

Chapter 81: Renaissance in Indo-Pakistan (Continued): Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan as a Religio-Philosophical Thinker

It was the experience of the Indian Revolt that made Sayyid Ahmad Khan what he is for us today. He realized the dangers that were inherent in the situation for the future welfare of the Muslim community in India, and decided to take the challenge boldly. He wrote *The Causes of Indian Revolt* (1276-77/1859) and *The Loyal Mohammedans of India* to counteract the growing anti-Muslim attitude of the British rulers and hostile propaganda of the Hindus.

On the positive side he tried to acquaint the Muslims with the wealth and richness of the new learning of the West. He set up his Scientific Society in 1281/1864 first at Ghazipur and then at Aligarh with the purpose of translating English books into Urdu so that the common people might become aware of the advance in knowledge reached by the West. In 1283/1866 he started a bi-weekly, *The Aligarh Institute Gazette*, to enlighten the public on the aims of the Scientific Society.

His visit to England in 1286/1869 proved very helpful in convincing him that the only way to rehabilitate the Muslims was to provide them with the weapons of Western learning through modern education. But this very introduction of Western learning brought with it the intellectual ferment which compelled Sayyid Ahmad Khan to address himself to the reinterpretation of the whole cultural and religious heritage of the Muslims.

For this purpose he started the famous periodical *Tahdhib al-Akhlaq*, in the first issue of which he set forth in detail its aims and objects. "The aim of this periodical is that the Muslims of India should be persuaded to adopt the best kind of civilization so that the contempt with which the civilized people look upon the Muslims should be removed;... it is true that religion plays a great part in making a people civilized. There are, no doubt, some religions that stand in the way of progress. It is our aim to judge

where Islam stands in this regard.”¹

The spread of Western education among Muslims and the general enlightenment that the introduction of modern science brought about in the public was the greatest challenge. In one of his lectures he refers to the spread of doubt and misgivings in the hearts of the people about Islam.² Discussing the spread of belief in naturalism, he said, “Today we are in need of a modern *Ilm al-Kalam* by which we should refute the doctrines of modern science and undermine their foundations, or show that they are in conformity with the articles of Islamic faith. While I am endeavouring to introduce these sciences among the Muslims, it is my duty to defend the religion of Islam and to reveal its original bright face.”

But the important question was how to prove the validity of a particular religion in the face of so many claimants. He came to the conclusion that “the only touchstone of a true religion can be this: if it is in conformity with human nature or with nature in general, then it is true. This would be a clear proof that the religion in question has come from God, the Author of nature both in man and outside.

I am fully confident that the guidance that He has given us is absolutely in conformity with our constitution and our nature and this is the only touchstone of its truth. It would be clearly absurd to assert that God’s action is different from His Word. All creation including man is the work of God and religion is His Word, so there cannot be any contradiction between the two.”³

What is nature? Sayyid Ahmad Khan interprets it in the sense in which the thirteenth/nineteenth century scientists interpreted it as a closed system of the universe which obeys certain laws of mechanics and physics and which is characterized by a uniformity of behaviour to which there cannot be any exception. All inorganic, organic, and human behaviour is subject to these mechanical laws.

In one of his articles, he says, “In the beginning this knowledge of nature was limited. But with the increase in knowledge, the sphere of nature has correspondingly increased and, thus, seems to have become co-extensive with what we find in the universe, what we see or feel, so much so that the actions and thoughts of man and even his beliefs are all different chains in the inexorable laws of nature.”⁴

But this mechanical conception of nature, as James Ward put it, is totally antagonistic to the spiritual interpretation of life, and, therefore, cannot be upheld by a person who is advocating the truth of any theistic religion. In the writings of Sayyid Ahmad Khan we meet with both types of naturalism, mechanistic and antitheistic on the one hand and teleological and theistic on the other, and he often passes from the former to the latter without any thought to consistency or logic.

In the same article he says that “just as among us some people are religious and others irreligious, so among the naturalists there are several people who begin to think that when we find the laws of nature permeating every sphere of the universe, then there is nothing but nature, and so come to deny God. Perhaps such were the people whom our ancient Muslim thinkers called naturalists (*dahriyyun*).

But there are some people among the modern scientists who in their intensive researches in the laws of

nature came to the conclusion, on the basis of nature's magnificent display of design, that there must be some designer, the Cause of causes, whom we usually call God. These scientists traversed the same path as the youth of Chaldea, well known as Abraham, had followed."

Thus it is clear that Sayyid Ahmad starts with a mechanical and quantitative conception of nature and passes on to a teleological interpretation of it without realizing the inconsistency involved. He interprets the experiences of Moses (as) and Abraham (as) in the same spirit. "None of the prophets," he says, "came to realize God except through this process. Moses (as) expressed his wish to see God; he got the reply: 'By no means canst thou see Me but look upon the mount' (7: 143).

