



**INDO-MUSLIM RELIGIOUS THOUGHT
IN 19th CENTURY :-
SIR SYED AHMAD KHAN AND HIS CRITICS**

ABSTRACTS

THESIS

Submitted for the award of the degree of

**Doctor of Philosophy
IN
Philosophy**

By

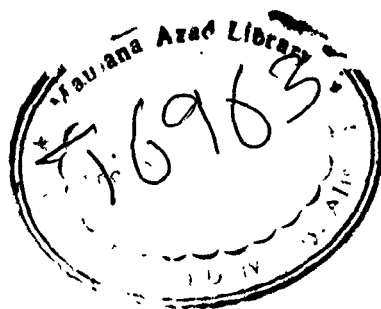
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ABSTRACT

“INDO-MUSLIM RELIGIOUS THOUGHT IN 19TH CENTURY: SIR SYED AHMAD KHAN AND HIS CRITICS”

This study on the “Indo Muslim religious thought in 19th century: Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and his critics” has been divided into five chapters with an introduction. This part of the study gives a brief historical account of Mughal decadence and also takes into account eminent religious scholars like Shah Waliullah, his successors and followers. It has also been pointed out that the Islamic legacy was continued till it was vibrantly used by Sir Syed, Maulana Azad and Justice Amir Ali.

The first chapter briefly describes the life and works of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan. It deals with his genealogy which ascends to the prophet. The chapter also speaks of his maternal ancestors. Sir Syed was influenced by his mother and maternal uncle and grand father. His father had a sufi inclination and taught his son the lesson of sobriety and devotion. In brief the chapter also gives a picture of the social milieu, Sir Syed lived in.

The second chapter entails a precise palaver on the trends of rationalism in Islam. At the outset of the discussion the place of reason in Islam is taken into account. Verses of the Quran have been

cited to substantiate the argument. Reference has been made to the traditions which provide impetus for the application of reason.

The third chapter deals with the early phase of Sir Syed's religious thought. It has been divided into two parts. Part one discusses his attempts seeking harmony between Christianity and Islam. He, however, insisted that the Muslims must preserve their socio-religious identity.

Besides, the palaver includes his image where he appears to be a conventionally staunch Muslim. He believes in the miracles, exorcism and popular superstitions. All the books that he wrote in this period reiterate the common Muslims belief. Here he emphasizes the Muslims to follow the pure and simple religion of the Prophet and his companions.

It should be noted that this chapter also includes the discussion on his emotional but well argued responses to the challenges thrown up to Islam by the Christian missionary. *Khutbat-e-Ahmadi* is one such treatise offering a befitting reply to William Muir's book "The Life of Mohamat".

Besides, Sir Syed seriously pursues his earlier efforts to bring the two communities closer to each other. He wrote the commentary of the Bible which remained incomplete. It is, however, a sober

attempt to convince the Muslim Ulema on the basis of his scholarly argument that the Christians must not be despised but accommodated in accordance with the divine indictments contend in the Quran. Sir Syed, as a prelude to his commentary on the Bible, wrote ten discourses discussing the vital problems like prophet hood, revelation, corruption and abrogation etc in the divine books to apprise the religious scholars of both the communities of the affinities and the points of disagreement in the approach of the two religions to the above mentioned problems. The chapter has critically analysed these discourses and explained their significance in the comprehension of the structure of the two religions. Sir Syed, at this stage, is thoroughly rational and disowned his earlier held convictions.

In addition to his commentary on the Bible, Sir Syed also wrote some smaller but significant treatises like dining with Christians and the earlier mention pamphlet explaining the word *Nasara* used to mean the helper justifying it from the Quran. The Christians, however, interpreted it otherwise considering it as a derogatory term. Sir Syed persistently convinced the Muslims that the Christians being the people of book (ahl-e-kitab) could not be their enemies. His efforts, however, were not appreciated either by the Muslims or by the Christians. The former doubted his allegiance to Islam and the

latter perceived designs to prove the superiority of Islam over Christianity. Sir Syed, nevertheless, did not give up his mission but followed it with new vigour and zeal.

In the later phase of his religious thought Sir Syed takes a different stand. He rejects all superstitions and examines the religious truth on the touchstones of reason and nature. In this chapter his basic principles are examined and deliberated upon. The discussion herein has proceeded from his relevant articles, epistles and the books like the one *Tafsir-al-Quran* (The exegesis of the Holy Quran). Sir Syed has meticulously explained the above referred touchstones later on applied them in examining the articles of faith. This part of his religious thought deals with his views on God, His angles, His Books, His prophets, day of judgement akin to it the reward and punishment (heaven and hell) and good and evil (destiny). Sir Syed explains all these articles of faith on the basis of these two principles and very often emphasizes that the 'word of God' is never in-contradiction with the 'work of God'. To present it otherwise is the error either of perception or of judgment.

Sir Syed very emphatically denies the possibility of miracles. He also rejects the common place concept of angels and *jinns*. He frequently admonishes the young Muslims to go through the religious

literature with care and caution and challenges the authenticity of the *Sirah* and the *hadith* literature.

Sir Syed's incomplete exegesis of the Quran has also been a subject of severe criticism. His views on Quran and his principles of exegesis aroused a great controversy even in the minds of his friends like Mohsin Mehdi. The chapter also projects his on going religious mission which imbibes his political, social and educational thought.

A separate chapter has been devoted to the contemporary critics of Sir Syed's religious thought. The Muslims and the Christians both were suspicious of his intentions. Even his serious works like the two commentaries were not welcomed with a note of appreciation because Sir Syed's faith which stood as a challenge to the clergy of both the communities adversely affected the common religious faith. His interpretation of the Christian doctrines and of incarnation, trinity, original sin etc could never convinced the ecclesiastical class and his views on the miracles, *Jinns* and angels could never appeal to the Muslim elite and the theologians. Many of them therefore criticized him quite harshly and opposed him to the extent that they could manage the mandate (fatwa) issued against him from the holy cities: Mecca and Madina.

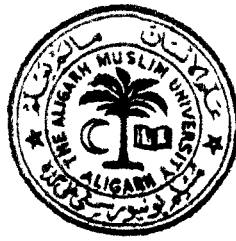
Among the severe critics of his religious thought Ali Bakhsh and Imdad Ali were the most acrimonious scrutinizers. Ali Bakhsh wrote two treatises, *Taid-e-Islam* and *Shahab-e-Saqib* which have been discussed in this chapter. The two treatises appear to be an attempt of calumny instead of being serious academic works. Sir Syed's answer to his points of criticism has also been included herein. In his defence he is always argumentative and never apologetic. Sometimes, however, his arguments are weak but not absurd. Ali Bakhsh has raised some thirty objections particularly in his defence of Islam (*Taid-e-Islam*) but many of them are allegations, sometimes due to his inability of understanding him in right perspective and sometimes an account of his mischievous designs against Sir Syed.

Imdad Ali also followed his contemporary and criticized Sir Syed for his religious views. He managed to have a *fatwa* from the Ulema of the holy city of Mecca and tried to tarnish Sir Syed's image as a leader and scholar in the eyes of Muslims. Both of them could not succeed because they were not honest in their efforts.

Amongs his friends many disagreed with his religious views but Mohsin Mehdi came out forcefully and presented his arguments to dissuade him from his religious ideas. The discourse between the

two friends particularly on the exegesis of the Quran is carried through in their epistles.

The last chapter is the conclusion which is an upshot of the preceding discussions in the earlier chapters. It is educed on the basis of the erstwhile concepts that Sir Syed has always advocated with emphasis and enthusiasm. The conclusion describes his views on several controversial concepts and superstitious beliefs like corruption, abrogation, preservation of the divine books in the pristine form, angels, *jinns* and other miraculous deeds that Muslim adored close to their heart. It also describes the vital significance of his two basis principles; reason and nature serving as touchstones to examine the veracity of religious truth. The principles also serve him as a tool to reject and eliminate the corrupt material from the religious convictions.



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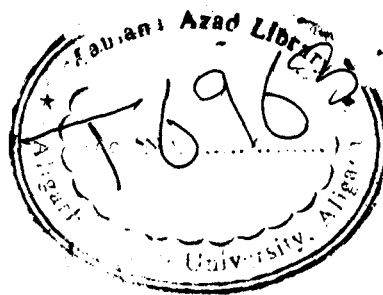
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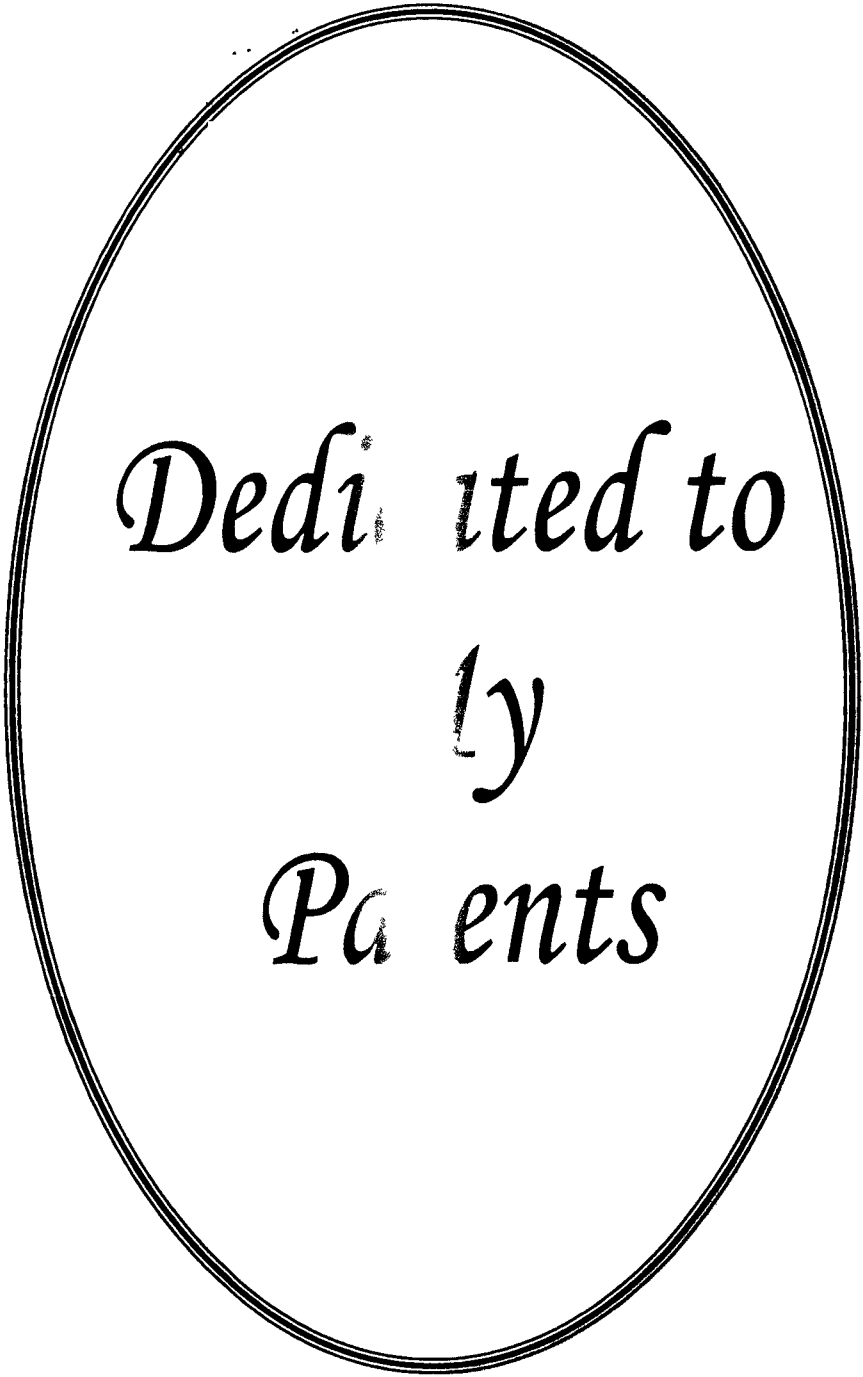
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*Dedicated to
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Parents*

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Dated.....20.09.2008.....

Certificate

This is to certify that the thesis entitled "Indo-Muslim Religious Thought in 19th Century: Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and His Critics", submitted by Mr. Mohammad Imteyaz for the award of the degree of Doctor Philosophy in Philosophy has been completed under my supervision.

It is further certified that Mr. Mohammad Imteyaz has fulfilled all the requirements laid down in the academic ordinances with regard to the Ph.D. degree and that to the best of my knowledge the thesis contains his own research.

Roshan Ara
Dr. (Mrs.) Roshan Ara
(Reader)
(Supervisor)

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"All praise is due for Almighty, whose grace and benevolence materializes my maiden work".

It is my great privilege to thank all those who have been helpful to me during the preparation of this thesis.

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I also feel obliged to the computer operator, my batch mates, friends and hostel mates. Thank you every body.

Mohd. Imteyaz
Mohammad Imteyaz

CONTENTS

<i>CHAPTER</i>	<i>PAGE NO.</i>
<i>INTRODUCTION</i>	<i>1-15</i>
<i>CHAPTER-1</i>	<i>16-33</i>
Life and Works of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan	
<i>CHAPTER-2</i>	<i>34-70</i>
Rationalism in Islam	
<i>CHAPTER-3</i>	<i>71-113</i>
Early Religious Thought of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan	
Part-A & Part-B	
<i>CHAPTER-4</i>	<i>114-142</i>
Religious Thought of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan	
Later Phase	
<i>CHAPTER-5</i>	<i>143-173</i>
An assessment of Sir Syed's Religious thought and his critics	
<i>CONCLUSION</i>	<i>174-178</i>
<i>BIBLIOGRAPHY</i>	<i>179-186</i>

INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

With the arrival of East India Company there ushered a new era in the history of India, it was not only important for the decadence of one empire yielding place to the other but also for the cultural transformation, religious identity and the inception of modernism. We are aware that Europe had witnessed the phenomenon of renaissance which became conducive to transgress the older values and challenged the long cherished religious truth. In the aftermath of the same the Europeans including the English, experienced a great change in all walks of life. They were introduced with greater fascination to the concepts of democracy, secularism, free enquiry and scientific outlook. The British history records many unpleasant events in the transitional period of the shift from one system to the other involving different set of principles leading to diverse consequences.

The British who entered India as traders established their rule by challenging the than existing empire. It is obvious that they took immediate cognizance of the internal contradictions between the feudal states, each desiring to establish political supremacy over the other. Needless to say that the whole panorama of decadence emerged due to the weak and constantly declining Mughal Empire, the events like the rise of Maratha, Ruhila insurgency, Panipat wars created in Muslims a defeatist attitude resulting into many

complexes devastating not only the political system but also the socio-cultural life.

The cultural debris led religious disorder. The newly risen small Kingdoms changed the cultural milieu and affected the Muslims mind. As a consequence of this the Muslims adhered to many un-Islamic practices which owed their origin, in the first place to Hinduism which was caste-ridden and in the second place to Christianity playing an important role in the reshaping of culture and the transformation of religion. Thinkers like Shah Waliullah viewed such a situation with all seriousness and made sober strive to eradicate Hindu influence on the Muslim culture. It was indeed a puritan attempt which appealed to the Muslim masses, but gave way to the inception of religious movements among the Muslims of India.

Not only in India the puritan attempts had been made from time to time in the Muslim world. The origin of *ilm-al-Kalam* was the first of this kind when the Muslim scholars showed stiff resistance on account of the subsequent hazards to the growing influence of Greek philosophy and Christian Judaic criticism against Islam. The movements of Abu Hasan al Ashari and Imam Ibn-e-Hanbal, Asharism and Zahirism also took recourse in dogmatic theology against the rational theology of the Mutazilah who accelerated the growth of knowledge and infused the spirit of scientism and free enquiry.

The Muslims when established their rule in India brought with them an amalgam of Perso-Arabic Turkish culture which became still richer when synthesized with the local civilization. In the age of decadence Shah Waliullah was one to make such ardent attempt and admonished the Muslims with all exuberance to return to the way of prophet.

Shah Waliullah was taught by the eminent members of his family, thereafter by the teachers of repute of Mecca during his sojourn in the holy city at the time of pilgrimage. He felt the need of the revival of religious thought. There were two basic achievements of this eminent scholar, the socialization of knowledge and disparagement of blind following of religion. In the preface to the translation of the Quran, he vehemently criticized the Muslim theologians for holding knowledge unto themselves and concealing the real teachings of the Quran and tradition from the Muslims. In opposition to the theologians he decided to render a translation of the Quran in the commonly spoken Persian language.

Shah Waliullah always discouraged the blind following (*taqlid*). In his view the doors of *ijtehad* (independent opinion) must always remain open to offer plausible solution to the ever emerging problems, to which the Muslims faced in the age they lived in. He wrote a full length tract on the importance and workability of the provision of the *ijtehad* (the independent opinion). He was well conversant with the need and advocated for it.

In the light of his major works, Shah Waliullah is regarded as the pioneer of the Wahabi movement in India simultaneously launched by Abdul Wahab Najdi in the Arab World long before. The presumption, however, is not true for the school of Deoband, the acknowledged representative of Wahabi movement in India, claims to owe allegiance to Shah Waliullah. Shah Waliullah being a puritan Muslim sought to draw all the alien practices which had entered Islam with the passage of time. In his book *Al-Maqalah al Wadiya Fi-al-Nasihah wa-al-wasaya* he mentioned some such Hindu practices which in his opinion vitiated Islamic religion and Muslim society. These practices are concerned with the social customs like marriage and funeral etc. which were to be eradicated. In his *Hujjat*, he exhorted the king not to appoint Hindu nobles in his court because of their ignorance of Muslims Law. His councils, however, were neither heard nor acted upon by the king. Shah Waliullah is considered the most influential pedagogue of his time. He understood the need of the hour and wanted to present a comprehensive solution of the socio-political and religious problems. He served as a guide for the ensuing movements initiated by his followers later.¹

Sir Syed, who was deeply influenced with Shah Waliullah, was born in an age of turmoil. It was not only the period of political instability but also of social upheaval and religious chaos. With the introduction of British rule their

¹ Malik Hafeez: Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and Muslim Modernization in India and Pakistan, PP 255-258.

emerged a number of religious movements out of which some affected the religious and social life of the Muslim masses in India. The puritan movements like *Wahabism* advocated to impose a rigid code of conduct upon the Muslims declaring it to be inconformity with the Islamic Law. They pleaded further that the rule of *Shariah* was the only way for the Muslims to regain their lost political power. Moreover the *Wahabis* purified rather stringently to consecrate Islam from all alien practices. The champions of *Wahabism* also aroused in the Sunni Muslims the feeling of hatred against the Shias. They provoked a feeling of hostility between the two communities which proved detrimental for the Muslim society.

Another important movement was initiated by Ahmad Raza Khan Brailwy. It is believed to be in contradiction with *wahabism* and is still at variance with the latter's ideology. The *Brailwy* movement accommodated the local practices adopted by the Muslims with their interaction to other communities. They also desired to preserve their identity as Muslims and distinguish themselves as superior community on account of their faith.

There were some other movements like Karamati and Faraizi which created religious tension among the Muslims. Both of them considered India as *Darul Harab* (the place of battle) in opposition to *Darul Aman* (the place of peace). They taught their followers to fight not only the British but also the Hindus. Ismail Shahid and Syed Ahmad Shahid of

Rai Barailly particularly led the movement and formed a government in exile to overthrow the British rule and regain the lost political supremacy. They joined hand with the *Sikhs* for the success of their mission. The attempt however failed and both were killed by the Indians with the British hatched conspiracy.

The missionary activities threw up another challenge which was felt not only by the Muslims but also Hindus. The movements like *Brahmo Samaj*, *Arya Samaj* and *Sanatan Dharma* were started for the aegis of the Hindu community. The clergy of both the religions were worried to check the process of conversion into Christianity and desired to introduce some comprehensive system in congruous to the purpose.

Sir Syed also aimed at checking proselytism but his method was different. His main objective was to inculcate the feeling of amity among the Muslims towards the Christians. But his attempt of bringing about reconciliation was appreciated neither by the Muslims nor Christians. Sir Syed, however, was convinced that the British were a superior race and they were ruling the world due to their advancement in Science and Technology. He, therefore, recommended to the Muslims to obtain the knowledge of modern science along with the knowledge of their traditional sciences. The biographies particularly of the prophet, the commentaries of the Quran and the books of the tradition were replete with conjectures fabricated Judaic stories and unreliable narratives

(*rewayat*). It was therefore needed a correct or reliable version of these sciences. Besides he was also of the view that the Muslim clergy always took recourse to emotionality. He also considered it necessary that the Quran and the authentic tradition should be reinterpreted in conformity to the modern sciences.

Sir Syed did not deny the significance of the tradition (*hadith*) as a tool of knowledge which provides the paradigm to find out the solution of the problems and also answers the questions which are intricate and puzzling. He also acknowledges that the tradition is the valid means to know the life and the time of the prophet. It is however difficult to assess the veracity of the tradition. He has devoted fairly long articles to examine the authority of the tradition and has discussed the validity of different criteria evolved by the eminent traditionists for the determination of its truth. He has quite unequivocally asserted that this doubt, regarding the veracity of the traditions, is rooted in the philosophy of Shah Waliullah and his predecessors. Shah Waliullah, being a noted traditionist was well conversant with the problem and often admonishes the people to judge the validity of the tradition before they believe in its veracity. The only valid criterion for the two noted authors is the concurrence of the tradition with the Quran.

Sir Syed considers *ilm-al-Kalam* to be a comprehensive method to meet the challenges posed against Islam by the rival religions. He rightly thinks that it was used rather

successfully in the early phase of Islam when it was criticized by the Jews and the Christians and when the knowledge of the Greek philosophy raised significant questions regarding its basic tenets. The scholars of *kalam* (*muttakalemin*) prudently dispelled the doubts and offered convincing answers to the criticism of the Jews and the Christians on the one hand and to the questions regarding the basic tenets of Islam on the other. The *ilm-al-Kalam* emerged in defence of Islam and together with it formulated a framework for the interpretation of the basic articles of faith and the Quran in accordance with the demands and the requisites of the then existing knowledge. The situation is analogous. Sir Syed emphatically felt the need of a new *ilm-al-Kalam* to meet the challenges thrown up to malign Islam. It is obvious that the missionary work was one of those challenges. Some Muslims were baptized which became the cause of concern for him, Sir Syed adopted a policy of persuasion for he thought that the dispute could be of no consequence and therefore wrote the commentary of the Bible. He, therefore, desired to interpret the religious texts in the scientific manner with the mission that the Muslims, after being scientifically advanced, would defend Islam on one hand and make progress in the worldly affairs on the other.

In conformity to the rich tradition of rationalism in Islam Sir Syed advocates the application of reason and condemns the blind following of rituals and traditions. He emulates his immediate predecessor, Shah Waliullah who

very strongly rejected adherence to any one of the four schools of jurisprudence without taking into account the good points in the other schools. His rationalism assumed greater significance in his contemporary perspective. The religious milieu of nineteenth century was dominated by the puritans, who presented Islam as a most un-accommodative religion and deliberately dissuaded themselves to acknowledge cultural transformation conducive to transgress the precincts of religion. The Puritanism also devastated the sufi spirit which emphasized the moral and social aspect of religion transcending all bounds and accommodating other cultures. Sufism, as we are aware, stress upon the esoteric aspect of religion which is humane in character having little emphasis on rituals. With the inception of *Naqshbandiyah* silsila sufism also took recourse in Puritanism. The Naqshbandi's made all attempts to dispel the adopted local practices for the sufi course. Under this influence, Mir Dard and his father initiated a new school of sufism known as *Tariq-e-Mohammadi*² where in, there was a fascinating slogan 'fall back on the way of Mohammad'. Sir Syed also received mystic training from his family preceptor, Shaikh Ghulam Ali, but he was never inspired. The mystic experience could not of course be analysed rationally. He therefore, showed little interest in the discipline. In short he rejects dogma emphatically and reproves the Muslims to apply reason before they accept any religious doctrine. He is well

² Ekram Mohammad Shaikh: *Mauj-e- Kausar* PP 77-81.

convinced that all the dictates of religion can be analysed with the help of our reason. Besides the application of reason he ruled out the possibility of superstitions and fantasies.

Sir Syed points out that the religion, Islam is categorically harmonious with nature. All its doctrines can be explained as having full correspondence to the natural phenomena. At the first instance it appears that he is profoundly influenced by the eighteen century European naturalist philosophers and presents a mechanistic view of life based on Darvenian hypothesis or the recently developed theories of eighteen century physicist. Sir Syed no doubt hardly shows little resistance to the Darvenian concept of evolution and the theories of modern physicist but the routes of his naturalism lay deep in the philosophy of some Mutazila thinkers and their successors like Ibn –e- Tufail. In support of his principle he has cited the verses of the Quran where in God has introduced himself to His creatures with the help of nature, His own creation. He has also explained the prophet-hood as a natural habitus and asserted further that the prophets like Abraham, Moses and Mohammad (SAW) cognized God due to the innate potentiality through natural phenomena. The nature works in accordance with the Laws which he believes can not be violated.

Besides these two touchstones, Sir Syed has mentioned in his exegesis of the Quran, four basic principles of his new *kalam*. Obvious as it is that he resolved to bring out a covenant between science and religion. In order to reach a

compromise Sir Syed presented the formula of these four principles:-

- (i) God exists a priori;
- (ii) There is no contradiction between word of God and work of God;
- (iii) There can be no disagreement between the manifest covenant and the verbal covenant (Wada-e-faili and wada-e-qauli);
- (iv) Reason distinguished man from other animals.³

Regarding the first Sir Syed is convinced that God exists; He is one, pure and simple and that His attributes are identical with His essence. No science in the world can prove it otherwise. Concerning the second and the third, Sir Syed is clear that the work of God regulated through the Laws of nature has no discord with the word of God. In fact the correspondence between the two confirms the truth of the other. He again is unequivocal in his conviction that the truth of the latter depends solely on the former. In case of the contradiction the former would prevail.

With the growth of science there started an interesting palaver in the eighteen century carried forward to the nineteenth century: whether man created religion or religion created man. Sir Syed asserts that man has cognized God with his reason. In keeping with his principles delineated in his exegesis, he interpreted the Quran in accordance with the

³ Ansari, Asloob Ahmad: Sir Syed Ahmad Khan A Centenary Tribute, PP 380.

investigations of the modern sciences. He was never obstinate in the determination of the meaning of the Quran. He rather advocated that new dimensions may always be added to the meaning of the Quran in accordance with the development of science and growth of knowledge in the times to come. It acknowledges the importance of the independent personal opinion (*ijtehad*) and discourages blind belief (*taqlid*).

Jalamuddin Afghani a Pan-Islamic thinker and Ghulam Ahmad Qadiyani the founder of the Qadiyan sect known after him as Ahmadi movement, reacted sharply to the religious thought of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan. Ghulam Ahmad wrote a small article criticizing him for his views regarding the granting of prayers. Sir Syed argued in his article on the referred subject that God has the knowledge of all future events whose occurrence can not be averted as they have to happen in accordance with the Law of nature manifesting the will of God, it is useless then to pray for the inversion of the natural course. Ghulam Ahmad Qadiyani rejected it arguing that the patient should not take the medicine as well because it does not work unless God so wills, but then the patient is not aware of it God may will so. Analogous to it is the case of the prayers. No one knows what He knows and He knows His will.

Pan-Islamism was a revivalist movement and its main objective to apprise the Muslims of modernism but with the nostalgic touch by glorifying their past. Hali through his

"*Musaddas*" performed this stupendous task quite successfully. Sir Syed himself felt proud of his deed and exalted him for his poetic skill, sober style and easy language. Jamaluddin Afghani was the ardent representative of the movement. He admired the Turk rulers and reformers like Khaldah Khanam and declared his support to them to emerge as leader of the Muslim community for the revival of their political supremacy. Sir Syed also joined him in his mission with a sharp difference between the two that the former opposed the British with all his might without any compromise where as the later looked for every possibility of creating amity between the British and the Muslims. He visualized the future of Muslims in India with the firm conviction that the British rule in India was to live long. His faithfulness may be interpreted positively but it disappointed not only the Muslims but the leaders of other communities also.

Jamaluddin Afghani was also very critical of his religious views. He could never agree with his new *ilm-al-kalam* and its principles. It is true that Afghani was not an orthodox Muslim in many respects and considered the legitimate application of reason as necessary but like many of Sir Syed's friends was not convinced of his personal interpretation (*tawil*) of the Quran, particularly when he attempted to add remote dimensions of the meaning, neither conventional nor assigned, to the words of the Quran. He tried to interpret Islam particularly the Quran in the

framework of science giving the impression to other communities that Islam is a scientific religion and that science confirms it. His aim may be noble but his critics were never convinced. In short Afghani considered Sir Syed's *ilm-al-kalam* as heresy. Besides he thought that Sir Syed was isolating the Indian Muslims from the main stream that is the Muslim community of the world. Afghani disparagingly used the word *nechri* (naturist) for him and vehemently rejected his principle of naturalism. In the history of Indo-Muslim thought Sir Syed is perhaps the tallest person, who has influenced his successors and showed the courage to disagree with his eminent predecessors like Shah Waliullah and some of his contemporaries. We are cognizant that Ghazali dominated the religious scene in the whole Muslim world. He was considered as the Imam, who had the authority to serve as a guide of the community and the guardian of a religion. The most venerated scholar Ibn Timiyah could also not obviate his influence but infact contributed rather significantly to reaffirm Ghazalian orthodoxy. In short the clergy as a whole regarded Ghazali as its revered Imam without penetrating into his thought and the dogma he encouraged.

We have chosen Sir Syed on account of his modernist approach, scientific attitude and free enquiry. He never showed any kind of vanity of the days by gone but often reminds the Muslims of their glorious past for building up a better future. He carried out the rational ancestral legacy,

challenged the basic concept of faith by making it an ancillary of reason and nature. His religious thought, as we have studied, presents many novel ideas which demurred his popularity. Many of his religious work like the exegesis of the Quran could never be thoroughly discussed for they were not made public due to his disparaging remarks on the orthodox clergy. Despite of the stiff resistance from the theologians Sir Syed continued his assault on the religious literature and the authors who produced it. His views on revelation, the existence of angels and *jinns* and the authenticity of the tradition came under heavy criticism but he was never dissuaded to change his views and gain there by the popularity in the Muslims and support from the Ulema.

This study has critically examined all these ideas and has made feeble attempt to establish his eminence as a revolutionary religious thinker in modern India who left his influence on his contemporaries like Amir Ali and the future thinkers like Iqbal and Maulana Azad. Summing it up this study in an acknowledgement of his perseverance modern insight in the political and religious affairs and the sober efforts to provide scientific paradigms for the interpretation of the Quran and the tradition. We have discussed his religious thought in order to clearly bring out the progress, he has made in his religious thought. He begins as an orthodox Muslim passes through the phase of Puritanism and ends up on the note of rationalism and naturalism.

CHAPTER-1

Life and Works of Sir Syed

Ahmad Khan

CHAPTER – 1

LIFE AND WORKS OF SIR SYED AHMAD KHAN

Sir Syed was not only a reformer but also a visionary and a thinker. He wrote many books on various subjects, which manifest his clear insight and reasoning. In fact, he has made a new beginning in literature by writing a different prose. As a social reformer he imposed upon himself the stupendous task of emancipating the Indians in general, and people of his own community in particular from the coercion of the British rule. He, therefore, resolved to pursue a particular mission by means of educating the Muslims in the modern sciences and removing the orthodox approach to religion. Sir Syed always defied conventionality in all realms. He never followed traditionalism either in practice or in writing. In religion he challenged the commonly accepted basic concepts, like that of revelation, angels and Jinn etc. In his religious thought the act of interpretation is very important. Like many of his predecessors, he chose allegorical interpretation. He can rightly be understood as an epoch making person. His ideas created a sort of intellectual revolution.¹

Sir Syed was born on 17 October 1817. It was a period of transition. The Mughal rule had faded away. The internal revolts of Marathas and Ruhilas and the external aggression of Nadir Shah turned the empire into ruins. It was not only a political upheaval, which affected the nobility but also a social devastation which made the life of the people horribly

¹ Baljon, J M S. *The Reforms and Religious Ideas of Sir Syed Ahmad*, p. 91.

miserable. The people breathed in an atmosphere of fright and fear. The company rule was extending its domain. The people lost all their property, liberty and equality. In such a pungent atmosphere, Sir Syed opened his eyes and grew up with a different consciousness and inspiration.²

Sir Syed belonged to a distinguished family. His great grandfather originally belonged to Arabia. They migrated to India in search of new home with better possibilities of livelihood and prosperity having stayed at *Damghan* and *Herat*. They came to India to try their fortune in the Mughal court during the reign of Shahjahan. The Mughals, always Patronized the people of luminaries and theologians. Sir Syed's great grandfather was an able administrator and eminent scholar. Shahjahan facilitated him with a considerably, good rank of nobility, which rose the social status of the family.³

Sir Syed had a very illustrious genealogy. He claimed to be a descendent of Hazrat Ali which means, he was related to the *Ahl-e-bait* (The house of the prophet). Sir Syed's grandfather, Syed Hadi, in the recognition of his services received the title of Jauwad Ali Khan with the *Mansab* of one thousand *zat* and five hundred *Sawar* from Alamgir II. Later on his successor Shah Alam conferred upon him the title of Jauwad-ud-Daula. Sir Syed's father, Mir Muttaqi, inherited the name and fame of his ancestors. But he himself had no interest in the royal matters for he had a sufi disposition.⁴ Khawaja

² Nizami, K.A. : Sayyed Ahmad Khan; pp. 9-10.

³ Saksena, Ram Babu: A History of Urdu Literature; p. 269.

⁴ Hali Altaf Hussain; Hayat-e-Javed PP 1-3.

Zain-al-Abedin the maternal uncle of Sir Syed, was also a man of great talent and varied interests and exercised profound influence on him as a youth.

As we are aware, the Mughal empire became quite weak. The company rule was becoming more and more strong. India became almost a British domain. Khawaja Fariduddin, the maternal grandfather of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, belonged to an eminent (Kashmiri) family of Delhi, and was connected with that of the famous Delhi poet, Khawaja Mir Dard. Khawaja Fariduddin was a person of versatile talent. He possessed an immense knowledge in the field of Mathematics, Astrology and Music. Apart from this, he was an able and competent administrator. In 1791, East India Company appointed him as superintendent of the Calcutta Madarsah (Madarsah-i-Alliyah). Pleased with his performance East India Company, later on deputed him to Iran and Burma on the diplomatic mission. In 1803, he was send as an attaché of British Embassy to Persia under the governorship of Lord Wellesley, but due to ill health he returned to Calcutta. In 1810, he resigned from the post of *tahsildar* of Banda and went to live in Calcutta. However, in 1815, he was appointed as *Wazir* with the title of Dabir-ud-Daula, Aminul-Mulk, Muslah Jung by the emperor Akbar Shah II. Working in the capacity of *Wazir*, he introduced various financial reforms, because of which he was forced to resign, but very soon he was recalled by emperor and was again

empowered with the task of *Wazir* for three years. He died in 1828.⁵

Sir Syed as a child was impressed with his maternal grandfather's abilities and had an ample chance to learn a lot from him. Sir Syed inherited administrative acumen from him. Sir Syed also drew inspiration from his father Mir Muttaqi, who was a devoted disciple of a Naqshbandi Saint, Shaikh Ghulam Ali. He received his formal education in the Madrasa of Shah Abdul Aziz. This madrasa preached Waliullahi tradition earlier established by his father Shah Abdul Rahim. It provided modern education with Islamic parameters, and imparted the latest knowledge of *Hadith*, Jurisprudence (*Fiqh*) and other Quranic sciences. Sir Syed under the influence of Madrasa education was influenced by Wahabi movement. If analysed, we would know that the Naqshbandi culture, despite continuing the sufi tradition, was quite Juxtaposite to Wahabi movement. Both of them emphasized the Puritan approach and aimed at eradicating all alien practices from Islam. Sir Syed, however, never encouraged Puritanism and orthodoxy. He was a revolutionary.⁶

It is interesting to note that in this period of decadence, when Mughal empire got dwindled within the fort of Delhi, there lived many eminent scholars exalted sufis and renowned theologians in and outside of the precincts of the fort. Although Bahadur Shah had little importance in the political environment yet, enjoyed the company of great poets like Ghalib, Momin, Zauq etc. Young Sir Syed carefully studied the works of these

5 Muslim India: Monthly Journal of Reference And Research And Documentation; Vol. I, October 1983, P. 439.

6 Ikram Mohd Shaikh : *Mauj e Kausar*; Daryaganj, New Delhi, 1962, PP. 77-79.

prudent scholars and perused them in his own way. Besides these theologians having mystic disposition, we also come across some important Sufis like Mir Dard, Mazhar Jan-e-Janan and Shah Latif, who are known for their significant contribution in this particular realm. Sir Syed apprised himself with the current sufistic trends. The perusal of his religious thought reveals that Sir Syed was quite rational and modern in his approach to religion. He inculcated this disposition due to the scholarly environment, prevailing in the Delhi of those days. The persons of repute and eminence in different realms had categorically abundant the hope of any improvement what so ever, they, therefore, resorted to writing and producing exquisite literature in the form of creative poetry and prose. Besides, the mentioned poets, there were some important critics and approvers of literature. The name of Nawab Mustafa Khan Shaifta and Nawab Ziauddin are worth mentioning. The former was a man of letters and the latter was a bibliophile, who had a very rich library which unfortunately was rendered to flames in 1857. Many Lovers of knowledge, however, benefited themselves from it.⁷

Sir Syed always kept company with the learned persons and the patrons of knowledge. He was always welcomed by the eminent scholars of his age. He himself admired with fervour many scholars of his time. Ghalib inspired him most Sir Syed exalted him rather frequently in his writings. He showed him, his revised edition of *Ain-e-Akbari* but Ghalib advised him to forget the past and remember the present. Apart from, there was

⁷ Ibid. PP-79-81.

a galaxy of scholars, who respected Sir Syed and enjoyed his company. He always worked for the socialization and the growth of knowledge.⁸

Soon after he completed his education, Sir Syed started his career as a government employee. He served the British Government for about 35 years but he never forgot his greater responsibility to the community and the society. He was never nostalgic, he only wanted to create and awakening the Muslims by telling them about the meaningful and significant contribution of their ancestors.⁹

Sir Syed Ahmad Khan was nearly of 20 years, when he stopped his education in 1837, without being proficient in any field. However, he retained his interest in scholars and poets, such as Sahbai, Ghalib and Aurangzeb.¹⁰ One year latter, in 1838, his father passed away, leaving behind the responsibility of managing family affairs. The burden of family's maintenance compelled him to seek a job. As Mughal court had very little or nothing to offer in the name of a job, Sir Syed made a firm decision to enter into British Service much against his family's wishes. As a result of his continuous and rigorous effort of searching a job, in 1838, he got an appointment as a record writer (Sarishtadar) of the criminal Department in the office of the *Sadar-Amin* of Delhi.¹¹ With the passage of time he climbed up the ladder of his career. In February 1839, he was deputed as *Naib Munshi* (deputy amanuensis) in the office of Sir Robert

⁸ Ibid. PP 81-82

⁹ Ibid. P 82.

¹⁰ Sheikh, B. Ali: A leader Reassessed Life and Works of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan; P. 4.

¹¹ Graham, G.F.I.: The Life And Works of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, P. 4. & Journal of Islamic Culture: vol. 4, 1930 P. 389.

Hamilton, the then commissioner of Agra. Thereafter, within two years and ten months, he was promoted to the rank of *munsif* and was appointed in the said capacity at Mainpuri in December 1841. Very soon he was transferred to Fatehpur Sikri in 1842, where he worked for four years. During this period he got three books published, viz;

1. Zila ul Qulub Bizikr ul Mahboob (written in 1839), which dealt with the life of Prophet Mohammad.
2. Tuhfa-i-Hasan (also written in 1839), was the Urdu translation of chapters 10 and 12 of Tuhfa-i-isna Ashariya, which was basically the refutation of Shia attacks on Sunni, and
3. Jarr us Saqil (written in 1844) which contain a scientific treatise on wheels and pulleys.¹²

In February 1846, on his humble request expressing his desire to stay with his mother, he was transferred to Delhi, where he lived consecutively for eight years. After his transfer, as he was settling down permanently in Delhi, he decided to do some research work into buildings of the city and its vicinities. The outcome of his decision was "*Asar-us-Sanadid*" (description of old Monuments), the most important non-religious literary work of Sir Syed Ahmad, which took about one year and a half to complete. It was first printed in 1847 and contained four chapters.¹³

- i. A description of the buildings outside the city;

¹² Hali Altaf Husain: Hayat-e-Javed PP. 246-247

¹³ Ibid. P-52.

- ii. A description of red fort and its buildings;
- iii. A chapter dealing especially with the buildings of Shahjahanabad; and
- iv. A chapter devoted to the famous personalities of Delhi; who were either contemporaries of Sir Syed or lived just before him.

Along with the accounts of historical buildings in and outside Delhi of Muslim rule in India, Sir Syed has also mentioned some of the important scholars and mystics of past and the present.

The second edition of *Asar-us-Sanadid* was successfully completed in 1854. In January 1855, he was given a higher promotion, and was appointed *Sadr-i-Amin* (Sub judge) of Bijnaur, where he wrote history of Bijnaur and revised *Ain-i-Akbari*.¹⁴

Their behaviour generated feeling of hatred among Indians against them. At the time when Sir Syed was acting as *Sadr-Amin* at Bijnaur. He proved his loyalty to British by saving life of at least 20 Europeans venturing his own life. For showing loyalty and courage of saving life of European he not only received pension from British but was also granted the title of "Companion of the Star of India".¹⁵ In spite of all these he was forced to leave Bijnaur and in September 1857, he went to Delhi, found his uncle and cousin killed, and his mother living

¹⁴ Ibid. PP-54-58.

¹⁵ May, L.S.: Indo Muslim Religious Thought from 1857 to the present. P. 38.

miserably in a stable as pauper. His mother died there soon after.

When the revolt was over, the British initiated the re-occupation campaign and indulged themselves in brutally punishing all these involved in the revolt. This activity of British left an adverse impact on the mind of Sir Syed Ahmad.¹⁶

In April 1858, he was transferred to Moradabad as *Sadr-us-Sadur*. Latter on in 1860, he was entrusted with the job of administering and expediting famine relief work. He accepted his new task, on the condition that in no case, famine suffered orphans will be handed over to Christian missionaries, but to Muslim or Hindu family's as the case may be. But he was shocked to know that he was cheated by the British, whose newly appointed collector had decided to handover all the orphans to Christian Missionaries.¹⁷ One year after, in 1861, his wife died, leaving behind two sons and one daughter. The act of betrayal by British and sudden demise of his wife, changed his mind and he concentrated on educating his countrymen for their betterment.¹⁸

In the pursuit of his educational programme, he established a Madarsah in Moradabad. Latter on he founded scientific society at Ghazipur in 1862, when he was transferred from Moradabad to Ghazipur. The Madarsah set up at Ghazipur was latter raised to High School. In 1864, he came to Aligarh and stayed here for three years. During his stay at Aligarh, he

¹⁶ Journal of Muslim India P. 439

¹⁷ Hali Altaf, Husain: Hayat-e-Javed. PP 105-110.

¹⁸ Ibid. PP 125-126.

did four important works. One was to shift scientific society to Aligarh, which became its permanent headquarter; secondly he established British Indian Association; thirdly he setup educational committees all over the North Western provinces and Oudh, and the fourth and last but most important step in the direction of education was to publish a regular periodical entitled as 'Aligarh Institute Gazette', with a view to promoting the objectives of scientific society. At the end of his three year tenure, in 1867, he was transferred to Banaras as a judge of the small cause court, where he served approximately for ten years. Thereafter, in 1876, he retired from government service.¹⁹

Sir Syed was basically an academician and his academic excellence is manifested in his writings. Although, his interest varied and he wielded his pen to discuss the problems of all existing sciences, yet he showed inclination to the religious discourse. He wrote many important books on religion. All these works reflect his staunch faith and profound knowledge. Sir Syed never followed blindly, he had his own well argued convictions having a rational foundation and a scientific outlook. Moreover in his days of child-hood and adolescence he remained in the company of the devotees and scholars of religion for he had favourable aptitude to the religion.²⁰

He spent almost sixty years in writing books and treatise on the religion, Islam. In 1898, he wrote a defeating reply to the criticism of a Christian author on the prophet Mohammad's wives (The mothers of Muslims). He was deeply influenced by

¹⁹ Journal of Muslim India. P 439.

²⁰ Ikram, Mohammad Sheikh: *Mauj-e-Kausar*, P 82-83.

the reformist movement of Syed Ahmad Brailwy and Ismail Shaheed. In his monumental book *Asar-us-Sanadid*, he has also mentioned them with a sense of veneration and respect. He became their follower with a sense of pride. The enlivening influence of Syed Ahmad Shaheed in particular impelled him quite a great deal and played an important role in the transformation of his religious ideas. Sir Syed himself claimed to be a Wahabi, who in those days were deemed as rebels. Under the impact of these noted scholars, he wrote several books and treatises. Such as *Sunnat dar radd-e-Bidat*, *Tabyin-al-Kalam*, *Kalimat-al-Haq*, *Tafsir-al-Quran*, *Khutbat-e-Ahmadia* etc. in all these books he has imbibed the reformist spirit and has followed different method.²¹

He started his educational movement by establishing a Madarsah for teaching Persian and other Islamic Sciences. But soon after he realized that it was no good for the welfare of Indian people. With the zeal and concern for the upliftment of Indian commune, he founded another educational institution at Ghazipur in which teaching of English was compulsory. Beside these institutions, Sir Syed started the scientific society which aimed the translating of English books of Science into Urdu. In addition to this he also published a bilingual newspaper in English and Urdu; perhaps the first of this nature. Upon his transfer to Banaras he gave the responsibility of looking it after to Raja Jai Kishan Das.²²

²¹ Ibid. PP 83-84.

²² Ibid. PP-84-85.

Sir Syed, till then, was quite secular in his approach, he desired to execute his reforms upon Indians in general. His stay at Banaras changed his mind. Some Hindu officers and nobles made attempts to replace Persian from *Bhasa* as official language and also advocated for the change of *lipi* into *Devnagri*. He was shocked. He realized that the two communities have started to come at variance. In a meeting with Shakespeare, the then commissioner of Banaras, Sir Syed discussed his programme of education for Muslims. Shakespeare heard it passionately but with astonishment. He enquired from him the reason for the change in his attitude. He, with the sense of depreciation told him of his feelings and spoke of the schism, he noticed between the two communities.²³

During his stay in Banaras, Sir Syed got an opportunity to visit England. His son Syed Mahmud was awarded a prestigious scholarship by the British Indian government for his higher education in Britain. He, along with his son, went there with a noble mission in his mind. In addition to his admission, Sir Syed also wanted to collect relevant material to offer a befitting reply to William Muir's book on "The life of Mohamet". He wrote a well argued and forcefully contended book to prove his strong point. Sir Syed stayed in Britain for about one and half year. He did not only collect the material for his intended work but also met many people of high repute and also carefully studied the social, political and educational system of Europe in general and Britain in particular. He came to the conclusion that the basic reason of all the advancements of west lies in free

²³ Ibid. PP-85-86.

thinking, scientific attitude and rational approach. He immediately resolved that he would set up some institution to inculcate in the Muslims of India, all these qualities.²⁴

On his return from Britain, Sir Syed brought out a periodical (*Tahzib-al-Akhlaq*) which published articles regarding the wretched condition of the Muslims of India. Most of them were contributed by Sir Syed himself. The periodical was brought out three times. He had to stop it again and again due to strong opposition of the members of his own community. Each time it was seized with a note of despondency. Just after two or three issues of *Tahzibul Akhlaque* was bitterly condemned, particularly for the articles on religion. This periodical was not only a landmark in the field of Urdu journalism but also a milestone in the history of Urdu literature. It was in fact, the vehicle of his thought through which Sir Syed attempted to convince his fellow beings to abandon the path of dogmatism and to come forward to respond to the call of the day.²⁵

Upon his return from the Britain, he took some wise steps to put his resolution into practice. The pursuit of his educational mission began with the establishment of school at Muradabad for the teaching of Arabic and Persian. Soon after its foundation, Sir Syed realized that along with Persian, Arabic, Sanskrit should also be taught. He, therefore, included it in the school syllabi of Ghazipur. He made once such attempt at Bijnaur also. But his most significant educational achievement

²⁴ Ibid. P 86.

²⁵ Ibid. PP 86-87.

was the establishment of MAO College at Aligarh. Sir Syed, constituted a committee of like-minded persons who showed their concern for the education of Muslims. His son Syed Mahmud prepared a proposal for the establishment of M.A.O. College. The British government of India enthusiastically favoured it. Many British officers, including William Muir and Lord North Brook the then viceroy, whole heartedly extended personal contribution to the college fund and also promised to provide moral and financial support. The committee in the first place, decided to start a school in the name of M.A.O. High School under the supervision of Maulvi Samiullah whose services were highly acclaimed and appreciated. After its foundation Sir Syed sought retirement from his service and dedicated himself fully for the promotion of the college. Lord Lytton laid its foundation stone. The MAO College which was so created by the Muslims of India with the support of British government was secular in character. It threw open its portals to all Indians without any discrimination.²⁶

The establishment of M.A.O. College was widely welcomed by the Indian Muslims. They rightly considered it as beneficial for their mental progress and material promotion. It evoked harsh response in its repugnance particularly in the clergy, who, as commonly held, opposed English education for obvious political reasons. It is of course true that some of them made poignant remarks due to the revolutionary religious ideas of Sir Syed. Before going to England he translated the book of Alfinistan on History of India (Tarikh-e-Hind). Besides, in his

²⁶ Ibid. PP 88-90.

incomplete exegesis of Bible, Sir Syed made some objectionable claims in discovering the points of agreement between the two religions. His attempts were interpreted otherwise. Similarly his other religious ideas also caused inevitable irritation, it actually became the basic reason for his strong opposition. At least two of his opponents Maulvi Imdad Ali and Maulvi Ali Bakhsh were government servants and could not, therefore, oppose English education for the referred reason. His friend Mohsinul Mulk also had some genuine doubts about his faith till Sir Syed clarified them. Despite his strong opposition, he continued his efforts for the development of the college on the one hand and the erstwhile published periodical on the other.²⁷

After setting up the college, Sir Syed rightly thought to seek retirement from his government service. He carried out his resolution and left Banaras in July, 1876 for permanent settlement at Aligarh. In the last leg of his life Sir Syed very meticulously and devotedly worked for the development of MAO College. He visited many places in Northern India, like Ludhiyana, Jalandhar, Amritsar, Lahore and Patiala to raise the college fund. He was accorded the Warmest welcome every where he reached. The Anjuman "*Zindah Dilan-e-Punjab*" organized these meetings for him in the above mentioned cities. Sir Syed collected a huge amount for the college fund. On account of its better finances and educational standard the college gained unprecedented reputation in the shortest time. He now resolved to handover the college to a board of trustees. A

²⁷ Ibid. PP 90-93.

bill was proposed to create the board. Syed Mahmud, the son of Sir Syed prepared the draft bill which of course received the concurrence of the British government. He was the secretary of the board and Syed Mahmud was appointed as joint secretary. The trustees like Maulana Samiullah who really worked hard in the establishment of school and thereafter the college had very strong but convincing reservation against his name. Maulana Samiullah being his right hand in his strenuous efforts aptly considered himself to be his successors. Besides Maulana Samiullah and his supporters also knew the idiosyncrasies of Syed Mahmud's temperament. Despite being quite knowledgeable and meticulous worker Syed Mahmud was quite short tempered and addicted to drinking. Notwithstanding his angularities he was appointed as joint secretary with the support of English Professor for whom he Syed Mahmud was an attraction in Aligarh. Maulana Samiullah however, resigned from the board and went to Allahabad, where he built a Muslim hostel for the Muslim students of Allahabad University.

The inhibitions of the opponent came true, Syed Mahmud had to resign from his job due to some serious differences with his father. Sir Syed wanted him to mend his ways, but he admonished his father not to interfere with his personal life. Syed Mahmud left Aligarh for Lucknow.

The last days of his life he were quite miserable. His own son was its cause. His agony was enhanced when he discovered that his office clerk, looking after the duties of the treasurer made an embezzlement of one lakh rupees from the college fund

which could not be recovered even after his attempts. He felt the heaviness of the shock. In this state of mental torture, Sir Syed breathed his last on 23rd March 1898.²⁸

Sir Syed lived a full life. He shared its sweets and sour but hardly made any complaints against its bitterness. He appreciated its beauty and communicated its charms to others. He, throughout his life, tried hard to do something for others. He was one of them who live for others and dispensed happiness with them.

Sir Syed was not only a thinker but also a reformer. In the assessment of his greatness it is some times difficult to say whether he enjoyed it as a reformer or a scholar. In our opinion he was equally great in the two fields.

Despites, all serious charges of heresy, apostasy and infidelity, Sir Syed went on pursuing his mission with new vigour and fresh zeal. Those who supported him in his mission were quite sincere people. They knew Sir Syed's heart which was full of sympathy, sincerity and gratitude for his people. During his Government service, he was felt concerned with the glorious past and the opaque present of the Muslims. It was manifest in all his reformative efforts. The course of his reforms began from Muradabad and ended at Aligarh. All the educational institutions, he began where the substantive evidence of his on going mission. Besides, he also took up some novel and effective measures to bring in reforms in the community behaviour. *Tahzibul Akhlaque* was one of them. It

²⁸ Ibid. PP 94-99.

had many fold significance. The most exalted one, was to create awakening in the Muslim community which fell into the dyke of darkness, after loosing age old rule some of them still lived in the political dilemma and many others having seen the afflicting and athletic devastation of Delhi, another cities by the British army had lost their hopes. Sir Syed through this paper addressed those despondent people and called for them to come out of their dejection and give up the unconscious hatred towards the British. He thought that the Muslims could regain their political strength after being educated in the modern style. He considered western sciences to be the proper tools of development. Having this in mind, Sir Syed founded a scientific society to translate the works of science from English into Urdu language. Sir Syed was also aware that Aligarh College could not catered to the educational leads of all Muslims in India. He, therefore, founded Muslim educational conference, which could implement the project of Sir Syed in different states and districts of India. His reforms movement later on took up the shape of Aligarh Movement. The Movement did not only look after the educational leads of Muslims of India but also resorted to give in the guiding principles in the realms of politics and religions. Thus, Sir Syed lived a life full of vigour and zeal. He always remained actively engaged in his project. Even his critics exalted him for his sincerity, sobriety and commitment.²⁹

²⁹ Ibid. PP 100-107.

CHAPTER-2

Rationalism in Islam

CHAPTER – 2

RATIONALISM IN ISLAM

Sir Syed, like many of his predecessors, was a rationalist. He was imbued by the basic spirit of religion, Islam, which, unlike Judaism and Christianity, emphasized the application of reason not only in matters of worldly sciences but also in the realm of religious knowledge. Islam never encouraged blind following (*taqlid*) or conservatism. The Quran spoke of the articles of faith with the force of argument. It is true that these arguments presented are rhetorical in nature.

Since the time of the Prophet Mohammad (SAW) the Quran has evoked various responses not only in the followers but also in the antagonists belonging to other religions. They are impelled to acknowledge its veracity, profoundness of meaning and exquisiteness of style. Its very content speaks of its being a book of God. In addition to this the miraculous content also compels people to ponder over it and try to penetrate into what has been said therein, so as to realize the force of argument and depth of meaning.¹

The Holy Quran became the center of attraction and scholars showed their interest and studied it from various angles. Many of them became interested in its language and style. Consequently they developed whole science of hermeneutics with its various forms of interpretation. The interpretation of the Quran was indispensable for the obvious reason that the book consists of two types of verses namely, the

¹ Fakhry Majid. A History of Islamic Philosophy, P 2

clear verses and ambiguous verses [*Muhakemat, Mutashabihat*].² The meanings of the clear verses are unequivocal and required no interpretation whatsoever but the ambiguous verses being complex in character always needed interpretation. In the days of Prophet and there after in the regime of the subsequent pious caliphs the Muslims resolved their difficulties and understood the intricacies of the meanings with the help of the Prophet earlier and pious caliphs later on. The Muslim intelligentsia then developed the interest in the interpretation of Holy Quran. Consequent upon, the scholars have been writing exegesis.³

If we compare Islam with Judaism and Christianity, we will know that Islam is distinct from them for several reasons. The first and the most important one of them is the emphasis on the application of reason. The other two religions mentioned, lay emphasis on the firm faith without giving any room to rational thinking and contemplative reasoning. The Christianity for instance very harshly discourages the use of reason and argumentation.⁴ We are cognizant that the Greek Philosophy before the commencement of the Christian era was quite rife in Europe and other parts of the world. It was widely read and appreciated in the Greek centers of learning rampant in Asia and Europe. The Greek masters particularly Plato and Aristotle were highly venerated and exalted. The world acknowledged their prudence, Philosophical genius and sagacity of arguments. The people learnt from them different sciences and regarded their

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3 Nadwi Muzaffarudin: Muslim Thought and its Sources, PP 2-3.

4 Indian Review: Vol. 1917, PP 188-189.

contribution as a milestone in history of human civilization. The Greeks laid the foundation of rational thinking, free enquiry and scientific attitude. They also gave to the world valuable sciences of argument like rhetoric, dialectics and logic.⁵

The Christian clerics radically opposed the pursuit of knowledge. They considered that the acquisition of knowledge was their prerogative alone. The masses should not be allowed to acquire it. The reason being obvious that they were cognizant of the fact that the socialization of knowledge may create reawakening, and in the aftermaths they may raise a voice of defiance which could sometimes be detrimental to the cause of religion, Christianity. Their conjunctures were true.

With the growth of human civilization man reached a destination of vital significance. 1356 was a land mark in the human history when the printing press was invented. The acquisition of knowledge, which till then was a share of the few, became possible even for the common man. The availability of the books was quite easier and plenty. The Christian clergy, notwithstanding their resolution could not stop the augmentation of knowledge and the socialization of education. As a consequence to this, the renaissance started in many countries of Europe. After a very strong resistance from the papacy resulting into a heinous bloodshed leading to the up surge of civil war. The Christianity was sundered into several communities, having their own churches emphasizing a different set of doctrines. The Christian clergy felt this danger

⁵ Fakhry Majid: *A History of Islamic Philosophy*. PP 5-7.

long before and discouraged therefore the acquisition of knowledge and the subsequent application of reason.⁶

The Christian clergy concealed the books of ancient masters. The Greek repository was almost buried and forgotten with persistent and directed effort. Al-Mamoon, the successors of Harun Rashid, once sent to Rome a delegation to ask for the precious treasure of the Ancients. The Pope abruptly refuse to part with the books of ancient masters but the clergy persuaded him to give these books to Muslims because in their opinion they would, on account of their rational descent, create a chaos in the Muslim community. They wanted to keep away their community from the use of reason.⁷

The Christian parsons taught them nothing but faith. They made people believe that they are the effect of a regretful cause, the original sin. The Jesus Christ by paying the price of his precious life redeemed man from the heinous crime. God being the father incarnated himself into the human form of Jesus Christ and received afflictions as a mark of penalty for the erstwhile committed sin of Adam in paradise. Christianity successfully created in man a sense of guilt and depression. A true Christian would never question but follow it ardently. The image of the Jesus Christ, as presented in Christianity, is of super natural man, who transcends the world.⁸

Paradoxically enough the Prophet of Islam declaratively asserts that he is a human being. There is an often quoted verse

⁶ Indian Review: vol. 5, 1917 P 62.

⁷ Fakhry Majid: A History of Islamic Philosophy. PP 15-16.

⁸ Indian Review vol. 5, 1917, P-692.

in the Quran where God asks the Prophet to tell his people that he is a human being like them with the distinction that he receives revelation from God.⁹ Moreover the Prophet of Islam was born of his human parents like an ordinary child. His birth was certainly not a miracle. If we go through the life of Prophet, we can easily infer that the Prophet always emphasized the application of reason. Despite the fact, we should not conclude that revelation is subservient to reason. The Prophet of Islam always tries to convince people to act upon the tenets of Islam on the basis of arguments. Moreover, it should be noted that his arguments are never supernatural. He always draws them from the natural Phenomenon. Many verses from the Quran and the traditions of the Prophet may be cited to substantiate our contention. The belief in God is argued on the basis of the universe, He created the objects of many types and shapes, He design therein. This type of argument, albeit, rhetorical in nature, appeals to the reason. Contrary to this, Christianity and Judaism draw their arguments from the extra natural phenomenon sometimes by frightening people with His wrath and sublimity and sometimes by alluring them with His mercy and majesty.¹⁰

At the time of the death of the prophet many people gathered in the abode of Aysha. All felt grieved at heart. Even the most valiant of them shed tears knowing that the Prophet would not be among them any longer. Some of them in sheer gloom asked the Prophet as to who would guide them after him.

⁹ S. XVIII: 109.

¹⁰ Indian Review: vol. 5 1917, P 63.

He abruptly asked him again that in his life the Prophet used to clarify the Quranic ambiguities and explain the hidden meaning there in. Who would do the job after his demise? The Prophet replied, "your reason".¹¹

Islam as a religion always gave reason, its due place. In addition, Islam has again and over again emphasized the attainment of knowledge. The very first verse of the Quran reveal to the Prophet astonished not only him, but also his other colleagues. The angel pronounced the very first amazing word of the revelation, which is imperative in nature, "read in the name of God". The opening words of the message baffled the Prophet, he told Gabriel that he did not know how to read. Gabriel informed him of the will of God by which, He has chosen him to be His Prophet. Gabriel also told him to remember the words as His message to be conveyed to the masses. The whole of the Quran was revealed to the Prophet in bits as and when needed and was completed in a span of some twenty-three years.¹² The message was so delivered to prepare the people for the acceptance of the arguments presented either to refute earlier scriptures or to withhold the right in the last revelation. It can be contended then, apart from other reasons, it took a longer span in order that people accept its validity and authenticity on a rational basis.

The word *aql* in its various forms along with its synonym *hikma* has occurred several times, instructing the people each time for its proper application with an emphasis on its prudent use. The

¹¹ Ibid: vol. 3, 1915, PP 24-25.

¹² Fakhry Majid: A History of Islamic Philosophy, P 2.

reason must be applied, to know the majesty and grace of God, to comprehend the meaning of his being one and the only one and to understand the infinite possibilities of the manifestation of His attributes. The Quran has also reproved of its erroneous use. The reason justifying infidelity, apostasy or polytheism is hazardous. The Muslims acted upon his exhortations. They applied their reason in the solution of the problems, they faced with. In its aftermath their emerged different sciences; in the beginning particularly the Jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and scholasticism (*Ilm-al-Kalam*) and subsequently many other sciences related to the Quran and the tradition.¹³

The concept of rationalism, like other ideas has been borrowed from the European Philosophy. We witness that it has been introduced in the European lexicons with the emergence of renaissance in Europe. Bacon, in sixteen century started the tradition and Descartes later on formalized it. Rationalism emerged as a theory of knowledge in the philosophy of the precursors and successors of Descartes. Rationalism was thus used in Europe in the epistemological and ontological sense. The former provided a theory of knowledge and later helped in the comprehension of being. In other words the former applied reason as a tool of knowledge and the later used it as a method of defence. Earlier rationalism meant to defend Christianity by explaining its various doctrines and concepts. St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Anslem used it in this sense. It was inconformity with Neo-Platonic principle of defence. The three saints mentioned above, built up the edifice of Christian theology not only on the Neo-Platonic contentions, but also used

¹³ Ibid: P 134.

Aristotelian way of argument. The renaissance presented another shade of rationalism which prepared a basis for the commencement of Philosophy and science. The rationalism, henceforth, was no more a method for the defence of religion, but a tool for the acquisition of knowledge.¹⁴

It should be clear that rationalism in Islam was not an outcome of any revivalist movement. It was the product of the religious teachings imbibed in the Quran and the tradition. It is obvious then, questions that arose in the Muslim mind were related to either the Quran or the tradition. After the demise of the Prophet his immediate companions particularly the four caliphs resolved the problems of the Muslims by giving them a Quranic solution. But after the expiry of the regime it really became difficult for the Muslims to get a satisfactory answer to their question and a workable solution of the problems. The nature of caliphate was changed. Instead of being a representative the caliph became a ruler, hence, he could not satisfy their religious crave. The Muslim intelligentsia then played an effective role by providing them religious leadership. Their scholarship of religion assigned them this authority and they used it with enough sensibility and prudence.

The Quran was the first inspiration on account of which the Muslims began to study the world from different angles. There are many verses which encourage the people for scientific enquiry and rational thinking. The Quran asserts that the universe is self revealing.

The Quran is also a repository of knowledge, it has, on one hand, imbued man to discover noble things in the universe, it also

¹⁴ Saeeda Iqbal: *Islamic Rationalism in the Subcontinent*; PP 17-19.

informed man on the other hand about many things that existed in the past and were destroyed for not being able to contribute in any way to society. Besides, the Quran has given a very accurate assessment of human nature it speaks the good qualities of man and also his infirmities. Unlike Christianity, Islam is never critical of man for having committed the original sin. The Quran cognizes the importance of man and addresses him as the best of His creatures (*Ashraf-ul-Makhluqat*). It may be a matter of interpretation, but God has addressed him so because of his wisdom, reason. The Quran never condemns him as some pitiable creature which is to be chastised. The Quran ascertains the intrinsic value of man and cognizes that the whole universe is for him. When the angels were ordered to prostrate before Adam, and after the denial of the devil, God explained to him and the other angels, the importance of man with the test of knowledge that he innately inherited.

The History records that there were some very famous centers of Greek learning like Harran, Jundishapur, Edessa, Qinisrin, Aleppo and Alexandria in Mesopotamian and Egyptian cradles. In these centres, people other than the Greeks also showed keen interest in the Greek learning. They started translating the famous works of Plato and Aristotle. The large number of them could not survive, but some of them in Syrian languages were handed over to the subsequent generations. The Rosita's and Adages carried the emblems from the Philosophical teachings of the two classical masters, Plato and Aristotle. Poetic of Aristotle was perhaps the first translated work in the Syriac language. Thence started trends of translation. Many other books of medicine and metaphysics particularly of Aristotle were translated thereafter. Before the advent of Islam, Plato and Aristotle

were being read in the above mentioned centres of Greek learning either in original or through translations. The Arabs, however, were introduced to the classical masters long after the inception of Islam.¹⁵

Islam was in its purest form in the days of the Prophet Mohammad (SAW). The reason was obvious. The Prophet was alive to check any kind of deviation. It should be clear that even in his own days, he had to argue the veracity of the message of God which he conveyed quite faithfully and sincerely to the Jews, Christians and Pagans living in the Arabian peninsula. We are cognizant that the Prophet had to face stiff resistance to the extent that he migrated from his native place *Mecca* to *Medina*. Despite all odds, he never lost his hope and finally succeeded in his most noble mission. Most of the times, he averted the onslaught either by his moral courage or with forceful contentions. He showed miracles only when he deemed them to be indispensable. It clearly means that he emphasized reason more than dogma. Apart from it, the Prophet also dealt rather prudently with the hypocrites, who had no desire to listen to any argument. They, nevertheless, on one hand asked the Prophet many question, some times of no significance and on the other raised queries and created doubts about the religion in minds of the sincere followers. The Prophet, however, very wisely answered the questions of the hypocrites and the sincere followers and also cleared their of doubts.

The Muslims particularly the new converts had in the first place many queries about the Quran itself. Besides there emerged a new science related to the interpretation of the Quran and the

¹⁵ Fakhry Majid: A History of Islamic Philosophy, P 13.

tradition. In order to satisfy themselves and explain the Quran to the Arabs and the foreign converts, there arose a host of scholars who studied it from different angles. Some felt fascination in its picturesque language, studied the Philology, the semantics and syntactic, others were bewitched by its style in rhythmic and versified language. In the aftermath of their interests, they started a significant discussion on the importance of the words and the style of the Quran. In addition to this, the scholars also indulged into yet another significant palaver on the priority of the word and meaning. We have a long-chain of scholars like Jurjani, Jahiz, Mautaz, Qadama, Qatiba etc. dealing with this controversy. Apart from it, some scholars attended to the writing of exegesis. The Quran thus became the center of attraction just after the Prophet.¹⁶

The Quran and the traditions the Muslims had yet another repository of knowledge and wisdom, the Greek literature. Besides the Muslim felt the need to equip themselves with the Greek sciences for some other reasons as well. Most important of them was to eradicate the alien elements from Islam. It is obvious that the new converts brought with them their ancestral practices, customs and traditions which naturally had become their habits. These practices of course had no or little concurrence with Islam. Such things were to be discouraged, but with arguments.¹⁷

There was a two fold growth of knowledge in the Islamic world, the esoteric side gave way to the emergence of spiritual sciences like mysticism which latter on developed its own epistemology, ethics, metaphysics and aesthetics. The exoteric side

¹⁶ Nadvi, M. Iqbal Husain: *Arabi Tanqeed Mutala or Jaizah*, PP 247-274

¹⁷ Wolfson, Harry Austrin: *The Philosophy of the Kalam*, PP 70-79.

led to the origin of rational sciences which required interpretation and explanation. These rational sciences were divided into two kinds, the jurisprudence, purely theological in nature and the *Kalam* having a theosophical approach for the explanation of religious questions. The rational tradition also gave way to the emergence of yet another branch of knowledge which was purely of philosophical nature. It was different from *Kalam* in the sense that it dealt with the problems not directly related to religion. The Philosophers classified under this group were greatly influenced by Greek Philosophy. They, therefore, made efforts to interpret Platonic, Aristotelian and Neo-Platonic principles in the Islamic paradigms.¹⁸

The Muslims at the outset contemplated, as Shahrastani pointed out, over the following four questions:

1. The question of freedom of human will, i.e., whether man has liberty of volition or not, and whether he has discretion in of his actions or not;
2. The problem of attributes of God, i.e. whether God has attributes or not; and if He does, whether they are parts of His essence or excluded there from;
3. The question of demarcation between beliefs and actions, i.e. whether a man's actions form the part of his beliefs or they are separate from them; and
4. The dispute between reason and revelations, i.e. whether the real criterion of truth is reason or revelation. In other words, whether reason is subject to revelation or revelation is other wise.¹⁹

¹⁸ Ibid PP 4-5.

¹⁹ Ibid PP 11-12.

These questions basically are related to the articles of faith. After the Christian and Judaic attack the new converts changed their attitude towards Islam. They began to question the very articles of faith, the *mutakalimin* in their answer to these questions began some new discourses. The *mutakalimin* defended the Islamic belief with forceful arguments. Apart from the questions that Shahrastani pointed out, the unity of God in nature of Book (Quran) also became the contentious issues. Not only the *mutakalimin*, the Philosophers also pondered over the issues and argued their point of view in the subsequent discourses on these problems. The Quran and the tradition taught them a great deal and prepared their mind to accept any piece of knowledge from any where. There is, albeit, a weak tradition yet useful that the Prophet exhorted the Muslims to travel even to a far of place like China for the acquisition of knowledge. The work of the translation of the Greek books received official recognition in the days of Abbaside Caliph, Al-Mamun, but earlier some individual authors did the task with a resolution of benefiting others from the platonic and Aristotelian thought. Thus Muslim scholars became ardently involved in the study of the Greek sciences after the establishment of *Bait-al-Hikmat* with Al-Kindi as its director by the Caliph Al-Mamun. It was the first serious effort for the decimation of Greek knowledge in the Islamic world. It is stated that Al-Mamun sent a delegation to Rome to implore the Pope to part with the book of Greek masters for the purpose of their translation into Arabic. The Pope at first instance, severely refused to pass it on to the Muslims, but the clergy later on admonish him to gives these books to them

with the objective of creating chaos and breach in the Muslim community.²⁰

The *Bait-al-Hikmah* the board of translators rendered into Arabic, many works of the Greek masters related to various fields of knowledge dealing with natural, social and normative sciences. Consequently, Greek medicine, astronomy, Physics, logic, metaphysics, ethics and aesthetic became quite popular.²¹ Different schools of thought like Mutazilism, Asharism and Zahirism etc. came into origin. Besides the Muslim intelligentsia was divided into two formidable groups in the name of Plato and Aristotle. The Neo-Platonists were called Platonists (*Ishraqis*) and the followers of Aristotle were known as the peripatetic (*Mashain*).²² The former group had a mystic tilt and the later showed Philosophical inclination.

The *mutakalmin* had a clear rational approach founded in the Quran and the tradition. *Kalam*, as we are aware, is the first rational exposure of the Muslim intelligentsia. No one denies the fact that the inception of *Kalam* was an outcome of Greek learning, but then it is equally true that the Holy Scriptures imbued the followers to apply their reason. The articles of faith came under discussion not because the Muslims were skeptic but with a view to explaining them to the new converts more explicitly elaborately and in a convincing manner. The *mutakalmin* took all possible care to present the articles of faith before the masses in their pristine form.

Ilm-al-kalam also dealt with yet another important question as regards the position of a Muslim sinner (sinner here signifies the

²⁰ Ibid. PP 98-101. & Fakhr Majid, A History of Islamic Philosophy PP-21-25.

²¹ Khan Ali Mahdi: Elements of Islamic Philosophy PP 49-51

²² Ibid: P-43.

perpetrator of the great sin, *Gunah-e-Kabira*). The controversy arose particularly after the battle of *siffin*. A group in the Ali's army strongly reacted to the compromise that he made with Maviya whose army raised the Quran on the daggers which he rightly took as an indication of surrender. This group of Ali's army considered Maviya as infidel and that there could be no covenant with infidels (Kafir). In their strong reaction, they included Ali also in the category of infidels and considered both of them as the perpetrator of the grave sin (*Gunah-e-Kabira*). Ali's decision invited a controversy which later on assumed political, religious and Philosophical importance. It led to the emergence of some new schools of thought which either favoured or rejected his decision. The question was, however, discussed by the emerging schools *Kharja*, *Murjia* and later on *Mutazilah*. The former two uphold paradoxical views and the later took a midway position.

Ilm-al-kalam is the discipline which brings to the service of religious beliefs (aqaid) discursive arguments; which thus provides a place of reflection and hence use of reason in the elucidation and defence of the content of faith. *Ilm- al – Kalam* is the discussion of all subjects connected with the six articles of the Muslim creed: 1, Unity of God; 2, the angels; 3, the Books; 4, The Prophets; 5, the day of Judgement; 6 the decrees of God, as distinguished from *al-Fiqh* which is an exposition of the five foundations of practical religion, recital of creed, prayer, fasting, zakat and Hajj.²³

Primarily there were two phases of *Kalam*, the early and the later. There emerged different schools from the study of different problems. The Jabr and the Qadr dealt with problem of destiny. It has

²³ Dictionary of Islam, P 260.

always been a matter of disagreement whether man has got a power of choice or he is just subservient to the will of God. Both these schools drew inspiration from the Quran and substantiated their argument from its verses. The school of Jabr was founded by Jaham bin Safwan and his pupils propagated it. The school advocated that man is a tool in the hands of God. Every action of man is pre ordained. He has no power of choice. The destiny cannot be averted by any efforts. It is the will of God which has got to be executed.²⁴

As a reaction to complete fatalism another school was founded in the name of Qadr. It was optimistic in nature and rationalistic in character. Mabad-al-Juhaini, a courageous man, reacted to the despondent and wretched pessimism. Juhaini is of the opinion that man is free to exercise the power of choice, God has bestowed upon him with reason which could help him in discerning the right and the wrong. He is responsible for all his actions. The Quran has emphatically asserted that every one would reap what he sows.²⁵ The Quran has also very categorically declares that God would reward the virtue and punish vice.²⁶

We also come across some other school of early *ilm al kalam* the *Murjia*, *kharjia* and *Sifaties* discussed different problems. The former two, as said earlier concerned themselves with the position of Muslim sinner and later discussed the problem of attributes. The *Mutazilah*, who is yet to follow, pondered over both, along with many others.

²⁴ Nadwi, Muzaffaruddin, *Muslim Thought and its sources*, PP 17-19.

²⁵ S. II, 286 & S. XCIX, 7-8

²⁶ S. X, 27 & S. XXXIV, 3-5.

The later *kalam* has two important school the *Mutazilah* and the *Ashara* out of which the *Mutazilah* being rationalist can be counted as the school of *Kalam*, but the *Ashara* being dogmatic can not perhaps be classified in that category. Nadvi, therefore, uses the word scholasticism to refer to *Asharism*.²⁷ He rightly disagrees with those orientalists who used the word to refer to the two. The basic question that the wayfarer asked Imam Hasan al Basri was regarding the position of Muslim sinner. Wasil bin Ata irritated the teacher with his promptness. Upon being seceded he began to teach some disciples from among those of his own teacher. Wasil bin Ata being taught by a Qadri scholar retained many of his principles. On account of being separated from the *Qadr*, this school was addressed in the name of *Mutazilah*. The school gave more importance to reason even in relation to revelation. The priority of reason on revelation became a controversial issue in future. They mainly concerned themselves with the unity and Justice of God and called as the people of unity and justice (*ahl-al-tawhid wa al adl*).²⁸ Some scholars of Muslim Philosophy have described as many as ten doctrines but the number can be reduced into five: the unity of God (*tauhid*); justice of God (*adl*), intermediary position (*manzilah-bain al manzilatain*); promising and warning (*Waada wa Waid*) and enjoying good and prohibiting evil (*amr bi al maruf wa al-nahya an-al munkar*)²⁹

The group *Ikhwan-us-Safa* which included the Philosophers like al-kindi, Al-Farabi, Ibn-Sina, Ibn-Rushd etc. followed the legacy of the Quran which emphasized the application of reason. They studied the Greek masters and were impressed by their thought, the

²⁷ Nadvi, Muzaffarud Din: Muslim thought and its sources PP 8-9.

²⁸ Ibid. PP 6-24.

²⁹ Nasr Sayyed Hassein ed by : Islamic Spirituality PP 397-398.

way of argument and the style of writing. They were also influenced by the Philosophical questions, they posed in their works and also the way they approached to find out their solution.²⁹³⁰

Beside this we still have another stream of rational thinkers, the group of Philosophers known as the Brethren of purity (*Ikhwan-ual-Safa*). They were the Philosophers of Islam, but not theologians. The chain of these Philosophers start from Abu Yousuf Yaqub Ibn Ishaq Ibn Sabbah Ibn Imran Ibn Ismail Ibn al-Ashath Ibn Qais al-kindi. Kindah was one of the great Arab tribes before Islam. Al kindi was the first Muslim Philosopher who propounded his theory under the influence of Greek Philosophy. They, on the contrary, always held Islam to be superior to all existing Philosophies. Moreover, they were always engaged in the clarification or explanation of the articles of faith to the new proselytes and the critics of Islam. They were mainly interested in theological problems. Al kindi for the first time showed keen interest in Greek Philosopher. He learnt it from his Christian teacher *Yahia bin Adi* who was in the court of al Mamun. The caliph noticing his prudence and scholarship appointed al kindi as the director of the board of translators (*Bait al Hikmah*) which al Mamun established with a view to opening new horizons of knowledge into Islam. Al kindi, succeeded his mission. He translated many Greek books and wrote some two hundred treatises, but many of them are lost. He had gained the fame of an eminent philosopher. He is believed to have translated *Enneads* of Plotinus. Al kindi also attempted at harmonizing Greek Philosophy and Alexandrian thought with Islam.³¹

30. Sharif M.M. A History of Muslim Philosophy Vol. I, PP 422-423.

31. Ibid PP 421-423.

Al kindi was the first scholar who could rightly be called as philosopher. In one of his treatise as he tried to define philosophy and considered it to be the most sublime in the human arts. He also holds philosophy to be the science of sciences and thinks it to be on the acme in the hierarchy of learning. Like a Philosopher he remains with the truth attained with the help of logic and reason.³² Al-kindī being a *Mutazilah* never defies the religious truth. He is of the view that the truth perceived and taught by the Prophet could be comprehended by syllogistic reasoning.

Another important contribution of Al kindi lies in the fact that he is the first Philosopher in Muslims to have acknowledged the existence and consequent significance of other sciences. He has spoken of the division of sciences into the divine and the creative ones. Again he classifies them in physics and metaphysics, the former pertaining to the terrestrial world and the latter concerning with celestial and spiritual world.³³

In his doctrine of spirit al kindi mainly follows Aristotle with some digressions which originate in Plotinus, who presented the Alexandrian version of Aristotle. Al kindi was an emanationist. He presented the theory through his idea of the four fold division of intellect and spirit. Like the Alexandrian peripatetic, Al kindi is convinced that all knowledge comes from idea having roots in Platonic reflections. Al kindi believes that God or the highest spirit is the basic source of knowledge. He is the first cause; the second, spirit is the effect which receives the knowledge from the first and passes it on to the third which preserved it till required. The fourth is the

32. Atiyeh, George N: Al-Kinid, PP

33. Saeeda Iqbal: Islamic Rationalism in the subcontinent PP 42-43.

human intellect (aql) which is called aql *mustafad* (acquired) as it is emanated from the first through a process.³⁴

Besides al kindi has also left treatises on ethics, aesthetics and logic. He has tried to prove the existence of God in a logical manner through the syllogism of existence and concept.³⁵

It is evident that al kindi paved the way for other Philosophers in the Muslim world. He laid the foundation of the edifice of knowledge which others erected with innovations and correction. He provided a line of thought which latter on was developed into a discipline.

Al-Farabi (d.950) succeeded him as a subsequent director of the board of translator (Bait-al-Hikmah). He was chosen to complete what al-Kindi left unfinished. Being an expert of Greek language he translated the works of Plato and Aristotle in different fields and wrote treatises and books with a view to explaining the philosophy of the Greek masters and emphasizing the points of agreement between the Muslim scriptures and the works of Greek masters. He understood Aristotle so perfectly and opened the mysteries of Greek Philosophy so comprehensively that he was called the second teacher by the Muslims, the first being Aristotle himself. Farabi was one of the associates of the literary circle of Saif-al-Daula, the great Hamdani at Aleppo. He strove to reconcile the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle with that of the Quran. He dealt with all the problems of religion such as prophecy, angels, resurrection, the pen, the tablet, etc. but in a neo-Platonic fashion; e.g., he believed that the universe had

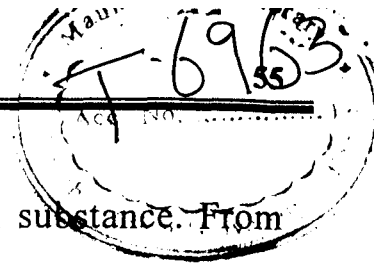
emanated from God in a descending order. He denied the eternity of matter upheld by Aristotle.³⁶

Farabi propagated the theory of ten inelegances with a clear objective of synchronization. Farabi's theory of emanation is a repetition of al-Kindi with the difference that it is more elaborate and explanatory.

These ten intelligences are in fact grades of existence arranged in a hierarchy, God being on the apex. Farabi is a thorough going Muslim but together with it, he had a penetrating philosophical insight. For this reason he wants to interpret the unity of God in the manner that plurality could be accommodated. God is one, pure and simple. He emanates Himself first in the celestial and thereafter in the terrestrial worlds. The Muslim Philosophers drew inspiration from the verse of the Quran in which God is believed to have created the world in six days.

In his scheme of thought the first existence that proceeded from, is absolutely spiritual. God being the supreme consciousness emanates Himself into a solely conscious existence. Farabi, therefore, addresses it as first intelligence. The Plurality starts from the lower grade of existence. The first intelligence emanates itself into the second, which is a combination of the spirit and the substratum. It, therefore, emanates itself into the first sphere and the third intelligence. Farabi, thus speaks of ten intelligences and nine spheres. The tenth intelligence also emanates itself into the universal soul

³⁶ Umrudhin, M: *The Ethical Philosophy of Al-Ghazali*, PP 29-30.



which in turn embodies itself into the material substance. From the first to the last the plurality increases on each level but God transcends it without being effected with the diversity. Farabi tries to suggest that God participates in this world directly. It should also be noted that element of materiality becomes more and more strong and predominant in the subsequent intelligences to give way to the existence of the terrestrial world in the forms of spheres. Each of these spheres has its own soul embodied in its antecedent. The universe also possesses a soul which Plotinus name it as the nous. The sufis later on influenced by the Ishraqis (emanationists) cognize it as the universal soul (nafs-e-Kullia). Again the objects of the universe also possess their designated soul like the vegetative soul, animal soul and rational soul. By suggesting the grades of the souls, Farabi reiterates Aristotle on one hand and confirms the truth of the Quran on the other that the objects of the terrestrial worlds are the combination of the body and soul which conjoin each others by the command of God. Ibn Sina later on elaborates Farabi's theory of emanation. It remained in currency till it was repudiated by Ghazali.³⁷

Besides metaphysics, al-Farabi also made a notable contribution in the field of logic.

In tune with the other Muslim Philosophers, al-Farabi recognized the significance of reason. He considered it to be the basic force élan vital of all the forms of existence. He is of the view that all the forms of existence possess the intelligible which on one hand coordinates beings of different nature and on the

³⁷ Sharif M.M.: A History Muslim Philosophy vol. 1. PP 457-460.

other helps in the attainment of perfection. Farabi following his teacher speaks of the faculties of soul as vegetative, appetitive and rational. The rational comprehends three primary principles which run through all the forms of existence. They are:

- (i) The primary principles of geometrical knowledge;
- (ii) The primary principles of ethical knowledge; and
- (iii) The primary principles of metaphysical knowledge.

Farabi delineates six forms of reason: (1) The Reason which is generally predicated of the reasonable and virtuous in common parlance and which Aristotle calls *phronesis* (al-tawaqqul); (2) The Reason which theologians posit as prescribing certain general actions and which is in part identical with common sense; (3) The Reason which Aristotle describes in *Analytica Posteriora* as the faculty of perceiving the primary principles of demonstration, instinctively and intuitively; (4) The Reason, referred to in *Ethica VI* as a habitus, and which is rooted in experience. This Reason enables us to judge infallibly, by some intuitive acumen, the principles of right and wrong; (5) The Reason referred to in *De Anima* in, and to which Aristotle has assigned four meanings (a) the Reason which is potentiality, the soul (b) The Reason in act, the intelligible (c) The acquired intellect related to the preceding, the intelligible (d) The active intellect, the immaterial form; and (6) The last is the form of active intellect, which is manifest in two forms (i) a material substratum and (ii) the actions to remove the impediments of material substratum.

Al Farabi has discussed these forms of reason in one of his monographs, *Risalah fil-Aql* based on Aristotle's *De Anima* and *Ethica VI*. The principle of emanation does not describe only the celestial world, but also the terrestrial one, for it is the first principle and the basic source of all existence. In addition to the metaphysics, ontology and epistemology Farabi also applies Reason in the parlance of ethics and politics. Along with it, reason also comprehends and analyses the experience of supreme beauty which runs through all beautiful objects.³⁸

Ibn Sina is one of the Muslim Philosophers who influenced the eminent scholars of different sciences in and outside the Muslim world. The Europeans owe a great deal to his investigations in realms of medicine and other philosophic sciences. In the group of Ikhwan-al-Safa (The brethren of purity), Ibn Sina is perhaps the greatest name. He made a notable contribution in all the branches of knowledge known to his world.

Ibn Sina was a prolific writer he wrote his magnum opus in the name of *al Shifa* which runs into several volumes and is mainly devoted to Philosophy and medicine. He wrote another equally important book in the name of *al Najat* primarily dealing with religion. He has justified in it *the prophecy, the revelation* and *the miracle* and argued them with convincing ratiocination.

Ibn-Sina also conceived of ten intelligences to have emanated from God in a hierarchy. The existence as Ibn Sina believed was present in the potential form in the mind of God,

38. Fakhry Majid: A History of Islamic Philosophy. PP 138-142.

which He cognized, when He desired to know. It clearly indicates that God had the knowledge of Himself, which He appropriated according to His will. He emanated Himself into the first intelligence, which possessed its essence and the attribute of manifesting itself into the second intelligence and the first sphere. It means that the first intelligence contained both the substance and the accident. Having been emanated from the first, the third intelligence proceeded from the second. The process of emanation went on to the last ten intelligence and nine spheres. It is implicit therein that these intelligences are simultaneously the substance and the accident being related on one hand to the world of essence and on the other to the world of spheres. Each of these spheres, as Ibn-Sina points out in consonance with his first teacher, is simultaneously a body and a soul. It suggests that he interprets sometimes these intelligences as spirits and sometimes itself into the universal soul (*naafs-e-Kulliya*) which is manifest in the objects of the world. Thus Ibn Sina advocates the theory of emanation in order to argue the existence of the many from the one.³⁹

Ibn Sina presents the theory of reason as well. It is counted as one of the faculties of soul. He has simultaneously described the theory of soul which apparently seems to be reiteration of Aristotle's theory of logos. He has nevertheless made some improvements by adding some functions to the sensuous faculty such as the perception of hot and cold, moist and dry, hard and soft, rough and smooth.

³⁹ Nadvi, Maulana Abdul Salam: *Hukma-i-Islam* vol. I PP 341-351.

The perfection of the soul, as Ibn Sina thinks, is the cognitive body. It is manifest in its various forms like the vegetative soul, animal soul and the human soul. Each of these forms of the soul possesses some unique faculties which characterizes the particular form. The human soul is perfected into the rational soul which is divided into two, the practical reason and theoretical reason. The former deals with the motion which operates into the actions related to the appetitive faculty, imaginative, estimative faculty. The latter is concern with morality related to the norms and virtues.

The theoretical reason is divided into four parts: (a) potential (possible), (b) habitual holy reason, (c) actual reason and (d) acquired reason. The potential reason apprehends universal form of the immaterial and abstract character. In the former case the forms are intelligible and in the latter they are potential. He speaks of three types of potentiality: (1) it might refer to the pure ability or aptitude of the agent. OR (2) it may refer to that ability in so far as it has been determined to some extent. OR (3) it may refer to the fulfillment of that ability in a concrete way. These three potentialities correspond to three different powers, (i) absolute or "material" power, (ii) possible power, and (iii) the habitus (*malakah*) or the "perfection of powers".

Habitual holy Reason is partly potential and partly actual. It is actual as it apprehends universals and is also called Reason in act. It accrues the stage of acquired reason in relation to the actual conditions. When it is routed in active intellects and

apprehends the natural processes including the process of cognition.

The acquired Reason helps man to attain destined perfection. It is also the source through which man reasons the higher beings in the non terrestrial world. The acquired Reason is cognitive in nature. It provides assistance to the acquisition of knowledge not only of the universals but also of the particulars.

In the hierarchy the holy Reason is on the apex. It is a source of the divine knowledge.⁴⁰

Ibn al-Rawandi, al-Sarkhas, and Zakaria Razi carried through the legacy of rationalism to its logical conclusion. The *Mutazilahh* despite being rational could not defy the religious truth. They in fact made strenuous efforts to harmonize religion with philosophy. Their convictions dissuaded them not to reject the religious authority but the philosophers mentioned took recourse in complete rationalism. They did not only approve of the priority of reason but also deemed it to be the sufficient guide to apprehend the truth. They did not diffuse the need and significance of religion, nevertheless they rejected on rational grounds, the prophecy as the necessary prerequisite for religion. They held that reason alone is the valid source of knowledge. Thus these philosophers consider reason to be the sole criterion of the knowledge of God and the world.

Amongs these three, Zakaria Razi is the most non-conformist. Under the influence of Plato, he advocated for the five eternal things: the matter; the space, the time, the soul and

⁴⁰ Fakhry Majid: A History of Islamic Philosophy, PP 159-164.

God. Thus Razi along with his other contemporaries may be called as the real champion of rationalism. Besides being so, they considered themselves to be true Muslims.⁴¹

The rational traditions received serious threats after the emergence of Asharism. Abul Hasan al Ashari, as we are aware, at the outset of his career was a staunch advocate of Mutazilism. He often represented as *Mutazilah* leader in various congregational discourses but due to his frequent defeats in the public debates, he renounced Mutalizism on the pretext that its rationalism was heinously disadvantageous to the cause of Islam. Asharism, nevertheless, prepared the grounds for the decadence of rationalistic attitude, scientific outlook and philosophical enquiry.⁴²

The revival of dogmatism got strength at the hands of the successors of Asharism, Hanbalism and Zahirism till it culminated into Ghazali, who made all efforts to reaffirm dogmatic theology.

Ghazali was educated in philosophy in the Nizamiya school of Nishapur where he became a teacher after completing his education. As a student he studied Greek Philosophy and Muslim peripatetics. He began to look for mathematical certainty in philosophy which of course was not obtainable. His faith, in all that he knew was badly shaken and his search for certitude was despondently defeated. His skepticism enhanced his agony and he became more and more restless. His anxiety compelled him to leave the comforts of life, he enjoyed in Nizamiyah.

41. Saeeda Iqbal *Islamic Rationalism in the Subcontinent* PP 46-47.

42. Sharif M.M.: *A History of Muslim Philosophy* vol. I PP 222-224.

In the state of confusion and perplexity with the sense of not doing justice to his students, he resigned from his post and went deep into the jungle where he wondered for many years and carried out ascetic practices to dispel his doubt and find out the desired goal which however was not achieved even through it.⁴³

One day he received the enlightenment that the act of willing and the existence of a willer go together. This helped him to formulate a premise "I will therefore I am".⁴⁴ The enlightenment proved to be a sucker to comeback to the world. He joined the academy again and resumed his earlier duties.

In his journey of skepticism, Ghazali gave a new method of enquiry to philosophy, "the method of doubt" which was later on adopted first by St. Anselam and thereafter Descartes. To this juncture Ghazali was a rationalist even though he claimed to have renounced it. Skepticisms is not however irrational. Much depends on the conclusion arrived at. He, however, remained rational in building up the argument to point out the incoherencies in the philosophy of the Greek masters. Ghazali's ordeal re-strengthened theology of course, but close the door of knowledge for future generations. His rebuttal of Greek philosophy infused a new spirit in theology and a new inspiration to the scholar of future generations who meticulously worked to reaffirm the theological truth. A genius like Ibn Tamiyah who

⁴³ Khan Ali Mehdi: *Elements of Islamic Philosophy*. PP 192-193.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* P 199.

mastered in logic also fell into the same clutches and wrote a book with the same title to show his obeisance to Ghazali.⁴⁵

Ghazali's influence badly jeopardized the growth of knowledge in the Arab world. The centre of learning was then shifted to Spain which at that time was the nucleolus of political power and the seat of intellectual pursuit. It produced eminent scholars in several fields like tradition (*hadith*), philosophy and religion. Ibn Bajja, Ibn Masarra, Ibn Hazam and Ibn Tufail were some of the important scholars who excelled in their respective fields. Ibn Bajja was a renowned traditionist whose compendium of *hadith* is still quite significant and is included in the six authentic collections of *hadith* (*Seha-i-Sitta*). Ibn Hazam is an important Zaharite scholar. He is still venerated for his rational thinking and philosophical insight. Ibn Tufail is an eminent philosopher who, for the first time in the history of Muslim philosophy, presented the theory of evolution which of course is distinguished from the teleological theory of evolution of Aristotle. Ibn Rushd is yet another erudite philosopher who was reckoned with more by European scholars than those of his own community. He was a scholar of philosophy, religion and Jurisprudence and wrote source books in these fields. Young Ibn Rushd variably replaced old Ibn Tufail. He once again sought harmony between religion and philosophy and made attempts to avert the influence of Ghazali from the Muslim philosophy. Although he could not succeed his mission yet he proved that Ghazali could be challenged and that there are incoherencies in his arguments as well.

45 Ibid. PP 195-200.

Philosophy became subservient to theology initially with the effort of Abul Hasan al-Ashari and thereafter al-Ghazali. The rational tradition set out by the *Mutazilah* and the philosophers was completely annihilated. One can easily understand the perils which ensued the end of rational thinking, free enquiry and scientific outlook. One can agree that the attempts of al-Ashari and Ghazali reduced marginalized the possibility of advancement. The philosophical convictions of Farabi and Ibn Sina were buried deep into the confines of faith. Even the scholar like Ibn Taimiyah also could not do away with the influence of theologians though he used the strength of logic in the defence of philosophy. The stubborn theological convictions brought the growth of knowledge to a halt and the course of advancement that commenced in the Abbaside dynasty could not touch its acme. Infidelity, heresy and apostasy lost their natural meaning and became tools of condemnation to discourage the potential scholars having keen philosophical insight and sagacious and penetrating intellect. In such an atmosphere of fear it was difficult for any scholar of eminence to plead the case of philosophy. Ibn Rushd defended philosophy without being apologetic. He got philosophical insight from his immediate predecessors, Ibn Baja and Ibn Tufail. The Arabic translations of Plato and Aristotle provided food for his thought. Ibn Rushd through *Tahafut al- Tahafut* heavily criticised Ghazali and brought home to the people the incoherencies of Ghazali in his arguments. He reaffirmed the genius of the classical masters. He very rightly criticised Ghazali for making philosophy the handmaid of common man. He holds that philosophy is not everybody's forte. Only the chosen person can understand its problems. It means that reason

cannot be a true guide in all cases, only a few can take advantage of its abilities.⁴⁶

In *Fasl al-Maqal*, Ibn Rushd very forcefully argues that philosophy verifies the religious truth and thus there is a complete concordance between the two. Ibn Rushd here is quite relevant to the modern mind.⁴⁷

Ibn Rushd also adores rational thinking and free enquiry in his *Fasl* and *al-Kashf* also. He advocates rather strongly for the application of reason in the authentic comprehension of the Quran, where he categorizes meaning into five kinds which are important and need a thorough discussion. Besides, in all his works he uses dialectic and rhetorics as his methods.

In his theory of interpretation, Ibn Rushd emphatically advocates for the congregational consensus (*ijma*) rather than analogy (*qiyas*) and independent opinion (*ijtihad*).⁴⁸ The basic spirit that ensues from all his works, be they commentaries or the original contributions, is that religion and philosophy are not at variance. They in fact confirm the same truth.⁴⁹

The soul must be distinguished from intellect only in the system of Ibn Rushd. Intellect in man is the faculty through which he knew the eternal truths without the media of sense-organs e.g. the axioms of mathematics, fundamental laws of thought, ultimate values, etc. These comes to it from the over-mind of the universe, i.e. the active intellect, which is their real source and origin. During its temporary abode in he body the intellect of man suffers separation from active intellect, but after

⁴⁶ Nasr Seyyed Hossein. (ed.) *Islamic Spirituality* P.425

⁴⁷ Sharif M.M.: *A History of Muslim Philosophy* vol. 1 P.545.

⁴⁸ Fakhry Majid: *A History of Islamic Philosophy* P.315.

the body has perished at death, itself being imperishable, it goes back to be merged once again into active intellect to live there in eternity along with other intellects. Thus the immortality of the intellect is not individual but collective, it is not personal immortality but corporate immortality.⁵⁰ Ibn Rushd also laid emphasis on the science of interpretation by developing his own hermeneutics.

In India we do not see many movements like them except some which were conservative in their character. The theologians in India had a greater responsibility. On one hand they had to save Islam from the local perversions and on the other they had to present Islam in the manner that the non-Muslims may not criticize it. In order to achieve the purpose the traditions and the exegetes meticulously worked to present the real face of Islam before the Indian masses. In addition to this the Indian scholars also had to keep upright in the matter of religion. They performed the stupendous task with the missionary zeal. There was a long chain of some scholars which begins from Nur Turk in the reign of slave dynasty and terminates into Iqbal with various shades of rationalism. The scholars having a pioneer position include Shah Abdul Haq and Shah Waliullah. The latter of course is more important for the variety of his works and intelligent exposition of problem.⁵¹

Shah Waliullah is the most important and serious religious scholar of the later Mughal age. His eminence was acknowledged not only by his contemporaries in India but also by other scholars

⁵⁰ Sharif M.M.: *A History of Muslim Philosophy*, vol. I PP 551-555.

⁵¹ Mujeeb, M: *The Indian Muslims* PP 97-112.

living in the Islamic world. He was not only an exalted religious scholar but also a renowned practicing sufi of *Naqshbandiyah* order. He wrote many books on *tasawwuf* (mysticism) in which he discussed at length its problems and his experiences at the time of finding their solutions.

Shah Waliullah was also a prolific writer like his predecessors. He wrote about hundred books including monographs and treatises. *Hujjat-Allah-al-Baligha* is however his magnum opus. The book discusses religious problems of various nature. We may find opposite elements in his religious thought. Some times he appears to be quite orthodox and at others he is accommodative. In his letter to Mohammad Shah, he exhorts the king not to appoint Hindu and Shia as nobles and to implement *Shariah* rather imperiously. At other places also he has advocated for a puritanic approach. Moreover, he rightly thinks that politics and religion in Islam cannot be separated.

His significance as a religious thinker lies in his achievements that he made in the field of interpretation of the Quran and the jurisprudence. Shah Waliullah followed it as a conviction that the fate of the Muslims could be bettered by teaching them the Quranic sciences and the tradition. In order to achieve his goal he translated the Quran into Persian. Many conservative scholars raised serious objections against his mission of socialization of knowledge. The Orthodox *Ulema* issued a mandate against him. He was scourged on his hands. Shah Waliullah, nevertheless, pursued his mission. In addition to this, he also wrote commentaries on the books of Tradition. He

also wrote a book on the principles of exegesis which became quite helpful for the future authors interested in this field. It is true that he hardly interpreted anything fresh but he popularized this art and other religious sciences to the common Muslims.⁵²

Shah Waliullah was rational in his approach. Though a staunch follower of al-Ashari, he emphasized the application of reason in the religious discourses. Even in the acceptance of tradition or jurisprudence he never encouraged blind following (*taqlid*). He himself followed all the schools of jurisprudence. He thought that all the jurists used their prudence in the interpretation of Law but sometimes made inexplicable assertions. He wrote a valuable treatise on independent opinion (*ijtehad*). He was rightly claimed as *Mujaddid*, for he knew the religious sciences in details. He stood for reconciliation. He was of the view that most of the controversies arise due to the ambiguity of language. In order to avoid such controversies, he admonishes that the words should be defined and be used as definitive having particular meanings without much variation.

Expatiating about *Din* (religion) Shah Waliullah agrees to commonly acknowledged definition. *Din*, as the Quran asserts, in the way to God. It means a complete obedience to Him. In the eyes of God, *Din* is one i.e. Islam. All the prophets from Adam to Mohammad (SAW) had preached the same religion. Despite several omissions in the earlier books, there are many common elements in the *Shariah* of the other communities. He paid regards to all these versions of the Law.

52. Rizvi, S.A.A.: Shah Waliullah, P 224.

Shah Waliullah in his last days adhered to the *Quran* and the *Sunnah* like orthodox Muslims. He also believed that the two Caliphs after the Prophet must be followed strictly. Such assertions are in contravention with his earlier contention against the blind following (*taqlid*). He in short often repeated Ghazali's ideas of *Ahya-al-Uloom*. He, however, kept his own time in his mind and made changes accordingly. He is known to have better argumentative force, a keener insight and more sagacious prudence.⁵³

His three sons, Shah Abdul Aziz, Shah Rafiuddin and Shah Abdul Qadir, carried through the legacy of their father who earnestly desired to pass on to the masses the basic knowledge of the Quran and the Tradition. Shah Rafiuddin and Shah Abdul Qadir, despite the vociferous opposition of the Ulema translated the Quran into Urdu. It was perhaps the first Urdu rendering of the Holy Quran. These two mentioned above gave new impetus to a nobler mission of socialization of knowledge which got currency at the hands of Shah Waliullah.⁵⁴

Religious thought of Sir Syed, which is our future concern, is an outcome of his rationalistic attitude. Sir Syed though conservative in faith was rational in his approach which he showed not only in religion, but also in the solution of mundane problems. Reason to him is not a faculty, as conceived by classical Islamists, to acquire knowledge for the perfection of the individual man, it is on the contrary an instrument of knowledge. Its application depends on the individual skill of

⁵³ Ibid. PP 277-282.

⁵⁴ Mujeeb, M.: *Indian Muslims*, PP 390-392.

man. It may commit error which is subsequently corrected by the reason of other man. He also considers experience to be significant, for it is a tool for the growth of reason. In short, rationalism for sir Syed is not only epistemological, but commonsensical.⁵⁵ We shall discuss it in the subsequent chapter while dealing with his religious thought.

⁵⁵ Saeeda Iqbal, *Islamic Rationalism in the Subcontinent* PP 139-144.

CHAPTER-3

Early Religious Thought of Sir

Syed Ahmad Khan

Part-A & Part-B

CHAPTER – 3

EARLY RELIGIOUS THOUGHT OF SIR SYED AHMAD KHAN

PART-A

Sir Syed accommodated in his religious thought at least all the important Semitic religions. He regarded it as a useful tool to promote human welfare, proper understanding and integration. He emphasized human fraternity liberty and equality and believed that the religion creates in man a sense of dignity and sobriety. Quran has been revealed to curb the evil and promote uprightness. It has laid emphasis on *Sirat-e-Mustaqim* (straight path).¹ Sir Syed advocated that along with the ritualistic aspect of religion, the moral aspect is more significant. His argument is often substantiated by the Quran particularly in the verses emphasizing the rights of man (*huquq al-abad*).

As stated before, Sir Syed adopted a comparative approach to religion in order to bridge the schism between the Christianity and Islam with a definite mission of bringing the two communities closer to each other for a peaceful and prosperous future particularly of Muslims in India. As we are aware, there had been a long antagonism between the Christians and the Muslims. It was partly for religious variance and partly for political reasons. The religious variance was due to the Quranic verses which defied the basic Christian faith denying

Jesus to be the son of God. The Quran also rejected the Christian concept of the Unity in trinity and advocated monotheism. The Christian scholasticism from the very beginning tried to avert the Islamic challenge with a missionary zeal having a sense of religious antagonism and political rivalry which continued all through the medieval ages. The Christian priests made an effort to castigate Islam as a brutal religion spread out with the help of sword.

Sir Syed realized that the Christians have not forgotten the past and they would devastate the Muslim community in the long run. Consequent upon the war of 1857, Sir Syed very rightly held that the British had firm ground beneath their feet and that there was no possibility of emancipation from their rule. He concluded that the Muslims had to make adjustment with them but it should be made with dignity. Having realized the fact, Sir Syed wrote a treatise dealing with the causes of the war of 1857. It shows that he was a man of courage and perseverance. His efforts were applauded not only in India but also in the English Court. Sir Syed saw it with his penetrating eyes and discovered the cure in the amity of the Muslims and the Christians. In order to complete the task, he translated the Bible into Urdu and wrote on a juridical problem of the Muslims dining with the Christians and justified the act by recognizing them as the people of book (Ahl-e-Ketab). It was not of course a welcome step for the orthodox Muslim who dissuaded themselves from doing so for a simple reason that they used hem which is forbidden in Islam. He was fully aware

but he insisted on this religious reform for it could bring the two closer to each other. Sir Syed wrote many letters to this effect in his *Tahzib-al-Akhlaque* (training of the morality). Sir Syed in short prepared his religious fabric with a definite motive of minimizing the old age animosity and to substantiate that Islam and Christianity are not juxtapose to each other provided that they are comprehended in the right perspective.²

The Muslims avoided to send their children to the centers of British learning, for fear of conversion. Sir Syed felt the agony and rightly inferred from the existing situation that if the Musalmans were left in the wretched condition, it would indeed be disastrous. They would be pushed into the dyke of despondency. He therefore, resolved to establish the schools (Madrasas) where Islamic and western education could be combined. This, Sir Syed thought could be the remedy of saving the Muslims from socio-cultural and religious devastation. Even after educating the Muslims in modern sciences, the task was not easy. In order to finish it he convinced the Muslims that Christianity and Islam are not at variance but in concurrence with each other. Sir Syed wanted the upliftment of the Muslims which could not be possible without learning the modern science. He, therefore, founded a scientific society, which has been mentioned earlier and tried to justify that religion and science are not opposites.³

² Baljon, J M S The Reforms and Religious Ideas of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan, PP 17-24

³ Ibid PP 43-50

Another peril that prompted Sir Syed to commit himself to the religious writings was the missionary activity which became hazardous to the cause of Islam in India. The missionaries, as we are aware, started the work of proselytization of lower caste Hindus and indigent Muslims into Christianity. The missionaries tempted the poor people by giving them money. The plan worked out well, particularly after the Bengal Famine. Sir Syed when posted at Moradabad was handed over the charge of the Famine stricken people. He accepted the new responsibility after the agreement with the government that the Muslim orphans would not be admitted in the Christian orphanages. The government under the pressure of the missionaries reviewed the policy and the Muslim orphan children were transferred in the missionary run destitute homes. Sir Syed immediately quitted the responsibility. He started writing small articles in his famous news paper *Tahzib-al-Akhlaq* (the training of morality) to impart true knowledge of Islam to check this process of conversion.

It should be noted that Sir Syed while discussing the causes of war of 1857 made a sweeping, but historically wrong remark that the British government did not impose its religion upon its subject like the Muslims. The remark is pernicious and speaks about the nature and the character of Muslim rule. A scholar like Sir Syed should not have made such an erroneous comment. The British government on the contrary openly preached Christianity by using all possible media. The religious congregations were held either in the places of worship or in the privately owned houses. The Christian missionaries also

distributed their printed literature and preached their religion by organizing assemblies in the market places. The inspector of schools, known as Black Father along with the Paragna visitors use to go the villages to convince the residence to send their children to the village schools. The people feared that their children would become Christians due to the allurements of prosperous future and respectable life. The government provided police protection to the clerics engaged in the propagation of their religion. The government also announced the priorities and the privileges of the English educated persons in the jobs. The government also made considerable changes in the syllabi of the colleges where jurisprudence and other Islamic sciences were taught. They were replaced by modern curricula with Christian ethos. The Muslim noted it all with care and anxiety and were fully convinced of the aims and objectives of the British government. It was true, that they did not force the Indians to accept their religion in principle, but they compelled them through their internal policy sometimes by announcing awards to the students showing interest in Christianity, sometimes giving concessions in the Jobs and sometimes with the enactment of such Laws so as to augment the Christian religious fervour. The Muslims and the Hindus both were suspicious of the religious policies of the government of East India Company.⁴

In such perilous situation, Sir Syed resolved to defend Islam from the apprise of Christianity. But his method of defence was indeed peculiar. He sought to find out the points of agreement between the two religions. Sometimes after 1857 the Muslim Ulema

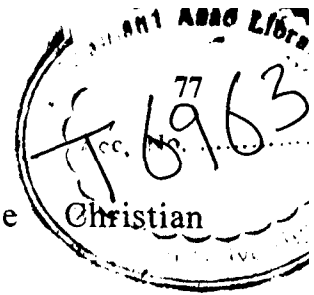
⁴ Khan Sir Syed Ahmad *Asbab-e Baghawat-e-Hind*, PP 119-132.

frequently used the word *Nasara* for the Christians. The British felt it humiliating for they confused it with *Nazereth*. Sir Syed wrote a pamphlet to explain the meaning of *Nasara* which, denotes one who helps and justified it from the Quran. He, thus convinced the Christians that the term had no humiliating content.⁵

William Muir's book "The life of the Mohammet" was another important event which added a lot to the transformation of Sir Syed's mind which made him an eminent religious thinker. He wrote his book on the gesture of Pfander, a noted missionary official, with a purpose to vilifying the Prophet of Islam. It was not an academic assault but a calumniating effort. In order to give a befitting reply he wrote *Khutbat-e-Ahmadiya* in which he wisely reacted to the vilifying criticism of the Prophet of Islam. He worked hard and spent much of his time in the collection of the material from the British Museum and the India office. In order to complete the self assigned task he lived in England for about a year and completed the book. By writing it Sir Syed propounded the modern *ilm-al-kalam* with the similar aims and objectives. He checked the proselytization on the one hand and purified Islam from the alien perversions on the other. Moreover he revived the erstwhile rational tradition and explained the tenets of Islam to the younger generation. He himself took up a missionary work and presented Islam to the Muslims and the other communities in a rational manner. Sir Syed, however, was a devoted religious man and he proved it by

⁵ Baljon, JMS, The Reform and Religious Ideas of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan, P22.

Early Religious Thought



facing the hazardous challenges from the missionaries.⁶

His religious thought can be divided into two phases. The early phase is spread over almost twenty years. The later phase begins from 1869 and continued till the end of his life 1898. In between the early and the later phases there is a transitional period which resulted into some valuable works. The early and the later phases of his religious thought are not merely a division for convenience but characteristically distinct from one another. In the early phase we see Sir Syed inclined more towards the orthodox approach. In the period of transition he seems to be more defensive. In the later phase, we notice real Sir Syed characteristically a scholar, academically eminent, intellectually rich and persistently courageous having his own views. Even in the days of dogmatism one can observe the traits of rationalism. We see in his early books the method of argumentation which speaks of his rational approach. His early writings on religion can be classified as defensive and puritan. The former aimed at bringing out a synthesis between Christianity and Islam. The political purpose of the religious works seeking agreement between Christianity and Islam does not, however, belittle their academic excellence. The later aimed at purifying Islam from the alien elements, which he considered, had entered into Islam with the influence of Hinduism. It should be noted that Sir Syed never attacks Christianity in his writings. It is also significant that he has

⁶ Nizami, K. A. Sayyid Ahmad Khan, PP. 119-121.

sympathy towards the *ahl-e-ketab* (People of the Scriptures) which is one of valid points of the proximity between the two Semitic religions. Sir Syed's early phase which will be the content of our discussion later on, is however, quite significant in the formulation of his religious thought.

The early religious thought of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan was shaped under the profound influence of three important schools: namely *Naqshbandiya Mujaddidiyah*, Shah Waliullah and his school and the *Mujahidin* movement. Regarding the first, it would suffice to say that Sir Syed was brought up amidst the people of spiritual leanings. He was apprised of *Wahadat-al-wajud* (Unity of being) by his maternal family and also through the connection of Khawaja Mir Dard. He was acquainted with the philosophy of *wahadat-al-shahud* (Unity of appearance) by his preceptor and family benefactor Shaikh Ghulam Ali who followed *Mujaddid* in all earnestness. Notwithstanding the fact, Sir Syed had little impact of the schools, he was more deeply influenced by a lately develop school *Tariqaih-i-Muhammadi* perhaps for the simple reason that it speaks of this world more than the next.

Sir Syed was also influenced by a renowned and eminent philosopher Shah Waliullah, who was his immediate predecessor and whose teachings were still fresh in the memories of his contemporaries.

We also notice the tracts of *Mujahidin* philosophy particularly in the early religious thought of Sir Syed. The *Mujahidin* movement was an outcome of Shah Waliullah's political thought. His disciple

Syed Ahmad Shaheed of Rai Barailly along posterity of Shah Waliullah with Shah Ismail gave a new impetus to the movement and attempted to apprise the Muslims of their political rights and social responsibilities. The political movement of the *Mujahedin* was not agreeable to Sir Syed but its puritan aspect made a considerable affect on his early thought. Shah Ismail supported *Tariqah-i-Muhammadiyah* as a legitimate system to purge Islam from alien percepts and concepts. The school emphasized the Quran and the *sunnah*. Its followers aimed at returning to the radical Islam with the enforcement of *Shariah* in its purest form. They called all such practices as *bidat* and discontinued them henceforth. Sir Syed showed his keen interest in this school of *sufism* for the reason that it laid emphasis on the exoteric aspect of Islam. It showed more interest in the correction of moral in this world than the reward of righteousness in the next. It was not much concerned with the eschatology but fairly emphasized the uprightness of the affairs in the routine course of life. It was natural then that the scholars like Sir Syed drew inspiration from such doctrines so as to make the future of the Muslim community brighter and more optimistic. It should clearly be kept in the mind that this school of *sufism* presented a paradox, for whereas other schools laid emphasis on the esoteric aspect and hence encouraged a kind of inertia. This school infused a new zeal and a new spirit within the ambit of *Shariah*. Sir Syed formulated his early religious thought under this impact.⁷

As stated earlier the works of Sir Syed, which are related to the early religious thought may be classified as those of puritanic nature

7 Troll, C W Savvid Ahmad Khan Re-interpretation of Muslim Theology, PP 30-36

and those which aim at bringing about harmony between Christianity and Islam. The former include *Jila-al-Qulub*, *Rah-e-Sunnat-dar Radd-e-Bidat* and *Kalimat-al-Haq*. The latter comprises *Tabyeen-al-Kalam* (The commentary on the Bible). Besides, he also quoted Pentateuch the Jewish scriptures, which shows his comparative approach and profound study of Semitic religions.⁸

In the early phase of his religious thought, Sir Syed was carried away by the orthodox Muslim schools. Under the impact of his mother, he had a faith in the exorcism of emulates and doing favour to the deads by reciting the Quran on their graves. It clearly suggests that he later on renounced faith in such things. His dogmatic attitude towards religion is evident in such books like *Jila-al-Qulub bi dhikr al Mahboob* (Purification of the hearts by remembering the beloved), 1841. It is a treatise on the life of the Prophet in the form of *Milad* (Birthday celebration).

In the subsequent review of the books Sir Syed speaks of the purpose of its writing. He admits that in his days the observance of *Milad* as the part of the birthday celebrations of the prophet was in-vogue. The people use to hold it on the pattern of *Majlis* in the Shia community in which *Marthia* recital was common. Similarly psalms (*Naat*) or panegyrics eulogizing the prophet were recited in melodious voices. Sir Syed resolved to write a book of *Maulud* narrating some events from the fascinating biography of the prophet. In its composition Sir Syed took the benefit from two important books namely *Surural-al-Mahzoon* (the joy the afflicted) of Shah Waliullah, a short treatise on the prophet's life and *Madarij-al-*

⁸ Ibid P.354

Nabuwah (the stages of the prophet hood), a voluminous and monumental book of Shah Abdul Haq Dehlavi having a considerable detailed account of the prophets biography.

At the time of its inscription, Sir Syed subscribed to the orthodox religious views. He himself admits that in his religious fervour he had no time to contemplate over. But, in the later phase he reviewed his earlier faith. He had become a thoroughgoing rationalist till then. He could contemplate over no convincing argument to substantiate the miracles on the basis of either deductive or inductive reasoning. Sir Syed therefore rejected the occurrence of many miracles like the prostration of the trees and mountains, the presence of three angles shadowing him from the sun, his identification of *Buheera* and *Maisarah* as the future prophet, and the sundering of the moon etc. Besides, he was also skeptic about his ascension (Miraj) to the skies. He, however, agreed to the spiritual ascension instead of the one of the body. Sir Syed also rejected the authenticity of events which occurred following his birth. In short, he disowned his earlier views in the epilogue of the treatise.⁹

Kalimat-al-Haq (the words of truth) is another important early religious writing. It primarily deals with the problem of preceptor and disciple. At the outset, Sir Syed clarifies that he has written the tract to remove errors as regards the two concepts. It should be noted that Sir Syed right from the time of his infancy had lived in the company of either the practicing mystics (sufis) or the persons with mystic disposition. He, therefore, had no wrong notions of mysticism (tasawwuf). Sir Syed keenly observed the behaviour of pseudo-sufis

⁹ Khan Sir Syed Ahmad. *Tasanif-e-Ahmadiya*, Vol. 1, PP-1-22.

who persistently caused misnomer to the spiritual discipline. Notwithstanding, the obnoxious behaviour of these mystics. The people tried to justify it with glamorous excuses. Those who criticized them were either contemptuously dealt with or sometimes consoled with pretentious claims asking them to distinguish the path of *tariqat* from the one of *Shariat*. People accepted the imposters as their guides in this world and the intercessors in the next without taking their deeds into account. They regarded them to be above *Shariah* and thought that they were the champions of esoteric knowledge. The *Shariah* being exoteric was not important for them.

The *Shariah* corrects the outward behaviour, the formal practices prescribed worships and the external aspect of man's personality. In contradiction to the commonly held opinion, Sir Syed argues taking support from the Quran and the tradition that the *Shariah* is more important and hence indispensable for the uprightness of outward-inward behaviour, formal-informal practices, external-internal aspect of man's personality. It shows the straight path (*Sirat-e-Mustaqim*). He quoted verses from the Quran saying that defying *Shariah* means defying religion. The Quran directs the prophet in *Surah-al-Imran* to apprise the people of the fact that if they love God they must carry out the *Shariah* (Law). At another place in *Surah Hashr*, the Quran ascertains that the people must obey the prophet and take what he bids and avoid what he interdicts. Still another place in *Surah Nisa*, the Quran admonishes the people to accept the decision of Prophet with no ifs and buts. It is explicit from these verses that the *Shariah* is certainly more important and one, who divests himself from it, is not a man of faith.

He further strengthens the contention by reciting traditions of the prophet but all from *Mishkat*. These traditions reaffirm the argument that enactment of *Shariah* is inevitable. Even slightest digression is impermissible. It has to be obeyed in letter and spirit. It covers both, the inner and the outer, the spiritual and the physical, the divine and the worldly aspects of the individual and the society. The *Shariah* is the knowledge of the divine secrets and the source of the material explorations. Sir Syed contends that the Companions of the prophet never divested even a thread bare from the *Shariah*. If anyone of their generation or posterity deliberately or otherwise showed any sign of discontent or indifference to *Shariah*, they opposed him vociferously. The rule of *Shariah* was, therefore, maintained in form and content.

To sum up the contention, Sir Syed points out that the *Shariah* has shown true path of religion. Any other path adopted in the name of religion cannot lead to the desired destination. He also holds that no stage of piety can be reached without practicing the *sunnah* of the prophet. No one can claim to have attained the station of *Wali*, *Qutub*, *Abdal*, *Ghos* etc, if he avoid the path of *Sunnah*. Sir Syed elaborates that the *Shariah* was carried out in letter and spirit by the prophet. The prophet, even after being on the acme of perfection had no privilege to denounce the Law. No other man, how so ever pious he may be, should be considered to enjoy it. He rejects the argument that miracle (*Karamat*) is essential for the preceptor. He can not impress his disciples without them. The straight path, the path of *sunnah*, as recommended by the Quran and pursued by the prophet, is a miracle in it self and helps the preceptor to transcend the stations one after the other till he reaches the last as desired or upto his capacity. He rejects

the present system of guidance (Piri), discipleship (Muridi) on account of their indulgence in the innovative practices. He also argues that there is no room for any inclusion in the religion (Islam) for the Quran has already declared in *Surah Maidah* that he has finalized the religion (din) and His gift to mankind which is suggestive of the fact that there is no possibility of innovation (*bidah*); that there is no place for non liturgical worship and that there is no room to accommodate any other path in the name of *tariqah* or otherwise. Sir Syed thus concludes that it is false to understand that the preceptor would be intercessor on the day of judgment.

Sir Syed also rejects the false notion of the people that without non liturgical performances like remembrance of God in the way prescribed in the four orders, meditation, abstinence, poverty and self mortification etc are indispensable for the preceptor. Without them he can neither traverse the path of *sufism* nor can he be a neophyte on the way to God. He emphatically advocates that the path of *sunnah* can alone provide assistance to the neophytes for the achievement of the desired goal as it did in the case of Companions who transcended different stations only with the help of formal worship as recommended by the *Shariah* with exemplary spiritual assiduity and supplication. In his conclusion, he points out that he respects the spiritual ascendancy only of those engaged in the pursuit of straight path.¹⁰

In the early phase of his religious thought, Sir Syed contributed another important treatise under the title, *Rahe-Sunnat Dar Radd-e-Bidat* (the path of sunnah and the rejection of the innovation). In the

¹⁰ Ibid. PP 78-91.

prolog of the book, he discusses the present day religious scene which has allowed admittance to many innovations. Even at the outset, Sir Syed as he did in his earlier book *Kalimat-al-Haq*, has emphatically suggested to the people to remain adherent to the path of *Sunnah* without the least digression. He confesses rather loudly that many innovative practices have crept in Islam and the Muslims have abandoned the path of Muhammad (SAW). He despondently exclaims that the Muslims despise the strict followers of the path and show their favours to those who deliberately or otherwise give it up and carry out the un-Islamic practices. By writing this treatise, he aims at eradicating the imported perversions particularly from the local culture and the native land.

Sir Syed classifies the innovation into three kinds. All of them fall back upon the lexical meaning of the word *bidah* (innovation). They are different on the basis of the manner the *bidah* (innovation) is committed. The lexical meaning of the word *bidah* is to do something new or novel. Novelty may be created in many ways. He has classified it into three kinds. He is dealing with the concept as a religious term which of course retains the conventional meaning, but has a religious connotation. It means that the term *bidah* would apply to deduce or infer something new or novel either in the form of addition, transformation or farfetched interpretation. In its first kind, Sir Syed has explicitly stated by substantiating his contention on the basis of the traditions. At the inception, he has quoted two traditions, one describing that the Prophet after the prayer addressed a small gathering of the Companions and delivered some exhortations, which they understood as the last words of the Prophet. In a mood of sheer

distress, they asked the Prophet to bequeath them something. The Prophet asked them to follow him and his caliphates, for they have been declared as pious, and to follow the ruler whosoever he might be. At another place the Prophet said that his days were the best and the days of his Companions, caliphs were equally good. The Muslim *Ummah* in this tradition has been advised to adhere to the religion as practiced in those days.

He further analyzed it saying that innovation means to adopt something which was not done either by the prophet or some one in his days. Sir Syed has cited traditions of the prophet on different occasions in the palaver. Defining the innovation, once again more precisely now, he quotes a tradition which says that the prophet exalted his days, those of his Companions (*Sahaba*), the days of their Companions (*Tabeyeen*), and those of their Compatriots (*Tab-e-Tabeyeen*). The subsequent generations and posterity thereof amalgamated alien practices and rituals with Islam. These amalgamations should be termed as *bidah* (innovations) and be discouraged. The prophet further said that his community (*ummah*) would corrupt the religion as the Jews did theirs, and that there would be seventy three sects in Islam of which one would follow the right path and shall bear the entitlement of the paradise. Upon being asked the prophet clarified that it would be the one pursuing the path of *Sunnah* without any amalgamation or perversion.

Explaining innovation Sir Syed says that it is something novel but novelty must be defined as something new and fresh. A new sword, a fresh bread or a new cap is not innovation for the simple reason that the sword, the bread or the cap were available in the days

of the prophet. Novel would be described as to innovate something or alike which was not done in the days of the prophet and subsequent periods.¹¹

Sir Syed also criticizes sufis belonging to different orders baring the *Naqshbandis* for pursuing such practices like those of meditation contemplation, remembrance, abstinence and self mortification etc., for he regards them as innovation (*bida*). Again for obvious reasons that they were not followed at least in this manner in the days of the prophet and the pious generations. Sir Syed elaborates the innovation (*bida*) with the help of several examples; celebrating the birth of the prophet, holding congregations to commemorate the days of his birth, reciting the Quran on the graves with the presumption that it would be blissful to the dead, giving charity in his name, offering prayers to him (*fateha*), celebrating martyrs day of Imam Husain in the month of Moharram (first month of Arabic calendar), organizing grievous assemblies (*majalis*) in his memory particularly in the days of Moharram and many other such practices. Superstitions of different kinds, false notion about the deads, *Tazia* procession and such other practices are also innovations. To perform some of the deeds mentioned above may not be innovative but their performance on the particular occasion or particular days makes them innovative. Some of them may also carry reward and have legal approbation but they become innovative when performed on particular time or occasion. In brief this type of innovation like the

¹¹ Ibid. PP 95-100.

other one's also means to do something new which was not practiced erstwhile in the period of the inception of Islam.¹²

In addition to these, innovation has been classified as good and bad (*bidat-e-husna* and *bidat-e-siyah*). Sir Syed, even at the out set, has criticized this classification. He comprehends that the concept of innovation can in no case be good (*Husna*). He argues in the manner of *Asharism* and questions the authenticity of the merit of innovation. He analyses the language of the traditions and tries to determine the meaning of the words there in. He argues that there are examples, of course of eloquence, that a particular word is used in different meaning. The holy scriptures are replete of such examples. They should therefore be read rather carefully. He infers from the discussion where in both the scriptures are cited that the meritorious innovation (*bidat-e husna*) is a farfetched conclusion.

Sir Syed, again like Asharites, rejects the concept of the meritorious innovation rather contemptuously asserting that the repetition of the meritorious action looses the virtue of its reward ability. Recitation of the Quran, summons to prayers (*azan*) or shaking hands (*Musafah*) are blissful actions but on the same analogy these actions cannot be deemed as rewardable when performed without occasion like summons to prayers (*azan*) after the burial, recitation of the Quran on the graveyard and shaking hands after the noon prayer (*Asar*). It is rewardable only when performed under the provision of Law (*Shariah*). Thus, he rejects the concept of good innovation and argues that the merit of an action is determined by the revelation, reason is not a competent judge. Sir Syed, here, has quoted

¹² Ibid. PP106-113.

Ghazali who himself is an *Asharite* thinker and upholds the priority of revelation to reason. He advocates in concurrence with Ghazali that the commands of *Shariah* are final and there are no possibilities of drawing analogies either. Sir Syed at this juncture reacts to the situations like a conformist and defies the authority of reason which in later years he revises and comes forward as a thorough going rationalist.¹³

Deliberating upon the traditions (*rewaj*) and the general consciousness (*ijma*) Sir Syed tries to differentiate between the two. Describing the former, he asserts that something new originates at one point of time and perpetuates till it become a convention. It is persistently followed by the generation after generation, in the manner that if it is abandoned, it is deemed as sin. It means that it acquires the significance of a cliché. It nevertheless remains a convention and not a generally agreed religious practice. Moreover, professional practices those of the soldiers of the mystics, which necessitate from the demands of the profession also do not get religious sanctity. Sir Syed understands all these things as innovation (*bida*) and admonishes not to confuse with generally agreed religious principles (*ijma*). Defining the letter *ijma*, he asserts that *ijma* means a congregational decision, a general consciousness, arrived at in the assembly of scholars (*ulema*). After the inception of something the assembly of scholars meets to find out its basis in the framework of *Shariah*, the Quran and the *sunnah*. If they find out some clear evidence of the initiated thing or something similar to it, they declare it as legitimate. Thus a congregational decision is not *bidat*

¹³ Ibid. PP 117-124.

(innovation). For it is derived from the Holy Scriptures and fits in the set Islamic paradigm. Here again Sir Syed advocates for the orthodox view and rings the conventional knells.¹⁴

Sir Syed vehemently criticizes those, who think that interpretation can be given to something which is not lucidly described in the tradition. He argues that the tradition has clarified all that is contained in the holy Quran. He thinks that there is no room for its interpretation, in the manner that something new is inferred. Sir Syed closes the doors of interpretation at least at this juncture. Although he recognizes the importance of independent opinion (ijtehad) in the later phase of his religious thought. He also holds that the events or the actions which were not pursued in the days of the prophet and the subsequent periods should not be treated as *Sunnah*. The do's and the don'ts both are *sunnah*. He suggests that the prophet should be followed in all respects. *Sunnah* means whatever he has done or refrained from.¹⁵

Some persons by virtue of their dignity or requirement may perform certain actions but they could not be followed as presidents. Prophets marrying more than four women at one time, interdiction to marry the prophets wives. Praying for the redemption of the polytheist and so on are some examples not to be imitated and be conceived as *sunnah*, hence permissible. They were the acts which could be performed by the prophet alone and could not be made public practice.¹⁶ Sir Syed has also pointed out the actions which may not be termed as *bida* (innovation). They are *sunnah*, in fact. He cites

¹⁴ Ibid. PP 126-127

¹⁵ Ibid. PP 128-129.

¹⁶ Ibid. PP 129-130.

some examples such as compilation of the Quran, reorganizing its chapters, using diacritics in the Quran, collections of the traditions, writing new books of the jurisprudence etc. These actions are *sunnah* because they have been performed repeatedly.¹⁷

Sir Syed here discusses that the following four schools of jurisprudence may not be regarded as doing any innovation unless the Imam (*Spiritual* leader) defies the Quran and the tradition. The four established religious scholars of jurisprudence have been acknowledged by the community as pious. They can, therefore, be followed without any fright or fear of deviation. Moreover there is a choice to the people that they can follow one Imam (*Spiritual* leader) in respect of one provision and can follow the other Imam in respect of the other provision. It means that in the juridical matters one can take recourse in any of the four schools either partly or fully. The partial following does not designate any one as infidel.¹⁸

Regarding the problem of ends (*wasta*) and means (*wasilah*) Sir Syed points out that the means (*wasilah*) are necessary for the achievement of ends (*wasta*). He classifies the means as intrinsic and extrinsic. The intrinsic means such as ablution, bathing, recitation of the Quran, retirement in the mosque (*etikaf*) are requisite for the achievement of some higher ends, like prayer, contemplation over the spirit of the Quran or offering the congregational prayer and saving one self from the perversions of life, but the means described above are the ends in themselves. He quotes the verses from the Quran and the traditions of the prophet in support of their being ends in

¹⁷ Ibid. PP 130-131.

¹⁸ Ibid. PP 131-132.

themselves. The extrinsic means are traveling for the holy pilgrimage, passing through the market to reach the mosque, drawing water from the well for ablution. They are not ends in themselves but a means to some higher end. End is worthy of reward.¹⁹

In the conclusion of the book, Sir Syed deviates from the orthodox path. He appears to be some what rational. He argues that no one has the right to address some one as innovator (*bidati*). The argument proceeds that the words like hypocrite, infidel, polytheist reoccur in the *Shariah* time and again. If some one does some misnomerous deed related to any of these concepts mentioned above should not, however be designated as one of them because he commits the sin of doing one or the other deeds often un-deliberately. Even if he does it intentionally, his status as Muslim is not changed, for, his other actions are in correspondence to the norms of religion.²⁰

Beside these important treatises, Sir Syed has also contributed some small and less significant works which expose his early religious thought. Sir Syed translated the portion of book *Kemiyah-e-Saadah* (the alchemy of happiness) by Ghazzali.

After the preface, he, at the out set, has described the contents of the original book. The alchemy of happiness (*Kimiyah-e-saadah*) is based on four pillars, each of them having ten minutiae. The first pillar means self cognizance. Man must know himself and thereby understand the reality of his being. The second pillar is concerned with the cognizance of almighty. Man must know God and realize His grace and sublimity. The third is related to know the reality of the

¹⁹ Ibid. PP 132-133.

²⁰ Ibid. PP 133-134.

world. The fourth is related to the eschatology. Two of these are concerned with the inner being, the esoteric aspect of man. The first consists in the purification of heart, mind and senses from the biological desires and the animal instincts like sex anger pride etc. The second aims at installing in the heart the virtues like passion, gratitude, love etc. The other two are related to the external and exoteric aspects of man. The first one of them is concerned with obedience to God. It is actualized in His worship. The second deals with the worldly affairs. It discusses the manners in which the action is to be performed.²¹

Besides the contents, Sir Syed has translated the early part of the book, which deals with the human structure comprising the body and the soul. It also discusses their relation. Moreover, it describes the significance of both the body and the soul being inevitable for each other. It also speaks of the training of the soul with an exhortation that man should not contemplate over its definition. It should be considered as, the Quran points out, the command of God.²²

Sir Syed translated another book which he considered quite significant for it would remove misconceptions which exist between the *shias* and the *sunnis*. The book *Tuhfah-i-Hasan* (a beautiful gist) is a translation of the book of Shah Abdul Aziz under the title “*Tuhfah-i-Athna Asharih*” (a gift to the twelvers). Here again he chose to translate only a part, chapter ten and twelve.²³

²¹ Ibid. PP 1146-153.

²² S. XVII, 84.

²³ Khan Sir Syed Ahmad: *Tasaniif-e-Ahmadiya* PP 14-15.

The chapter ten discusses the blames on Abu Bakar, the first caliph, Hazrat Aysha (R.A) the wife of the prophet hence the mother of the Muslim (Umm-al-Mumenin) and other Companions. He holds that the *shia's* have charged false allegations on these Companions. He argues that the Companions were not innocent like other human beings, they also made mistakes. They were trained by the prophet, they could not therefore, accrue the faults. Their mistakes, however, could not be a matter of serious criticism to me extent of vilification. The prophet has frequently admired them.

The chapter twelve deals with the *Tawalla* and *Tabarra* (love of virtue and abstention from evil). Sir Syed very sharply reacts against the institution of *tabarra* and considers it to be an evil practice. The Companions of the prophet can not be vilified. Thus he vehemently rejects the *Shiaite* point of view regarding the priority of Ali to other caliphs and considering them as the object of anathema and curse.²⁴

Besides these translations, Sir Syed wrote a letter in the form of a treatise under the title *Namiqah dar bayan-e- masalah-e-tasawwur-e-shaikh* (embellishment of the concept of shaikh). We are familiar that he earlier harshly criticized the concept of a preceptor (pir) in his *Kalimat-al-Haq*. He has revised himself here in this letter and speaks of its embellishment. Sir Syed's early criticism of the concept of Shaikh bothered the *Naqshbandis* quite a great deal. The followers of Mir Dard in particular felt the blow on their exhortation. He revised and ascertained the importance of the shaikh in the sufi discipline. He now recognized that the stations of the annihilation and subsistence

²⁴ Ibid. PP 24-72.

(*Fana aur Baqa*) can not be reached without the help of the guide (pir). He admitted that the Shaikh helps to inculcate the love of God in the neophyte. The guide gives him training to annihilate himself into his (Shaikh) being. The novice transcends the stage and annihilates himself first into the essence of the prophet Mohammad (SAW) and thereafter in God (*Fana fi-al-Rasul* and *Fana-fi-al-Allah*). Annihilation into the prophet is the unique Naqshbandi concept particularly the school of *Tariqah-e-Mohammadiyah*. The preceptor also teaches the sufi adapts the manner of remembrance of God and thus leads him to His way.²⁵

²⁵ Ibid. PP 138-141.

CHAPTER-3

EARLY RELIGIOUS THOUGHT OF SIR SYED AHMAD KHAN

PART-B

Besides many other social, political and religious controversies the note of discordance between Christianity and Islam was overemphasized. The Muslims, due to political subjugation and due to the religious discontent that arose on account of the missionary work, developed a sense of despise and abhorrence towards Christianity. In their emotional hike they forgot that belief in Christianity is a part of Muslim conviction which conforms to the tenet of Islam embedded in the Quran itself. The Christians, on the other hand, detested the Muslims and considered Islam to be an upgraded version of their religion. They took the clue from the verses of the Quran certifying the birth of Jesus Christ of Virgin Mary without being begotten by any man¹ and his venerated status as a prophet. The Quran also confirms the death of the Jesus Christ due to the tyranny of the Jews. There is however disagreement on the point of crucifixion and resurrection thereafter. They also adhered to Quran's categorical denial of the doctrine of trinity which may be treated as the backbone of Christianity.

The medieval history is replete with the scores of evidences of religious antagonism and political animosity. The scholars of the two religions remained grossly occupied to argue the supremacy of their religion. The Muslims

defended and removed alien content from their religion. Sir Syed was well cognizant with the putative polemics and took part in it with a different mission being puritanical and political in character at the same time.

It is evident then the Christian missionaries learnt Persian and other Indian languages to converse with the people and to convince them of the significance of their religion. Samuel Lee Joseph Woolf and Dr. Pfander were the early Christian scholars who infused therein a new spirit by writing about the significance of Christianity in a polemical style. The Muslim scholars like Mohammed Ishaque (the grandson of Shah Abdul Aziz), Maulana Noor-al-Hasan, Syed Ali etc. reacted with equal force and rendered apologetic works of equal significance to answer the immediate challenge. Sir Syed was closely watching the controversy and the ensuing dire consequences to emerge in the near future. He was cognizant of the growing animosity of the Muslims with the Christians due to the ensuing parrel to their religion. The antagonism responded a great deal of reaction, retaliation and the feeling of intolerance particularly in the Muslims due to the obvious socio-political reasons. Some of the Muslim scholars showed positive reaction by writing important treatises and letters to the Christian doctors of faith. Mohammad Ishaq and some others were regular correspondents of Pfander. The treatises of Rahmat Allah were perhaps the befitting significant works to answer the

Christian polemics. In response to the Muslim divines Pfander published *Hall-al ashkal*.²

The debate till then was merely an intellectual exercise which evoked little response in the masses. It took another turn when the missionaries under the patronage of the company government began to circulate the inscription of the Bible and other published material in the form of pamphlets in the masses making before them some voracious offers in the government jobs, if they accepted Christianity. The younger generation of Hindus and Muslims started embracing Christianity with a dream of better prospects in future. People like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Sir Syed checked the tremendous influence and sloped the immediately growing proselytism. Movements like *Brahmo Samaj*, *Arya Samaj*, *Wahabism* emerged vociferously to look after the revival of Puritanism in Hindus and Muslims. Sir Syed was conscious of the venture inherent in the circulated writings and the missionary propaganda. He was paved by William Muir's book on the "Life of Mohamet" which states a distorted version of facts and brought out sometimes farfetched conclusions by misinterpreting certain events or accidents of his life. He decided to respond him and check the desired effect of his vilifying efforts. With a view to achieving it he wrote a very important book named as *khutbat-e-Ahmadiya*.

Sir Syed, being a government employee, was well aware of the missionary activities and the supportive efforts

² Troll, C.W.: Sayyid Ahmad Khan Reinterpretation of Muslim Theology-PP 59-71.

of the company government. The process of conversion which started with the initiation of a debate by the GOAVEN Jesuits arguing the priority of the one over the other, turn impudent when the Christian missionaries having an acute sense of power began to make despising remarks against both the popular religions in India, Hinduism and Islam. He, having realized, that the British had established themselves in India. He considered suitable to create a feeling of amity between the Muslims and the Christians. But in his efforts he frequently tried to make his Muslim brethren believe that he upheld Islamic faith prior to any other religion. The under current in the commentary on the Bible and other treatises evidently speaks of his ideals. His friendship with the Christian employees however convinced him to change his religious policies. In many other treatises, commentary on the Bible and *khutbat-e-Ahmadiyah* are quite notable. One is polemical and other is defensive or apologetic. They, however, show his intellectual level, scientific outlook and free enquiry.

As stated earlier, Sir Syed was well aware of the antagonism between Christianity and Islam. He reviewed Christianity and Islam and came to the conclusion that both the religions are Unitarian in nature and that if closely analyzed the Christians would also agree that the doctrine of trinity is not supported by the text of the Bible. He also made the Muslims realize that the problem of abrogation, they delineated upon, did not cut so deep. It could be solved if properly dealt with in the light of the Quran and the tradition.

Before taking up the stupendous task of writing the commentary upon the Bible, Sir Syed was well aware of the fact that his ordeal may not be appreciated by either of the two communities. The Christians would be unhappy that he did not believe in the doctrine of trinity, original sin and the Jesus being the son of God. His Muslim brethren would not appreciate his efforts due to their deep-rooted animosity with the Christians. Many Christian authors like J.M. Arnold and Garcin de Tassy exalted the works of Sir Syed and admired him for his prudence, intellectual ability and power of comprehension. J.M. Arnold has included a letter of Sir Syed which he wrote to him as a cover-note on the copy of the first volume of his commentary on Bible which he presented to him.³

In the light of Sir Syed's letter, it is evident that he was aware of the difficulties he could face in the acceptability of his sober attempts which had some political meaning, but no personal motives. Despite being political, one cannot mitigate Sir Syed's eminence vast scholarship and profound study that he had of the religions. He is always logical and rational. Garcin de Tassy a noted French Orientalist who wrote highly critical research articles on the problems of Urdu language and literature, applauded Sir Syed's effort. He was greatly impressed by the fact that a Muslim had tried to understand Christianity and also presented it in its real form and true spirit.

There is no doubt, Sir Syed was a true profile of courage and perseverance. He had a cherished goal before him and pursued it with

³ Hali Altaf Hussain: *Hayat-e-Jawed*, PP 111- 124.

full devotion and extreme dedication. He showed all this in writing the exegesis of the Bible. After the mutiny of 1857, he resolved to write the commentary of the Bible for the fulfillment of the task. He devoted all time, money and energy. The seized salary during the period of the war when paid to him in the accumulated amount was so utilized by him that he bought books on Bible, for the preparation of the intended commentary. His crave of knowledge compelled him to have an access to the original scriptures. He, therefore employed a Jew named Salim to teach him Hebrew and explain the delicacies of the Pentateuch.⁴

Having equipped with possible tools, Sir Syed began to write his commentary. Before he started it he wrote a long epilogue comprising of ten discourses. Sir Syed himself was dubious about the acceptability of his work by the either communities. He, therefore prepared the mind, which could receive his work, by clearing misconceptions. The discourses follow two appendixes which again discuss problems of vital importance.

At the outset of the commentary, he introduces the book of Genesis. The exegesis of the book of genesis runs into eleven chapters. The ensuing five chapters are related to the exegesis of the Bible. Thus, he completed his first volume; the second could not be published although he is believe to have prepared it. We shall, hence forth present a summary of his ideas contained in the discourses and the commentary.

The first discourse is related to the necessity of the Prophet. It begins with the presumption that God exists and that His existence is

⁴ *Maktubat-e-Sir Syed*, ed. Ismail Panipati, Vol. 1, PP 19-22.

self evident and apriori. He is eternal, transcendent and emanent. He is the creator of all things and is created by none. He is to be cognized.

In consonance with the belief, Sir Syed firmly asserts that God sent His Prophet in every nook and corner of the world so as to communicate His will to man and to guide him to the straight path. All the prophets in all parts of the world taught him the lesson of the unity. These prophets came with books of different size containing His teachings. Man, time and again, forgot the teaching of the prophet and established the rule of evil. God sent his prophets with the same guidance till His will was finally divulgated. The prophet Mohammed (SAW) was the last Prophet who completed the guidance. It is evident then all the prophets before him were true and taught the same lesson. The Jesus Christ was one of them. He brought with him a reveal book Known as the Bible.

The arrival of prophets is confirmed by the Quran in its several verses such as *Surah Fatir (Ayat 24)*, *Surah Raad (Ayat 7)*, *surah Yunus (Ayat 47)*, *Surah Shura (Ayat 13)*, *Surah al Maidah (Ayat-51)*. The Quran verifies that the belief in the Prophet is an article of faith for Muslims. Sir Syed has also touched upon other articles of faith like the unity of God, belief in the angles, belief on the day of judgement and belief in the destiny etc. The referential description of articles of faith has been made to emphasize that the religion, Islam accommodates all other formal religions and their prophets with a sense of veneration and integrity.⁵

In the subsequent discourses, Sir Syed defines revelation as an addition of something to the human knowledge. It is the message of

⁵ Khan Sir Syed Ahmad; Tabyeen al-Kalam. PP. 2-7.

God. The message of God is delivered in many ways: (i) It is delivered to the Prophet by God directly, it requires no agency. The other ways are the instances of indirect communication; (ii) It is delivered through an angel; (iii) It is delivered through a cherubim; (iv) It is delivered through a supernatural voice without having any continence or form; (v) It is impressed on the heart and (vi) the message is delivered in a dream.⁶

The earlier four forms of revelation are wrongly akined to the Prophets alone. The Muslims believe that revelations were received even by those who had no pretensions of being the Prophets. Sir Syed quotes the examples of Asiya, Zool Qarnain and Virgin Mary about whom the Quran certifies. There are events when they received the message to perform a particular act. The Quran has recorded several occasions when Mary was instructed to deliver the child who would be the prophet of God.⁷

Sir Syed also quotes a tradition declaring Umar to receive the message of God even without being a Prophet. The Christian authors also agree on this focal point and advocate the same in their books.⁸

The revelation (*wahy*) is a general term. In order to distinguish one from the other specific terms like *tahdees* (the holy saying), *ilham* (inspiration), *kashf* (intuition) and *mushahida* (absorption) are used in this sense. The term *wahy* is restricted to the Prophet alone. When it received by some person other than the Prophet it is called *tahdees* (the

⁶ Ibid. P-7

⁷ S. XXVIII. 7, S. XVIII. 87, S. XIX. 16-22, S. III. 42, 43 & 45.

⁸ Khan Sir Syed Ahmad: Tabyeen al-Kalam, P-9.

holy saying). The other forms of revelation like intuition and inspiration are common to the people of faith.⁹

Distinguishing the Islamic concept of the revelation, Sir Syed points out that the Prophet of Islam had a unique distinction of receiving the revelation in a particular language from God Himself. It means that the earlier Prophets received messages from God which they described to their companions, meaning there by that the messages of God were conveyed to the Prophets in their own language and their companions thereafter communicated them to the common folk using their own words. Consequently there appeared many versions of the same scripture. The Bible is one such example of which we see some twelve versions belonging to the twelve epistles of the Jesus Christ like Mathew, Luke, Paul and John. In the case of the Quran, as generally believed, and Sir Syed also subscribes to it, the ideas and the words both were revealed to the Prophet Mohammad (SAW). There was no need to translate the message of God in his own language. It is evident then that the form and the content of the Quran was inscribed on the tablet where it was finally preserved. The Quran, therefore, challenged the eminent people of the day to compose just a verse in this manner and style. The Arabs were spell-bound and could not compose even a verse in its response. The Christians like Beausobre, Lofant, Martin Luther, St. James and Thomas Scott admit in their respective books that the language of the Bible is not divine.¹⁰

The Prophets described the message to his companions in the most suitable language to express the divine commandments. They heard it with patience for onward transmission to the masses. In the act

⁹ Ibid PP7-8

¹⁰ Ibid PP9-15.

of deliverance they sometimes missed the words of the Prophets. They sometimes inserted new words and at others left the gaps. In both cases, it was treated as omission. The amanuenses sometimes could not hear the proper word or recorded it wrongly. It was the case of misrepresentation. The Christians, as stated before, are aware of the variations. They have accepted it in their commentaries.¹¹

Sir Syed also clarifies that the Quran in keeping with the tradition refers to the earlier books. He quotes some seven verses from the Quran wherein it is stated that the Jesus and the Christians sometimes tried to hide the contents of the Torah or the Bible. The Prophet and his companions sometime reminded them of the actual content and they had to confess it. He refers to the case of a Jew pair who committed adultery. The prophet proposed punishment in accordance with their book. The hidden verse of the Torah recommending to kill the perpetrators of adultery by pelting stones. Thus the verses causing inconvenience were either wrongly interpreted or concealed by the Jews and the Christians in their books. The Quran reasserted them and apprised them of their revealed inscriptions. Sir Syed argues it to emphasize that the Quran recognizes the Torah and the Bible in their present form as revealed Books, but corrects the amalgam and omission in their content.¹²

The fourth discourse is not so important. Generally Muslims believe that there are three books preceding the Quran. But Sir Syed has included the *Suhoof* as one of the revealed Books and thus have numbered them four. It is believed that *Suhoof* are the small treatises revealed to the Judaic prophets. Some of these treatises are mentioned

¹¹ Ibid. PP 20-21.

¹² Ibid PP 22-31.

in these major books including the Quran. The Muslims follow it as an article of faith that all the books erstwhile revealed are true and authentic but they have been abrogated. Sir Syed quotes several verses of the Quran testifying to the veracity of the other revealed books. He concludes that the followers of the Semitic religions share some points of agreement which should be stressed and brought forth.¹³

The proceedings two discourses are related to the revealed books given to different prophets. Sir Syed like the Christian scholars divide the Books into two categories: the Old Testament and the New Testament. The Old Testament is rampant over the period of *Torah* and *Zuboor*. The New Testament includes different version of the Bible (*injl*) along with the divine words delivered to the Jesus Christ. The Muslims consider the words of the Jesus Christ as revealed and have no doubt about their being divine, the word of God. Sir Syed has repeatedly asserted that all the writings of the inspired people need not be divine.

The books of the pre-Christian era are classified into three categories :(i) The books included in the Bible (*injl*), Sir Syed has given a list of 39 such books; (ii) the Books which were sometime included in the Bible but later on rejected either on account of their sudden absence or deliberate exclusion after their being declared as apocrypha; and (iii) the books were never included in the Bible. The discourse may be concluded with the remark that Sir Syed

¹³ Ibid. PP.32-38.

worked hard to press upon the point that the Muslims believe in the original Bible as a revealed Book and therefore there is an affinity between the two.¹⁴

The Muslims act upon this criterion to decide the integrity of the book. Sir Syed has devised it from the science of tradition where the chain of reliable person is very significant (*ilm-al-rijaal*). He refers to Lordner's five kind classifications of book: (i) all the clergymen of the past and the present consider them reliable; (ii) some clerics deny their reliability and others uphold it, the number of supporters is greater; (iii) the number of the clerics denying them is greater; (iv) the clergy is equally divided on their authority. Their truth and falsity is decided on the basis of Eusebius; and (v) all the clergy of the past and the present consider them fabricated. With this classification, Sir Syed desires to communicate that the Muslims do not deny the Bible and the books included there in without any rationale. Besides the criteria described above, the Muslim also look into the content of the books otherwise regarded fabricated. If the content is neither verified nor rejected, they regard it possibly reliable on the assumption of their being utterances of one or the other Prophet. They are bound to follow as it is, the part of their faith. Here again we see the under current running through all his writings of this nature.¹⁵

Sir Syed, in his discourse on the problem of corruption, points out different ways of corruption. At the outset, he defines the term *tahrif* (corruption). In his *tafsir-e-kabir* a commentary on the Quran, Fakhruddin Razi defines the term as a change in the original meaning or the content of something, it may either be partial or complete. It may

¹⁴ Ibid. PP 39-57

¹⁵ Ibid PP 58-63.

sometimes be changed so much so that it is far from the truth. The Muslims in general understand it in the sense that the change signifies a motive to avert the meaning of the text. In the Quran it has occurred that the Jew and the Christian scholars deliberately concealed the fact. Although they knew the actual yet they remained silent. Sometimes a person who has compiled the text is responsible for the corruption. He does so willfully. The Quran condemns such people. It may be added that corruption is of two kinds of words: *tahrif-e-lafzi* (corruption of words) and *tahrif-e-manvi* (the corruption of meaning).¹⁶

Sir Syed speaks of eight forms of corruption. First is in the form of addition in which some word or passage is added to the original; the second is in the form of omission in which some word or passage is omitted from the original; the third is in the form of replacement where some word having the same meaning replaces the original; the fourth is also a kind of replacement where the original passage is replaced by another at the time of its recitation. It is however, verbal; the fifth is in the form of concealment wherein some verses of the original are concealed and others propagated. As Sir Syed has pointed out, the Jews concealed the verses prophesying the arrival of the Prophet Mohammad (SAW) and the verse related to the punishment of adultery *ayat-e-rijm* (pelting the stones); the sixth is in the form of deviation where in the personal commands are narrated to the people in the name of the commands of God. It is the case of making false statement as regards the scriptures; the seventh and the eight are the form of misinterpretation. In the first case the words having dual meaning are so interpreted that they mislead the people, meaning thereby that the people are told the meaning of the word other than the actual. In the

¹⁶ Ibid. PP 64-65.

second case the ambiguous verses are given farfetched interpretation so as to divest people from the original text.¹⁷

At the outset, Sir Syed clarifies that the Muslims could not agree with the first three forms of corruption. But some of the Muslim Scholars contend it otherwise. They argue that the corruption of earlier three forms has also been made.

Sir Syed has thoroughly analyzed the other five types of corruption citing the examples from the Quran in support of each mentioned above. It can convincingly be inferred from his content that the revealed books of the Jews and the Christians are preserved in the pristine form till today. People had altered them in different ways but always with the sense that the original is not lost.¹⁸

Sir Syed has earlier asserted that the inspired people other than the prophets also receive revelation and considers inspiration as one of the forms of revelation. In his discourse regarding the veracity of the books of the inspired people, Sir Syed has discussed the problem at length and has pointed out that there is an ample possibility of errors and variations in these books. The Muslims and the Christians together agree on the point that due to the lapse of time and the paucity of the means of preservation, it was not possible to save these books in original. The problem became more acute in the case of the ancient books especially the Jew scriptures contend in the Old Testament. Sir Syed alludes to many Christian scholars like Horne, Bantley, Rabbin, Father Morin, Bishop Walton etc. pressing upon the point by comparing different manuscripts that there were, myriad variations in them. There were at time some efforts to collate these manuscripts but

¹⁷ Ibid. PP 65-67.

¹⁸ Ibid. PP 67-95.

errors and variations could not be removed due to the serious disagreement of the clergy.

Sir Syed has made an elaborate historical study of the manuscripts of the scriptures. He has broadly classified them into the old and the new scripts. The new have been further divided into two: the Oriental and the Occidental having a reference to Bible and Tibries. They have been further analyzed into four families like the Spanish, the Oriental, the German and the Italian. These families have followed different codices which were devised to remove errors and variations from the manuscripts of the ancient scriptures.

In our opinion Sir Syed has tried to differentiate between the corruption or change (*tahreef*) and the occurrence of error. The corruption and change as pointed out is a deliberate attempt which speaks of the malafidies or intention of the persons. The error, however, is not deliberate it can be committed even after taking all care. It can occur due to the calligraphic style of the person. It can also be rooted in the wrong perception of the reader.¹⁹

Sir Syed has deliberated on the problem in order to emphasize that many of the translations of the Old and the New Testament have been made without taking care that the work translated may be replete with many errors which would consequently inhere in the translation as well. He has discussed it in a long discourse and substantiated it with a long list of translations made into different languages from the other different ones. In the earlier discourse he has pointed out that the possibility of error and variations which, he infers, would entail from

¹⁹ Ibid. See for details PP 96-149.

the translations as well. The translation is, nevertheless, an important tool but must be used with care and diligence.²⁰

Sir Syed has discussed abrogation at least on three occasions emphasizing that it has not been made in the Quran. The verses of the Quran that Fakhruddin Razi quotes to substantiate abrogation in the Quran have been wrongly interpreted. He vehemently criticizes the exegetes supporting the abrogation (*naskh*) in the Quran. In all the discourses referred to above, he deals with the definition of the term *naskh*, in the lexical sense which implies change. As a term it is used to replace one legal command with the other implying that the earlier would be replaced with the latter. Every word used in the Quran, as the Muslims believe, is significant in its place. The readers must be aware of their etymology so as to understand their reference. The words *nonsakh*, *ummul Kitab*, *Qalu* are the key words to understand the discourse. If care fully analyzed, they provide enough clue that the Quran speaks of the rejection of earlier commandments. It is again obvious that the concept refers to the abrogation of one inditement with the other. A host of the Judaic and the Christian scholars despise the idea, for the reason, that it denies the Omniscience of God. He being all wise issues no incomplete or defective command. Whatever is revealed from Him is eternally true, there is no possibility of its abrogation. The supporters dwelling upon the same contention are of the view that God being Omniscient knows the need of the day, the level of human intelligence and the span of knowledge and decides in all his wisdom requisites of society. Each period of time is an

²⁰ Ibid. PP 156-159.

advancement over the other. Its requirements, therefore, are different. God knows it and does it accordingly.²¹

Sir Syed has referred to the two verses in the Quran *Surah Raad* and *Surah Nahal* which speak of abrogation. More over in agreement with the Judaic and Christian scholars, he contends that the abrogation of God's inditement is not possible but his argument is different. He represents the Muslim concept or interpretation of the term abrogation. In his opinion no verse of the Quran has been replaced or abrogated. It entails from the argument that nothing is replaced with another, it existed for a particular stage and a particular time. Continuing the discussion he asserts that every inditement issued is a consequent which anticipates its accident. If the accident is false the consequent cannot be true. The time and the age should be deemed as accidents. Their change ensues new consequent. In short Sir Syed vehemently advocates that there has been no abrogation in the Quran. He agrees with the exegetes like Abu Muslim Asfahani who deny its relevance with reference to Quran.²²

Sir Syed's mission has been interpreted otherwise. A host of scholars, belonging to the past and the present disagreed with his mission and interpret it as a call of the day to which he fell a prey. He however was honest in his efforts. In addition to his exegesis he wrote many letters and Pamphlets, often polemical in style in the defense of his mission. He more often than not, was bitterly criticized even by his friends for his deliberate inclination towards Christianity which some times made him apologetic of his religion and community. In his letters he often had to defend his convictions and argue his point of view

²¹ Ibid. PP 263-268.

²² Maqalat-e-Sir Syed: Vol. 13 ed. Ismail Panipati PP 139-150.

either with strong grammatical logic or equally strong rational contention. This can be noticed in the discussion on “eating the strangulated hen”.²³ The same can be ascertained in another discussion on eating with the people of the book. His religious fervour however, continued despite having an open mind, liberal outlook and rational attitude. He remained a staunch Muslim throughout.

²³ Maktubat-e-Sir Syed ed: Ismail Panipati. Vol. I, PP 57-60, 122 & 178-183.

CHAPTER-4

Religious Thought of Sir Syed

Ahmad Khan

Later Phase

CHAPTER-4

RELIGIOUS THOUGHT OF SIR SYED AHMAD KHAN

LATER PHASE

In the light of proceeding palaver we mark a vivid distinction in Sir Syed between his early and later religious thought. Even a cursory glance would reveal it clearly that Sir Syed makes his appearance as religious thinker having a mission in mind yet quite conservative and insistent upon his ancestral point of view which was dogmatic in nature and orthodox in approach. Sir Syed was quite tolerant to the people of other religions particularly, Christians. Sir Syed adhered to the principles of nature and rationality to argue the supremacy of Islam and was fully convinced that the modern tools and the recent methods of argument could better explain Islamic religious thought on one hand to the Muslims who had meager knowledge of Islam due to which they were inclined towards Christianity and on the other the liberal and open minded Christians who wished to know Islam for their own interest. Sir Syed was successful to a great deal, he performed the job of *mutakalemin* in his own age.¹

We have deliberated upon the importance of reason in the preceding chapter. His rationalism should not however be equated with the classical rationalism.² He does not consider reason to be a distinguishing faculty of man. He holds it as an instrument which should be applied. It is not only theoretical but discursive and practical as well. He is closer to Shah Waliullah whose organic rationalism gives more importance to cognition.

At the time when Sir Syed stood to popularize his rational approach, we come across two more important streams, which could be

¹ Dar, B.A.: Religious thought of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, PP. 133-175 & Sir Syed No. PP 9-18.

² See Chapter Second for detail.

considered as antagonistic to his movement. One was the *Deoband* movement which aimed at preserving the true spirit of Islam and believed in the revival of theology and the other was the long lived conventional institution of *Sufism*. It also exhorted the Muslims to adhere strictly to Islam, but with the provision of accommodating the ingredients of other religions.

Sir Syed develops his theory of rationalism in one of his articles "thoughts of man" (*Insan ke Khayalat*). It is parallel with Ghazali's *al Munqidh* and Descartes discourse on method. He begins it in a rhetoric style comparing man with other animals. Man shares a number of characteristics with animals but he possesses a distinct quality of mind. Sir Syed, of course, does not deny the animals, possessing the mind which rescues them in making judgements in adverse situations but man's reason is more functional and guides him to grope his way into darkness. It helps him to discern between good and evil, right and wrong and also apprises him of his social needs. In his journey to certitude, he passes through the following steps: (a) Man is bestowed with reason; (b) This, he does by acquiring knowledge through reason; (c) We are certain that our faith i.e. Islam is the true faith; (d) Hence our faith must be based on knowledge; and (e) knowledge can be acquired through reason only.³

In another article on prudence (*Samajh*), Sir Syed emphatically explains its significance. At the out set, he defines it as a discerning power which helps man to distinguish between good and evil, right and wrong. He begins it by pointing out the difference between the foolish and the wise. The latter is distinguished from the former on the basis of his prudence. He also understand the nature of his company and reacts accordingly. The prudence is the highest quality in man. It helps man to

³ Maqalat-e-Sir Syed: ed. Ismail Panipati Vol. 5, PP 249-256.

cognize his own potentialities and also rescues him to bring them out and develop the best for the refinement of his personality and the performance of the task, he is assigned. He also appreciates with its help the merits of others.

Besides, these articles we often find frequent references to the discourse on reason in his letters. Despite his emphasis on it, he is well cognizant of the limits of reason. Discussing the difference between the reason (aql) and nature (naql), he points out that the word of God is always commensurate with reason.⁴ In another letter he again deliberates upon the domain of reason. God, who has bestowed it, is also aware of its limits. He, therefore, explains things with figures of speech like Similes, Metaphors and Allegories. He has also asserted that the power of reason is augmented with its application, further more knowledge contributes to its sharpness. The scientist, therefore, apply reason in a better way. The domain of their reason is wider but they also are unable to answer many questions. They have discovered oxygen and hydrogen, and with their admixture made water, but how does it take place is not known to them. The theologians have a direct answer that God does it.⁵ At another place he again acknowledges that human reason is limited but points out that collective wisdom is higher than the individual wisdom and must therefore be relied upon.⁶

The palaver on reason is suggestive of the fact that Sir Syed knows its limitations but considers it to be the only valid source of knowledge. Truth can be arrived at by no other except the two (reason & faith). It confirms revelation and understands its delicacies.

⁴ Tahdhib-ul-Akhlaq: 1311 A.H. PP. 28-29.

⁵ Ibid, PP 1312-13 A.H. PP 8-9.

⁶ Maktubat-e-Sir Syed: ed. Ismail Panipati P. 383.

Another principle, that Sir Syed adheres to in his later religious thought, is the rule of nature. He advocated it to the extent that his contemporaries addressed him as naturalist (*nechri*). The term of course was used for him in a derogatory sense but Sir Syed instead of feeling it as offensive accepted it large heatedly. He always remained cool and never got exasperated even by harsh criticism.⁷ It is requisite at this juncture, particularly after going through his rationalism, to know the meaning of nature. It should not however, be confused with the naturalism of Spenser. It was not un-scientific either. Spencer's naturalism, having its roots in Greek atomism, reduced every thing to mechanical composition.⁸

Sir Syed repeatedly emphasizes that Islam is in conformity with the laws of nature. All the prophets from Adam to Mohammad (S.A.W) advocated principles which were in harmony with nature. By way of elaboration he frequently gives the examples of Moses and Abraham and concludes that the two great Prophets cognized God with the help of nature. He also insists that the nature being the creation of God helps man to know the creator.⁹

Sir Syed has defined nature as an all pervasive force. It affects all that happens either in the form of accident or event. He also considers nature as a teleological force giving a purpose and design to all the objects in the universe.¹⁰ Both the animate and inanimate objects are cogniscent of their ends. The former aspires to achieve the goal and the latter serves it without knowing it. The activity may either be cognate on conscious level or in cognate on conservative level. The creatures have been designed in different sizes, structures and shapes suited to the end

⁷ *Tahdhib-ul-Akhlaq* 1296 AH PP 18-21.

⁸ Dar, B.A. Religious thought of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, PP 150-156.

⁹ *Maqalat-e-Sir Syed* ed. Ismail Panitpati, vol-15, PP 146-153.

¹⁰ *Akhri Mazamin Sir Syed* ed. Malik Chunnuddin PP 115-119.

assigned to them. The bee for example knows it, how and where from prepare the honey. No other insect can do the job.¹¹

Sir Syed often refers to the law of causation which binds up the events, things and actions in a well knit sequence. The natural sciences envisage these laws The Quran confirms the laws of nature. Throwing of Abraham into the great fire, his remaining alive therein without being effected at all, the remaining of Joseph in the stomach of a fish after being swallowed, are some events against the laws of nature. He very, enthusiastically rejects all such beliefs for being unnatural.¹² To him naturalism is an argument to substantiate the religious truths on one hand and the veracity of the modern sciences on the other. He repeatedly emphasizes the laws of nature particularly the scientific notion of cause and effect using it as an argument to prove the existence of God as the Creator of the Universe. Thus he puts up all efforts to make people believe that he is a thorough going religious person.¹³

Sir Syed through out all his religious discourses very vehemently asserts that religion is to be examined on the basis of his two erstwhile formulated principles. It means that religion must be in correspondence with nature and the set of beliefs must be certified by the reason. He accepts that the individual reason may be erroneous, he, therefore, talks of collective reason to testify to the articles of faith of a particular religion. He cites the example of Judaism and Christianity in which many worldly things which are otherwise against nature and reason have been included. He, however, does not rule out the possibility of such inclusion in Islam as well.¹⁴

¹¹ Tahdhib-ul-Akhlaq 1296 A.H. PP 1-5. & Maqalat-e-Sir Syed ed. Ismail Panipati Vol. 146-153.

¹² Ibid. 1314, A.H. PP 106-108.

¹³ Sir Syed ki Islami Basirat, ed. by Khwaja, Prof. Jamal PP 49-52.

¹⁴ Tahdhib -Akhlq 1290 A.H. PP 6-7.

Sir Syed agrees with a popular definition of religion that it is a set of convictions and rituals performed under some rules and regulations. He amicably accommodates the virtuous persons belonging to any religion or those practicing atheism. He offers a unique interpretation that all the monotheists of any religion, either revealed or pagan, are Muslims. In order to substantiate his argument he quotes verses from the Quran,¹⁵ and the traditions of the Prophet. A person not believing in revealed books or prophets or incarnations, or resurrection is a Muslim. He justifies this in the way that all the prophets due to their being monotheist and close to nature were Muslims. Strangely enough he argues that even those who deny the existence of God, believe in Him because they complain of proofs and not the very existence of God. With this definition he aims at explaining to the younger generation that there is no note of discord between the religion, Islam and the modern science. Thus it was an approach of compromise between the two.¹⁶

Sir Syed has elaborately delineated his views on religion in one of his articles under the title “religion is a natural instinct of man” *Mazhab Insan ka Amar-e-Tabayee Hai*. He begins it with the definition of natural instinct. To explain it he chooses the examples of snake and scorpion which sting the objects that come in a way. Stinging, thus is a natural property. In the same way religion is also a natural property of man. He asserts that all human beings belonging to any race or area believe in one or the other religion. The uncivilized races dwelling in the forest of America and Africa living in the Island of the Ociyana also followed some religion. The civilized races whose existence stresses by history

¹⁵ S. IV. 5, S. II. 105-106.

¹⁶ Tahdhib -al-Akhlaq; 1314 A.H. PP 114-115.

have and evidentiary proof that they practiced a particular religion. He concludes therefore that it is a natural instinct.¹⁷

Sir Syed also acknowledges that man is inquisitive to know the objects which surround him. He noticed things with wonder simply because all of them surrounding him appeared to be powerful in comparison to him. He could not control the rivers, the trees, the animals and the insects. He also noticed the natural forces like rain clouds, changing seasons, flooded rivers, stormy winds, earth quakes and volcanoes, which affect human life in the form of devastation. As he could not control them he envisaged the one, all powerful Being who could control these forces and other powerful objects in the environment. Sir Syed substantiates it from the verses of the Quran.¹⁸

Sir Syed points out that there are two main reasons of the worship of God. He is adored either as a gesture of thanks for his blessings and bounties because of fear lest it would arouse his displeasure which could result into calamities [harm] to him. Man thus offers prayers expressing his humility, and obedience to the deity and performs sacrifices either of man or animals. There may however be differences in the way of performing them, but they are performed to win His favour and avoid His wrath. When these worships are performed for other than God it is idol worship and when offered to one God it is an approved monotheism even if offered to an unaided stone as his image.¹⁹

Further more religion is a natural instinct and it must be propagated by someone from amongst the fellowmen. Sir Syed elsewhere and here in this article emphatically reiterates that the prophet hood too is a natural instinct. He argues that man is born with different potentialities and

¹⁷ Ibid. 1296 A.H. PP. 53-54

¹⁸ Ibid. P. 54

¹⁹ Ibid. P. 56

aptitudes and is able to perform the tasks of different nature. Some of them have religious aptitude and have the ability to perform the religious task. These men are called prophets. They are born in every society and do their job as and when the need arises. It is wrong to presume that prophets were born in the Palestine and nook of the Arab peninsula, and the other continents. Sir Syed agrees with other scholars like Abdul Quddus, Dara Shikoh, Shah Waliullah who held similar views. The Prophet of Islam also confirms this theory on the basis of the Quran.²⁰

Sir Syed also contends that all the religions, historically known or otherwise taught the lesson of monotheism even the polytheistic religions recommending idolatry are monotheistic in spirit. He gives the example of Hinduism, Greek-o-Roman and Egyptian religions who taught monotheism. All the Prophets, thus preached one religion, the religion of monotheism which later on was corrupted. The Prophet of Islam also advocated it, saying that the religion was one. He cites the verses of the Quran.²¹ In short no prophet in any corner of the world taught polytheism or dualism. The *Torah* and the *Bible* also certify it. If the Bible is thoroughly scanned, there are some hundred and fifty verses advocating monotheism and no verse explaining trinity. The Prophet Mohammad (SAW) advocating through Quran, asserts that Islam teaches the concept of perfect monotheism, the Unity of essence (*dhat*), attributes (*sifat*) and worship (*Ibadat*) whereas other religions advocate for the unity of essence alone.²²

Sir Syed tries to seek reconciliation between Christianity and Islam on the basis of the following points.

- (i) The idea of some ultimate power in human mind.

²⁰ S. XIII. 7, S.II.23, S.XXXV. 24

²¹ S. XLII. 12, S.LXVII. 47.

²² Tahdhib -al- Akhlaq 1296 A.H. PP 56-59.

- (ii) Human imagination of different objects as the ultimate power or its manifestation.
- (iii) The idea of worshipping the ultimate power with the fear of his displeasure and greed of his bliss.
- (iv) Objectification of the conceptualized ultimate power.
- (v) Common principles worship with its different modes.
- (vi) Birth of a Prophet, incarnation or reformer in a society.
- (vii) The lesson of monotheism through all religions.²³

All the communities following the prophet of any region would be entitled for heaven. The criterion for the award would be the performance for virtuous actions. To substantiate his contention, he cites the verse of the Quran²⁴, which guarantees paradise for all those whom God desires.

The most important in the articles of faith is the belief in one God, Sir Syed has elsewhere pointed out that other religions profess belief in His unity but Islam presents a complete concept. Before Sir Syed all the Muslim philosophers and theologians of high repute deliberated upon the concept in detail. The dialecticians (Mutakalemin), the Mutazalites and the scholastic philosophers gave their own interpretation and attempted to define it in the Quranic paradigm. In its explanation, Sir Syed seems to be profoundly influenced by the Mutazila philosophers who deny the independent existence of attributes. He being a Muslim believes in God who is eternal, infinite and necessary existence, being the source of all that exists in the world. He is the first cause and inheres unity of essence, existence, attributes and cause. He is Omnipotent, Transcendent, All seeing, All hearing, All knowing and All living etc. Sir Syed also believes in Him as a Law giver who never deviates from the Laws, he formulates

²³ Ibid. PP 58-59.

²⁴ S: IV. 48

for His creatures. He executes His law with utmost will and supremacy. Thus His essence and attributes are not distinguished from one another.

His formulated Law of nature is never changed. It is true that He has the power to avert it, but it is not done. He creates things and enforces the laws by an act of will. The sound "*Kun*" in the form of command is the manifestation of His will. His command is uncaused but thereafter generates a sequence of cause and effect. God occupies no space. He is directionless, fixed in no position. His being on the sky is allegorical. It only gives the sense of His majesty being on the top of the hierarchy. He is indivisible having no possibility of diversity of change. He is neither substance (*Johar*) nor accident (*Arz*) but essence (*dhat*). He is confined to no form. He is neither motion nor inertia. He is eternal infinite.²⁵

As stated earlier Sir Syed has very frequently ascertained that God in Islam is One, Pure and Simple. In one of his articles, he very unequivocally confirms that even the polytheists like the Trinitarian Christians ultimately belief in His unity.²⁶

The prophet of Islam has explained it with the help of nature. Sir Syed has quoted some traditions saying that there is some one who created the earth, form the clouds, commanded them to rain, grew thereafter the gardens. There is someone who created the earth and the skies, made days and nights, change the seasons, made bottoms of the oceans so as to stop them from the mixing with each other and creating havoc thereafter. There is some one who nailed the mountains and the earth, guides you in the darkness of the sea and blows the breeze before it rains. Each tradition poses the same question as to who can do it, and gives the answer that it is God.²⁷

²⁵ Maqalat-e-Sir Syed, ed. Ismail Panipati, vol.13 PP. 3-5.

²⁶ Tahdhib -al Akhlaq, 1312 A.H. P 53.

²⁷ Maqalat-e-Sir Syed, ed. Ismail Panipati, vol.1 PP 17-18.

We also notice the phenomenon of life and death, change and decay, and regeneration and corruption, we conclude a being above these phenomena always living, permanent, having no possibility of generation corruption. He creates but he is not created. We therefore conceive in Him the attribute of being ever existent (Hayee). In the same way with the perception of world phenomena we conceive in Him all attributes which in one way or the other are the properties of our personalities.²⁸

In addition to this he has offered cosmological, teleological and ontological proofs for the existence of God. We shall discuss them one by one. Offering the cosmological proof Sir Syed asserts that Islam believes in God being the cause of the universe. He begins the article "comparison between the cause and the effect" (*"Al-talazim bain al-illat wa malul"*) with an interesting palaver. He refers to the earlier Muslims Philosophers particularly Ibn Sina who in conformity with his teacher, Aristotle, argue that the cause and effect are inseparable with each other. The cause must produce the effect and the effect must preceed the cause. Ghazali and Ibn Timiya reject the argument on the ground that the inseparability of the cause and the effect makes them insensate for each other and determines as pre-requisite for one another. It necessarily envisages the eternity of the two if the cause is eternal the effect should be eternal as well. Sir Syed rejects their argument and believes that Ghazali and Timiyah both had little knowledge of the natural sciences and that the span of knowledge has increased quite a great deal since then. He therefore, vociferously upholds the theory of the Greek masters.

The natural scientists believe that the universe is made up of matter. With the process of their permutation and combination the universe and its objects came into being. Some organized themselves into

²⁸ Tahdhib -al Akhlaq, 1312 A.H., PP 54-57.

the form of different animals others combined into the form of vegetation and still others assemble in the form of inanimate objects like hills and stones. Sir Syed disagrees with the scientists who believe that the order in the universe is accidental and that the permutation and combination of the atoms in different forms is not under any thought plan but just a matter of chance. He holds that God caused these atoms to organize in different forms and that there is a purpose behind every created thing in the universe. From the smallest insect to the largest animal (whale) they are so designed that they could fulfill the created purpose. Sir Syed further argues that causation does not entail eternity of the world, for, it is subject to change. He gives the example of a small seed buried in the ground developing into a big tree which undergoes transformation and changes its position as cause and effect. Thus on the basis of cause and effect Sir Syed proves the existence of God as the first cause and the prime mover.²⁹

Sir Syed has quite often emphasized in his many articles that God is the law giver. More often than not God has explained Himself through nature. He often quotes the examples of Prophet Moses and Prophet Abraham who cognized and discovered God with the help of the phenomenon of nature. The Quran very apodictically asserts in many verses that He is the creator of the heavens and the earth and all amid them, the stars, the planets, the moon, the clouds and many other such celestial and terrestrial bodies. They help man to realize His existence.³⁰

Besides the cosmological proof for the existence of God, Sir Syed also constructs ontological evidence but his ontology is also based on his cosmology. In fact he emphasizes again and over on God being the first cause (cause-a-sue). Constructing the ontological evidence he envisages

²⁹ Maqalat-e-Sir Syed: ed. Ismail Panitpati, Vol-3, PP 239-247. & Tahdhib -al Akhlaq 1296 A.H., PP 186-188.

³⁰ Sir Syed ki Islamic Basirat, ed. by Khawaja Prof. Jamal, PP, 93-97.

that all existence in the universe, linked up in the well knit chain of cause and effect. There is no uncaused event and accident in the world. The chain, however, stops on the final cause, God. He reframes the argument in another manner that the objects should either be existent or non-existent. In the case of their being existent they must have a cause inseparable from its effect. He asserts that the matter transforms its shape, the water becomes air, the air again being solidified becomes water. Rebuilding the argument he says that things become non-existent there must remain something existent. The existent may be one or many. In case of their being many, they must have the potentiality of being existent by themselves or must have been actualized by the one.³¹ Having perceived the existents we infer the idea of the agent who brings it into the existence. It is thus proved that there must be a creator of the world.

Sir Syed, like many dialecticians, believes that man possesses animal and rational tendencies. The rational ones are the manifestation of the angelic powers. Anger, recompense suspicion, jealousy, greed etc, are the evil powers in man. He categorically asserts that the Quran bears no testimony to the existence of an independent creation named as angels or devils.³²

As we are aware, believe in the angels of God is another important article of faith. It is true that, Sir Syed holds that the term angel has been used in the Quran. It is obligatory then, that the Muslims must believe in the existence of the creatures like the angels. On the basis of the same the Muslims readily draw a figure of the angels braving a body impermeable by the five senses particularly the vision and the touch, but nevertheless having the inability to assume human form to participate in the activities of man and to intercourse with them. The angels are also believed to have

³¹ Maqalat-e-Sir Syed, ed. Ismail Panipati, Vol.1, PP 8-12.

³² Ibid. Vol.,13 PP-184-185.

wings to travel between the heaven and the earth. They are assigned jobs by God and do nothing on their own. It means, they work as the agents of God. Sir Syed, however, emphatically declares that the belief in such creatures is correct but their form, figure and shape are not evident from the Quran.³³

In the first place he emphasizes the fact that the type of the existence of the angels is questioned by reason. The dialecticians and the scholastics [Mutazila and Ashara] both do not agree to the commonly held concept. Probing into the meaning of the word angel, Sir Syed points out that it has been used in the Quran and the earlier scriptures the Old and the New testament in various ways. Etymologically the word means messenger the slave and to carry out the orders. Sometimes it means the contagious disease, sometimes the wind and sometimes the messenger. It also refers to the human beings having quicker and broader perception. Moreover these scriptures also describe the events which the angels participated in their wrestling with the Prophet Yaqub their reception by the Prophet *Lut* as his guests, their conversion and dining with the prophet, all these could be cited as instances. In short man imagined the angels as power agents between God and the prophets traversing between Heaven and Earth. The pagans give them the status of gods and goddesses enjoying the delegated powers.³⁴

Continuing the palaver Sir Syed asserts that the Jews considered the angels as material entities having a different body made up of air fluid matter. They could assume different forms and perform stupendous task. The angel sometime signified the companions of the Jesus Christ. The Jews, however, admitted no element of feminism in the host of the angels. They nevertheless envisaged the different grades of angels, some

³³ Ibid. PP 159-160.

³⁴ Ibid. PP 167-168 & Khan Sir Syed Ahmad: Tafsir-al Quran, Vol. I, PP 118-123.

commanding more respect than others. The Jews and Christians used the word angels to mean the intelligences, through which God emanated himself in the world. In short Sir Syed argues that the concept of angels was prevalent in the Semitic and non-Semitic religions long before the advent of Islam.³⁵

He argues further that the pre-Islamic Arabs who worshiped the deads particularly the pious souls never use the word *Malak* or *Malaik* in this sense. Sir Syed substantiates it from the Arab tradition and literature. They used the word *Jin* instead for different kinds of souls and used different words qualifying their merits. The word *malak* or *malaik* however occurs in the lexicon which means the powers of God. The Jews and the Christians also used it in the same sense. The Quran, as Sir Syed interprets also uses the word in a similar way.³⁶

Sir Syed vehemently asserts that the word *malak* or *Malaik* has not been used in the sense that the Jews conceived it. The Quran has generally used it to mean the powers of God manifest in the universe and its objects. Sir Syed perhaps refers to the laws of nature enforced everywhere in the celestial and the terrestrial world. In order to substantiate his contention he again cites the verses of the Quran, which he interprets in accordance with his own principles. He points out that the Quran has mentioned the names of *Micail* and *Gabriel* only for the reason that they occur in the Jewish scriptures. The Jews as mentioned elsewhere considered the *Micail* as their friend and *Gabriel* as their enemy.³⁷

Sir Syed, in his commentary on the Quran, justifies it with reference to the bezels of wisdom (*Fusus-al-Hikam*) of *Ibn al Arabi*, who in his treatise holds that the world as a whole is a big individual (*Insan-e-*

³⁵ Maqalat-e-Sir Syed: ed. Ismail Panipati Vol-13, PP-168-171&179.

³⁶ Khan Sir Syed Ahmad: Tafsir al Qura Vol.-1, PP 127-129.

³⁷ Maqalat-e- Sir Syed: ed. Ismail Panipati Vol-13, PP 174-176.

Kabir) and man is the miniature of the same. The angels are the capacities and powers of big individual. Sir Syed agrees with him that the angels refer to the attributes and the powers of God.³⁸

Sir Syed, being a revolutionary thinker, did not accept the popular view regarding angels and he defies the common belief about *Jinn* as well. Although he agrees to the possibility of the existence of such creations like angels and *Jinns* yet he rejects the popular conviction on the contention that the Quran provides no evidence to the confirmation of the beliefs about the creation of a being having a particular body a distinct form made up of a different matter with a separate dwelling far away from or at least beyond the reach of man. Sir Syed gives, on the basis of the evidence found in the Quran a new interpretation.

The *Jinns* as commonly held are created of water, air and fire. They do not contain the element of soil. They therefore are not perceivable with our five senses unless they themselves intend so. Moreover it is also believed that they can perform the havius tasks which otherwise are impossible for man. They are also classified as good and evil spirits, doing good or harm to man. Like the human beings they also give birth to their infants.³⁹

There were two fundamentals terms (*ins* and *jinn*) which described the whole human race. The former was used for the civilized people who lived in cities and towns and developed some rules and principles which regulated their individual and social life. Contrary to this there were men who lived in jungles and amid the mountains leading a savage life. They followed no rules and principles but the laws of nature and remained, therefore, wild and undisciplined. Unlike the civilized people, they were

³⁸ Ibid PP 181-184.

³⁹ Khan Sir Syed Ahmad, *Tafsir-ul-Qural* vol-3 PP 59-62.

quite strong having much energy and courage to do even hazardous task giving an impression of their being super natural.⁴⁰

In concurrence with Ghazali, Sir Syed asserts that the Quran is the word of God, but he disagrees with his later assertions where Ghazali attempted to differentiate the work (Kalam) from the apophthegm (Qaul) and describes the Kalam conveying something to the heart through the speech. Criticizing him, Sir Syed points out that the meanings are conveyed either directly or indirectly. In the case of direct speech the particular words of the speaker are repeated without any addition or subtraction. In the case of indirect speech the meanings are conveyed in the words of other than the speaker. In the former case, the meanings conveyed, would be considered as the speech (Kalam) of the speaker. In the later case it would be understood as the speech of other person. Sir Syed explains with the examples of tradition that the sayings of the prophet, as not been described in the words of the prophet and may not be understood as his words, even though the contents are the same. Sir Syed credulously holds that the Quran is the word of God, revealed to the prophet with words and content from Him. He has asserted it several times that prophet hood is a potentiality present in the man whom he chooses to be his prophet. It is evident then the prophet of Islam received the content in the ordained language which he remembered and passed it on to the companions in verbatim, who finally put it to writing. The Quran, therefore, as Sir Syed thinks, inconsonance with the Muslims at large, has undergone no change. Carrying it further Sir Syed rightly point out that the messages of God communicated in the words of the prophet have not been include in the Quran, and are known as the divine tradition (Hadith-e-Qudsi). Thus it is evident that the discourse of the speaker

⁴⁰ Ibid. PP 67-71.

communicated in his words would be known as his speech (Kalam). In case the discourse is communicated in the words of others, even though the contents are the same, would not be his speech (Kalam).

We can only assure ourselves that the nature and the way of His speech must be different from those of ours. The person, he speaks to, cognizes it, and knows His way and understands it fully.

Sir Syed acknowledges that the person, who is capable of receiving the message of God is a prophet. He receives the revelation due to the innate capacity known as *Malka-i-Nabuwah* (The potentiality of Prophethood). In short the prophet having the spiritual powers uses this capacity to the full and reforms the life of the people by maintaining balance between good and evil, animal and rational human and divine tendencies.⁴¹

The veracity of the Quran can never be challenged. The anecdotes, reiteration of the erstwhile beliefs contained in the earlier scriptures, figures of speech, linguistic delicacies, admitting something without argument to sustain the subsequent contention and building up the evidence with the help of the supportive statements to substantiate the desired communication (Kalam-e-Maqsood) do not affect the truth of the Quran.⁴²

Like Mutazila, Sir Syed also holds that the Quran speaks of many promises of God. These promises describe His infinite attributes. Those, who believe that his omnipotence is limited by keeping the promises, are categorically wrong. He is free to make promises and once He made, He must keep His word. God has created the universe. He has also formulated the laws of nature. The palaver on the promises and the laws of nature is concluded in the denial of all the miracles of the prophets

⁴¹ Tahdhib -al-Akhlaq 1314 A.H., PP 184-186.

⁴² Maktubate-e- Sir Syed, ed. by Ismail Panipati, P-144.

described in the Quran. The reason is obvious that they are against the laws of nature. Sir Syed very emphatically asserts that the laws of nature are never contradicted. Bearing child without a father, rising of sun from the west, changing the course of moon, planet and star and the occurrence of such other phenomena are wrongly adduced claims. They defy the work of God and thus impossible. He in support of his argument alludes several verses of the Quran.⁴³

The earlier assertion has been further clarified, he once again categorically asserts that the Quran contains nothing super natural. Like a staunch Muslim, Sir Syed advocates that every word of the Quran has been well preserved and that all the verses in a chapter (*Surah*) are well knit with each other. Further he also holds that there is no abrogation in the Quran. Regarding the revelation of the Quran, he reiterates and pleads for the common man's point of view. All Muslims are aware of the fact that the Quran was revealed in bits. The Prophet received the message as and when it was deemed necessary. He further argued that the instructions were given, commands were issued, things were explained with the help of a parable or an anecdote and events were described either in pre-historical sequence using as hint (*talmih*) to the past and uprising the present and the future generations to take lesson there from and to abstain from repeating the same mistake.⁴⁴

In the analysis of the meaning of the Quran, one must also take into account the miraculous parables and anecdotes described in the Quran. Many of the narrations have been picked up from the Septuagint. These stories should not be interpreted literally, they have been used for the desired communication. He repeatedly used the examples of the fire not burning the prophet Abraham or the fish swallowing John (Yonus) or the

⁴³ Ibid. PP - 144-150.

⁴⁴ Ibid. PP-153-167.

birth of the Christ without a father. Sir Syed rejects the occurrence of all such events repeatedly on the simple contention of their being against the law of nature.⁴⁵

Sir Syed has clarified again that there is no discordance between the word of God and work of God and that if there is disagreement, the work of God will prevail. Moreover he asserts that the disagreement may be due to the wrong interpretation of the Holy text. He adds that the discourses are doted with figurative statements. Such statements when unfolded give us clues that they have ample possibilities of interpretation, and in each of these possibilities, there is a difference of the literal and the desired meaning. There are many statements in the Quran which can not be taken literally such as God sitting on the skies with hand and feet and other organs akin to the five senses. Such statements may be treated as way of expression having something hidden to say which he calls desired communication (*Kalam-e-Maqsood*).⁴⁶

Upholding the distinction between two types of Prophet (Nabi and Rasool), Sir Syed disagrees with the classical theory of the prophet hood in which it is believed that the prophet is chosen by God from amongst the men without taking into account the strong morals of the person. God being the absolute master could appoint any of His Servants as His prophet.⁴⁷

Thus, Sir Syed presents his own theory. It is nevertheless original in character although its roots are found in the philosophers like Ibn-al-Arabi, Abdul Karim Jili and Shah Waliullah. He holds that the prophet hood is a natural instinct. He therefore contends that any ordinary human being, as the theologians and the philosophers advocate, cannot become a

⁴⁵ Ibid. PP 161-165

⁴⁶ Ibid. PP 157-161.

⁴⁷ Tahdhib Akhlaq 1313 A.H. PP 17-23.

prophet unless he possess this innate habitus. He also disagrees with them on the concept that the prophet is chosen from amongst the men at a particular point of time when God desires to appoint him at the highest rank and thereafter creates in him the capacity to comprehend the message of God. Sir Syed on the contrary believed that a prophet is a prophet since birth and realizes the potentiality within himself when it is needed to or faced with a particular situation. The occasions of its realization may be called as *ba'athat* (declaration of Prophet hood). Sir Syed argues that man is born with certain potentialities which are shaped and find expression and by which he is identified. On the basis of the same he becomes a carpenter, poet or a painter. He acquires excellence in his profession and becomes its prophet when he touches the acme. Without this natural gift or potentiality he could not become what he was. Similar is the case of the prophet. He possesses the natural habitus of prophecy. In short Sir Syed convincingly argues that the prophet hood is not an abrupt gift solely dependent on the will of God, if He wills to choose someone to be His prophet He creates him with this habitus.⁴⁸

Sir Syed firmly believes in the institution of Prophet hood. He also justifies the need of the Prophet for the guidance of people or to communicate the will of God. He also agrees that the prophet receive revelation in different modes. We shall bring out his views on revelation in the proceeding passage.

In *Tabyeen-al-Kalam*, Sir Syed discusses six modes of communication.

1. The revelation must come from God;
2. It has been delivered upon earth by an angel;
3. That angel has been clothed in the human shape;

⁴⁸ Maqalat-e-Sir Syed: ed. Ismail Panipati Vol. 13, PP 73-77.

4. There may be only a supernatural voice, without any visible appearance of the speaker;
5. It may be conveyed by direct inspiration to the heart of man;
6. It may be announced in a dream or an opening.⁴⁹

Sir Syed defines revelation as an innate potentiality or a natural habitus found in the highly evolved men called as prophets. In accordance with the commonly held view, it is conceived that the prophet is a chosen person. The choice is exercised only by God. It is, therefore conferred upon a person at a particular time whence God sends His message, revelation to the prophet, the chosen one for transmission to the masses imbining for welfare and spiritual up gradation.⁵⁰

Sir Syed seems to suggest that the revelation has two fold purpose; that it is needed for the enhancement of knowledge or that it is necessitated for the correction of human morals. The instinct of revelation or inspiration in the form of potentiality is found in the manner that other capacities are preserved and manifest. Sir Syed explains it that man possesses many capacities out of which some are dormant and others manifest. Even the dormant ones sometimes become active or discovered. Contrary to this, the active potentialities, if unused, become dormant. One is known as born poet, a blacksmith, a musician, a dancer and so on. It is daring to equate prophecy with such capacities commonly found in the men of ordinary disposition.⁵¹

At this juncture, Sir Syed anticipates the criticism of the orthodox clergy of Islam considering him as infidel for denouncing the tenet of the finality of prophet hood (Khatm-e-Nabuwah). Their criticism is baseless, for, as he holds, he has never denounced it. The finality of the Prophet

⁴⁹ Khan Sir Syed Ahmad: *Tabyeen-ul-Kalam*, P-7.

⁵⁰ Khalique Abdul: Sir Syed Ahmad Khan: *Nature, man and God - A critique* PP 178-182.

⁵¹ *Tahdhib -ul-Akhlaq* 1297 A.H. PP 151-152.

Hood is different from the cessation of the blessings from God. God is benevolent and His benevolence is a bounty which never ceases, he shows it even in the case of a bee. It would not cease in the case of man provided that man possesses a pure heart like that of the insect. God's bounty is ever flowing, it has no or little relation with the prophecy. Sir Syed's contention is confirmed by the *sufis*.⁵²

Sir Syed defies any existence of any external agency between God and prophet. He rejects the commonly held convictions that Gabriel came down to the earth in the human form and conversed with him to communicate to the will of God. Sir Syed believes that the inherent capacity known as *Namus-e-Akbar* (the great power) is the only agent, if there was any, between God and prophet.

The revelation is engraved upon the heart and the person, to whom it is communicated, interprets it in words. This kind of revelation is a mystic experience common in the prophets and the mystics. It is related to the vision. It is experienced even by common man. We often have prophetic dreams, interpreted, as the will of God.

The revelation sent to the animals is known as *wahy-e-Rabbani*. It is termed as *ilham* (inspiration) in the case of common man either through the dreams or in the form of sauntering. In the case of mystics, it is intuition (*Kashf*) and in the case of prophets, it is termed as *wahy* (revelation)⁵³. Sir Syed, however, is convinced that all its forms are natural and have the same character.

Life here after is another important article of faith, not only in Islam, but other Semitic and non Semitic religions, as well. At the outset Sir Syed eludes to a number of verses of the Quran in which an awesome description of the day of judgment has been given. It has been stated that

⁵² Ibid. PP 153-154.

the earth would be leveled, the mountains would be sundered into dust, the ocean would boil and the deads would resurrect from their graves after hearing the horrible sound of the flute (*sur*). There would be chaos all around. He tries to justify it scientifically and regards it as a probability of geographically metamorphism resulting into the referred havoc. The natural sciences, as he points out, provide us the evidence of metamorphic transformation.

In Arabic the words *Qayamah* or *Hashr* are used for the final destination. Every creature born in the world, as the Quran asserts, and Sir Syed also believes, has to reach its final destination (*Qayamah*). The earlier part of this article describes the ultimate end of the earths, moon, skies etc. Its latter part deals with the destination of man.

Sir Syed's interpretation of the ultimate end (*Qayamah*) of man is different from the common man's concept. He holds that the day of turmoil for every man is one's own death. Citing the verses of the Quran where it is stated that his eyes would be petrified and he would not be able to discern what is what. The loss of his eye sight has been symbolized by the blackness of moon. Sir Syed has quoted *Tafsir-e-Kabir* where in the author has so interpreted the verse. The dying man shall grope into the darkness having no control on his diseased limbs. Regarding the resurrection of the body, Sir Syed again holds a different view. He is of the view that the dead would be resurrected in a different body but the soul would have the capacity of anamnesis on the basis of which it would account for the past deeds. In support of his argument he again quotes many verses from the Quran.

The concept of after life is akin to the ideas of heaven and hell. Sir Syed understands that all the verses in the Quran alluding to the hell and heaven are allegorical in nature. To him their literal interpretation is not

rational. Justifying his contention, he refers to the verses of the Quran saying that the dwellers of the paradise would be free to lead a life full of eroticism and sensuousness, enjoying the company of the beautiful women [*hoor*], tasting all kinds of delicious fruits, having bath in the canals of honey and milk. He rejects its literal interpretation and favours the allegorical one. He is not of course alone to differ from the dogmatic concept of the heaven and hell. Many other scholars, some of whom he quotes, like Ibn-e-Rushd and Shah Waliullah also stress upon of the allegorical interpretation of such verses. In short he believes that the afterlife may be continuation of this life, but in a different garb and a distinct body with the same soul.⁵³

In a fairly long article on the problem of destiny Sir Syed argues that God has created things with a specific purpose which is not imposed but ingrained in their nature. The creatures act and react to the fulfillment of the inherent teleos. In order to serve it, God has given capacities of both mental and physical. Even the smallest insect possesses all that is required for its existence. To him destiny means the nature of a creature being more relevant in the case of man. In support of his argument he quotes the verses of the Quran. He holds accountable only to those who can discern between the right and the wrong. In short it is the nature of man that he can distinguish between the good and the evil.⁵⁴

Considering the human nature, we come to understand that there are two basic faculties in man having the capacities of either performing or leaving an action intentionally. It means that he is born with a will helping him in either doing an action or rejecting it all together. There is yet another possibility that he may dissuade himself from doing a

⁵³ Maqalat-e-Sir Syed: ed. Ismail Pampati, vol. 13, PP 311-347.

⁵⁴ Tahdhib -al - Akhlaq 1313 A.H., PP 78-85.

particular deed which he willed earlier. It means that he has the power to enact or defeat his will. Sir Syed further argues that there is always a cause of all the three possibilities but it was different in various phases of civilization. In the primitive days the biological desires were the basic cause of the performance or abstention of an action. Man as and when felt thirsty went to drink water in a pond. With the growth of civilization there was a consequent addition of the cause. Man by his nature is rational and willful. The social forces like rites and traditions, reason, and latter on religion have been indispensable causes in the execution of human will manifesting his requisites power mentioned above. Sir Syed cites the verses of the Quran in support of his argument.

The ultimate cause the creator also possesses the attributes of knowledge. Consequently He knows all about His creatures and also has the knowledge of the subsequent events which would occur in their life. He explains it with the example of a watch maker, who even before its manufacture has all knowledge about its parts, their adjustment, their coordination and the period, the watch would work for. God in the same way knows everything about man, his future life and the subsequent events ensuing therein. He explains it again with the example of a fortune teller who prophesies about some one to die of drowning. It does not mean however that he has forced him to drown. God of course has the knowledge of every one's destiny without denying free choice.

In the end of the article he comes to the following conclusions:-

- (i) God has created the world and He is the final cause;
- (ii) He has created all the beings of different species of the same nature and that the nature is not changed.

- (iii) We notice that there are two faculties in man one persuading him to perform an action and other dissuading him from doing the wrong deed;
- (iv) Man is free to perform all actions inherent in his nature;
- (v) Due to this power of choice he is accountable for his deeds;
- (vi) The first cause has the knowledge of all the events and actions incurred upon or performed by the creatures in the past, present and future;
- (vii) To carry out the practices recommended by the *Shariah* and to abstain from the interdictions is the will of God (*amr-bil-maruf nahi an al munkar*, do's & don't's) and the criterion of piety.

In the subsequent passage of the article, Sir Syed tries to explain these concluding points with an elaboration of the fourth one, asserting evidently that the nature of things is not changed. Sir Syed also agrees that will of God is reflected in the voluntary and involuntary actions of the created objects. The heaviness of the stone, burning capacity in the fire, human power to act either ways have been willfully ingrained in their nature. Due to the heaviness of the stone it sinks in the water. The fire burns because it is in its nature. The man exercises choice due to the potentialities innate in him. Men like other objects is destined through his nature to perform or abstain from a particular action and is also accountable for his deeds. Commenting upon the Zaharites interpretation of the Quranic verses, Sir Syed points out that Ibn Hazm has given unconvincing interpretation. The subject matter of these verses is man not God. Moreover he has disregarded the other verses from the Quran which evidently speak of man's free choice inherent in the potential powers given to him. In short Sir Syed's views on destiny are an amalgam of

Mutazila and Ashara point of view. He is, however, the advocate of free choice.⁵⁵

Sir Syed is well cognizant of the age old controversy regarding free will and determinism. In one of his articles, he speaks of different solutions arrived at by the erstwhile school of Muslim philosophy the one pleaded for the freedom of will and another inferred semi determinism.

Sir Syed also speaks of social determinism and holds that man lives in group. His behaviour is conditioned by the customs and the traditions followed in society. He performs actions under cultural compulsions. He appears to exercise freedom of choice, but in fact he acts under many social pressures. His rights and duties all are determined by the social milieu prevailing in a particular area. Man, nevertheless, exercises his choice within the moral and cultural paradigms set forth by society. This can also be understood as psychological determinism.

In addition to that Sir Syed also advocates natural determinism. The creature acts in accordance with its nature. Substantiating the contention, he gives the example of many creatures having innate qualities like the ferocity of the beast, flight of the fowls, sociability of man and so on. Moreover, there are many potentialities manifesting in the form of instincts emotions or abilities rising out of the need of the occasion. Rationality, as generally agreed upon, Sir Syed holds, is a distinguishing feature of man which helps him to discern good from evil and on account of it he becomes accountable for his deeds.

Moreover, he also speaks of two powers particularly present in man. The first is commonly known as the conscience, religiously known as *nur-e-imani*. It helps man to discriminate between the good and the evil. The second is the power of heart (*nur-e-qalbi*) which is more

⁵⁵ Ibid. PP 101-111.

reliable and dependable. It reaches the truth despite the social inhibitions. He gives the example of the prophets Abraham and Mohammad (SAW). Both these prophets even after being born in a polytheistic society never succumbed to the social pressures of their time, engaged themselves in the search of truth and resolved to spread it to the masses explaining and taught the lesson of monotheism. The prophets heart is illumined to cognize the reality and is capable to receive the revelation even without agent.⁵⁶

In the later phase Sir Syed was entirely a different person. Although as he claimed he still was a faithful Muslim but now he examined all convictions including the articles of faith on the two significant touchstone: nature and reason. Even the omnipotence of God did not mean arbitrariness. It is concealed as he thought in carrying out his words instead of defining them. Sir Syed emerged as revolutionary in the interpretation of various concepts but without divesting from the basic spirit of religion, Islam. Despite harsh criticism from his contemporaries, he continued spreading his religious ideas and uprising the Muslims of what he thought as right.

⁵⁶ Maqalat-e-Sir Syed: ed. Ismail Panipati vol.13, PP 245-253.

CHAPTER-5

*An assessment of Sir Syed's
Religious thought and
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AN ASSESSMENT OF SIR SYED'S RELIGIOUS THOUGHT AND HIS CRITICS

A cursory look at the religious thought of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan would reveal some easily perceptible factors: - Sir Syed began his religious career as an orthodox Muslim who credulously followed his family heritage having staunch faith in traditionally practiced religion which has little room for free enquiry, scientific out-look and rational attitude. Under this influence he wrote *Tasanife-e-Ahmadiyah*, a compendium of six treatises different principles related to the way of *Sunnah* and the Sufi tradition of preceptor and the disciple (peer, murid). The earliest writings show no variance with the Islam. Sir Syed at this juncture was not the least victim of any criticism either by the Muslim clergy or the common folk. In fact he earned name and fame for being a conservative Muslim. Soon after the independence war of 1857 in which he helped many British families from the public wrath, he realized that the British Government would continue for long and, that the Muslims had become politically and economically weak. He, therefore, thought to do something so that the Muslims could regain their lost position and gain some kind of political stability, He took major steps in the field of education and also resolved to bring the Muslims and the Christians closer to each other. His resolution, however when communicated through his writings particularly the exegesis of the Bible and the tract on the dinning of the Muslims with the Christians invited a great deal of criticism not only from the Muslims but also the Christians.

His commentary on the Bible was widely welcomed and highly exalted in the Christian world for obvious reason of its being the first attempt of a Muslim to write something seeking affinity between the two great religions. Sir Syed's objective of writing the exegesis was entirely different from the endeavour of the Christian missionaries. Many of the priests studied Islam but with a pernicious design of vilifying Islam for being atrocious to other communities. Sir Syed, on the contrary, sought points of agreement between the two Semitic religions, Christianity and Islam. They could not agree with his noble objective and criticized him on the ground that he is trying to interpret the basic tenets of Christianity in accordance with the Islamic faith. There are many instances some of them are as follows. (i) Sir Syed disagreed with the primal concept of the original sin in Christianity. He read and interpreted the Bible as suited to his convictions. Adam could not be a sinner for he being a prophet and his birth was infallible. Eating the forbidden fruit was not a sinful act but the inception of the knowledge of good and evil. The first couple, thus descended from the heavens to execute the knowledge, they acquired after eating the fruit. (ii) Sir Syed being a Mutazila disapproved God's anthropomorphism he, therefore, interpreted the words *be Salmenu Kidmutenu* in Genesis, 1:26 as the shadow of God. He created Adam in His own image is a well known divine tradition, Sir Syed in accordance with the same never agreed with man being the incarnation. He disregarded all anthropomorphic interpretations. Man being the shadow, however, shares his attributes like life, power, knowledge, mercy, sovereignty intelligence, justice etc. (iii) Sir Syed also interpreted the coming of the Christ in the Islamic framework. The Muslims believe that God has sent prophets in all parts of the world as and when they were needed. In this

part of the world Jerusalem there prevailed such a situation where upon God sent Jesus Christ to curb and check the social evils. (iv) Sir Syed also tried to explain the son ship of the Christ with reference to the Quran. He points out that the 'father' means *Rab* (lord) and 'son' means faithful servant. He refers to many chapters of the Old and the New Testament substantiating his interpretation. It is again opposed to the commonly held belief about Jesus Christ. It may, then, be concluded that Sir Syed lucidly attempted demythologize doctrines of Christianity analogous to Islam.¹ In conformity with his rational approach on account of which he rejected miracles, he elaborated the miraculous deeds of the Jesus Christ described in the Quran, in the rational manner. (v) For instance, the Quran in Surah S.iii:43 describes the child Jesus to have infused the soul into the bird of clay, he made himself. Sir Syed puts forward grammatical argument elaborating different uses of the conjunction *fa* and concluded that the child Jesus said it while playing with other children, meaning there by that it was a child like assertion having no or little veracity. Sir Syed's explanation irritated both the Muslims and the Christians for he averted the commonly held meaning and tarnished the image of the Jesus Christ having a miraculous ipseity. (vi) Sir Syed also rejected the belief that the Jesus Christ was born of a virgin lady (Mary). He reinterpreted the Quranic verse S.xxi : 91 (declaring the Virgin Mary to have preserved her maidenhood, by taking an entirely disagreeable meaning of virginity totally unacceptable to both the Muslims and the Christianity. (vii) Similarly, Sir Syed also explains the event of the death of the Christ, it is against the common beliefs once again. The Quranic verse delineating the event of crucifixion has been interpreted in his own way in both the

¹ Baljon, J.M.S The Reform and Religious Ideas of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, PP. 104-106

commentaries of the Bible and the Quran. Sir Syed believes that the Christ due to the affliction of piercing the nail of his palms and feet was drawn into the stage of deep unconsciousness. The profound swoon made people believe that he was dead. After the crowd was dispersed, his companions moved him to a safer place. They concealed his having regained consciousness due the ever growing animosity of the Jews with the Christian prophet. Sir Syed's explanation may be rational but exasperating to the Christians. His sincere attempts seeking religious harmony were marked with suspicion particularly by the Christians, who looked at him as a Muslim harming the Christianity with his personal interpretation of the basic Christian tenets in the Islamic framework. Thus, his commentary on the Bible could not bring in the desired impact.²

Another treatise that Sir Syed wrote by establishing religious harmony was on the problem of the Muslim dining with the Christian. It was in response to the query of some person from Lucknow that whether the Muslims could dine with the Christians. Sir Syed first answered it through his periodical and thereafter rendered full length treatise on the subject. The reaction of the common Muslims against the solution Sir Syed proposed may be stated.

Sir Syed being a Government employee had to work with British Officers and sometimes made long journeys with them. It was indispensable then that he shared food with his fellow travelers. He however justified his action in the light of Islamic injunctions.

² