Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817-1898) on Taqlid, Ijtihad, and Science-Religion Compatibility
Tauseef Ahmad Parray¹, Aligarh Muslim University

Contextualizing the Discourse

‘Modernism’—a movement to reconcile Islamic faith with modern values such as democracy, rights, nationalism, rationality, science, equality, and progress—emerged in the middle of the 19th century as a response to European colonialism, which pitched the Muslim world into crisis. Islamic modernism generated a series of novel institutions, including schools that combined Islamic education with modern subjects and pedagogies; newspapers that carried modernist Islamic ideas across continents; constitutions that sought to limit state power; and social welfare agencies that brought state power into even more sectors of social life. Thus, Islamic modernism began as a response of Muslim intellectuals to European modernity, who argued that Islam, science and progress, revelation and reason, were indeed compatible. They did not simply wish to restore the beliefs and practices of the past; rather they asserted the need to ‘reinterpret and reapply’ the principles and ideals of Islam to formulate new responses to the political, scientific, and cultural challenges of the west and of modern life.

In a nutshell, as a reaction to the penetration of Western capitalist modernity into all aspects of Muslim society from the Arab world to Southeast Asia, a significant number of Muslim intellectuals began to write down the general outlines of a new intellectual project that is often referred to as “Islamic modernism”. Islamic modernism was an attempt to reach a medium between adaptation and rejection.²

The most prominent intellectuals who pioneered the modernist visions and agendas were Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838-1897) and Muhammad ‘Abduh (1849-1905) in the Middle East and Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817-1898) and Muhammad Iqbal (1877-1938) in

¹ Dr Tauseef Ahmad Parray completed his PhD (on “Islam and Democracy”) in 2014 from Department of Islamic Studies, Aligarh Muslim University (AMU), India. He also served as “Iqbal Fellow” (Mar-Aug., 2014) at Iqbal International Institute for Research & Dialogue (IRD), International Islamic University, Islamabad (IIUI), Pakistan. From 2010, he has published several works (papers, reviews, and articles) internationally in 19 reputed journals and magazines of Islamic Studies, Social /Political Science, from 11 different countries of the world: USA, UK, UAE, KSA, Malaysia, Philippines, The Netherlands, Pakistan, Turkey, China, and India. He has published mostly on Islam-Democracy relation and its various aspects, Islamic Modernist/Reformist thought/thinkers of South Asia India/Pakistan, and other related themes and areas. He has also participated in various conferences and symposiums, both National and International, and is on the Editorial Board of various Journals and Magazines, based in Malaysia, Pakistan, Turkey, USA and UK. Email: tauseef.parray21@gmail.com.
South Asia. Despite some distinctive differences, each argued that Islam was a dynamic, progressive religion that was made stagnant by the forces of history and the mind-set of many Ulama. They identified the sources of Muslim weakness and asserted the compatibility of religion, reason, and science; they reclaimed the glories of Islamic history, reminding Muslims that they had once been very strong, spawning vast empires and an Islamic civilization whose wonders included major achievements in science, medicine, and philosophy.

They set out to initiate a reformation, to boldly redefine or reconstruct Islamic beliefs and thought, to reform Islamic theology and law. At the same time, they emphasized Muslim pride, unity, and solidarity to face the political and cultural threat of European colonialism. In the words of Javed Majeed, although there were some differences between these modernist thinkers, their work was governed by the “same project”, which was to show that Islam was consistent with the rationality of the European enlightenment and the development of modern science. As such, they argued that there was “no fundamental incompatibility” between modernity and its narrative of progress, and Islam as a religion.

The theme of this essay is to briefly introduce views of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817-1898)—Islamic modernist writer, educational and political activist, and a reformer—on Taqlid, Ijtihad, and Science-Religion Compatibility. The modernist thinkers like Sir Sayyid had to struggle, firstly, with the issues of power and powerlessness, identity and assimilation, and modernity and traditionalism; and secondly, they have been determined to stimulate new thinking on contemporary issues and to demonstrate that Islam is a dynamic religion that calls for continuing intellectual review of both “normative” and “historical” Islam, in order to construct “modernist, enlightened, just, forward-looking, and life-affirming Muslim societies.”

Emergence of Modernist/Reformist Thought: Brief Assessment

Since the mid-19th century, Muslim scholars and thinkers (including that of South Asia as well) have contributed greatly to the development and dissemination of Islamic reformist and modernist discourse. Their contribution—and in the context of Indo-Pakistan subcontinent, especially of Sir Sayyid, Iqbal, Fazlur Rahman and such other eminent personalities and thinkers and reformers—are acknowledged by Muslims as well as Western (Orientalists/Islamists) scholars alike, agreeing that the “emergence of Muslim modernist reformers in the Indo-Pakistani subcontinent was a momentous event with far-reaching consequences.” At the same time, it is true that these scholars hold different

---

opinions, diverse positions, and dissimilar views about the “nature and relative importance of the factors that caused this important development.”