What was on the mountain? It was nature, a manifestation of the law of nature. God could not manifest Himself direct; the way He pointed out was the way of nature.... When asked, 'What art Thou?' He invariably refers to the laws of nature and implies that it is He who changes night into day and day into night and gives life to the dead and death to the living."

Secondly, he refers to the spiritual experience of Abraham (as) as recorded in the Quran (3:75-79). "From nature he went to God, from the uniformity of the laws of the physical universe, he was able to transcend to the spiritual reality behind. He saw the stars, the moon, the sun, that appear and disappear, rise and set according to fixed immutable laws, and was able to penetrate behind the veil of these laws of nature to their Author. He declared, 'I have set my face, firmly and truly, towards Him who created the heavens and the earth.'"⁵

This identification of Islam with nature implied that true religion consists in the belief in one God only and that all those people who accept this doctrine of the unity of God are Muslims, however different they may be in the rituals and other religious observances. In an article "Islam is Nature and Nature is Islam," he says, "Islam is such a simple and useful religion that even irreligiousness is included in it.... What minimum beliefs an irreligious person may hold must be the basic creed of Islam.

Every religion has certain special rituals and creeds on account of which it is differentiated from others, and anyone who does not believe in and follow these rituals is called irreligious, though we have no right to call him so, for religion pure and simple is above all these rituals and formalities with which it comes unfortunately to be bound up. He who does not believe in any prophet, avatar, revealed Scripture, or the ritualistic formalities but believes only in one God is a Muslim in the true sense of the word."⁶

By reason Sayyid Ahmad Khan means the empirical reason, to which the Quran appeals. He calls it human reason or *aql-i kulli*. "It is that inherent capacity in man by which he draws conclusions on the basis of the observation of objective phenomena or mental thinking processes, and which proceeds from particulars to generalizations and *vice versa*.... It is this capacity of man which has enabled him to invent new things and led him on to understand and control the forces of nature; it is by this that man is able to know things which are a source of his happiness and then tries to get as much profit out of, them as possible; it is this which makes a man ask the whys and the wherefores of different events around him."⁷

In a very illuminating article, "Thoughts of Man," Sayyid Ahmad Khan discusses the problem of reason in detail. After defining reason as above, he says that man is distinguished from animals on account of rationality, which imposes on him duties and responsibilities far in excess of those on animals. The main function of reason, according to him, is to acquire knowledge about the nature and reality of things. But this knowledge is intimately related with certitude (*yaqin*).

"I fully realized," he says, "that without certitude knowledge is possible neither in the sphere of the world nor in that of religion. But what kind of certitude do we need? I know, for instance, that ten is more than three. If someone states to the contrary and in proof of his statement changes a stick into a snake, I would, no doubt, be utterly surprised at his strange feat but it would never shake me out of my belief that ten is more than three. Without a certitude of this kind it is not possible to proceed further."

But the important question is how and where to get this kind of certitude. He examines the beliefs of different people. A Christian, for instance, believes in the doctrine of the Trinity, because it is claimed to have been taught by Jesus (as) and Jesus (as) is credited to have wrought many wonderful miracles. But such beliefs, based as they are on the authority of a particular individual and supported by the miraculous performances, cannot stand on any sure ground.

In order to be acceptable they must have the sanction of reason and common sense. He concludes, "I come to the conclusion that reason alone is the instrument which can decide the matter, and bring about the necessary conviction. But is not reason fallible? Yes, it is, and we cannot help it. As reason is used almost universally, so the reason of one man can be corrected by that of another and the reason of one age by that of another age. Without it nothing can be achieved."⁸

In the history of Muslim thought and especially among the mystics, however, reason has often been placed subordinate to intuition or mystic disclosure (*kashf*). Ghazali, for instance, whose line of argument (as developed by him in the *Munqidh*), is adopted by Sayyid Ahmad Khan, holds that there is a higher stage beyond reason where reason appears as fallible and defective as sense perception is at the bar of reason.

But Sayyid Ahmad is not willing to accept this argument. He says that supposing such a state exists, how can we judge the validity or otherwise of the knowledge yielded by it? The contradictions in the reports of mystic experience are proverbial. What criterion is there by which we can determine which of them are true and which false? Naturally, we have nothing else but reason to decide the matter.⁹

There is, however, no qualitative difference, according to Sayyid Ahmad Khan, between reason and revelation. He does not admit the usually accepted distinction of natural and revealed religions, for it would mean that revealed religion is something different or in certain respects even antagonistic to the natural and rational demands of man. He looks at the problem of their relationship biologically and makes inspiration a natural development of man's instinctive and rational capacities.

All insects and animals possess instinctive power that the Quran calls *wahi*, revelation (16:68), and thus

makes instinct, reason, and revelation belong to the same category, though with a difference of degree at each grade of being. It is as a result of man's natural aptitude that he calls *wahi* that people in different ages and regions have been able to evolve an almost universal standard of moral values.

Those who are endowed with reason to the highest degree are the guides and leaders of people whom Shah Wali Allah calls the *mufhimun*. According to Sayyid Ahmad, these guides and leaders appear in all spheres of human life, secular as well as religious, and they all, without any distinction, receive divine illumination or *wahi*.

An inventor of a new mechanical device, a discoverer of hitherto unknown and unexplored regions of the universe, a composer of beautiful symphony, are all recipients of spiritual revelation in their different spheres. The difference between the prophets and other geniuses, according to him, is due to the difference of the spheres in which they work. The prophets are spiritual healers and their primary and sole function is to reorientate the spiritual and moral life of the people.

Sayyid Ahmad Khan totally rejects the view of the theologians according to whom a person attains prophethood merely because God, in the arbitrary exercise of His power, confers this rank on him. According to them, there is no difference between the prophets and other mortals except that the former occupy a particular rank conferred on them by the favour of God. The relationship between the prophet and his followers is envisaged as that between a king and his subjects, a difference depending in most cases merely on the accident of birth.

But, according to Sayyid Ahmad, this relationship can be better understood in terms of the relation that holds between a shepherd and his sheep. "Though the prophet and his followers both belong to the category of humanity, as the shepherd and the sheep belong to that of animality, yet the possession of prophetic faculty marks off the prophet from the rest of humanity just as the possession of rationality marks off the shepherd from the sheep."¹⁰

Thus, according to Sayyid Ahmad Khan, prophethood is a special natural faculty like other human faculties and capacities which blossoms forth at the opportune time as flowers and fruit ripen on a tree at a particular time. There is nothing strange about it. Sometimes a particular individual comes to possess a certain faculty in such a perfect form that the people recognize him to be a genius in that particular branch of art or craft.

A poet, a physician, or a blacksmith can become the master of his art and craft. One who possesses extraordinary natural powers of healing spiritual maladies and is thereby able to bring about moral regeneration of mankind is called a prophet. When these natural aptitudes ripen and mature at the proper time, he feels called upon to declare to the people his new mission of moral and spiritual regeneration.

The Sayyid rejects the mechanical interpretation of the way revelation came to the prophets; it was the logical consequence of his view of prophethood. According to him, there is no intermediary between God

and the prophet. He receives all revelation direct from God. Gabriel is in reality a symbolical representation of the prophetic faculty.

“His heart is the mirror which reflects the divine illuminations. It is his heart that carries the message to God and then returns with the divine message. He is the being from whom the words of God’s speech emanate, he is the ear which hears the wordless and noiseless speech of God. From his heart gushes forth, like a fountain, the revelation and then it descends on him. His spiritual experiences are all the result of human nature. He hears his spiritual message (*kalam-i nafsi*) by his physical ears as if somebody else is saying something to him; he sees himself with his physical eyes as if another person is standing before him.”[11](#)

Thus, according to Sayyid Ahmad Khan, revelation is not something which comes from outside. It is the divine mind working through human consciousness. The intensity of the feeling which moves and vibrates the deepest chords of human personality makes the recipient feel as if he is receiving something from outside; in fact, revelation is the projection of his inner consciousness when it is in deep contact with the spiritual reality in which he lives, moves, and has his being.

The Sayyid derives support for his theory from the fact that the Quran was revealed to the Prophet (S) not as a whole but piecemeal as and when occasion demanded. All human faculties come into operation only in reference to certain situations and practical needs. The human mind is a storehouse of several ideas, memorized verses and remembered events, but they all lie dormant in it. When the occasion demands, say, the recall of a verse, it comes into consciousness and we quote it. The same is the position of the prophetic faculty. When circumstances demand, the prophetic consciousness comes into operation and gives expression to what is needed at the moment by direct revelation from God.[12](#)

Sayyid Ahmad Khan believes that the prophetic faculty is present in all men without distinction, though there may be differences of degree. The revelations of God are open to all men. The deeper recesses of the human heart are always susceptible to the spiritual call; it is due to this that man is able to penetrate through the world of nature to God. What has come to an end is, according to him, the role of prophethood.[13](#)

There was a time when people were not mature rationally and they needed the guidance of prophets, but with the passage of time and development of human reason, this guidance was discontinued and, as the last favour of God, the moral and spiritual values enunciated by Islam were fully disseminated.

“Therefore, he [Muhammad (S)] is the last of the distributors of these divine gifts, not only because he came in the last period, not only because there would come none after him for the distribution of divine gifts, and both of these meanings form the very connotation of finality, but also because with him these divine gifts were fully distributed and there was left nothing to be distributed.

As Islam is the most valuable gift of all, its distributor must be looked upon as the highest of all; and because divine gifts were distributed in stages and the Prophet Muhammad (S) came to distribute them

the last of all, his prophethood is also the last. So it was declared in the Quran (5:5): ‘Today I complete for you your religion and complete My favour to you and have chosen for you your religion, Islam.’”¹⁴

According to Sayyid Ahmad, this finality of prophethood lay in clarifying the conception of *tauhid* on which alone depends the ultimate salvation of man.¹⁵

But if religion is so natural and simple as Sayyid Ahmad holds, the question naturally arises: what is the necessity of prophetic guidance? It is true, he admits, that a man can attain moral truth by a reflective study of the laws of nature. But this possibility is realizable only after men have explored these laws of nature in their totality and unravelled their mystery and secrets.

In spite of spectacular advances in the different fields of science and technology, modern man still feels that he has not been able to reach the core of the mystery. It is due to this difficulty in attaining moral and spiritual truth through a purely scientific understanding of nature that, according to Sayyid Ahmad Khan, mankind needs the divine guidance of prophets who, due to their natural aptitude and spiritual vision, are able to arrive at moral truths which are universally valid. Like geniuses in other branches, prophets are geniuses in the spiritual field and mankind has been able to make progress both in the material and in the spiritual world through the appearance and work of these geniuses.

In conformity with his view of religion as an aspect of nature, Sayyid Ahmad Khan looked upon God as the Author of nature and as the First Cause. The relation of God to the universe is analogous to the relation of the watchmaker to the watch. As the craftsman is responsible for the peculiar make-up of the machine, the correlation of its parts, and its overall function, so is God the Creator of the universe. It is He who gave it the laws according to which it continues to work.

As God is unchangeable, so are the laws that operate in the universe. As the Quran (48:23) asserts, “No change shall you find in the habit of God.” Just as the material world works and operates in accordance with immutable laws, so there is in the moral sphere an absolute law of right and wrong that knows no exception whatsoever. Pains and pleasures follow logically the kind of acts performed by men and there is need for divine interference neither in the physical nor in the moral sphere.

It was as a result of this deistic view of God’s nature and His relation to the universe that Sayyid Ahmad Khan denied the possibility of miracles and efficacy of prayer. He could not accept miracles as violations of the laws of nature for “the law of nature,” according to him, “is a practical promise of God that something will happen so, and if we say it can happen otherwise we are accusing Him of going against His promise and this is inconceivable.”¹⁶

He continues, “I do not deny the possibility of miracles because they are against reason, but because the Quran does not support the happenings of events or occurrences that are against the laws of nature or those that violate the usual course of things.”¹⁷

In a way, Sayyid Ahmad was correct, for the Quran emphatically and repeatedly refuses people their

request to Muhammad (S) to show miracles in proof of his veracity. To all such demands the Quran replies, "Say: Glory to my Lord! Am I aught but a man, an apostle?" (17:90-93). But he was wrong in a way, for the Quran is full of the accounts of miracles of earlier prophets. In order to substantiate his stand, he made an attempt to explain these miracles by reference to natural laws, an attempt that was perhaps the only cause why his *Tafsir* did not gain among the Muslims the popularity it deserved.

By the same line of argument, Sayyid Ahmad Khan denied the efficacy of prayers (*dua*) as it is usually understood. The laws of nature are inviolable and nothing can change them; even God cannot go against them. The utility of prayer should be measured, according to him, not by its acceptance or non-acceptance by God, for that acceptance is out of question, but by the psychological effect it has on the individual in relieving him of the pains and anxieties attendant upon certain unfortunate events in his life.

But Sayyid Mahdi Ali made a very penetrating criticism of his views on God and His relation to nature. He rightly said that if God is the mere Cause of causes and cannot rise above the laws of nature and the absolute law of right and wrong, then he is God only in name, a being devoid of personality and all feelings of love and affection towards human beings.

"God is really dethroned and all religious life becomes extinct. Prayer would become a cold attribute of perfunctory worship of a being whose arm is never stretched out in answer to prayers, whose ear is never open to the supplications of the penitent." If such is the case, then man has no need to look to God in time of suffering; he has only to get as much detailed knowledge of the laws of nature as possible and then adapt his life mechanically to the requirements of the external world and, thus, attain success in life in proportion to his efforts.

This philosophy of life leads not to the broadening of human outlook but to the spirit of self-sufficiency and self-centredness, which is the enemy of spiritual life. Sayyid Mahdi refers to verses 25-35 of the twentieth Surah of the Quran where Moses (as) is said to have prayed to God for granting some specific requests, and the reply was "Granted is your prayer, O Moses." In view of this episode Sayyid Mahdi Ali rightly infers that Sayyid Ahmad Khan's conception of God and the function of prayer (*dua*) does not accord with religious consciousness at all. He points out that if we accept this position, it will mean that man has no significant part to play in the world and everything is tied to the inexorable necessity of mechanical laws. [18](#)

Sayyid Ahmad Khan tried to explain the emergence of man on this earth as a specific event in the long and laborious process of evolution, though, he adds, the process was originally started by God Himself when He uttered the creative word "Be." Man is the result of the chemical processes that went on in the universe, and at a particular moment he appeared as a form of animal life.

In order to explain the complex nature of man as he is at present, he gives his own interpretation of the legend of Adam's (as) Fall as related in the Quran. He thinks that its presentation in a dramatic form is only a literary way of placing before us certain basic truths about man. It is wrong, he thinks, to take it as

a literal account of a dialogue between angels and Satan on the one hand and God on the other.

The word “angel”, according to him, stands for the limitless power of God and potentialities of things. The solidity of mountains, the fluidity of water, the power of growth in vegetation, the power of attraction and repulsion in electricity, in short, all powers that we see manifested in different things of the universe, are signified by the word “angel”.[19](#)

Similarly, Satan, according to him, is not a being who exists outside us; it stands for evil forces in the universe. Man is angel and Satan combined. God’s command to the angels to bow down before Adam (as) signifies that the angelic or good forces of the universe will be obedient to man and ever willing to help him.

The same divine order to Satan means that man has the power to control the evil forces in him but the refusal of Satan in obeying the order of God signifies that the baser passions of man are not easily susceptible to control, and, therefore, man has to exert the full force of his personality to keep them in check.

There are two other things in the legend that need explanation. One is the reference to the forbidden tree. According to Sayyid Ahmad, this signifies reason and self-consciousness, which enable man to distinguish between good and evil. God’s order and man’s disobedience mean that man is able to make full use of his powers independently of what anybody may order him to do, even though he may be led astray thereby.

The other thing referred to in the same context is Satan’s stripping Adam (as) and Eve “of their raiment and exposing the shameful parts of their bodies” (7:27). The word “raiment,” according to him, means virtue and the “shameful parts” stand for evil, thus implying that man’s virtuous acts can cover up the nakedness of man’s evil deeds.[20](#)

With regard to the problem of freedom of will, Sayyid Ahmad’s position is based on his naturalistic study of man. He thinks that man is determined in his actions partly by external causes such as society, environment, and training and partly by internal causes such as the peculiar physiological and psychological structure that he possesses. But, in spite of this, he holds, man does possess a faculty by which he can discriminate between good and evil. He calls it “fight of the heart” or “light of nature” which enables a man to rise above the prejudices of his age.

This intellectual power of breaking with the past and introducing new value-judgments is present, according to him, potentially in all men though it matures and comes into play in the case only of a few gifted persons who unfold before the people new dimensions of life. It was this faculty of discriminating between right and wrong which helped Abraham (as), the youth of Chaldea, as Sayyid Ahmad puts it, to experience and declare: “I have set my face, firmly and truly, towards Him who created the heavens and the earth, and never shall I ascribe partners to Him” (6:89).[21](#)

Everybody possesses the capacity to follow the good as well as to do evil; well-being results when the tendency towards good outweighs the tendency towards evil. It is possible that in a certain person inclination towards evil may predominate, yet he need not be condemned, for if he brings into play the little tendency towards good that he possesses to counteract the effect of evil deeds, he is sure of salvation.

Salvation does not depend on the amount of virtuous deeds a person is able to perform; it rather depends, according to Sayyid Ahmad, on the honest efforts that he makes to put to full use all the powers that he is endowed with. What is demanded by God from all of us is the sincere effort directed towards the realization of well-being and good in preference to doing evil.

If we continue using this “light of the heart” and look upon evil deeds as evil and feel repentant of them, then surely a day will come when our lower impulses will weaken and the tendency towards good will predominate. There is no sin for man in that over which he has no power; sin follows only when man does not put the tendency towards good to full use.[22](#)

Man’s freedom follows, as a matter of course, from his very nature, which, in the words of the Quran, is patterned after the nature of God Himself. This capacity of man for free spontaneous action does not set any limitation to the omnipotence of God, for God gave this freedom to man of His own accord and not under any compulsion.

Sayyid Ahmad Khan also takes up the problem of the reconciliation of man’s freedom with God’s prescience. Like many thinkers of the past and of the present, he does not deny the omniscience of God in order to safeguard the freedom of man. To him there is no incompatibility between the two.

He gives the example of an astrologer who predicts that a certain man will die by drowning, and this comes out to be true. Can we say, asks Sayyid Ahmad Khan, that the astrologer has been the cause of this man’s death? What is in God’s knowledge, which he called fate (*taqdir*), is inevitable, and yet it does not involve or impose any restriction on the freedom of man. Whatever necessity there is it is in the knowledge of God, in *taqdir*, not in man. In spite of this knowledge, man still retains his freedom of actions.[23](#)

Sayyid Ahmad believes in the existence of the soul, for, according to him, on no other premise can we explain the existence of reason and will in men and animals. He does not go into any details about the nature of the soul, for, according to him, it is not possible for man to unravel the secret of this mysterious entity. He believes that it is a self-existing substance of a subtler matter and not a mere attribute. Qualitatively, the souls of animals and men are alike; differences arise from the peculiar structure of the bodies that are the instruments of their souls.

The soul is definitely immortal and does not die with the death of the body. Sayyid Ahmad Khan derives support for this position from the scientific doctrine that nothing perishes in the world, the quantity of matter remains unchanged, and only its form is changed. As to the Resurrection he refers to many

theories but accepts the one according to which both body and soul will emerge.

The soul at the time of death acquires a certain physical medium distinct from the present body and so at the Resurrection there will be no new life but a continuation of the old. He argues that wherever the Quran refers to the reality of the Resurrection, its real purpose is to refute the belief of those who deny the existence of the soul and identify life with life on this earth only. The various analogies employed by the Quran refer to the fact of the Resurrection; they are not intended to describe and reveal its nature and character.[24](#)

He holds that paradise and hell described in sensuous terms in the Quran are mere symbolical representations of the psychological states of individuals in the life after death. The Quran says, “No soul knoweth what joy of the eyes is reserved for the good, in recompense of their work” (32:17). It is impossible to express the reality of super-sensuous things in words, even though those be the words of God.[25](#)

The impact of the new learning and the spread of scientific knowledge created many problems for religious thought not only in Europe but also in India. The Christian missionaries who had already met the onslaughts of the challenge of modern science in the West began to approach and study the religious thought of Muslims in this new context.

The tradition-ridden ‘*ulama*’ who were unfortunately completely unaware of the new currents of thought released by science and also of the new moral outlook on life proved incapable of meeting this challenge. Sayyid Ahmad Khan was, thus, forced to take up this challenge. He had to rethink the whole cultural heritage of Islam and reinterpret it in the light of modern developments.

The first main hurdle in his way was the general belief among the Muslims of the Indo-Pakistan sub-continent that the door of *ijtihad* had been closed forever. No religion, if it is to be progressive and dynamic, can ignore the importance of change and development in human thought and knowledge, and so it is necessary that people in every age should give all basic moral and spiritual values a new interpretation.

During the creative period Muslim thinkers continued to think and expound the problems of their religious thought in consonance with the spirit of the changing times, but after the fall of Baghdad, when political and social life was disrupted, the doctrine of *taqlid* was put forth with the intention of arresting any further deterioration and disintegration. Even Iqbal accepted this plea and in *Rumuz-i Bekhudi* advocated *taqlid*, blind allegiance to authority, during a period of decline. Later on, however, he repudiated this stand.

A blind reverence for the past cannot help people overcome their shortcomings. The only thing that can counteract the forces of reactionism is the freedom of expression enjoyed by creative individuals. It was this truth that Sayyid Ahmad Khan realized, and he strove hard to convince others of it. He advocated that the door of *ijtihad* should be thrown open and every person who is qualified for it should be prepared to rethink and reinterpret the problems of life and religion in accordance with the circumstances of his

age.

In every religion there are certain truths that form the very basis of spiritual life. Such principles are eternal verities that cannot change with the change of time and place. Thus the Quran (30:30) says, “Set your face towards the right religion which is based on the nature of God on which is patterned the nature of man. There is no change in the creation of God: this is the right religion.” This verse refers to that aspect of religious faith that is above spatial and temporal vicissitudes.

For Sayyid Ahmad Khan the basic aspects of a religion such as Islam are belief in the unity of God (*tauhid*) and moral behaviour which springs forth from the depth of one’s heart and the light of which radiates in all directions. But religion, as usually understood, is much more than this; it includes also what is usually called *Shariah*.

Shah Wali Allah was the first thinker in the Indo–Pakistan sub–continent who realized the necessity of clarifying this important issue. Discussing the role and function of a prophet, he pointed out that reforms and social and moral reorientation carried out by a prophet should always be considered in the context of the type of social atmosphere in which he is born, and the cultural and intellectual stage of the people among whom he appears. It is not his aim, nor is it possible for him, to bring about a total change in the social and legal practices of his people. His main object is to build a society on moral and spiritual principles and for this purpose he keeps intact almost all that he finds in his environment except what is inconsistent with his ideology. He scrupulously tries to maintain whatever is compatible with moral principles and modifies the rest as little as possible; so as to avoid introducing unnecessary changes such as his contemporary society cannot easily assimilate.²⁶

Accepting this explanation of the role of a prophet, Sayyid Ahmad made a distinction between *Din*, *Shariah*, and worldly affairs. In the first category he includes belief in God and in His attributes, as well as acts of worship. In the second category he includes those matters that deal with moral and spiritual purification of mankind. He denies that a prophet is concerned at all with matters relating to our daily life.

Din is not subject to change, but our needs and the way we satisfy them depend on differences of time and place. If we include these things within the sphere of prophetic function, then with the change of time we shall need another prophet, which is contrary to the spirit of the finality of prophethood.

What is claimed to have been perfected and finalized by Islam is *Din* and not the *Shariah*. If the *Shariah* is not final, it logically follows that it is the duty of Muslims in every age and every country to deal with their problems in the light of their needs in accordance with the basic moral and spiritual tenets of Islam. For this purpose he took the step that Ibn Taimiyyah had taken in the seventh/thirteenth century. Like him he revolted against the dogma of the finality of the four schools of jurisprudence and went back to the very source in order to make a fresh start.

With regard to Tradition, Sayyid Ahmad Khan’s attitude was unequivocal. When the collections of Hadith were compiled in the second/eighth century, political and social conditions of the time helped in the

fabrication of innumerable traditions ascribing them to the Holy Prophet (S). He was, therefore, not willing to accept Tradition as a valid source of religious knowledge.

Our traditionists gave all their attention to developing the science of *rijal* that deals with the biographies of all the various transmitters of traditions. But the most important work to be done was a critical appraisal of Traditions with regard to their content, a task that was unfortunately not undertaken as diligently as it should have been.

According to Sayyid Ahmad, it is the duty of Muslims now to take up this important work. As the situation stands, he would accept only those traditions that are compatible with the letter and spirit of the Quran. He approvingly quotes the statement of ibn Taimiyyah that “the truly traditional is truly rational.” There is no other way out of this situation. In case by a critical analysis a tradition is proved to be true, Sayyid Ahmad would be willing to accept it as a valid basis for religion. Still he makes a distinction between traditions that deal with purely religious matters and those that deal with non-religious matters. The latter, he thinks, we are not bound to follow at all.[27](#)

Sayyid Ahmad Khan was not satisfied with the numerous available commentaries of the Quran. According to him, they contained nothing but fabricated stories and accounts of alleged miracles. Moreover, in the interpretation of the Quranic verses, they invariably referred to particular historical events in the context of which alone, it was claimed, their real meanings could be grasped. The result was that the universal and eternal significance of the Quranic verses was sacrificed at the altar of historical erudition.

To him the interpretation of the Quran by a standard (of traditions) which was itself doubtful could not be the best way of approaching the study of the Holy Book. He says, “When I am not willing to accept abrogation (or modification) of one verse of the Quran by another for the reason of its being against the wisdom or omniscience of God, how can I accept the abrogation or modification of the Quranic verses by any tradition, howsoever trustworthy it may be claimed to be by any standard? I am not willing to accord to the tradition any right of abrogation even in the secondary sense, of progressive revelation, which I have accepted with regard to the verses of the Quran. If there is any such contradiction, I would reject the tradition outright as untrue.”[28](#)

Sayyid Ahmad Khan critically reviews the work done by the ancient jurists. In the *Khutubat* his attitude towards their achievements is appreciative. He explains in details how they derived rules and laws from the Quran and the Sunnah for the regulation of social, political, and religious life of the people. In view of the spread, of Islam, it was necessary that the political and social life of the Muslim community should have been built up in accordance with the spirit of the Quran and the example set by the Holy Prophet (S).

This magnificent work was successfully undertaken by our early jurists. But at present we must distinguish between what the Quran says and the rules and regulations which the jurists have formulated

through inference. Sayyid Ahmad is of the opinion that howsoever praiseworthy and commendable the efforts of the jurists may be, we are not bound to accept their conclusions, for after all these are no more than man-made regulations which can and must be altered with the change of circumstances.

In one of his articles, "Uncivilized Countries," Sayyid Ahmad Khan rebukes Turkey for her negligence in the matter of legal reform. He holds that backwardness and weakness of Turkey in his time were due solely to the obsolete legal code that was prevalent there. According to him, it is one of the causes of the decline of the Muslims that they are still following legal codes that were formulated to satisfy the demands of a bygone age.

Every age presents new problems; and even though some old problems recur, yet their form is quite different and, therefore, the solutions they demand must be totally new. Nothing old can fill the place of the new without adaptation and proper amendment. The present age demands a totally new legal system pertaining to social, political, and administrative affairs.

Unfortunately, the political decline of the Muslims, instead of giving rise to a spirit of critical appraisal of the situation and a demand for a dynamic adaptation to the new environment, has produced an attitude of passive obedience to a static ideal of *taqlid*, i.e., blind allegiance to an authority which is no longer valid and useful in the new circumstances. Thus, according to Sayyid Ahmad, the spirit of *taqlid* in the sphere of jurisprudence produced the following evil consequences:

(1) People wrongly came to believe that all worldly matters were covered by religion and, therefore, nothing could be done without first obtaining sanction from the '*ulama*'.

(2) The decisions of the jurists gradually came to be identified with Islam itself. As a matter of fact, they were the expressions of opinion by different individuals within the context of their own time and place and were not meant to be applicable to all times. The result of this was that any attempt to modify them or replace them with better decisions was looked upon as a revolt against Islam itself.

Sayyid Ahmad thinks that it is the duty of the Muslims to rethink the whole legal system, civil and criminal, and rewrite their trade and revenue codes in the light of modern knowledge.[29](#)

Like ibn Taimiyyah, Sayyid Ahmad refuses to accept *ijma* as the source of Islamic Law. According to the former, it was the cause of all superstition and un-Islamic practices. Sayyid Ahmad's passion for *ijtihad* could not brook any limitations imposed by the so-called unanimity of jurists on certain matters. This unanimity may be the result of certain peculiar circumstances of a particular period.

With the change of time and circumstances, the validity of such decisions loses its force. Even the *ijma* of the Companions of the Prophet (S) does not possess any overriding importance for Sayyid Ahmad. We can certainly make full use of the decisions of these and other scholars in the reformulation and reinterpretation of the Islamic legal code in the modern age, but none of these, according to him, can impose any limit on the judgments of modern jurists who can arrive at decisions which they consider to

be compatible with the demands of the time and in consonance with the spirit of Islam and the Quran.³⁰

For this purpose Sayyid Ahmad decided to go back to the Quran as the only valid and sure ground of all our attempts at modern interpretation of Islam. In *Khutabat-i Ahmadiyyah*, he developed this view and supported it by the famous saying of the Caliph Umar that “God’s Book is sufficient for us.”

He boldly claimed to ignore all the mythical stories that had become current among the Muslims due to their having been incorporated in the vast store of commentaries on the Quran and, thus, taken for the scriptural text, i.e., the very Word of God. It did not mean that he was breaking with the past, for in his own *Tafsir* he discussed the views and opinions of almost all-important commentators and accepted and followed those that he thought were true.

What he wished to emphasize was that the altered conditions of modern life, the advance in and development of human knowledge, and the peculiar position in which the Muslims were placed, all demanded an effort on their part to solve their problems in the light of their own experiences unhampered by what the ancient doctors and thinkers had said. In several matters he refused to accept the views commonly held as true among Muslims because, in his view, they were neither supported by the Quran nor were practicable in the context of the changed circumstances.

For instance, he held that *rajm* (stoning to death), the accepted punishment for fornication, could not be accepted because, first, the Quran did not mention it, and, secondly, the traditions, on the basis of which the ancient jurists accepted it, seem to uphold the custom prevalent among the Arabs of those days in imitation of the Jews.

Again, there was a custom among Arabs to pay ransom money (*dit*) to the relatives of the deceased in case of murder. This custom is referred to in the traditions. But Sayyid Ahmad could not accept this as legally practicable and, therefore, tried to prove that the Quran did not sanction it.

It is commonly held on the basis of traditions that a will executed in favour of legal heirs is null and void. But Sayyid Ahmad followed the Quran in this respect. He strongly advocated that dividing of property by will is as valid according to the Quran as its distribution by the law of inheritance.

In one respect Sayyid Ahmad’s work certainly proved epoch-making. Before him it had been generally held on the basis of the Quran (2:106; 12:39; 16:101) as well as traditions that some of the Quranic verses stood abrogated. The number of such verses came to hundreds, though Shah Wali Allah held that they were only five.

Sayyid Ahmad gave a serious thought to this problem and came to the conclusion that the Quran being the eternal Word of God could not be looked upon as the notebook of a whimsical poet. He held that the Quran as actually recited by the Muslims was exactly as it was revealed to the Holy Prophet (S); not a word or jot of it was omitted and no verse of it stood abrogated.

For Sayyid Ahmad the abrogation to which the verses of the Quran refer relate to the laws of the previous prophets like Moses (as) and Jesus (as). A certain law is said to be abrogated only when, in spite of the continuity of the circumstances in which it was first promulgated, it is withdrawn, waived, and replaced by another law.

To Sayyid Ahmad such abrogation was totally foreign to the spirit of the Quran. The possibility of abrogation would be against the omniscience and wisdom of God. But if the conditions and circumstances themselves changed, then the promulgation of a new law instead of an old one would not be abrogation of the latter at all; it would rather be the sign of God's wisdom which expresses itself in progressive revelation.

According to Sayyid Ahmad, what have been abrogated are the laws of previous prophets and those laws of Islam itself that ceased to be operative on account of change in circumstances and conditions, so that if these conditions recur, the previous order would automatically become operative.

The attitude of Sayyid Ahmad was not merely theoretical; he was principally a man of action and by circumstances he was forced to put his ideas into practice. Just as he did not rest till he had set up the college at Aligarh for the education of Muslims, so in religious matters his purpose could not be fulfilled unless he could give satisfactory answers to some of the concrete problems of the Muslims in those days.

The Christian polemic had questioned the utility and moral value of such institutions as polygamy, divorce, and slavery. He tackled each problem in a scientific way, studied its pros and cons and gave a most judicious solution. It is important to note that in our own times many follow the course set up by him in this field. Similarly, with regard to the problem of inheritance, will, *riba*, and certain penal injunctions, his solutions are being accepted and advocated by all the progressive and liberal schools of thought in the Indo-Pakistan sub-continent.

There is no gainsaying the fact that by his scientific and critical thinking he became the first great thinker whose patterns of thought proved very fruitful. He was the first Muslim in the Indo-Pakistan sub-continent who was able to see the potentialities of the contact of Western culture with Islamic way of life and suggested the ways and means to meet the challenge of modern ideas for the future development of Muslim thought.

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