faith, was well equipped to flourish regardless of the difficulties experienced in the present circumstances.

Sayyid Ahmad Khan was also keenly aware of the fault lines within his community. This can be seen even in his early writings composed in Agra and nearby Fathpur-Sikri where he studied under the guidance of Maulna Nur al-Hassan (d. 1868), a leading *Naqshbandi* 'ālim and Professor of Arabic at the (East India Company) Agra College. In 1839, Sayyid Ahmad Khan penned a short biographical piece on the Prophet (*maulūd*) titled *Jilā' al-qulūb bi dhikr al-maḥbūb* (*Polishing of the Hearts by the Remembering of the Beloved*), which is indicative of discussions pertaining to the possibility of intercession and of the miraculous, and the perennial questions associated with the Sufi mystical tradition.¹¹ In this year he translated into Urdu portions of *Tuḥfah-i ithnā'asharī*, Shah 'Abd al-'Aziz's (son of Shah Wali Allah) generous response to recriminations levied by Shi'i scholars against Islam's first four caliphs (*rāshidūn*). 'Abd al-'Aziz penned this against the backdrop of intra-communal tensions in Lucknow that had resulted in the expulsion of the Sunni courtiers.¹² These writings reflect a stirring search for clarity in the pressing issues before him, and which continue to be of great consequence today. In these respective writings, it was the challenge between the Sufi, or those who advocate the mystical and spiritual authority, and the more textually driven legists who emphasized *shariah*. It was also the growing divide between the Sunni and Shia. His search for a central commonality and a means to unify the fractured Muslim community continued and intensified in the decades that followed as his educational vision took form.

¹¹. For a more thorough treatment of this work and for an exhaustive list of Sayyid Ahmad Khan's writings see Troll, op. cit., p. 3-27.

¹². Hali, Altaf Hussein, *Hayat-i Javed*, New Delhi: National Council for Promotion of Urdu Language, 2013, p. 31.

The pace of Sayyid Ahmad Khan's personal study rapidly escalated during his time in Delhi from 1846 to 1856. This phase of his life was characterized by a focused study of the Islamic sciences. One can point to this intellectual progression to underscore the continuity shared between Sayyid Ahmad Khan and his fellow co-religionists, lest the reader dismiss him as too 'progressive' or as a 'Western lackey' as some have done before. Though not formally groomed to become a religious cleric, Sayyid Ahmad Khan was tutored as an adult by some of Delhi's most prestigious luminaries in the scholarly tradition of Shah Wali Allah. He studied with the same teachers who guided, for example, Rashid Ahmad Gangohi (d. 1905) and Muhammad Qasim Nanotvi (d. 1880) who were the founders of *Dār'ul 'ulūm* Deoband, a school synonymous with tradition.¹³ Maulana Navazish 'Ali at Jamia Masjid instructed him in principles of jurisprudence (*fiqh*). He studied the Qur'ān and Hadith under Fa'id al-Hasan Saharanpuri. He also studied with Shah Makhsusullah, a son of Shah Rafi' al-Din (son of Shah Wali Allah), and who was one of the first to render into Urdu the meaning of the Qur'ān.¹⁴ Here again the perennial questions surfaced concerning the challenges of diversity facing the *Ummah*. Sayyid Ahmad published several short treatises from Delhi, the most important being *Kalimāt al-haqq* and *Rāh-i sunnah dar radd-i bid'a* and his translations of Abu Hamid Muhammad al-Ghazali's (d. 1111) *Kīmiyā-i sa'ādāt* and *Namiqah dar bayān-i mas'alah-i taṣawwur-i shaykh*. In the writings, he attempted to balance the competing visions for religious fidelity held by his Mujaddidī Sufi family with the reforms of the *Ṭarīqa-i muḥammadi*. *Kalimat al Haqq* (The True Discourse), composed in 1849,

¹³. Malik, Jamal, *Islam in South Asia: A Short History* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), p. 252-255. The Deoband founders studied under Shāh 'Abd al-Ghani, who was the son of Shāh Wali Allāh and father of Shāh Ismā'il. See also Ali Usman Qasmi, *Questioning the Authority of the Past: The Ahl al-Qur'ān Movement in the Punjab*, Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 44-47.

¹⁴. Hussain, Shaikh Nazir, *Arabi zaban ke adīb wa shāhir*, Mū'arif: Azamgarh, 1990, p. 199-208. Fa'id al-Hassan joined Sayyid Ahmad Khan in Ghazipur to assist in the work translation, writing and compilation (*tāsanif aur ta'ālif*). Fa'id subsequently proceeded with Sayyid Ahmad Khan to Aligarh, where he remained an integral contributor to Sayyid Ahmad Khan's work until his departure to Lahore in 1870.

provides a glimpse of his thought at this stage of the journey. Therein he argued that the Prophet embodied the ideal of all *shariah* and was thus the one true *pīr* or guide of the faithful. Whatever the differences, Sayyid Ahmad Khan believed there was a reasonable way for the community to find a way forward for good.

In this time there were heated exchanges pertaining to the veneration of holy men and adherence to different schools of law. Reflecting the mood of the time, much later in 1879 Sayyid Ahmad Khan recounted one particularly heated exchange with the chief mufti of Delhi, Muhammad Sadr al-Din Azurdah. The topic concerned whether it was licit to eat mangoes - does the faithful application of *shariah* allow or forbid the eating of mangoes? 'I swear by God in whose hands rests my life', stated Sayyid Ahmad Khan, 'if a person does not eat a mango for the reason that the Prophet did not eat it, then the angels will kiss his feet at his (death) bed'.¹⁵ As with many of his contemporaries, Sayyid Ahmad Khan was concerned with the quest to restore the practice of Islam to the original purity displayed in accounts of the life and sayings of the Prophet, and this was taken to the literal extreme so as to prove a principle. Sayyid Ahmad Khan later arrived at a very different approach, but at this stage of his life he was prepared to challenge even the Sadr al-Sudar on the requirements of *sunnah*.

As his distinctive interpretative approach crystalized in the 1860s, ample references can be seen to the writings of Muslim theologians (*kalām*) and philosophers (*falsafa*). Sayyid Ahmad Khan repeatedly employed their ideas and principles to undergird his own. Ibn Sina's writings like *Shifa*, for example, provided a representative example of what Sayyid Ahmad Khan was seeking to achieve. His was a quest for methods and principles.

¹⁵ Ingram, Brannon, 'Sufis, Scholars and Scapegoats: Rashid Ahmad Gangohi and the Deobandi Critique of Sufism', *The Muslim World* 99, 2 (2009) p. 478-501. See also Fazzur Rahman Siddiqui, *Political Islam and the Arab Uprising: Islamist Politics in Changing Times*, New Delhi: Sage, 2017, p. 115-116.

He sought to establish through induction (*istiqrā*) and experimentation (*tajriba*) a reasonable and structured way for scholars to disagree.¹⁶ Without pre-determined and mutually agreeable rules then there can be no cricket. If Muslims in India were to respond to British ideas and to the 'new sciences' then they need a commonly accepted mechanism to order their discussions. Some agree with one part, but not with another, and in the confusion there was in-fighting and division. Ibn Sina's writings, which had also been foundational to earlier thinkers like Shah Wali Allah, undergirded Sayyid Ahmad Khan's rationale and quest for a synergistic response to post-Enlightenment ideas.

This was an expanded view of the universe, and an openness to new ideas and ways of education. He was not afraid to disagree with the British (or with anyone else!) but they should disagree in a productive manner so as to move forward for the common good. Throughout the writings from this period, we see that Sayyid Ahmad Khan proceeded in the assumption that he was being faithful and consistent with the philosophical tradition of his Muslim intellectual ancestors. He did not appeal to European thinkers to establish key religious and social ideas, but rather to stalwart thinkers in his own tradition. This shared continuity with Muslim intellectual discourse was of vital importance in his day, and it remains vital in this present generation. He was reintroducing many in the community to their intellectual predecessors. Proceeding in that historic channel, Sayyid Ahmad Khan championed a cosmological argument derived through the lens of contingency, namely that all existence proceeds from the original expression of divine will. As philosopher William Lane Craig quote:

Probably no chapter in the history of the cosmological argument is as significant-or as universally ignored-as that of the Arabic

¹⁶ Mayer, Toby, 'Ibn Sina's "Burhan Al-Siddiqin"', *Journal of Islamic Studies* 12, 1 (2001) p. 18-39; Jon McGinnis, 'Scientific Methodologies in Medieval Islam', *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 41, 3 (2003) p. 307-327.

theologians and philosophers. Although we find in them the origin and development of two of the most important versions of the cosmological argument ... the contribution of these Islamic thinkers is virtually ignored in western anthologies and books on the subject.¹⁷

Writing nearly a full century prior to Craig, Sayyid Ahmad Khan was making a similar observation, namely that the foundations of the 'progressive' educational approach were as Eastern as they were Western, and as Muslim as Christian. By exploring these earlier thinkers, and having spent substantial time in intellectual exchanges in India and in England, Sayyid Ahmad Khan had become fully convinced that the best of 'Western' civilization was not the sole domain of Christians or Jews, but rather was the legacy of Muslims as well. He became energized by this confluence, and it brought about a sea change in his thinking. It was at this time, that Sayyid Ahmad Khan founded the Scientific Society to promote the translation and propagation of works of Western science and scholarship. These steps in the 1860s, only a few years after the terrible war, set him on a course that would lead to England in 1869, and then upon his return to the establishment of MAO and what became the first modern university created to integrate the best of traditional Muslim and modern learning.

THE POWER OF A SEED

There is a gradual appreciation of the significance of Sayyid Ahmad Khan's view. The interconnections between Ottoman and Arab Muslim and European Christian learning, which Sayyid Ahmad Khan so confidently affirmed, is becoming more clearly understood and documented. Namely, Arabic and Muslim sources were seminal in the European Enlightenment. Majid Fakhri summarized,

¹⁷. Craig, William Lane, *The Kalām Cosmological Argument*, Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1979, p. 3.

Thirteenth-century Europe was triggered by the Latin translations of the writings of al-Farabi and al-Ghazali (called Algazel), Ibn Sina (Avicenna), Abu Ma'shar and Ibn Rushd (Averroes), with the consequent revival of Aristotelianism, the cornerstone of Latin scholasticism.¹⁸

Spain (*al-Andalus*) served as the bridge to learning. Breakthroughs of discovery in philosophy, science, and medicine were 'triggered' by the discoveries in Baghdad and other centers of Muslim learning in Muslim lands. In ways similar to the work of the Book Society and its translators in India who rendered the 'new sciences' into Urdu, 'rational' ideas crossed into Western Europe thanks to the work of Arab translators who passed the seed of knowledge. That was the case in the 13th century, but it did not end there. As Marshall Hodgson from the University of Chicago surmised, 'If a visitor from Mars descended to earth during the 15th through 17th centuries, they would assume that the world was heading towards Islam. This was not merely due to military strength, but rather because of the 'vitality of the culture'.¹⁹ Sayyid Ahmad Khan held fast to this idea, and believed that in time his community (*qaum*) would again rise to prominence. At the heart of Sayyid Ahmad Khan's shift in thinking, from antipathy to sympathy towards Western education, was the assurance that this approach to learning was neither alien nor in opposition to the deep streams of his own Muslim tradition.

There is ample scholarly support for the view that energy and ideas derived from Muslim philosophers and scientists were infused into what became European universities. This renewed access to (Aristotelian) philosophy, for example became a major influence on the development of scholasticism and some of the most important thinkers in medieval

¹⁸. Fakhry, Majid, *Islamic Philosophy, Theology and Mysticism: A Short Introduction*, Oxford: Oneworld, 1997, p. 7.

¹⁹. Hodgson, Marshall G. S., *The Venture of Islam*, Vol. 1: The Classical Age of Islam Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974, p. 85.

Europe. At the forefront of medieval thought was the perennial struggle to reconcile theology (faith) and philosophy (reason). People were at odds as to how to unite the knowledge obtained through revelation with the information observed naturally through the mind and senses. In continuance with Ibn Rushd's 'theory of the double truth', as George Makdisi described, Thomas Aquinas asserted that both kinds of knowledge ultimately come from God and were therefore compatible.²⁰ Not only were they compatible, according to Thomist thought, they work in collaboration. Revelation guides reason and prevents it from making unseemly mistakes; and reason clarifies and demystifies the excesses of faith. This is a discursive tradition extended over time. It is a conversation, as Alisdair MacIntyre reflected, indicating agreement and disagreement over generations. The quest for learning was shared across languages, cultures, and religions.²¹ Questions and answers, and the way questions were formulated and answers derived, were carried across boundaries, beyond zones of culture and religion, and could be integrated universally.

Let us take a closer look at this shared intellectual heritage, as this is pertinent to questions of learning today. In the classical Greek approach, the aim of learning was to reconcile what Aristotle termed as the transcendentals: the good, the true and the beautiful. Each transcended the limitations of place and time and were rooted in being. The transcendentals were not contingent upon cultural diversity, religious doctrine, or personal ideologies, but were the objective properties of all that exists. The *trivium* and *quadrivium*, which form the basic curricula of

²⁰. Makdisi, George, 'Scholasticism and Humanism in Classical Islam and the Christian West', *Religion, Law and Learning in Classical Islam*, Hampshire: Variorum, 1991, p. 175.

²¹. MacIntyre, Alasdair, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989. See particularly the chapter entitled 'The Rationality of Traditions.' For additional detail see William Montgomery Watt, *Muslim-Christian Encounters: Perceptions and Misperceptions*, London: Routledge, 1991; and F. E. Peters, *Aristotle and the Arabs: The Aristotelian tradition in Islam*, New York: New York University Press, 1968.

this schooling, were disciplines that structured the study of all that was naturally present in the world. The genius of this so called 'classical' approach, was that it promoted a unified idea of observable reality and a dependence of creation upon a creator.

There is a growing sense that higher education today is out of balance. The headlong rush to push STEM (science, technology, economics, mathematics) and business placed an over emphasis upon technology apart from the foundational sources of knowledge. Even in saying this, I can imagine the question posed by Ghalib to Sayyid Ahmad Khan when he proposed to study the Mughal writings and the works of history: 'Is your imagination still coloured by the time of Akbar?' Yes, it was for Sayyid Ahmad Khan, and it is for me as well, and we are not alone. It is interesting to note that several others are coming to a similar conclusion. Shaykh Hamza Yousuf, for example, founder of Zaytuna in California, which is the first accredited Muslim institution of higher education in the United States, has set out to design a college that is no less revolutionary than Aligarh was at its inception. Shaykh Hamza Yousuf noted:

The liberal arts (also) became the cornerstone of Islamic education, and the idea of the college as a training center for the arts in service of religion is arguably a Muslim one.²²

Whereas some think of STEM as being faith-neutral, or unrelated to a particular religious view, and therefore more amenable to study by the religiously conservative, it is interesting now to think of the arts as having deep roots in faith. If Shaykh Hamza Yousuf's view is correct, then it would be a supreme irony that when Sayyid Ahmad Khan proposed a college on the Oxbridge model, for which he was chastised by many conservative traditionalists, he was in actuality reinstating -whether he

²². Yusuf, Shaykh Hamza, 'The Liberal Arts in an Illiberal Age', accessed, December 2, 2020, <https://renovatio.zaytuna.edu/article/the-liberal-arts-in-an-illiberal-age>.

realized it or not-an orthodox and established Muslim structure of learning.

Consider the modern university. As George Makdisi has convincingly demonstrated, 'The cultured Christian layman is aware of his religious debt to Judaism and his intellectual debt to Graeco-Roman antiquity; but, generally speaking, he is not aware of any debt to classical Islam'.²³ In the modern university the highest degree is the Doctorate. Where did that come from, and what is its origin? The Scholastic movement in Western Europe, mentioned above, which dominated universities from 1100-1700 named the Doctorate, from the Latin *docere*, that is *licentias docendi* (license to teach) which is a direct translation of *ijāzat at-tadris*. The *fatwa-ijmā* standard, the Islamic system of accreditation, was almost identical to what later became the Western University system and that has come down to our day. In the Ottoman Muslim world, the progression was '*faqih, mufti, and mudaris*', and this became in Europe *magister, professor, and doctor*.²⁴ Credentials, like the Doctorate, attest initially to the mastery of a field of study, but they also attest to a scholarly method of arriving at truth, a method to be applied in continued inquiry and research across expanding horizons. Greater awareness of this history allows for the development of approaches to contemporary education that could result, as Muhammad Legenhausen noted, 'in the revival and vindication of its traditions of enquiry in the international marketplace of ideas and in Islamic centres of learning'.²⁵ This was a seed that once planted bore fruit.

²³. Makdisi, George, *The Rise of Colleges: Institutions of Learning in Islam and the West*, Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 1981, p. 279-281; John Walbridge, *God and Logic: The Caliphate of Reason*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 107-119; Charles Thurot, *De l'organisation de l'enseignement dans l'Université de Paris au Moyes Age*, Paris: 1850, p. 160.

²⁴. Omid Safi, *The Politics of Knowledge in Pre-modern Islam: Negotiating Ideology and Religious Inquiry*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006. Also see Ebrahim Moosa, *What is a Madrasa*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019.

²⁵. Muhammad Legenhausen, '*Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*' by Alasdair MacIntyre, accessed May 14, 2020, <https://www.al-islam.org/al-tawhid/vol14-n2/book-review-whose-justice-which-rationality-alsadair-macintyre-dr-muhammad/book>.

FROM SEED TO ORCHARD

Aligarh College, along with many similar institutions that reflect the vision of Sayyid Ahmad Khan and other so called 'modernists', allowed for the balance of the old and the new, the East and the West. In the section above, we have considered the vital importance of Sayyid Ahmad Khan's open perspective on learning in South Asia. A man of religion, he identified human development as a process ordained and ordered by divine will. A man of history, he identified the progression of knowledge across cultures, and identified the pivotal participation of Muslim thinkers in the creation and dissemination of knowledge. This was not, however, an obvious conclusion. His was the way of collaboration and assimilation, and many of his coreligionists regarded this as a slippery slope towards the dilution of the faith or of outright capitulation. Sayyid Ahmad Khan was constantly compelled to allay the fears of those who argue that to embrace modern education was to weaken faith and to somehow betray one's community. In disarming the dichotomy between progressive and traditional, or Eastern and Western, Sayyid Ahmad Khan opened a channel for many to seek knowledge, whether in China, Chennai, Chicago, or beyond.

Such a perspective is again required in South Asia today. Majid Daneshgar, in his recent monograph entitled *Studying the Qur'an in the Muslim Academy* has raised serious concerns about the state of education within the academic departments of theology and philosophy in the 'Muslim world'. Reflecting upon his experience and observations, Daneshgar has raised serious concerns about the 'weaponization' of academia and both the immediate and long-term dangers of departments becoming centers of 'apologetics' rather than learning. There is a tendency, he observed, to undermine or devalue the work of Western scholars, whether Muslim or not, and also to reject or ignore the contributions of other Muslim schools of thought in general, but along the

Sunni and Shia divine in particular.²⁶ There is pressure, he observed, within departments and administration to not only censor, but also to 'weaponize' scholarly research to foment not only inter-religious but also intra-religious animosity. In the present milieu, many academic departments, even at the post-graduate level, seek to elevate their respective theological position at the expense of another. Success in this light, is the preservation and promulgation of a predetermined position, rather than the exploration and expansion of knowledge.

Daneshgar not only underscored the symptoms of this ailment, he also pointed towards a remedy. The way forward he put forth is an approach that fuses theoretical and philological practice, regardless of its geographical roots. It is possible, in his estimation, to combine 'Western theoretical' and 'Eastern philological' approaches and that this should be pursued in the 'Muslim Academy' even as some are attempting to do so in the West. One believes this can be done and that South Asia, which is underrepresented in Daneshgar's study, can take a leading role. In fact, as indicated above, it could be that such an integrated approach is actually indigenous to the intellectual tradition undergirding many of the leading universities in post-colonial South Asia.

As introduced above, Sir Sayyid Khan was convinced that Indians and Europeans shared an intellectual continuity. This seed, as it were, could be planted at Aligarh. He understood that despite their cultural and religious differences, both shared a way of knowing and could flourish together. To borrow an analogy from Allama Iqbal, the seed mediated through the prophetic bears the fruit of 'inductive intellect'.²⁷ Consider the seed: the intricacy is naturally miraculous. Given the right growth conditions, the seed sprouts and its differentiated internal components

²⁶. Daneshgar, Majid, *Studying the Qur'an in the Muslim Academy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020.

²⁷. Baljon, J. M. S., *Modern Muslim Koran Interpretation (1880-1960)*, Leiden: Brill, 1968, p. 65-66.

follow a set growth order producing root, stem, and leaf. The plant grows, produces, and the cycle is repeated infinitely according to the variables of the ecosphere. 'In its essential nature, then', again Iqbal, 'thought is not static; it is dynamic and unfolds its internal infinitude in time like the seed which, from the very beginning, carries within itself the organic unity of the tree as a present fact'.²⁸ The seed itself does not bear fruit, but upon maturation it will produce much fruit. Carrying this metaphor forward, one can see that the mature department, housed in the mature university, can confidently manage difference and healthy disagreement. The engagement with foreign ideas - even challenging and opposing views - can be assessed and addressed because listening does not equal agreement. By trusting the method of teaching that allows for a diversity of views to be expressed, all involved can grow and benefit.

Sayyid Ahmad Khan was on a journey from opposing the 'new sciences' to integrating them into an authentically Muslim approach to learning.²⁹ In this light, he saw the choice between Islamic and Western learning as a false dichotomy, and he established a school where others could embark on a journey of discovery similar to his own. As already noted, Sayyid Ahmad Khan's adaptation of Western mores caused great consternation for some, and yet his courageous exploration opened a pathway for others to access an impressive breadth of ideas, many of which were crafted by earlier generations of Muslim thinkers. Such education could be done, but this would not be easy, and as Daneshgar observed, there would be at least three areas of difficulty: language, curriculum, and accreditation. Language matters. It was determined, for example, that the language of education at Aligarh would be English. In the decades that followed, Aligarh and its many offshoots groomed students to become citizens of the British Empire, and in the post-colonial era, citizens of the

²⁸. Iqbal, Muhammad, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013, p. 6.

²⁹. Chittick, William, C., *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn Al-'Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989, p. 163.

'global world'. The goal was a sign of recognition and participation in the global economy.

This was the way to protect and promote the cause and values of the Muslim community in a globalized world where English was the *lingua franca*. But it also became a determinant of the elite. The principal and immediate beneficiaries of the school were from among the upper class (*ashraf*). English was not the only defining mark of inclusion in the highest levels of society but it steadily became a bridge to advancement, and a bridge that was too difficult for most to cross. From the 1870s onward, English was the language of governance, technology and advancement in the region. Arabic and Persian, while greatly valued among the Muslims of India, receded in importance, even as local vernaculars such as Urdu, Punjabi, Bengali and Tamil gained prominence as symbols of cultural and political identity. Some regional languages flourished at the local level but English became the gold standard and the ticket to success. The language itself became a resource and a boon, a form of social capital that distinguished the progressive from the traditionalist and the educated elite from the less fortunate.

The problem of language must not be underestimated. There are only so many hours in the day and only so much that can be covered in a syllabus. A greater emphasis upon English meant less time could be devoted to Arabic or Persian but it also meant less time could be devoted to any subject because of the habit and necessity of bilingualism. A new infrastructure of learning is required for a student or faculty member to competently engage with advanced ideas in a language that is not one's mother tongue. Many were aware of this problem even at the outset of the Aligarh movement. There was lively discussion on the merit of a similar college in which the syllabus would be given in Urdu. There were efforts in the Deccan, Hyderabad for example, to establish a counterpart that could offer a similar experience in Urdu. This vision later came to fruition in 1887 as Nizam College, now a constituent of Osmania

University. Though the institution thrived and is regarded as a success, it faced a similar difficulty, namely that the language of instruction was not the native tongue of its constituents. Urdu was not the common language in South India for the Muslims of Tamil Nadu and Kerala or of the Deccan. These students had to learn Urdu, just as students in the North, many of whom were native Urdu speakers, had to learn English. The point is that the language of instruction mattered at that time and it continues to be of central importance today.

There is no simple answer, yet institutions of higher education in South Asia today could benefit from reassessing the reasons for the choice of the language of instruction. Improvements in technology are developing rapidly and these may soon lessen the importance of an English curriculum, allowing for mother-tongue instruction at all levels and particularly at the University level. There will always be a value in learning another language and particularly the classical languages necessary for scriptural exegesis but the day may come when all secondary literature will be available in electronic translation. What could happen if the energy spent upon learning English were redirected towards critical thinking and research using regional languages in which students were already proficient?

Having noted the issue of language, we turn our attention to the related but substantially different matter of curriculum. Even if the same subject matter, with the same quality of resources, could be presented in any given language, or in this case say in English and Urdu, it should not be taken for granted that one pedagogical approach is the best for every institution. Aligarh, for example, was purpose built on the British model. Theodore Beck was recruited as the Principal and he succeeded in establishing a residential model similar in ways to Oxbridge.³⁰ Nizam College, however, was created by the amalgamation of the Hyderabad

³⁰. Minault, Gail and David Lelyveld, "The Campaign for a Muslim University 1898-1920" *Modern Asian Studies*, 8, 2 (1974) p. 145-189.

School, which followed a Western model and the *Madrassa-i 'auliya*, which carried a traditional *Dars-i Nizami* curriculum. As the two streams melded, students from the respective schools experienced a convergence in educational philosophies. Students from the English medium Hyderabad School experienced a shift in language but also in teaching methodology and curriculum. If the student had not reached the same degree of Arabic or even Persian or Urdu proficiency as other counterparts, he would have experienced difficulty in dealing with the traditional books and resources of learning. Conversely, those from the Madrasa would likely have struggled with mathematics and sciences, or perhaps the strange rigor of playing football or other co-curricular activities. Yet in any new educational venture, books must be selected, teachers appointed, and best efforts made to prepare students for the challenges of life. In a similar way, academic institutions across South Asia not only determined the language of instruction but they also selected a curricula and pedagogical approach. Both of these case studies selected a progressive model and went on to become top tier universities within the national mainstream but other institutions selected a different path, which is now referred to as traditionalist methodology.

The rift between progressive and the traditionalist approaches to education has been well documented. The primary example of the traditionalist vision took form in the eponymous *Dār'l 'ulūm Deoband* and its many affiliates. These carried forward the curricula and method of teaching that was already well-established in the region prior to the British hegemony. The 1857 uprising brought about significant changes in the economy and in educational policy. There was an extensive and targeted discrimination against Muslims. Regardless of one's opinion as to the causes of the war, in the aftermath decisions were made among families and communities as how best to move forward with the education of their children under the present conditions. The path towards economic uplift and towards some degree of participation in civil society, was through 'Western' education. But others, whether by

necessity or conviction, carried forward the traditional curriculum in local schools, now generally known as 'madrasas'. Over time, these schools shifted away from the fundamentals of education, namely: grammar, logic and rhetoric, and moved towards the fundamentals of religious practice. In other words, education became synonymous with religious education. Left to fend for themselves with little or no government support or regulation, madrasas became seminaries and were charged with the preparation of religious clerics and the functionaries of local mosques.³¹

Madrasas preserved religious knowledge and that in itself is admirable but they also taught a specific curriculum. The shift away from a general education towards a religious education meant that they would not prepare leaders for the community in the important fields of industry, politics or law. Promising students were sent to the 'Western' schools to become engineers, doctors and lawyers, leaving mainly the poor and disenfranchised to attend the traditional (madrasa) schools. Over time, these madrasa graduates became leaders and influencers in their own right. A significant portion of the Muslim community remained separated from the colonial and now post-colonial government systems. Today many Muslims across South Asia live in a parallel society, with their own educational, judicial and economic systems, like a state within the state. They are not part of the mainstream. The modern nation state employs graduates from the progressive or 'Western' schools for the highest positions and its leaders are often at a loss about how to provide jobs for students educated in the traditional madrasas. This divide still endures within South Asia today and is readily visible. Though class divisions are complex and poverty also limits schooling options, these divisions have

³¹. Metcalf, Barbara Daly, *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860-1900*, Princeton; Princeton University Press, 1984. Arshad Alam, 'Understanding Deoband Locally: Interrogating Madrasat diya' al- 'Ulum' in Jan-Peter Hartung and Helmut Reifeld, eds. *Islamic Education, Diversity, and National Identity: Dini Madaris in India Post 9/11*, New Delhi: Sage, 2006, p. 175-77.

been strengthened by the trajectories of language and curricula and this persists as a serious hindrance to national governance.³²

In general, some 'progressive' schools have become successful, particularly in the scientific (STEM) fields but less so in the humanities in general and in theology or philosophy in particular. It is not surprising to meet a South Asian doctor, engineer or software engineer anywhere in the world. This is seen as the road to success and progress. But there is also a danger inherent in this headlong push towards the sciences. When sciences are promoted apart from the arts, there can be a lack of depth and an inability to integrate the parts into the whole. Though traditional schools are often seen as a liability and have even been associated with violent extremism, this is a myopic view of the circumstances. As Jamal Malik has convincingly argued, the perpetrators of great crime, corruption, and terrorism are more likely to be graduates of 'progressive' or Western academic institutions. One reason for this is that their trajectory of learning, which includes both language and curriculum, has allowed for only shallow roots. Students report feeling disconnected from traditional sources of authority and wisdom and becoming vulnerable to charismatic preachers who promote plausible but unsound doctrine.³³ Undoubtedly, some madrasas have been used to recruit and indoctrinate militant extremism but this is not representative of the vision or values of these institutions. According to Malik's assessment, traditional madrasas have borne the brunt of the blame for terrorism, when in fact they have

³². Jaffrelot, Christophe, *The Pakistan Paradox: Instability and Resilience*, New Delhi: Random House, 2015, p. 544-6. Khalid Rahman and Syed Rashad Bukhari, 'Pakistan: Religious Education and Institutions', *The Muslim World*, 96, 2 (2006) p. 323-339. According to a 2002 report by Pakistan Human Rights Commission, over 250,000 of a total of 600,000 students in the Punjab are enrolled in *dini madaris* rather than private or public education. Other reports claim that this is grossly exaggerated.

³³. Malik, Jamal (ed.), 'In lieu of a conclusion', *Madrasas in South Asia: Teaching Terror?* Abingdom: Routledge, 2008, p. 165-167. See also Syed Wagas Ali Kausar and Abdul Wahid Sial, 'The Impact of Systematic Structure of Madrassahs on Student's Outcomes in Pakistan: Do They Need Structural Reform?' *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies* 14 (2015) p. 127-147.

often been the voice of wisdom and forbearance and have issued a call against the use of violence. These institutions embody diverse patterns of resistance but if they were bent on violence then present conditions would be far different.

In light of the negative repercussions caused by the separation of traditional and modern approaches to education, many universities have integrated a madrasa (*din-i madaris*) program within their framework. This has allowed for greater exchange among the faculty and students. In Jamia Milia Islamia University in New Delhi, for example, the doctoral program contains students from diverse educational backgrounds. Some are stronger in English, others are stronger in Arabic, but this public institution has proactively integrated students from a variety of backgrounds-including persons who are of other faiths-within the Department of Islamic Studies and has shown considerable success. Aligarh, on the other hand, has opted to create both a Shia Department of Theology and a separate Sunni Department.³⁴ Similar to the Catholic and Protestant divide in Germany, this model allows for a greater focus and collegiality within a tradition. Though the temptation remains for these different traditions to become focused on apologetics, which promotes a sectarian view or school of thought, still the move towards greater depth of learning within each tradition has opened the way for a new generation of scholars, who are beginning to share space and resources. Many examples could be examined from across the region and doubtlessly this is the subject of ongoing research.

My concluding point is that there is great benefit in integrating these two streams. The parallel society is subversive of government policy and creates an expensive drag on the economy. The way forward for the diverse communities is through integration and this begins with language and curriculum. Whereas the differences between traditional and

³⁴. Department of Shia Theology, Aligarh Muslim University, accessed November 20, 2020, <https://www.amu.ac.in/departmentspage.jsp?did=85>

progressive education may endure, important examples of integration already exist. Much is at stake and it is understandable that change comes slowly. Few would have imagined that Al-Azhar in Cairo could represent a religious tradition as well as a progressive university. Perhaps the day is coming when bastions of traditional education in South Asia like Minhaj University Lahore, Jamia Binoria, or even the *Dār'l 'ulūm* in Deoband, will be known for religious studies as well as for their successful graduates in diverse fields of the arts and sciences. From the Calcutta Madrasa to Aligarh and Osmania and now to many successful centers of higher education across the region, Muslim centers of learning in South Asia are faring better than those in many other regions. These centers of learning are following the path opened up by pioneers like Sayyid Ahmad Khan, who was able to foresee a fruitful orchard emerging from a small seed.