Some Western scholars have seen this phenomenon—of the response of Muslim modernist thinkers to imperialism/colonialism—as representing a reaction to British presence and rule in India and influences emanating from this presence; but different scholars have accorded varying degrees of importance to different aspects of British influence. For example, Bruce B. Lawrence has attributed it mainly to “commercial expansion emanating from north-western Europe”, while H. A. R. Gibb has stressed the impact of British education on India’s Muslim elite. Similarly, some contemporary Muslim scholars, like Fazlur Rahman, have also considered influences resulting from British presence as significant in the generation and evolution of Islamic modernist and reformist discourses in Indo-Pakistani sub-continent.

Clearly, the historical and socio-political context of post-Mughal India, including the impact of British education, made some form of reaction to the British imperialism/colonialism inevitable. As in other Muslim societies, in India, too, responses to the multi-faceted British influence and challenge have spanned the spectrum, in the words of Hafeez Malik, from total rejection to total embrace to synthesis:

(i) total rejection of these influences and the advocacy of a strict observance of Islam, later followed by the development of Islam-based models of government and resistance to the British conquest;

(ii) total embrace of European-style modernity, and;

(iii) synthesis, represented by Islamic modernism.

No doubt, many diverse factors were responsible for both the multiplicity of Muslim responses to the British challenges and to the emergence of reformist discourse in India. In spite of their differences regarding the principal impetus behind the emergence of the Islamic modernist phenomenon—whose basis were laid, in the Indian subcontinent, by Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan—most scholars agree that “Islamic modernists advocate flexible, continuous interpretation of Islam” in order to “reform” those aspects of Muslim tradition and law that have become “outdated, fossilized, or harmful” by scrutinizing those aspects in light of Islam’s normative sources—the Qur’an and the authentic Sunnah.

---

6 Ibid., 159.
9 Hafeez Malik, Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan and Islamic Modernism in India and Pakistan (New York: Columbia University Press1980) 8; [hereafter cited as Malik, Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan]; see also Hasan, in Hunter, op. cit., 160.
10 David Commins, “Modernism”, in OEMIW, 3:118.
Since the time of its pioneering figures (Sir Sayyid in India/South Asia, and Al-Afghani in the Middle East), Islamic modernism in South Asia especially has evolved in an uneven fashion. But the conditions that have led to this development in South Asia are similar and comparable to those in other Muslim countries and societies—whether in Southeast Asia, in Middle East, or in Africa—including the authoritarianism of most post-independence governments, the disappointing results of modernization policies which have not mitigated socio-economic disparities, the manipulation of religion by political leaders, and for Bruce Lawrence, the most “profound change” for the Muslims of India came not through the “decline of Mughals, the attrition of indigenous groups, or the persistence of Shi’i politics, but rather through the advent of the British.”\(^{11}\)

Although modern Islamic reform is often simply presented as a response to the challenge of the West, in fact its roots are both “Islamic (its revivalist tradition) and Western (a response to European colonialism)”. Islam possesses a rich, long tradition of “Islamic revival (tajdid) and reform (islah)”. Down through the ages, individuals’ and organizations undertook the renewal of the community in times of weakness and decline, responding to the apparent gap between the Islamic ideal and the realities of Muslim life.\(^{12}\) As with all things, a return to the fundamentals of Islam—the Qur’an, the life of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), and the early Muslim community—offered the model for Islamic reform.

During the 18\(^{th}\) and 19\(^{th}\) centuries, revivalist leaders and movements had sprung up across the Islamic/Muslim world. In other words, in diverse circumstances, Muslims initiated various revival and reform movements in the 18\(^{th}\) and 19\(^{th}\) centuries. Stretched across the Muslim world from North Africa to South and Southeast Asia, Muslim responses to colonialism and imperialism were conditioned, both by the source of threat and by the Islamic tradition—ranging from holy war (jihad) to emigration (hijra), non cooperation to adaptation and cultural synthesis. Some Muslims, ranging from secular to Islamic modernists, pursued a path of accommodation to tie together the West’s scientific and technological power to revitalize the community and to regain independence. That is, Muslim views of the West and the responses to its power and ideas varied from rejection and confrontation to admiration and imitation. And in the words of John L. Esposito, four diverse responses to the West took shape: rejection; withdrawal; secularism and Westernization; and Islamic modernism.\(^{13}\)

In the emergence of Islamic modernism, it is evident that it called throughout the Muslim world, for a reformation (islah) and reinterpretation (ijtihad) of Islam. Responding to the plight of Muslim communities and the intellectual and religious challenge of the West, Islamic modernism sought to bridge the gap between Islamic traditionalists and secular reformers or conservative religious scholars, characterized by following and emulating the past blindly (taqlid), and western secular elites, regarded as uncritical in their imitation of the West and insensitive to Islamic tradition. The blame for the

---

11 Bruce Lawrence, in *OEMIW*, 2: 282.
backwardness and plight of the Muslim community was credited to the Ulama’s static sanctification of Islam’s classical or medieval formulations and their resistance to change; so Islamic modernists wished to produce a new synthesis of Islam with modern science. John L. Esposito, regarding this situation, claims:

