

## *Heralds of Muslim Nationalism: A Brief Review*

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During the past hundred years, in every Muslim country there have been numerous leading exponents of modernity, but most of them look to the writings of the nineteenth century intellectuals like Rifa'i al-Tahtawi,<sup>1</sup> Khayr al-Din al-Tunisi,<sup>2</sup> and Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakebi,<sup>3</sup> for guidance and inspiration. We have seen earlier all the three of them were not secularists in the commonly accepted meaning of the term. All of them had been brought up according to the religious tradition of Islam. In fact, al-Tahtawi started his career as an *Imam* in a mosque, but during his five-year stay in Paris as an *Imam* of the Educational Mission in Europe, he was totally fascinated by the remarkable progress of Europe in every branch of human knowledge. Most of their ideas were laid down in works that later on became a beacon light for the rest of

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1. Rifa'i al-Tahtawi was born in 1801. In 1826 he went to Europe as *Imam* of the Educational Mission sent by Muhammad Ali from Egypt, and returned to Egypt in 1831. After serving in several government positions he acted as editor-in-chief of the journal *Official*. He died in 1873. *Takhlis al-Ibriz* and *Manahij al-Albab al-Misreyya* are considered his greatest works.
2. Khayr al-Din al-Tunisi died in 1889 at the age of seventy. From a humble status in a slum through his remarkable talents and energy, he rose to occupy the highest offices of the Tunisian Beylic and the Ottoman Empire. Most of his ideas are found in a book entitled *Aqwam al-Masalik fi Ma'rifat Ahwal al-Mamalik*.
3. Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakebi was born in 1854 in Aleppo in a prominent Arab family. In 1875, he started his career as a journalist. After a chequered and stormy career in government, he suddenly died in Cairo in 1902. *Tabai al-Istibdad* (The Nature of Despotism) and *Umm al-Qura* (The mother of cities, Makkah) are best of his known works.



modernists who followed them. Al-Tahtawi's *Takhlis al-Ibriz fi Talkhis Paris*, Khayr al-Din al-Tunisi's *Aqwam al-Istibdad* and *Umm al-Qura* set the pace and model for the rest of the modernizing intellectuals of the Arab world. The three reformers had similar attitudes that the triumphs of Europe in human advancement were superior and spectacular in every respect. Al-Tahtawi in *Takhlis* is very critical of the backwardness of his own people, and exhorts the Muslims to emulate the West in arts, sciences, philosophy, and technology. It is not only in material and scientific achievements that he has unmingled admiration for the western man, but also has nothing but praise for his energy, sense of justice, equity and truthfulness. Khayr al-Din al-Tunisi, hearkens his coreligionists that the only way they could regain their lost achievement-orientation, is by adopting the western institution. In his opinion, whether judged from the religious or non-religious standard, the western culture was superior to the contemporary Islamic culture. He criticized European institutions only when they were contrary to *Shar'iyah*. If the *Salaf* (good predecessors of early Islam) could borrow Greek logic and benefit, he saw no reason why the Muslims of today could not adopt the same attitude towards the modern western civilization. Even al-Kawakebi whose outlook was more puritanical, avoided rigidities and fanaticism commonly associated with fundamentalism, and advocated reconciliation between *Shari'ah* and modernity.

But even those early modernists were confronted with the same dilemmas that have bewildered Muslim reformers during the past hundred and fifty years. The first was how to reconcile traditionally ingrained beliefs with the undeniable realities of modern life. The second related to the admitted and indisputable weaknesses in a Muslim society, and the imponderable issues, whether they were due to the rigid adherence to the orthodox Islam or because the Muslims had abandoned their true beliefs. In the resolution of these dilemmas the modernists adopted two approaches. One was to adopt rationalism as a secular religion, and make Muslim society a replica of the western civilization. The other was to stay within the boundaries of traditional religion and



through a delicate process of adoption mould certain cardinal features of the western civilization in a manner that they do not seem inimical to the spirit of the *Qur'an*, or through subtle interpretation of the laws of *Shari'ah* to prove that Islam does not inhibit its followers against progress.

Most of the early Muslim modernists followed the second approach. They knew that western secularism in its naked form would not be acceptable to the masses, the bulk of whom were still obsessively attached to the orthodox Islam. In spite of their tremendous admiration for the western civilization they still called France the land of *kufr* (the land of infidels). They anticipated that modernization in Islam would grow from within, and to achieve this end they interpreted the Islamic framework freely but pragmatically, to permit the introduction of innovations from the West. For instance, they tried to prove that the western commercial and business practices were found in the book of *Fiqh*.

These early reformers of Islam in advocating assimilation of modern western civilization, relied heavily on the earlier peaceful and smooth adaptation of Islam to the Greek culture that was as different, and alien to the truly Islamic ideology as was the western culture during the nineteenth century. They were, however, mistaken because modern religious reforms did not have the same comprehension of the western sciences that the philosophers of early Islam possessed over Hellenism. Under the dramatically changed philosophical and scientific climate of the modern world, to perform a similar intellectual miracle was an uphill task. Grunebaum has referred to the difficulty in comparing the past cultural borrowing with the present. In his opinion, the present trend towards westernisation and earlier Hellenization could not be compared gainfully. Islam's acculturation with the Greeks, Iran and India in the past took place when the Muslims were politically victorious. The Muslims adopted alien civilizations, and assimilated foreign influences slowly. Pressures to which the doctrine was subjected seemed to be essential for its development. The present transfer of outside elements is a kind of imposition, and the Muslims alien the defensive and accepting them from a position of weakness. This puts the Muslims of today in a difficult position so far as modernizations concerned. Even a cursory glance



over different periods of the development of the religious doctrine of Islam can show that at every stage it encountered a serious struggle between *Sunnah* (Tradition or Custom) and *Bida'* (innovation). The term *Sunnah* here is used in the broader sense meaning "inherited opinion". From the earliest time, the 'Arabs had use *Sunnah* as a major determinant in showing propriety and validity. With the advent of Islam, they were told to disengage themselves completely from the pagan *Sunnah* and adhere strictly to the *Sunnah* of the Prophet and his reversed companions; and to this, later on was added the *Sunnah* of the leading jurists who founded the four schools of Muslim Jurisprudence. This *Sunnah* then became the model to be emulated by the believers, and was used as a yardstick to determine the truth and lawfulness of an issue. The history of Islamic law provides ample evidence that the jurists were given adequate powers for deductive reasoning; but wherever authentic *Sunnah* was available, human speculation was rendered superfluous. Among strict adherents of *Sunnah*, all kinds of *Bida'* were prohibited. But history shows that such a view, though respected in theory, could not be practiced universally.

The reasons for this kind of situation were quite obvious. The conquest of new lands outside Arabia expanded the intellectual horizons of the Muslims. New experiences and countless alien norms had to be assimilated the Islamised if the Muslim doctrine had to survive among the newly converted people of the conquered lands. The result was that theories had to be propounded by which this process could be accomplished with dignity and rationality. *Ijma* and *Masalah* were the two most popular devices commonly suggested by the leading jurists. Every innovation in the first instance met resistance from the orthodox circles, but finally when the bulk of the population accepted it, opposition was disarmed and the *Bida'* became a part of accepted creed. Once *Bida'* had acquired the crutches of *Ijma*, then it became a legitimate practice. Ignaz Goldziher mentions that as late as the eighth century of *Hijrah*, the theologians were issuing *Fatawa* against each other on the question of whether the celebration of the Prophet's birthday was *Sunnah* or a *Bida'*. But with the passage of time, as the practice was given popular sanction, it became a normal part of the



religion.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, the cult of saints, which is today such a popular phenomenon in every part of the Muslim world. Contradicts many fundamental principles of Islam and when it first started it was condemned by devout theologians as a patent heresy. In many cases the Prophet himself was portrayed in hagiolatry terms, which was entirely contrary to his image drawn in the *Qur'an*. But the objections of religious scholars were swept aside in these matters, and in sheer helplessness they had no choice but to give a reluctant approval.<sup>6</sup> Along with *Ijma'*, the jurists also resorted to *Maslaha* as the second most important instrument to legitimise innovation, or even an irregularity that was repugnant to the legal views expressed by the leading religious figures in the past. Among its greatest advocates of this views was Malik ibn Anas, founder of the *Maliki* school of Islamic Jurisprudence who laid down that overwhelming considerations of public good make *Bida'* a regular feature of the religion. An example from the recent history of Islam would be the introduction of printing presses in Turkey. The first printing press in Turkey was established by the Jewish refugees from Spain, but they were not allowed to print anything in Arabic or Turkish. This ban continued until the eighteenth century, when *Shaykh al-Islam* Abdullah Efendi issued a *fatwa* authorizing publication of works in Turkish provided they did not deal with religion. The first book in Turkish was published in 1729.<sup>7</sup> Finally, religious opposition to this innovation was overcome in the name of public utility. The modernists of the nineteenth century approached their crusade for modernization with the same attitude. Dr. I.H. Qureshi has explained this approach in these words:

It has been recognized in all Muslim countries that in many respects the mutable part of the Sharia requires considerable overhauling and the immutable bases need a new interpretation — (Islamism) not a code of certain rigid laws or even legal concepts — but a dynamic force, a concept of life, not of law, a guidance for the springs of thought and action and not a static code of action. In other words, Islam is a live

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5. Ignaz Goldziher, *Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law*, translated by Andras and Ruth Hamori (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1981), 233.

6. *Ibid.*, 239.

7. P.J. Vatikiotis, *The Modern History of Egypt*, (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1969), 165.



and dynamic ideology and not a dead unprogressive and static collection of injunctions and prohibitions, it requires a new interpretation at every stage of our development and cannot be content merely with precedents and past usage. Islam does not discard precedents and traditions, but it lays emphasis upon the progressive unfolding of the creative instincts of mankind in accordance with eternal principles defined by revelation.<sup>7</sup>

Many religious reformers of the last century further added that without large scale reformation of Islam, the Muslims of the world in their opinion, had very little chance of taking any stride on the road to material and scientific progress. They made a comparison with the Reformation in Christianity which completely revolutionized the outlook of the western man. In their opinion, without the intellectual and philosophical crutches provided by the Reformation, Europe would not have triumphed so rapidly in the fields of science, technology and rationalism. They wanted similar types of reformation in Islam, so that the Muslims could also pursue scientific learning without being inhibited by the traditional orthodox religion. Such a comparison, between Islam and Christianity, however, was deceptive. The Western type religious reformation did not seem feasible in Islam, because it did not have any powerful, highly centralized religious hierarchy, which could enforce uniformity in religious thought. In Islam each believer shapes his own spiritual destiny. It was primarily for this reason that Muslim reformers of the nineteenth century could not communicate with the Muslim masses effectively. The militancy of the various religious sects also became a major barrier to the development of a uniform package of religious reforms that would be acceptable to all Muslims. Even al-Azhar, the oldest and the most reputable centre of Islamic learning in the world, could not lay claim to any supreme religious authority strong enough to enforce a reform program.

Absence of an institution like papacy was not the only factor that made the implementation of reforms so difficult. Apathy and conservatism of the Muslim masses, and the hold that the ulema, as a class, had exercised over the society were also responsible in

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7. I.H. Qureshi, "The Future Constitution of Pakistan". *Islamic Review*, Vol. LX, No.4, January 1950, 33.



making the issue of religious reforms so critical and sensitive politically and socially. Therefore, one is not surprised that in the writings of the reformers the ulema as a class have been subjected to the sharpest criticism. They all blamed the religious doctors and theologians for ignorance and stagnation of the Muslim society. A Russian Tatar scholar Muhammad Faith in 1904 made the following remarks about them:

In my humble opinion, the precepts of the Koran can easily be brought to conform with culture and civilization. But unhappily there are no Ulemas living in our day capable of inspiring Islam and reconciling it with civilization. Our ignorant clergy expound Islam according to their own ideas, and instead of benefiting, they injure us. You Europeans have strained every nerve and rescued your religion from guidance of ignorant Popes and priest and have spread the light in your midst. Until we follow your example and escape by our own efforts from the grip of the mullahs, abandoning empty formalities, decadence is inevitable.<sup>9</sup>

The ulema were denounced for their worldly lust and retrogressive outlook. They had assumed the rule of the custodians of Islamic tradition and in this position through their distorted interpretations had corrupted the thinking of the people. The reformers were convinced that the enlightened precepts of the *Qur'an* had eternal operational potency, and as the divine reservoir of truth and prudence they were meant to be of assistance to every progressive movement that was meant to further the cause of human welfare. As the reformers accelerated the tempo of their efforts, the ulema felt a serious threat to the position of prestige and esteem that they had enjoyed for centuries, and this made them even more resistant to change. they jealously clung to their semi-autonomous spiritual domain and indirect political influence which often made them king-makers in a Muslim society. Secularism or at least a major change in the religious attitudes of the people that constituted the crux of the teachings of every reformer, would certainly have demoted the religious classes from the position of power and prestige which they had occupied for such a long time. In other words, the reformers would contend that the *Qur'an* was still a manifesto full of truth and guidance for practical life, but the

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9. Cf. Henry Elish Allen, *The Turkish Transformation*, (New York: Greenwood Press, 1968), 30.



ulema and *mullas* had confused and misled the masses so much that the sterling excellences of the religious doctrine had completely receded in oblivion. Ali Vahit, a Turkish scholar has described these sentiments of the reformers by saying:

The revolt against the Koran is due to not understanding to, failure to learn it from a competent authority. It is the Koran which creates faith in the heart, refreshes it, and keeps it free from doubts and different storms. It is the word of God which removes vices, immorality and trusts sins from the heart of man — a man sees a hodja (mullah) with a white turban on his head and thinks he is a competent person, and he wishes him to teach the command of God. He may either explain it in a wrong way or give him an answer that may not be the right answer to his question; he may be misled. A half-trained doctor causes death, and a half-trained hodja causes atheism. For our health we seek a competent doctor; so for our religion we should look for a competent guide.<sup>10</sup>

No matter what the devotees of modernism would say against the ulema, the fact that could not be denied was that over a long period of time they had assumed complete domination such critical areas of national life as education and judiciary. As custodians of the laws of *Shari'ah*, they wielded considerable juristic authority, and occasionally as mediators between the state and other pressure groups in society they also assumed a very decisive political role. Every religious reformer realized that unless the privileges and prerogatives of the ulema were broke, modernization could not become a popular movement. It is for this reason that in the literature on Islam and modernism there has been tirade after tirade against the entrenched power of the ulema. Every protagonist of modernity has a deep-seated antipathy to *mullaism*.

Before turning to the basic ideas of the leading proponents of "Islamic modernism" it is essential to know that over and above the liquidation of the power of the ulema, what else was common among all the modernists. The genesis of modernism is traced back to the intellectual activity that was engendered by modern education, modern press, and western political philosophy. These developments generated a new world view, which sought expression in hostility to imperialism and love for nationalism and also produced an urge to modify Islamic tradition in a manner that

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10. *Ibid.*, 192.



it could effectively operate into the newly emergent areas of public policy. The two main characteristics of the modernist outlook as it was publicized during the second half of the last century were "qualified rationalism" and "apologetic" interpretation of Islam. The modernist accepted the concepts of western civilization like science, progress and freedom, but at the same time they were deeply attached to the belief system of Islam, which was so deeply rooted in their sentiments and gave them a powerful cultural identity. The famous Munir Report in Pakistan as aptly summed up the situation as follows:

[The modern Muslim] finds himself standing on the crossroads, wrapped in the mantle of the past and with the dead weight of centuries on his back, frustrated and bewildered and hesitant to turn one corner or the other. The freshness and simplicity of the faith, which gave determination to his minded and spring to his muscle, is denied to him. He has neither the means nor the ability to conquer and there are no countries to conquer. He therefore, finds himself in a state of helplessness, waiting for someone to come and help him out of this morass of uncertainty and confusion — nothing but a bold re-orientation of Islam to separate the vital from the lifeless can preserve it as a World Idea and convert the Musclem into a citizen of the present and the future world from the archaic incongruity that he is today.<sup>11</sup>

This exactly was the picture of the mind of the Islamic modernists who initiated the movement of the modernization near the close of the last century. Their basic anxiety was the future of Islam, and how could they make it synchronize with the needs of modern civilization. Wilfred Cantwell Smith says:

The present study is in no sense an endeavour — patently absurd — to discern what that future unfolding may be. Our concern is simply to give attention to the fact that the career of Islam on earth, from what it has been is currently in process of changing into what it will become. One does not know or need to know, what it will be; but one actually can observe the contemporary process by which some tomorrow or other is being prepared. Islam is today going through that crucial, creative movement in which the heritage of its past is being transformed into the herald of its future. Outsiders may study,

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11. Cf. Elie Kedourie, "Islam Today" in *Islam and the Arab World*, 335.



analyse, interpret the process; Muslims themselves not only may but also must participate in it.<sup>12</sup>

Religious and ideological movements vastly depend for their success on the courage, intellectual boldness, commitment, sagacity and clarity of thought and actions of their leaders. Particularly during times of crisis and turbulence the quality of leadership plays a decisive role, because every crisis creates an atmosphere for the birth of new ideas, to solve problems and resolve dilemmas which always come in the wake of revolutionary changes. It has been noticed earlier, that during the second half of the nineteenth century the world of Islam had been violently destabilized by foreign conquests, and ever-expanding infiltration of European ideologues of liberalism, nationalism and secularism. All of them challenged some of the fundamental precepts of the ideological framework of Islam. The Muslims responded to this challenge by many different ways. The most powerful response assumed the form of reformism, and defence of Islam through apologetics. The leaders who led such a movement through their writings and ideas have left a permanent mark on modern Islam. Therefore, it is important to briefly assess their contribution once again at a time when near the end of the twentieth century Islam is facing numerous internal and external challenges.

### **Khayr-al-Din Al-Tunisi**

The earlier biographical details of Khayr-al Din are clouded and sketchy but this much is certain that he arrived in Tunis as a slave in 1840 and by sheer dint of merit near the time of his death in 1889 he occupied one of the highest offices in the Tunisian Baylic. Between 1878-79, he also acted for a few months as the Grand *Vizier* of the Ottoman Empire. He founded al-Madrassa al-

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12. A recent western commentator said, "Muslim scholars insist that nothing in Islam is incompatible with technological advance or industrial development. In the days of the caliphs, Islam led the world in scientific and intellectual discoveries. The Muslims, however, objected vehemently to those aspects of modernization that led to the breakdown of the family, and produced other social and moral evils. Anwar Ibrahim, head of the Malaysia Islamic Youth Movement, once remarked, "Does modernization mean having liquor factories? If so, then we are against modernization. Does modernization mean electronic factories? Then we are for modernization. There is nothing in Islam against development, but such a development must have moral basis. It must be just no exploitative."



Sadiqiyya, the first modern educational institution in Tunis in which elaborate measures were adopted to teach European languages and modern subjects. But this was done not to the exclusion of 'Arabic and traditional Islamic subjects. He took great pains to demonstrate the superiority of the West over the politically and educationally bankrupt Muslim world of his time. In his opinion, strength and prosperity would only come to the Muslims if they imbibed the spirit of the contemporary western institutions. Ulema, he felt, had been asleep intellectually for centuries, the magnitude of the tragedy he pointed out increased manifold when the conservative Muslims even opposed those innovations that were not against *Shari'ah*. What was right, he said, had no specific cultural hue, it was universal. In the battle of al-Ahzab, the holy Prophet followed the advice of Salman al-Farsi who proposed to dig a trench around Madinah, as was customary with the ancient Persians. He also referred to the practice of the *Salaf* who willingly borrowed from the Greeks and developed their sciences to an extent that they became the leaders of the world in science and philosophy.<sup>13</sup>

Khayr al-Din was deeply impressed by the interpretations of law by the Hanbali jurists. He was convinced that the *Shari'ah* was of divine origin, and its obedience was mandatory for all Muslims. It assured happiness and prosperity both here and hereafter. But at the same time he emphasized that the mind of a Muslim should be free from dogmatic rigidities. On the other hand he believed that what the *Shari'ah* did not specifically forbid, by the rules of social necessity could be declared permissible. This was the famous rule of *maslehat*, a principle that enjoined upon Muslims to choose from a variety of interpretations; but that should guarantee the greatest good of society. Following the Hanbali Jurist Ibn Qayyim al-Jawzi, he deduced from the history of Islamic law that rulers would not be guilty of the transgression of any principle of *Shari'ah* if there was a positive confirmation by the logic of the situation that the step taken did not violate any

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13. Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age 1798-1939*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 92.



fundamental of the *Qur'an* and the *Sunnah* of the Prophet and was in the general interest of the community.<sup>14</sup>

Khayr al-Din wrote a book entitled *The Surest Path*. Its English translation was published in 1967. In an introduction, while elucidating his objective in writing this work he stated:

The first task is to spur in those statesman and savants having zeal and resolution to seek all possible ways of improving the conditions of the Islamic Umma and of promoting the means of its development by such things as expanding the scope of the sciences and knowledge, smoothing the paths to wealth in agriculture and commerce, promoting all the industries and eliminating the cause of idleness. The basic requirement is good government from which is born that security, hope and proficiency in work to be seen in the European kingdoms. No further evidence is needed of this. The second task is to warn the heedless among the Muslim masses against their persistent opposition to the behaviour of others that is praiseworthy and in conformity with our Holy Law simply because they are possessed with the idea that all behaviour and organizations of non-Muslims must be renounced. Their books must be cast out and not mentioned and one praising such things should be disavowed.<sup>15</sup>

Khayr al-Din was a product of the era in which contact between Muslim statesman and reformers and the West has become frequent, and most of them had become convinced that Muslim societies were too weak to stop the onrush of western civilization. In this respect he was the forerunner of such stalwart Muslim reformers as Jamal-al-Din Afghani, Muhammad Abduh and Namik Kemal. *The Surest Path* is undoubtedly a book written from the Islamic point of view, and the author makes frequent citations from the *Qur'an* and relies heavily in his analysis on Muslim scholars and savants of the past, and all this goes to prove that Khayr al-Din was well versed in the traditional religious scholarship. But at the same time he felt that problems of government and administration were universally the same and as such it was in the fitness of things that Muslim reformers should learn through western education the techniques and philosophies which had given that civilization so much superiority over the rest of the world. He also argued that knowledge and prosperity were

14. Khayr al-Din Tunisi, *The Surest Path* [translated by Leon Carl Brown], (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), 74.

15. *Ibid.*, 73.



the hallmark of Muslim civilization had disappeared from the life of the *ummah* because the Muslims stopped to comply with the dictates of the *Shari'ah*. He says:

With God's help, I have economic and administrative policies with reference to their situation in earlier times. I have shown their progress in the governance of mankind which has led to the utmost point of prosperity for their countries. I have also noted the superiority formerly held by the Islamic Umma (as attested by even the most important European historians) in the two fields of knowledge and prosperity at a time when the Sharia exerted its influence on the Umma's condition and all conduct was regulated accordingly.<sup>16</sup>

Khayr al-Din emphasizes that borrowing from other cultures, as long as the borrowed learning and institutions were not inimical to *Shari'ah*, had been the common features of Islamic history. He praised western political systems because they had reduced the chances of oppression and had streamlined the administration of justice in a manner that the welfare of the masses could be ensured.<sup>17</sup> In his opinion all this had been achieved through the instrumentality of liberal democracy, and he tries to explain that the constitutional form of government was not alien to Islam. He referred to the principle of consultation in *Shari'ah* and cites Ibn al-Arabi who said, "Consultation is one of the foundations of the religion and God's rule for the two worlds. It is a duty imposed upon all men from the Prophet to the least of creatures."<sup>18</sup> He pointed out that authority which did not have legal and moral constraints was a source of perpetual lawlessness. He reminded the Muslims of their imperishable contributions to knowledge and the sciences, and how they had become so backward and had allowed others to outdistance them in every field of human endeavour. Like all later reformists Khayr al-Din was of the opinion that within the boundaries of *Shari'ah*, Muslims could legislate new laws that were in the general interest of the believers. He says: The Islamic *ummah* is bound in its religious and worldly activists by the heavenly *Shari'ah* and by the divine limits, fixed by the justest of scholars, which is a sufficient guarantee both for this world and the

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16. *Ibid.*, 77.

17. *Ibid.*, 82.

18. *Ibid.*, 123.



next. Now, there are certain important, or even absolutely essential activities relating to public interest by which the *ummah* secures its prosperity and proper organization. If there is no specific rule in the *Shari'ah* either providing for or forbidding such actions, and if instead the principles of the *Shari'ah* in general and view them with a favourable eye, then the course to follow is whatever is required by the interest of the *ummah*.<sup>19</sup> In short, the primary objective of *The Surest Path* was to support the reform movement called the Tanzimat, which was being vehemently opposed by many leading ulema of the Empire, but which the statesman like Khayr al-Din believed was the only way by which the tottering structure of the Ottoman rule could be saved from complete ruination.

The introduction of European civilization, however, must have caused deep ideological fermentation in Tunisia because it had a long established tradition of religious establishment headed by powerful hierarchy of ulema, who enjoyed great social prestige. They were considered to be models of good manners, pious thinking, and proper behaviour. As a class they were equipped with all the paraphernalia of psychological and organizational cohesiveness. They represented the conscience of the community, but in the performance of their public and private duties they were always very discrete and circumspect. They generally avoided confrontation with the government and although committed to conservatism and blind traditionalism, they had always kept their attitudes and opinion flexible. Leon Carl Brown says:

The religious establishment was one group in Husainid Tunisia, aside from the state, whose activities and influence transcended the small units of families, tribes, quarters, and guilds within which most daily life was circumscribed, even the state itself played a less comprehensive role in comparison with the establishment, for it chose to remain aloof from society to the extent possible, but the other had roots, and influence in every part of Tunisia.<sup>20</sup>

Obviously the emergence of secularism in the wake of westernisation must have produced a lot of resistance from the

19. Leon Carl Brown, "The Religious Establishment in Husainid Tunisia" in Nikki R.Keddie (ed), *Scholars, Saints, and Sufis*, 48.

20. Afghani published this periodical from Paris in 1884. The life of this periodical was short because only 18 issues of it were published.



religious classes because it meant a loss of resistance from the religious classes because its meant a loss of status hallowed by centuries of public reverence.

### Jamal al-Din Afghani

Jamal al-Din Afghani (1839-1897) rose to his world reputation during the last decades of the nineteenth century and by his iconoclastic personality and radical thinking left a deep mark on the attitudes of the religious reformers in many parts of the Muslim world. Emerging from the remote haunts of the *Shi'a* theology in Iran, he swept across the *Sunnite* world of the Ottoman empire like an intellectual hurricane, preaching pan-Islamism, fighting European imperialism, and teaching the Muslims to reinterpret Islamic ideology in the light of modern science and technology that had completely revolutionized human civilization. His mercurial temperament, and the political conditions of the Islamic world, did not give him the chance to settle down to develop a serious and systematic framework of his thought. Most of his writings are in the form of speeches, and articles that he wrote for his periodical *al-Urwat al-Wuthqa*<sup>21</sup> and a small treatise entitled *The Refutation of Materialism*. These writings are scanty and too patchy; but a student of Afghani can draw a fairly clear picture of his approach to the crucial issue of adjusting Islam to the realities of the modern world.

Afghani's approach to religion of Islam was very pragmatic and rational. He was convinced that Islamic ideology had remained static so long that its dynamism had been blunted and the backward-looking vision of its self-installed custodians, the ulema, had rendered the mission of Islam totally ineffectual. Therefore, it would be helpful to start the examination of his religious ideas by a brief analysis of his views about the ulema as powerful religious elites in a Muslim society. He blamed them for their fanaticism, and rigid adherence to the concepts which were not fundamental to Islam, and had long since become outdated. He denounced them for their monopoly of the educational system and unscientific

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21. Cf. Nikki R. Keddie, *An Islamic Response to Imperialism: Political and Religious Writings of Sayyid Jamal al-Din Afghani* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1968), 62.



methods of instruction and learning. He could not understand their antipathy to European sciences, and was never tired of denouncing them for not realizing that in the modern world, the Muslims will not be able to salvage themselves from difficulties without learning science and technology. In an article, he criticised them in these words:

The strangest thing of all is that our Ulema these days have divided science into two parts. One they call Muslim sciences and one European sciences. Because of this they forbid others to teach some of the useful sciences. They have not understood that science is that noble thing that has no connection with any nation — how very strange it is that the Muslims study those sciences that are ascribed to Aristotle with the greatest delight as if Aristotle were one of the pillars of the Muslims. However, if the discussion relates to Galileo, Newton, and Kepler, they consider them infidels.<sup>22</sup>

In view of the widespread influence of the ulema in a Muslim society, Afghani always thought that without change in the outlook of the ulema, Muslim nations would never become progressive. He hearkened the religious scholars to abandon the path of the knowledge that had become archaic. The books they read and taught had no relevance to contemporary life of man. Cloistered in their own intellectual hovels, Afghani thought, the Muslim theologians had never considered, "what is the cause of poverty, indigence, helplessness, and distress of the Muslim."<sup>23</sup> He expected them to explore the practical problems of the Muslims and should not sit like revered sages expecting people to admire and idolize them. They should tear the veil of ignorance from their eyes, and he warned them that their hair-splitting of the dogma and time-consuming intellectual pursuit of theological trivialities was an exercise in futility.

Afghani was well versed in the tradition of Islamic philosophy and whole-heartedly supported the rejuvenation of philosophic

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22. *Ibid.*, 64.

23. Afghani defended philosophy, because in the contemporary Ottoman empire, it had been completely excluded from the curriculum of the religious schools. Basgoz and Eilson say, "Every discipline which recognized free discussion and thought was accused of heresy and dropped from the curriculum as being philosophy, *felsefiyat* and therefore at cross purposes with religious orthodoxy." Cf. Frank A. Stone, "The Muslim Faith and Reason: Discussion and its Implications for Islamic Education." *Muslim World*, Vol.LX, No. 6, October 1970, 314.



studies for Islamic revival.<sup>24</sup> In his opinion, philosophy was the essence of human knowledge and remained one of the governing passions of his life. He admired Islamic philosophy because most of the Muslim philosophers relied heavily on demonstrable evidence to draw a conclusion and their faith in the authority of the revealed scripture as an instrument for understanding man and universe had rational basis. It was always the rationalist and scientific side of the Muslim philosophy that attracted him the most. The matter that needs to be understood at this juncture is that Afghani dichotomised the religious knowledge between the elites and the masses. In his "Refutation" he has explained this thesis in unmistakeable terms. In his opinion, only the select few have the capability to comprehend scientific and demonstrative argument. The masses need to be anaesthetized against it, because with their limited vision, and meagre power of reasoning, they cannot grasp the true significance of rationalism. Only emotions, rhetoric, irrational rituals, and persuasive force of mysticism attract them. People in general should be kept away from abstract thinking. He also follows the Muslim philosophers in his contention that religion is an inescapable necessity because of its practical value for the 'survival of social order. They were also opposed to materialism and naturalism, because they concepts inflated human appetites beyond reasonable proportions, and concluded that the role of the prophecy was to curb these propensities and give a social system a stable and legal framework.<sup>25</sup>

The next important thing that we need to examine about Afghani is his views about Islamic orthodoxy. His biographers generally agree that in the beginning of his career, Afghani acquired a reputation of being an agnostic, and in some quarters he was even labelled as heretic. But in "The Refutation of the Materialists" for the first time, he presented himself as a defender of the Islams' orthodox tradition. He criticized in this treatise the rising tide of westernisation in the Muslim world and evils that followed it. This transformation took place because during the last decades of the nineteenth century, anti-western sentiments were

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24. Nikki R. Keddie, 53.

25. *Ibid.*, 55-57.



rampant in every Muslim country, and even the most liberal and the rationalists were turning more and more towards Islam for a sense of direction and identity. Moreover, during his stay in India between 1880-1882, he noticed that a group of Westernised Indian Muslims, under the leadership of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan were preaching that loyalty to the British rulers was not un-Islamic. He also felt repugnance against their thesis that made study of natural law an integral part of the theological studies. It was due to this aspect of Sir Sayyid's modernism that his group was called the *Neicheriyya* (the followers of nature). Most of the recent commentators of Afghani's thought are of the opinion that his love for orthodoxy stemmed primarily from his hostility to Sir Sayyid. The crux of his religious thinking, in other words, was to criticize the religious conservatives, who were against western learning, and reformers like Sir Sayyid who preached blind following of the West in thought, food, language, dress, art literature, and social and moral ideas.<sup>26</sup>

### Muhammad Abduh

Jamal al-Din Afghani's junior colleague, disciple and co-editor of his famous *Urwa-tal-Wuthqa*, Muhammad Abduh<sup>27</sup> (1849-1905), was another landmark figure, whose contributions to the Islamic modernism earned for him a world wide reputation. Abduh though very much devoted to his master, was considerably different from him in many respects. He was less flamboyant in politics and more scholarly. He was more organized and systematic in his thought, and by virtue of the high official position that he occupied in Egypt, he was able to win recognition for many of his reforms from the government. Many of these reforms were later picked up for legislation in other Muslim countries also. His thought is the classic example of harmonious blend between

26. Muhammad Abduh probably fit into the definition which Sir Hamilton Gibb has given of the modernist apologetic. He says, "This then is the task before the modernist. The primary function of the modernist apologetic, it must be repeated, is to restore faith in Islam among doubting Muslims by demonstrating the supreme excellence of their religion. Its second function is to persuade the old fashioned Muslims that they, by their social conservatism and their stand on the letter of the law, are sinning against the light." *Modern Trends in Islam*, (New York: Octagon Press, 1975), 95.

27. The *Qur'an*, ii: 27.



traditionalism and modernity. This was a reflection of his cosmopolitan outlook, his wide-ranging intellectual interests, and profound reading in ancient and modern sciences. Writers on the modern revolutionary movements in Islam have listed that Abduh, when he formulated his program of reforms had certain very clear and specific objectives in view. He wanted (i) the purification of Islam from corrupting influences and practices, (ii) the reformation of higher education in Islam, (iii) re-interpretation of the doctrine of the *Qur'an* according to the needs of the contemporary civilization (iv) and the defence of Islam against European attacks. The anxiety shown in these reforms was the same that had been discerned in the writings of Muslim reformers who preceded him, but Abduh's greatness lies in the fact that he was more systematic, and used considerable prudence and common sense in publicizing them.

Abduh responded to all the challenges that confronted the world of Islam during that time. The relationship between science and religion, however, was the biggest challenge, that was a subject of enduring debate among religious scholars. Abduh tried to resolve this issue by showing that there was no incompatibility between reason and revelation. There was no conflict between religion and science, because both were based on reason. Application of reason, he argued, to the study of nature would automatically increase our knowledge of God. The more talent and energy we spend in exploring the secrets of nature, the closer we reach a stage when our path would be illuminated with the radiance of the Supreme Creator. A verse of the *Qur'an* that he has used repeatedly in his writings is, "He created for you all that is on earth."<sup>28</sup> He concludes that the verses in the *Qur'an* in which men have been hearkened to witness the signs of God in nature, constitute nearly half of the *Qur'an*. Since the word of God had not put any restriction on the study of physical sciences, it would be wrong to argue that religion was against reason or science.<sup>29</sup> For instance, Abduh tried to find clues to the Darwin's theory of evolution in the *Qur'anic* verse, "had God not repelled some of the

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28. C.C. Adams, *Islam and Modernism in Egypt* (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), 135.

29. The *Qur'an*, ii: 251.



people by means of others, the earth would have been corrupted.”<sup>30</sup> In other words, the scientific concept of the struggle for survival that was considered the hallmark of modern science had already been mentioned in the *Qur'an*. He called it Tanazual-Baqa and those who questioned such a derivation had the following reply from him.

Some intruders into the science of God's custom with societies suppose that the struggle for survival is only an effect of the materialism of the present age and that it is the materialists who instituted and pronounced this idea, which is contrary to the teachings of the Faith. But if those who say this understand the meaning of human nature or understood themselves, they would not say what they do.<sup>31</sup>

Just as Abduh was searching the origin of modern scientific knowledge in the *Qur'an*, the same way he was very keen to abrogate myths and superstitions that in his opinion were un-Islamic, or against reason. For instance, he did not have any faith in miracles. In his writings he did everything to disapprove of them. Malcolm Kerr has described Abduh's views on miracles in these words, “A miracle in Abduh's writings as well as in traditional terminology, is called Khariqal-ada, literally the infringement of what is usual — miracles for him are much more than unusual events; they are outright contradictions of established, fixed principles, and therefore irrational. Abduh revolted against miracles and denied that they have any place in Islam. Abduh admits that there is one exceptional miracle recognized by Islam: The *Qur'an*.”<sup>32</sup> It was sweeping statements like these that kept the bulk of the religious circles against him. In their opinion, his

30. Cf. Malcolm H. Kerr, *Islamic Reform: the Political and Legal Theories in Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Rida* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), 130.

31. Gibb, 119-120.

32. The *Qur'an* xiii: 12. Sir Hamilton Gibb has captured the spirit of this *Qur'anic* line when he asks the orthodox circles of modern Islam to realise their responsibilities. He says: If this is to be realized, however, the Muslim faith will have to show that it possesses the strength and vitality to generate these antitoxins, mainly out of their own resources, but not excluding the possibility of adapting some of the constructive elements of western thought in place of its destructive romanticism. The future of Islam rests where it rested in the past-on the insight of the orthodox leaders and their capacity to resolve the new tensions as they arise by a positive doctrine which will face and master the forces making for disintegration. Gibb, 122.



modernism smacked of heterodoxy. It was again for this very reason that in spite of his tireless efforts, he failed to reform al-Azhar. Most of his followers were recruited from the westernised section of the Egyptian population, such as lawyers, doctors, journalists, teaching, and government officials.

Abduh further adds that just as the *Qur'an* is perfect guide in examining the laws of nature, in the same way it has a code of laws that can keep society on the path of rectitude. There are special laws that govern the destiny of mankind. Every social system provides a depressing spectacle of contrasting characteristic. Strength and weakness, wealth and poverty, respect and humiliation, domination and subjection, tend to exist side by side in each society. The only way nations could steer through successfully in this whirlpool of contradictions is by obeying the laws of God. Those who abide by these laws triumph, the others sink and disappear in the darkness of oblivion. Abduh was probably among the early reformers of modern Islam who used the *Qur'anic* verse, "Verily God does not change the state of a people until they change their own state,"<sup>32</sup> as a reminder to his co-religionists that without change their future would remain bleak, he would like to assimilate the ideals of modernity through the inner resources of the faith. He would not like to abandon the fundamentals of Islam at any cost; but at the same time he would like the Muslims not to ignore the realities of modern scientific age. In theology, Abduh followed the school of *Imam* ibn Taimiyyah and *Imam* ibn Qaiyyam al-Jawzi, which favoured religious reforms on conservative lines. To their ideas he added al-Ghazzali's ethics and in doing so produced a very progressive Islamic doctrine. In his view, this was the only way that the Muslims could be rescued from the curse of sectarianism. In his *Risalat al-Tawhid*, he constantly reminds the Muslims that disputes and conflicts in religious interpretations were irrelevant and constituted a major cause of their ruin. He summed up his vision of Islam by saying that, "our belief is that Islam is a religion of unity in conviction and not diversity in principles. Reason is amongst its

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32. M.A. Zaki Badawi, *The Reformers of Egypt* (London: Croom Helm, N.d.), 55-56.



strongest supporters and revelation is one of its strongest bases. Beyond this are delusions from Satan and whims of the rulers."<sup>34</sup>

Another salient feature of Abduh's thinking was the emphasis that he placed on the use of *ijtihad* as legitimate intellectual device to introduce changes in those theological areas that had lost their utility. In a piece of autobiographical writing, he listed introduction of *Ijtihad* as his top priority. He said:

First, to liberate thought from the shackles of taqlid, and understand religion as it was understood by the elders of the community before the dissension appeared, to return in the acquisition of religious knowledge to its first sources, and to weigh them in the scales of human reason, which God has created in order to prevent excess or adulteration in religion so that God's wisdom may be fulfilled and the order of the human world preserved, and to prove that seen in this light, religion must be accounted a friend of science, pushing man to investigate the secrets of existence, summoning him to respect established truths and to depend on them in his moral life and conduct. All this I count as one matter, and in my advocacy of it I ran counter to the opinion of two great groups of which the body of Umma is composed, the students of the sciences of religion, and those who think like them and students of the arts of this age, which those who are one their side.<sup>35</sup>

He argues that the *Qur'an* and the *Hadith* embody only general principles, and avoid rigid ruling on specific issues. This leads to certain philosophical dilemmas which can be resolved only through the mediation of human reason. This makes *Ijtihad* not only permissible, but also essential for the survival of the Islamic doctrine.<sup>36</sup> Abduh, however, would not grant permission to use reason in religious matters to every Muslim. Only men with depth of understanding and knowledge of the meanings of the *Qur'an* are allowed to interpret the faith. He had a faith in *Ijma* but

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34. Cf. Albert Hourani, 140-141.

35. Maxime Rodinson says, "For instance, one cannot maintain that the Muslim religion is a total invariant. It has varied much over the centuries, and this is recognized by Muslim thought itself, since it currently uses such notions as *ihya* (revival) *tajdid* (renovation) and reform. If Islam needs to be periodically revived, reformed or renovated it is because it has fallen prey to torpor, archaism and various deviations which call for correction." *Marxism and the Muslim World* (London: Zed Press, 1972), 12.

36. Cf. Benjamin Rivaling and Joseph S. Szyliowicz, *The Contemporary Middle East: Tradition and Innovation* (New York: Random House, 1965), 161.



he would not rate it very high among sources of the Muslim law. Even if the collective will of the community, he says, has been established, it is still fallible and susceptible to error. He further adds that *Ijtihad* would still be needed even if *Ijma* has become a common characteristic in the assessment of the public opinion. Osman Amin, while commenting on Abduh's views on *Ijtihad* says, "In all his life and teaching, Muhammad Abduh has never ceased to fight the *taqlid*, that is the passive acceptance of the dogmas from religious authorities without asking for proof, and without thinking of the rights of free examination and personal initiative. It is this that we constantly hear him recommending the principle of *Ijtihad* that is thought free from all fetters, and stigmatising the *muqallid*, the imitator, to the point of likening him at times to an infidel. The gates of *Ijtihad* says Abduh is far from being closed once for all, as some wrongly pretend, are wide open to all the questions raised by the new conditions of life. The last word must no longer belong to the old letter or authorities long dead, but to the modernist spirit and to the consideration of the common good."<sup>37</sup>

Like the rest of Islamic modernists he declared the orthodox ulema as being guilty of *Bida'*, and criticized the Muslim masses for their apathy and fatalism. But with all his undiminished faith in the efficacy of reason, Abduh however, is very discrete in its advocacy. He would not stretch the limits of his rationalism, to an extent where it would touch the boundaries of Mutazillite thinking, because that would have adversely affected his Asharite conservatism. This attitude is amply manifested in his approach to free will. He claims that free will is not *shirk*. *Shirk*, in his opinion, comes into existence only when any one but God is endowed with a freedom that is unrestricted by natural forces.<sup>38</sup> His ideal of a Muslim society was the combination of revelation, reason and law. It is a society that obeys the will of God meticulously, adheres to the principles of rationality, and is committed to the moral and economic welfare of the people. When Islamic law is fully understood, obeyed and rationally interpreted, the society

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37. Kerr, 111-112.

38. Kalim Siddiqui, *Conflict, Crisis, and War in Pakistan* (London: Macmillan, 1972), 9.



flourishes; but the moment it either ignores or deviates from the fundamentals, decadence sets in and in the midst of chaos its future becomes uncertain. For the picture of an ideal Muslim society his mind was glued to the golden period of Islamic history, the generation when *salaf* presided over the destiny of the *ummah*. His definition of the *salaf*, however, is much broader than commonly understood in the theological vocabulary of Islam. He does not confine it only to the days of the Holy Prophet and his companions, but also includes the period when such luminaries of Museum theology as Ashari, Baqillani, and Maturide lived. He attributes the decline of Islam to the infiltration of alien philosophical knowledge and the distortions introduced by mystics who, in his opinion, publicized unbelief. Abduh's method was comparative and he was interested in all the four schools of Islamic jurisprudence. In forming his opinion, he always synthesized the interpretations of all the four schools of thought, and would take into consideration opinions of even the independent jurists and then analyse them all in the light of the *Qur'an* and the *Hadith*.

Afghani and Abduh constituted a very powerful school of thought among the Muslim modernists. They had lived and worked closely, and in spite of certain major differences, they still had so much in common in their thinking, that they were always treated as architects of a formative movement with unique characteristics of its own that distinguished it from other similar movements in the Muslim world. Their mission and message contrasted particularly from the movement of Islamic modernization that was started on the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent during the second half of the nineteenth century. In the history of modern Islamic renaissance, this movement is called the "Aligarh Movement", that was inspired by the thinking and reformative zeal of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan. Sir Sayyid understood the meaning of modernization quite differently from the one that formed the crux of Afghani and Abduh's movement.

### **Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan**

Sir Sayyid Ahmed Khan (1817-1898) was unquestionably the most dominant figure among the religious reformers of the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent during the second half of the nineteenth century. He was able to ignite a very powerful urge among his



disciples to purge Islam of all the impurities and inadequacies that had hindered the adjustment of the religious doctrine to contemporary conditions of life in which science, technology and general enlightenment had become the primary features of human civilisation. He was not educated in religion in any religious seminary. He studied Persian and Arabic with deep interest, but not with an objective to become a religious scholar. He used his knowledge of these languages for his monumental work *Asar-al-Sanadid* and in editing *Ain-i Akbari* of Abul Fadl. These two works alone would have earned for him a responsible niche among historians of India. But after the Mutiny of India of 1857, he turned towards the educational uplift of the Muslims of South Asia and assumed the mission of reforming traditional Islam. To achieve this end, he devoted all his talents and energies in understanding Islamic theology and comparing it with other religious systems. He even learned Hebrew and set up a press with English, Urdu and Hebrew types. His broad-based insight into various religions led him to conclude that there was no difference between Christianity and Islam. To prove this he wrote commentaries both on the Bible and the *Qur'an*, the latter, however remained unfinished, although whatever he was able to finish was fairly enormous in size and scholarship.

He was born in a Mughal aristocratic family. After finishing his early education he joined the judicial service of the East India Company as a *Munsif* (a senior official) but gradually rose to become a sub-judge in Delhi. During the Mutiny of 1857-58, he remained loyal to the British and own their deep gratitude by saving the lives of many Englishmen and women. His loyalty to the British made the traditional Muslim aristocracy very angry, and religious classes found in his advocacy of the English language a "high road to infidelity."<sup>39</sup> Sir Sayyid, however, had been endowed with a very strong character and powerful determination. To the members of the defunct aristocracy he advised to imbibe western learning, and profess loyalty to the British and they would again become the ruling elites, while to the *mullas* he answered by challenging their orthodox views and proving through fresh

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39. Kalim Siddiqui *Conflict, Crisis, and War in Pakistan*, (London: Macmillan, 1972), 9.



interpretation of the verses of the *Qur'an* that how far astray they had gone from Islam's Straight Path.

The Mutiny of 1857-58 had been a gruesome tragedy for the Muslims. This was also the turning point in the life of Sir Sayyid. His heart ached at the sight of the widespread ruin of the Muslim community and he decided to start a movement that would have a healing touch for the wounds inflicted by the war that brought to an end their centuries old rule over the subcontinent and left them humiliated and shipwrecked.

Sir Sayyid's greatest achievement was the Anglo-Oriental College which he founded in 1875, and that later became the Aligarh Muslim University. It was primarily an institute where young men of the former Muslim aristocratic families were taught English, western art, literature and sciences. He introduced the study of Islam, but the Islam that was taught at this institution was the one that was in consonance with his own interpretation. Many of the senior teachers at Aligarh were Englishmen, who exercised tremendous influence on the institution's academic planning. The Aligarh graduates became a breed apart socially and intellectually from the rest of the Muslim population of the subcontinent. A degree from Aligarh increased job opportunities, enhanced the chances of official patronage and was considered a sign of affluence. The entire campaign of Sir Sayyid for this kind of modernisation was called "Aligarh Movement."<sup>40</sup> The movement was supported by a constellation of his distinguished disciples. *Mawlavi* Nazir Ahmad, *Mawlavi* Zakaullah, the renowned poet *Mawlana* Altaf Hussain Hali, and an eminent historian of Islamic civilisation *Mawlana* Shibli Naumani, were the main pillars of the Aligarh movement.<sup>41</sup> They all agreed with Sir Sayyid that Indian Muslims must face reality and reconcile themselves with the West both culturally and politically. They were prepared to support his thesis that India, under the British rule, could be included in the *Dar-ul-Islam* (the Abode of Peace). Aligarh's prestige as an institute of higher learning was very high, but it would be difficult

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40. *Ibid.*, 10.

41. V. A. Smith, *The Oxford History of India, Pt. III* (Rewritten by Percival Spear), (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), 804.



to say that it became a beacon-light for a widespread renaissance in Islam. P. Hardy says:

... what Aligarh did was to produce a class of Muslim leaders with a footing in both Western and Islamic cultures, at least both in British and Muslim societies and endowed with a consciousness of their claims to be the aristocracy of the country as much in British as in Mughal times. Educated in a residential college which imitated the English public schools of the time, with its emphasis on character, leadership and prowess in games, rather than scholarship with debating societies and old boy's associations to maintain the college esprit de corps.<sup>42</sup>

The list of Sir Sayyid's works is fairly long. His *Asbab-Baghawat-i Hind* (causes of the Indian Revolt) was published in 1859. An account of the Loyal Mohammedan of India in 1860, Review of Hunter's Book in 1872, in which he proved that India was not *dar-al harb*; in 1872, *Tabyin al-Kalam; Essays on the Life of Mohammed* in 1870, and *Tafsir-al Qur'an* in 1880-89. Over and above this he wrote numerous articles in his famous Journal *Tahzib-al Akhlaq* (the refinement of Manners). In every single piece of writing, his main thrust was to convince the Muslims that the western knowledge was not anti-Islamic. He never doubted the truth of God and His last prophet, but he repeatedly cursed the Muslims for having ossified the dynamic spirit of the Islamic laws. He condemned their hostility to laws of nature which, in his opinion, were also manifestations of the attributes of God. P. Hardy has summed up the essence of Sir Sayyid's thought and its relation to the natural law in the following words:

Sir Sayyid avoids the imputation of setting up a closed system of natural laws, separate from the partnering a system of religious law, by arguing the man's reason and knowledge cannot grasp the nature and number of God's attributes and certainly not in the manner in which God Himself understands them. Thus, what may appear to be an event under a jurisdiction separate from that of nature, for example, a "miracle" may be explicable as a natural event because it is a manifestation of a Divine attribute which we as human beings have failed to conceive as belonging to God. Nature, then, "that law is conformity to which all objects around us, whether material or immaterial receive their existence and which determines the relation which they bear to ear other, is of God's attributes, which are one with His essence and exist from all eternity to all eternity. The unity

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42. *Ibid.*, 805.



of God is therefore preserved and Muslims in studying the laws of nature are in effect studying God. Islam is Nature and nature is Islam.<sup>43</sup>

Sir Sayyid could never be convinced that there was any conflict between "the Word of God and the Work of God."<sup>44</sup> He differed in this matter from the traditional religious scholars, but for his own satisfaction the thesis propounded by him seemed to be the only rational way of looking at Islam. The perplexing dilemma that confronted the modernists like Sir Sayyid was that the West had been able to achieve its contemporary material prosperity, educational uplift, and technological eminence only after separating church and the state. Sir Sayyid tried to resolve this dilemma by pointing out that in the revealed word of God, all issues relating to man's earthly existence had not been spelt out in all the requisite details. In his opinion, these details were to be fulfilled by the power of revelation that was embodied in human reason.<sup>45</sup>

Sir Sayyid relying on the authority of Shah Waliullah construed that there was a clear distinction between *Din* and *Shari'ah*. All prophets communicated the same *din*, but each one of them brought a different *Shari'ah* adapted to be circumstances of his time. The *Qur'an*, in his opinion, itself nullified the laws given to the world by the earlier prophets, therefore the code of secular law as enunciated in the *Qur'an* is meant for reflection and not for reference, calls for consideration not conformity.<sup>46</sup> Although the traditional theologians refused to recognise him as a religious reformer, but in his mind, he had no doubt that he was destined to reshape the ideological geography of the Islamic doctrine by reinterpreting its principles, which though cherished by millions, were according to his way of looking at the test of the *Qur'an* un-Islamic, and detrimental to progress. Even his critics agree that Sir Sayyid had a very rigorous method of investigation, his appetite for scholarly studies was insatiable, and his moral integrity totally unblemished. In order to refute the charges levied

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43. P. Hardy, *The Muslims of British India*, (Cambridge: University Press, 1972), 98.

44. *Ibid.*

45. *Ibid.*

46. *Ibid.*



against the Holy Prophet by Sir William Muir, he travelled to England to search for material in the India Office Library, and the British museum. Before turning to Sir Sayyid's religious ideas and the views that he held about modernism and Islam, it would be helpful to note that his mind was secular, and he was obsessed with the notion that rationality and common-sense constituted the most desirable instruments for human happiness and progress. His untiring crusade was primarily directed to restore the honour and dignity for the Muslim community of India, and remove religious hindrances that were inimical to modern knowledge. Although he had no systematic definition of the term progress, but about one thing he was sure that progress was not a religious concept. He thought that his effort to generate among the Muslims of India as awareness that they were sinking in an unfathomable pit of disgrace was a religious act. In an article published in his *Tahzib-al Akhlaq*, he stated his views on this matter as follows:

It is strange that to use one's effort to enable the Muslims to progress as a people, to maintain the study of religion, to make provisions for education in those worldly sciences which are beneficial and useful, to ensure economic security, to open avenues to honest employment, to remove the blemishes in social life and eradicated those evil customs and bad habits because of which people professing other religions look down upon the Muslims, to remove those prejudices and superstitions which are opposed to the Sharia and hindrance to every kind of progress — it is strange that this should not be attributed to religiousness and to love of the Muslims but to the absorption in worldliness. I do not see how this attitude could be justified in the eyes of God.<sup>47</sup>

Sir Sayyid contended that doctrines enunciated by the *Qur'an*, and those elaborated in the authentic literature on *Hadith* were fundamental to Islam, but then there were other principles of life that were sanctioned by laws of nature and were equally important.<sup>48</sup> Therefore, in his opinion, laws of *Shari'ah* need to be

47. Cf. M. Mujeeb, *The Indian Muslims*, (Montreal, McGill University Press, 1967), 448.

48. According to Percival Spear, Sir Sayyid firmly believed "that the essence of Islam was consistent with the best that the West had to offer. He was, in fact, a Muslim modernist appealing to general principles outside the scope of the four recognised schools of theology. He accepted the mission of the Prophet and God's revelation in the *Qur'an*. But he claimed that Reason was also an attribute of God and Nature his handiwork. The *Qur'an* and Islam might, therefore, be interpreted on the basis of reason to meet the modern needs and problems. The achievements of the West, so



supplemented with natural laws to comprehend the entire spectrum of life. He illustrated his contention by saying the *Salah* (prayer) which means thoughtful devotion to God is a religious obligation, but matters like *wudhu* (ablution) or whether one should pray while standing or sitting are only supportive instruments to be used in the light of common-sense and logic of the situation. It is for this reason that during illness these requirements are waved. He also pointed out the attributes of God listed in the *Qur'an* and the *Hadith* were only allegorical and could not be taken literally. He expressed similar views with regard to the Day of Judgement, Heaven, Hell, and Angels. Although his ideas on these subjects were very radical from the point of view of strict orthodoxy, and seemed to have gone too far, his examination of certain social institutions was very constructive and innovative. For instance, his thesis to prove that slavery was against both the spirit of the *Qur'an* and the laws of nature was based on positive logic of *Qur'anic* injunctions. In support of his arguments, he quoted profusely from the orthodox literature. Similarly, he portrayed in eloquent terms that polygamy had been indirectly prohibited by the clause of equal justice to all wives. In his opinion, usury was prohibited, but this prohibition was not applicable to Government Promissory Notes and loans.<sup>49</sup> He allowed the Muslims to wear western dress, and they could emulate their eating habits from anywhere in the world. To further undo the narrow-minded conservatism from among the Muslims, he emphasised that the believers must develop an attitude that would enable them to cultivate *hubb-i imaani* (love for the Muslims) and *hubb-i insaani* (love for the whole mankind).

The radical proposition of blending natural law with the laws of Sharia, could not win Sir Sayyid many sympathisers among the Indian Muslims. His ideas left many religious quarters completely stunned, and some even burst into violent opposition. But he was lucky to have created a band of disciples who were prepared to

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far as they rested on reason, might thus be welcomed and assimilated." In his synthesis of Islam, and the Western contemporary thought, he did not find much difficulty because Christianity and Islam had many similarities in their spiritual background. Cf. V.A. Smith, 804.

49. Kalim Siddiqui, 9-10.



help him, even when they disagreed with him on many issues. The last years of his fruitful life he dedicated entirely to his school, which he had founded in 1875, which was mentioned earlier became a university, whether writing religious treatises or planning curriculum for the college, Sir Sayyid put maximum emphasis on *amal-i salih* (good works). None of his predecessors, nor any of his contemporaries had described *amal-i salih* in such concrete terms. Perhaps the motive behind this was to convince his co-religionists that the success in this world is as important as the striving for the betterment of the world to come. This was contrary to the commonly held conservative opinion, which gave life hereafter primacy over life spent in this world.

Among Sir Sayyid's most enduring contributions, to rejuvenate Islam, however, was his powerful defence of *ijtihad*.<sup>50</sup> The above discussion confirms that every apostle of modernisation of Islam has condemned *taqlid* in unmistakable terms. *Ijtihad* is the only ideological tool with which the modernists want to break the rigidities of the laws of *Shari'ah* which had not been derived from the *Qur'an* or the *Sunnah* of the Prophet, but were only the interpretations of the previous jurists, which in the popular mind had been so hallowed that any deviation from them was considered sacrilegious. This had been the sole cause for the stagnation of the doctrinal framework of Islam. Sir Sayyid was fully aware of the fact that unless the doors of *ijtihad* were reopened, Muslims would always miss the benefits of progressive forces, and Islam as a religion would continue to be regarded by its critics as a hidebound doctrine with no future. In one of his essays, he described the disastrous consequences of the *taqlid* in the following words:

The Ahl-i-Sunnah wal-Jama' of the later ages have evolved the strangely erroneous concept that the principle of *Ijtihad* is no longer to be acted upon and now no one can become *mujtahid*. This error in belief has done us great spiritual and worldly harm. It is, therefore, essential that we should give up this belief and resolve upon investigating all matters, whether they concern religion or worldly life. We must remember that circumstances keep on changing and we are faced daily with new problems and needs. If, therefore, we do not have living *Mujtahids*, how shall we ask those who are dead about

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50. P. Hardy, 101.



questions which were not material facts of life in their time. We must have a mujtahid of our age and time.<sup>51</sup>

The approach of Sir Sayyid has been called "rationalist apologetic modernism". The distilled essence of his thinking was to adopt western standards of moral judgement, accept the laws of nature as the central feature of religious debates and discussions, and prove that reason and revelation do not contradict each other.

His ideas were particularly disturbing to the mullah class that had always advocated that Islam rested on an immutable belief system. The *mulla* created doubts and led the people towards disbelief. Sir Sayyid labelled the protagonists of *mullaism* as misguided religious maniacs, and continued to argue that Islamic message went beyond the world of belief and encouraged men to keep searching new ideas for the enrichment of the human mind. There is no doubt that he was deeply influenced by the reformatory climate of the nineteenth century. He searched every nook and cranny of the intellectual and theological heritage of Islam, and drew conclusions that would give religious consistency to his thought. His opponents called him an extreme rationalist, a nineteenth century Mutazilite, and found many of his ideas very close to the Zakiriyya school of jurisprudence, who completely rejected *qiyas* and *taqlid*. His famous biographer Altaf Hussain Hali (1837-1914) has compiled forty-one points of difference between Sir Sayyid and his orthodox opponents.<sup>52</sup> Hugh Tinker has described Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan's views about the regeneration of the fortunes of the Muslim community in India in the following words:

His campaign to rehabilitate his community followed closely (though not consciously) the approach of Ram Mohan Ray. He reinterpreted Islamic doctrine so as to disarm Christian criticism (as by stressing the predominance of monogamy among Muslims). He attempted a synthesis of Islam with the new scientific rationalism, but he also took a firm stand against the attacks of Christian controversialists against Islam, he urged a return to the *Qur'an*, and he asserted the supremacy of Islam amongst the religions of the world, because God uniquely revealed his purpose through the *Qur'an*. In practical applications — he believed that his community could be regenerated

51. Mujeeb, 449.

52. P. Hardy, 95-96.



by Western education by the absorption of Western thought into the Islamic cosmorama.<sup>53</sup>

In politics, Sir Sayyid is now considered by Estonians as the herald of separatist movement that culminated in the establishment of Pakistan in 1947. It is surprising that a leading westernise like him had no faith in western democracy. When the Indian National Congress was founded he advised his co-religionists to stay away from it because it preached democracy, which meant majority rule and majority rule meant Hindu rule. Percival Spear says, "thus the Sayyid sought to bring Islam in India into line with modern thought and progress. But there was no thought of union with the Hindus. They were still a heathen body tainted with idolatry and superstition. Toleration was matched with aloofness in his thought, coexistence with separateness. He preached co-operation with the British to avoid eclipse and absorption by the Hindus."<sup>54</sup> In his famous treatise *Asbab-i Baghavat-i Hind*, Sir Sayyid had put a lot of blame for that tragedy on the British. He criticised them for their aloofness from the masses and impressed upon them the need to establish bridges of understanding with the people as was the case with the Muslim rulers. He said, "There is no real communication between the governors and the governed, no living together or near one another as has always been the custom of the Mohammadans in countries which they have subjected to their rule."<sup>55</sup> The restrictions that he placed on the political activities of the Muslims, and the emphasis that he laid on the learning of the English language helped Sir Sayyid a great deal to win the confidence of the British and they showered many favours on him in strengthening the Aligarh movement.

Jamal al Din Afghani and Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan as leaders of two separate schools of modernity in Islam had only one point in common. Both believed in *ijtihad*, and considered *Shari'ah* to be evolutionary in character. In the rest of the characteristics of modernisation the two were poles apart. One some of the critical

53. Hugh Tinker, *India and Pakistan: A Political Analysis*, (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1962), 19-20.

54. Percival Spear, *India: A Modern History*, (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1972), 409.

55. Kalim Siddiqui, 11.



issues, where the two had diametrically divergent views, can be listed as follows:

- Afghani was a rationalist in his thinking but he considered Sir Sayyid's rationalism a new type of *Ilm al-Kalam* which was in essence heretical. Afghani expressed strong opposition to Sir Sayyid's emphasis on the law of nature as part of the *Qur'anic* doctrine, and contended that it falsifies the word of God. His famous treatise, "The Refutation of Materialism" was primarily directed against Sir Sayyid and his disciples.

We have seen earlier that Afghani was basically a political iconoclast. The main thrust of his crusade was to fight against European imperialism in the Muslim lands. Any Muslim leader or reformer who co-operated with the imperialist authorities was, in his opinion, an enemy of Islam. Sir Sayyid on the other hand was preaching the Muslims to cultivate subservience to the British, and stay away from the politics because that was the only way to win trust and confidence of the colonial rulers. In other words, there was an inescapable incompatibility of views between the two leading reformers of Islam during the second half of the nineteenth century. Moreover, Afghani also thought that Sir Sayyid's educational program was a part of the imperialist conspiracy to undermine some of the sterling virtues of the Islamic doctrine.

Sir Sayyid also had no faith in Pan-Islamism and was never an enthusiastic supporter of the institution of Khilafat. He was opposed to Afghani's passion of unifying the entire world of Islam, and would have been most satisfied if he could isolate the Indian Muslims from the rest of the world of Islam. He was in total disagreement with those fundamentalists like Syed Ahmad Brelvi and Shah Ismail Shahid, who had declared India under the British *dar-al harb*. Afghani as the leading high priest of



Pan-Islamism could not see eye-to-eye with Sir Sayyid on this issue.<sup>56</sup>

Sir Sayyid, however, was not the first one to differ so drastically from the orthodox interpretation of Islam. Philosophers and thinkers of Islam before him had voiced similar protests against the ulema, who had excluded reason completely from discussions relating to the religion. His doubts regarding the authenticity of the *Hadith* were nothing but a reproduction of the scepticism shown by al-Razi regarding this major source of Islamic *Shari'ah*. His emphasis on *taqlid-i shakhsi* was an extension of Shah Waliullah's thesis, and in declaring that "Islam is Nature and Nature is Islam" he was only reinterpreting and further elaborating what had been said by al-Jahiz. His repudiation of miracles was borrowed from the Mutazilite doctrinaires. In practical affairs like polygamy, slavery, interest, and *ijtihad* he shared his views with the rest of the Muslim reformers during the nineteenth century.<sup>57</sup> The only thing that distinguished him from the rest of the leading reformers of the contemporary Islamic world like Afghani, Khayr-ud-din of Tunisia, and Abduh of Egypt was that the latter showed more respect to the consensus than Sir Sayyid. This was probably due to the sense of revolt that he had against the stagnant thinking of the ulema. To remedy this situation he assumed the role of a *mujtahid* himself.<sup>58</sup>

We have provided a synoptic view of the various dimensions of Islam and modernism. It shows the inherent complexities and still unresolved dilemmas that continue to haunt the thought and imagination of the Muslim reformers. Although for fifteen hundred years the core of the Islamic faith has remained unchanged; but even a cursory glance over the history of Islamic civilisation can indicate that in different cultures its spirit has been somewhat transformed to suit the local conditions and norms of the people. Therefore, one is not surprised that in different Muslim countries the response of the people to modernity and the spiritual and moral anxieties that come in its wake has been widely different.

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56. Aziz Ahmad, *Studies in Islamic Culture in the Indian Environment* (Oxford: Clarendon Press), 55-56.

57. *Ibid.*, 57-58.

58. *Ibid.*, 56.



Moreover, since the end of World War II, with the rapid decolonisation and the galloping ambitions of the new rulers, most of the Muslim nations are in the midst of a breakneck race for economic and social development. In recent years, billions of petrodollars have flooded the coffers of certain oil-rich Muslim countries. This sudden influx of money in itself has been a tremendous incentive towards modernisation.

Comparison of one epoch in history with another, especially when the two are separated by a yawning gap of centuries, can often be deceptive and misleading; but by comparing what happened in the Ottoman empire at the turn of the last century when the western civilisation first penetrated into the archaic and decaying Muslim empire, and the changes that are taking place in some of the oil-rich nations of the 'Arab world today, a student of modernisation in the world of Islam, can get some pertinent clues that would enable him to resolve many perplexing problems. It was at the turn of the nineteenth century that the impact of Europe first started influencing the minds of the ruling classes of the Ottoman empire. That felt that by reshaping superficially some aspects of their society they would suddenly enter into the broad and progressive world of modernity. They totally misconstrued the fact that by implanting selected features of the western civilisation they would not be able to restore the lost glory of the empire. Civilisation is a compact package of institutions, norms and ideals; if you borrow one of its elements the rest will follow automatically. The early of reformers of the Ottoman empire were particularly wrong in their estimate that they could have western-style army, trained in Europe and conversant with European languages without altering its intellectual and political outlook. In their opinion, if the young Muslims received some western education, their religious and philosophical beliefs would not be affected. The history of secularism in the Ottoman empire during the nineteenth century shows their calculations were entirely mistaken.