Islamic modernists of the nineteenth and twentieth century, like secular reformers were open to accommodation and assimilation; they wished to produce a new synthesis of Islam with modern sciences and learning. Thus they distanced themselves from the rejectionist tendency of religious conservatives as well as western-oriented secular reformers who restricted religion to the private life, and they looked to the west to rejuvenate state and society.\footnote{Esposito, “Contemporary Islam”, 647.}

Islamic modernism had an ambivalent attitude toward the West, a simultaneous attraction and repulsion. Europe was admired for its strength, technology and political ideas of freedom, justice, and equality, but often rejected for its imperialist goals and policies. Reformers like Afghani, Abduh, Sir Sayyid, and Iqbal, argued the compatibility of Islam with modern science and the best of Western thought. They preached the need and selective synthesis of Islam and modern Western thought; condemned unquestioned veneration and imitation of the past; reasserted their right to reinterpret (\textit{ijtihad}) Islam in light of modern conditions; and sought to provide an Islamically based rationale for educational, legal, and social reform to revitalize a dormant and impotent Muslim community … Islamic modernism [in contrast to 18\textsuperscript{th} century revivalist movements which sought to restore a pristine past] wished to reformulate its Islamic heritage in response to the political, scientific, and cultural challenge of the West. It provided an Islamic rationale for accepting modern ideas and institutions, whether scientific, technological, or political (constitutionalism and representative government).

For most of these reformers, the renaissance of the Muslim community was the first step to national independence or liberation from the hated yoke of colonialism—the restoration of Muslim power. Muslims, they believed, must look to Islam, their source of strength and unity, but learn the secrets of Western power in order to cast off foreign rule and regain their identity and autonomy.\footnote{Esposito, \textit{The Islamic Threat}, 55-56.}

Muslim reformers emphasized the “dynamism, flexibility, and adaptability” during the early development of Islam. This time period was distinguished by Islamic accomplishments in the sciences, law, and education.\footnote{John L. Esposito, \textit{Islam: The Straight Path} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 127.} In the Middle East, Afghani, who epitomized the concerns and program of Islamic modernism, argued that reason, philosophy, and science were not foreign to Islam, were not simply the products of West, or as Adeed Dawisha writes, he argues that “Islam was in harmony with the principles discovered by scientific reason; [it] was indeed the religion demanded by reason”.\footnote{Adeed Dawisha, \textit{Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century: From Triumph to Despair} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 19.}
Afghani advocated for an Islamic renaissance, which would unite the Muslim world while simultaneously confronting the cultural threat posed by adaptation of Western ideals. Abduh, on the other hand, was the developer of the intellectual and social reformist dimensions of Islamic modernism. Afghani is considered one of the catalysts of Islamic modernization, with Muhammad Abduh seen as one of its great synthesizers. Abduh is even seen as the “Father of Islamic Modernism” in the Arab world. They sought to reform Muslim’s “clinging to the past” and “backwardness,” which had been brought on by a retreat into orthodoxy caused by Mongol domination. Afghani and Abduh did so by attempting to reach a medium between Islamic law and modernity.  

While in South Asia (or Indian Sub continent) Sir Sayyid—devoting his life to religious, educational, and social reform—called for a bold new theology and reinterpretation of Islam to respond to modern change; and acceptance, not rejection, of best in the western thought; and Muhammad Iqbal—combining what he thought to be best of the East and the West, his Islamic heritage and Western philosophy to produce his own synthesis and reinterpretation of Islam—called for the reconstruction of religious thought (in Islam) to revitalize the Muslim Ummah.

Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan: Life and Legacy

Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817-1898) was an Islamic modernist writer, educational and political activist, social reformer, theologian, journalist and the chief organizer of the 19th century modernist Islamic movement in Indian sub-continent, whose name stands out prominently as a dynamic force against conservatism, superstition, inertia, and ignorance in the history of India’s transition from “medievalism to modernism”. He was a dynamic personality who contributed many essential elements to the resurgence of Islam in modern India, but it is actually three categories under which he can be classified:

(i) as a great “modernist” thinker who interpreted Islam in a rational, scientific manner and established and initiated various educational programs to foster Western sciences among Muslims and to uplift the down trodden Muslim community;

(ii) as an “architect” of ‘Two-Nation Theory’, which led to the partition of India and the creation of Pakistan in 1947, and;

(iii) as a “heretic” (or “deviant”), since he emphasized, by bypassing the hadith, “direct recourse to the Qur’an” and rejected, on rational basis, angels, heaven, etc.

By and large, these categories describe and represent his roles as an educationist/social reformer, political figure, and theologian, respectively (although later two have been contentious and controversial over the decades and have been dominated by the former).

18 Esposito, Islam: The Straight Path, 130.
Sir Sayyid—the chief organizer of the 19th century modernist Islamic movement in South Asia, Islamic modernist writer, educational and political activist and reformer, and jurist/theologian—was the product of post-Mughal India, ruled by Britain. Sir Sayyid was born on 17th October, 1817 in Delhi, then the capital of the Mughal Empire. His family had migrated from Herat (now in Afghanistan) in 17th century CE. Sir Sayyid was born at a time when rebellious governors, regional insurrections and the British colonialism had diminished the extent and power of the Mughal state, reducing its monarch to a figurehead status.

He received an education traditional to Muslim nobility in Delhi and later studied mathematics, astronomy, medicine and Islamic jurisprudence. In a nutshell, Sir Sayyid had a formal education (strictly traditional) which was never completed as he ceased his schooling at the age of 18, but he reached out, through his personal study and independent investigation, to new horizons of intellectual creativity and laid groundwork for a modern interpretation of Islam, especially after the Mutiny of 1857. Under British rule, Indian Muslims’ social, economic, and political positions had been severely eroded. This reality had a profound impact on Sir Sayyid’s intellectual development.

Sir Sayyid is the eldest of the five prominent Muslim modernists whose influence on Islamic thought and polity was to shape and define Muslim responses to modernism in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Like the other modernists of his time—like Sayyid Amir ‘Ali (1849-1928), Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838-1897), Namik Kemel (1840-1888) and Shaykh Muhammad ‘Abduh (1850-1905)—Sir Sayyid was deeply concerned with the state of Muslims in a world dominated by European colonizing powers.

Sir Sayyid, a multi-dimensional personality, a creative thinker, a philosophical theologian, a community leader, an educationist and a liberal modernist, was one of those dynamic and revolutionary figures of history that have molded—patterned and shaped—the destinies of nations and changed the course of time. He was a great savior of Indian Muslims and possessed a multi-faceted personality, whose real greatness lies in his stressing a scientific attitude of mind and adopting a secular approach in all matters of human relationship. He believed in the supremacy of the reason in all matters, spiritual or temporal.

A great champion against ignorance, Sir Sayyid advocated a system of education which laid equal emphasis on training mind and morals of the pupils. He stood for liberty of conscience and freedom of expression. Sir Sayyid had inaugurated, in the words of Tara Chand, “a revolution in Muslim thought. His endeavor was to reform the Muslims individually and collectively.” And in the words of Prof. K. A. Nizami, Sir Sayyid was “one of the most towering personalities in the galaxy of the 19th century Muslims

---

reformers”, who occupies significant place in the modern history of the Indian subcontinent. He zealously worked to bring about a “change in the Muslim thought and behavior” and in fact, “he ushered in the dawn of an era of intellectual renaissance in India and contributed many essential elements to the development of modern Indian society.”

Being an educational and political leader of Muslims, who were living under British colonial rule in India, Sir Sayyid developed the concepts of religious modernism and community identity that mark the transition from Mughal India to the rise of representative government and the quest for self-determination. In other words, Sir Sayyid surveyed the abysmal and appalling state of Muslim community in India after the Sepoy Uprising of 1857, which resulted in formal British colonial rule and the end of Muslim dominance in the Indian Sub-Continent.

The Sepoy Uprising, or the first ‘war of Independence’ as Indians call it, was a crucial, critical, decisive and significant event in the history of Indian Muslims and it deeply influenced the development and progress of Sir Sayyid’s thinking. The 1857 Uprising was also “an ‘archaic’ attempt” of the Indian Muslims to recover their lost power in India; but its failure, due to the lack of organization spelt the disintegration and collapse of the feudal structure of Muslim society. This defeat was accepted as final by the Indian Muslims in the second half of the 19th century, and they felt the need of a “new kind of leadership—a leadership of adjustment—to find a modus Vivendi with the British rulers and their resurgent Hindu compatriots.” From 1858-98, this leadership was provided by Sir Sayyid, thrust upon him by “historical circumstances within India.”

Sir Sayyid’s response to the challenge of the West, or in simpler words, to the British presence (colonialism and imperialism) in India was, in Aziz Ahmad’s words, “a complete surrender to the impact of modern ideas”, as he was concerned with “only a fraction of the Muslim world—the Indian Muslims”. Most importantly, it convinced him that the best of western civilization could and should be assimilated by the Muslims because the “pure” Islam taught by Qur’an and lived/practiced by Prophet (pbuh) was not simply unopposed to Western civilization but was, in fact, its ultimate source and inspiration. To put in other words, the first two decades after 1857 witnessed Sir Sayyid’s increasing preoccupation with the prevailing conditions of Muslims in India. Like the Muslim modernists in Central Asia and Ottoman empire, Sir Sayyid espoused the causes of: (i) rationalism in Islam, which established a new orientation—that religion existed as an aid to man’s progress, and man did not exist just for religion; (ii) social reforms patterned after western culture; (iii) modern education through English, and (iv) Muslim

---


24 Ibid.

25 Ibid., 59.

26 Ibid., 59.
nationalism. His thesis also emphasized that (v) civilization do not belong to nations, but to man. Consequently, progress and prejudice, advancement and narrow-mindedness, could not blend and mix together. To achieve and accomplish the goals of his normative values, Sir Sayyid endeavored to establish Muslim-British rapprochement in India.27

He perceived Muslims as backward and in need of education. This period also saw an increasing degree of public involvement in educational and social arenas and Sir Sayyid undertook three major projects:

1) To “initiate an ecumenical movement in order to create understanding between Muslims and Christians;” that is, he spearheaded a modernist movement that saw no genuine conflict between Islam and Christianity because of their common moral message;

2) To “establish scientific organizations that would help Muslims to understand the secret of west’s success;” that is, the establishment of Aligarh Scientific Society in1865—a translation society to make western thought more accessible, and;

3) To “analyze objectively the causes for the 1857 revolt.”28

For Sir Sayyid, Muslims needed to change the way they saw and responded to the modern world; he devoted his life to religious, educational, and social reform. Like Afghani and ‘Abduh, he called for a bold new theology or reinterpretation of Islam and acceptance, not rejection, of best in the western thought. In Esposito’s words, he called for a new theology to respond to the modern change.29

He wanted to show that he was reclaiming the original religion of Islam, which God and His Messenger have disclosed, not that religion which the Ulama and the preachers have fashioned. His interpretation of Islam was guided by his belief that Islam was compatible with reason and the laws of nature and, therefore, in perfect harmony with modern scientific thought. He argued that Islam’s teachings concerning God, the Prophet, and the Qur’an are compatible with modern science, which involves discovery of the work of God in natural laws; in other words, Sir Sayyid argued that Islam is “in full correspondence with reason”.30 Furthermore, he equated reason with understanding and considered it an acquired quality that enables human beings to distinguish between good and bad, right and wrong, proper and improper. According to Sir Sayyid, who used terms like understanding, reason, and intellect interchangeably, the only criterion for a person having reason intellect, or understanding is behavioral rather than substantive.

It was during the decade of 1860s, that Sir Sayyid developed his ideas of a “modern Islam” and a Muslim polity living under the British rule. During this time, he wrote, in

27 Malik, Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan, 8-9.
28 Malik, “Ahmad Khan, Sayyid”, in OEMIW, I: 58.
29 Esposito, The Islamic Threat, op. cit., 58.
1858, *Asbab Baghawat-i-Hind* (“The Causes of the Indian Revolt”) and in 1860-1861, he published another tract, *Risalah Khair Khawahan Musalmanan* (“An Account of the Loyal Muhammadans of India”) in which he claimed that the Indian Muslims were the most loyal subjects of the British Raj because of their kindred disposition and because of the principles of their religion. He was the only Muslim who ventured to write a commentary on the Old and the New Testament, *The Mahomedan Commentary on the Holy Bible* (1862), which was “strategically designed to bridge the gulf between the two communities and to develop a common understanding and rapprochement”. In London, he also wrote, in response to William Muir’s *Life of Mahomet, ‘A Series of Essays on the Life of Muhammad’* (1870) and was later published in Urdu as *Khutbat-i-Ahmadiyya*.

**Religious Ideas of Sir Sayyid: Views on Taqlid and Ijtihad**

In his religious thought, he was a “rationalist”, who emphasized a rational approach to Islam; and hisundaunted confrontation of Islam with modern thought and his original method of Qur’anic exegesis inspired by western ideas was no more less than a revolution in the history of Muslim theology. He held the view that there can be no contradiction between Word of God (Qur’an) and Work of God (Nature). By his liberal interpretations, Sir Sayyid succeeded in paving the way for modern progressive trends in Islam, and he was first Muslim of Modern India to realize the necessity for a new interpretation of Islam that was liberal, modern and progressive. His emphasis on rational interpretation (*tafsir*), by-passing the *hadith*, and in rejecting the traditional practices and orientations of the orthodox made him “controversial” and was labeled as “heretic” or “deviant”.

Sir Sayyid developed an exegetical rationalism in his writings and insisted that *ijtihad* should be exercised freely and without limitation and that such exercise was a fundamental right for all Muslims. Drawing inspiration from the writings of Shah Wali Allah (1703-62)—Indian theologian and founder of modern Islamic reformist/modernist thought, who is considered not only as one of the influential theologian and revivalists in the subcontinent, but, as Bazmee Ansari says, may be called the “founder of Islamic modernism”31—he promoted an Islamic modernism and emphasized a rational approach to Islam and social reforms in Muslim culture and until his death in 1898 devoted his life to modernizing the life of Muslims in the Indian Subcontinent.32

Sir Sayyid’s achievement as a religious thinker in the context of Islamic modernism can be discerned as grappling with two broadly distinct problems: the rationalization of the minutiae of non-essential dogma, and the liberalization of Islamic law. With regard to the latter, his work is dynamic and constructive, and as such has made tremendous impression on modern Islam in general and on Indian Islam in particular. He tried to resolve the difficulties inherent in the four traditional sources of Muslim law by a dialectical rationalist exegesis of the Quran; by historical skepticism in scrutinizing the classical data

---


32 For details on the religious ideas and on his approach to *ijma*, *ijtihad*, and reform in general, see, Troll, *op. cit.*; Bashir Ahmad Dar, *Religious Thought of Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 1st ed. (Lahore: Instt of Islamic Culture, 1957); Ahmad, *Islamic Modernism, op. cit.*
of the *hadith*; by an almost unlimited emphasis on *ijtihad* as the inalienable right of every individual Muslim; and finally by rejecting the principle of *ijma* in the classical sense which confined it to the Ulama.

The modernists adopted the term *Ijtihad* (an Arabic term, literally meaning “exert” or “effort” and generally translated as independent reasoning or the intellectual effort of Muslim jurists to reach independent religio-legal decisions) as a rallying cry, transforming its meaning into the more general task of “rational interpretation” that they held to be incumbent upon all educated Muslims. Historically, *ijtihad* has been perceived as a concern primarily of the individual scholar and *mujtahid*, whose the doors were closed in 4th century AH, and a long period of *taqlid* (‘bind following’ or ‘imitation’) followed. Later, post-colonial Islamic thinkers used *ijtihad* as shorthand for intellectual and social reform, and as a break from *taqlid* or blind imitation of the past legal rulings.

The relationship between *taqlid* and *ijtihad* during this period became less judicial and more symbolic: the former referred to the general deterioration of everything Islamic and the later to its reformation. The reformists embraced, in a general way, a “dynamic and context-driven” approach to *ijtihad*, calling for interpreting the text based on changing and evolving circumstances.

The holy Qur’an repeatedly asks Muslims to change themselves and to constantly strive to change the world so that it could become a more just, equitable, and peaceful abode for humanity (e.g. Q. An-Najm, 53: 39-41). This is why at the core of Shari’ah, we find the “principle of *ijtihad* (sustained and reasoned struggle)” which is concerned primarily “with change and with shaping and reshaping the future”. The opposite of *ijtihad*, in this view, was *taqlid*, literally “imitation” or “tradition”—and in Islamic legal terminology it refers to the practice of following the decisions of a religious authority without necessarily examining the scriptural basis or reasoning of that decision and opposite of *ijtihad*—and closing the doors of *ijtihad*—which modernists took to mean “blind obedience to authority”. Sir Sayyid praised very much the broadening use of *ijtihad* by Shah Wali Allah of Delhi.

Sir Sayyid decried *taqlid* which in his opinion was responsible for the decline of Islam. For Sir Sayyid said, *Ijtihad* (innovation, re-interpretation with the changing times) is the need of the hour. Give up *taqlid* (copying and following old values). He gave a call that the Muslims could not progress without acquiring knowledge of modern sciences and technology. He asserted the simple truth that knowledge is not the exclusive preserve of any nation; it belongs to the whole mankind. He maintained a valiant posture and succeeded in realizing the intellectual energy of Muslims and they started getting education of science. In keeping with his rationalist mindset, Sir Sayyid stressed the importance of *ijtihad* and a rational interpretation of Islamic religious sources and thought. He believed as well as considered this to be necessary, in order to make Islam acceptable to the new age, and because he believed that Islam would not be understood by Muslims and appreciated by others unless it was presented in a rational way. He also

---

stressed the importance of relying on the Qur’an and sifting the false Hadith from the reliable ones. He tried to remove “the corrosive elements” and accretions that he believed were seriously detrimental to Islam in his day.\(^{34}\)

With regard to the religious thought of Sir Sayyid, Muhammad Umar al-Din—one of the three scholars after Hali (the other two being Mawlana Sa’id Akbarabadi and B. A. Dar) who made efforts to show in great detail, how Sir Sayyid’s attempt to reformulate Islam can be placed in the broader context of the history of Islamic thought—argues that Sir Sayyid maintained that Islam is the only religion that can go together with changing conditions and with a new age. For Umar al-Din, Sir Sayyid presented “a new conception of Islam and laid the foundation of a new [Islamic] theology (Kalam). As in former [intellectual] movements Islam had been presented in the form of law, or in the form of philosophy, or again in the form of a Sufi system [of thought], in the same way Sir Sayyid, keeping in mind the scientific spirit of the modern age, presented Islam in the form of a scientific theory”.\(^{35}\)

Of all the Muslim thinkers of South Asia in the last two centuries, it was Sir Sayyid, who undoubtedly can be labeled as the most rational in his approach and ideas. He influenced his own age and the impact of his ideas continued to be felt in the years to come.

### Sir Sayyid on Religion and Science Compatibility

Sir Sayyid believed in the compatibility of religion and science, and considered natural law and divine law to be the same, because according to him revelation cannot be opposed to scientific actuality since an agreement between God’s word and work is essential. For him, between the word of God (Scripture) and the work of God (nature) there can be no contradiction. Furthermore, he believed that when there appeared a contradiction between a scientific fact and a religious rule then the latter must be reinterpreted according to scientific evidence. Finally, Sir Sayyid concluded that “if we keep in view the principles deducible from the Qur’an itself, we shall find that there is no contradiction between the modern sciences, on the one hand, and the Qur’an and Islam, on the other”.\(^{36}\)

Applying his naturalistic rationalism to his exegesis of the Qur’an, he arrived at fifty-two points of divergence from traditionally accepted Sunni Islam.\(^{37}\) Moreover he advised that in secular matters where Islam is silent, Muslims should emulate western practices. He believed in religious pluralism and considered it absurd to believe that God’s Prophets appeared only in Arabia and Palestine to reform a handful of Arabs and Jews, and that other peoples were denied of knowledge of the divine. He added, whoever followed the prophets achieved salvation. In this regard, his views are on a par with the more liberal contemporary reformist thinkers. He may be considered as a pioneer in what is now

---

\(^{34}\) Ibid.


\(^{36}\) Hassan, *op.cit.*, 163.

\(^{37}\) Ibid.; Ahmad, *Studies, op. cit.*, 53.
called “Inter-faith Dialogue”, and he worked for “greater understanding and goodwill” and harmony among Muslim sects, and between Muslims and non-Muslims.  

Sir Sayyid’s Contribution and Reforms: An Evaluation

In this section, a brief summary of the views—praise and appreciation—of some of the scholars and writers (both Muslims and non-Muslims equally), is provided, which shows both the importance as well as relevance of the educational reforms of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan. For instance, John L. Esposito (Georgetown University, USA), is of the opinion that Sir Sayyid combined theory with practice, seeking to implement his idea and train a new generation of Muslim leaders. His prolific writing was accompanied by his leadership in many educational reforms: a translation society to make western thought more accessible, the introduction of their own journals, and the formation of Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College (later named as Aligarh Muslim University), which was modeled after Cambridge university.

Sir Sayyid helped the Muslims in India to emerge again. Various writings have emphasized different areas of Sir Sayyid’s thought and activity—social and political, educational and cultural—in which he made reforms. But almost all agree that his prime achievement was a revival of Muslim morale and prestige in British India, and that to him goes the credit for having re-established the dynamism of the Muslims in India as a social and political force.

His efforts are regarded as a “dynamic and constructive achievement” that made a tremendous impression on modern Islam. In the words of A. H. Albiruni (the pseudonym of Pakistani historian, S. M. Ikram), Sir Sayyid not only filled the big void created in the life of Muslim community by the disappearance of the Muslim rule, but he did more. He bridged the gap between medieval and modern India and gave the Indian Muslims “a new cohesion, a new policy, new educational ideals, a new prose, a new approach to their individual and national problems, and built up an organization which could carry on his work.”

Altan Hussain Hali (in Hayat-i-Jawid) after presenting Sir Sayyid’s overall view sets out to describe his various “services to country, community and religion”; and denotes his work by the term “Reformation”, calling him a reformer, while as, for Allama Iqbal, Sir Sayyid’s “real greatness” lies in the fact that he caught a glimpse of the “positive character of the age which was coming”, and he felt the need for a “fresh orientation of Islam and worked for it”; and there is no denying in the fact that this sensitive soul was, in the Indian Subcontinent, the “first to react the modern age.”

---

38 Vide, Hassan, *loc. cit.*
41 Hali, *Hayat*.
Some European writers (like John Strachey and Sidney Low) during his lifetime characterized Sir Sayyid’s thinking as “liberal”, “progressive”, or “enlightened” (that is, the one who tried to prove Islam to be the liberal, rational and progressive religion), and these labels have continued even after his death.\(^{43}\) This European view was shared by many Indian writers—Hali and Justice Shah Din (1868-1918), for example. Shah Din, although did not consider Sir Sayyid a great scholar of Arabic, or a well-versed theologian, nevertheless, he maintains that the fact remains that in his power of grasping the fundamental principles of our Islamic system of faith, and in his keen insight into such of his features have made it a great motive power in the world, he has been hardly excelled by the most learned theologians of modern times.\(^{44}\)

B.A. Dar projected this image succinctly as: “He was the first man in modern India to realize the necessity for a new interpretation of Islam that was liberal, modern, and progressive”.\(^{45}\) It clearly reveals that Sir Sayyid’s entire intellectual energy was devoted to trying to resolve the conflict between religion and science and to reconcile the best of both for the younger generation of the Muslim elite whom he wished to attract. Thus, Sir Sayyid was the first representative of Islamic modernism in South Asia who presented a new orientation of Islam and reacted to the modern age.

**Criticism on Sir Sayyid’s (Religious) Thought**

Of all the Muslim thinkers of South Asia in the last two centuries Sir Sayyid Ahmed Khan was undoubtedly the most rational in his approach and ideas. Sir Sayyid influenced his own age and the impact of his ideas continued to be felt in the years to come. But, at the same time, his ideas on religion and his socio-political views have been criticized by various scholars. Even today a substantial number of people reject his views. For example, some South Asian scholars have questioned Sir Sayyid’s intellectual prowess as an Islamic thinker, noting contradictions in his philosophy. Fazlur Rehman believed that Sir Sayyid “was not a keen religious thinker, nor perhaps primarily and deeply religious,” but “was led by the inner logic of the Muslim intellectual history to justify his cultural progressive attitude theologically”.\(^{46}\) Despite his accomplishments, his close identification with the West condemned him in the eyes of those who chafed under colonial rule. Sir Sayyid’s “strong affinity for the West”, argues Esposito, brought “strong criticism from ulama and anticolonialists who dismissed his loyaltyism and reformism as political and cultural capitulation”.\(^{47}\)

He interpreted Islam according to his “own criteria” and on the basis of a “rationalist re-interpretation” of the Qur’an. He formulated his own principles of exegesis (tafsir) and outlined “15 basic principles” for his own exegesis, (among others) including: God has

---


\(^{45}\) Dar, *op. cit.*, 262.


\(^{47}\) Esposito, *The Islamic Threat, op. cit.*, 59.
created the laws of nature and maintains them as the disciplines of creation and existence; therefore ‘there can be nothing in the Qur’an contrary to the laws of the nature’; and ‘linguistic research is necessary to study the sociological mores and possibilities of development of human society contained in the direct and indirect expressions of the Qur’an’.

Sir Sayyid has been criticized by Muslim scholars for denying miracles; he regards Prophet Muhammad’s (pbuh) Isra’ (ascension to heaven and vision of God on a night of beatitude) only a dream, “neither a physical nor a spiritual experience”. For him, the only miracle attributable to Prophet (Pbuh) is his great Prophetic role, which is revelational in nature but thoroughly consonant with reason. He was the lone modernist of his period) in his “total rejection of ijma” as a source of law. Regarding these views, he has been criticized largely.

‘Tanqid al-Khayalat’ (1882-84), an early polemical work by Imad ud-Din (d.1901), criticized the theological ideas expresses by Sir Sayyid in Tahzib al-Akhlqaq. This made a great impact on subsequent writers especially on E.M. Wherry and H. U. Weitbercht. Weitbercht in his close analysis of what he calls, ‘The New Islam in India’, detects, as distinctive features of Sir Sayyid’s new theological outlook, the adoption of azad-i-ra`y (the liberty to adopt a personal opinion in religious matters) as against taqlid (blind adherence). He marks out other features—a revival of doctrines of the mutazilite school, the acceptance of the (Western) conceptions of conscience and nature, and last but not the least, the re-establishment of pure tauhid, unity of essence, attributes, and worship—in Sir Sayyid’s outlook. Aligarh College and the Muhammadan Educational Conference were, in Weitbercht’s opinion, nothing but the means to give the intellectual program a practical effect.

Many opponents of Sir Sayyid refer to Jamal al-Din Afghani’s criticism of him. In one of his articles, ‘al-Dahriyun fi’l Hind’ (The Materialists of India), published in al Urwat al Wuthqa in 1884, he wrote about Sir Sayyid: “He appeared in the guise of naturalists [materialists], and proclaimed that nothing exists but blind nature … and that all the prophets were naturalists … He called himself a neicheri or naturalist, and began to seduce the sons of the rich, who were frivolous young men”. Furthermore, during his lifetime, he was intensely criticized by religious scholars (‘Ulama) who regarded his liberal reinterpretation of Islamic scripture as blasphemy.

---

48 Sayyid Ahmad Khan, Al-Tahrir fi- Usul al-Tafsir (Agra, 1892), 32-56.
49 Vide, Troll, op. cit., 19.
Concluding Remarks

The emergence of Islamic modernism and the legacy of modernists it produced influenced the development of the Muslim community and its attitude en route for the West. Their vision inspired Muslim intellectuals and activists across the Muslim world to emphasize educational reforms that incorporated a modern curriculum, legitimated legal and social change, and contributed to the formation of anti-colonial independence movements. And Sir Sayyid, captivated by the amazing progress registered in multiple fields of European people, wanted similar scientific and technological sophistication and superiority, material progress and advancement of Muslims as well.

Sir Sayyid’s efforts are regarded, on the whole, as a dynamic and constructive achievement as he bridged the gap between medieval and modern India and gave the Indian Muslims a new cohesion, a new policy, new educational ideals, a new prose, a new approach to their individual and national problems, and built up an organization which could carry on his work. Sir Sayyid (and other like-minded Muslim modernists) restored Muslim pride in Islam’s intellectual and scientific heritage, generated modern ideological interpretations of Islam that incorporated modern concepts and perceptions, ideas and ideals, disciplines and institutions, and thus introduced and reinforced a change-oriented mind-set.

It is my conviction, and firm belief, that the voices of educationists reformist thinkers like Sir Sayyid have prevailed and will prevail all the negative forces and their thinking will remain as a source of inspiration for all the reformist and modernist thinkers, not only across the Muslim world, but also for Muslim thinkers of Europe, America and other countries and continents across the globe, for the reason that it is still not only relevant, significant, and important, but equally essential, considerable and appropriate. To keep alive and to maintain properly this legacy—a legacy of education, of learning, of culture, of civilization, and of a rich tradition—which Sir Sayyid has left behind for the educational advancement and improvement of Muslims, almost all his works have been (re)published now by Sir Syed Academy, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, India.

Contact details: tauseef.parray21@gmail.com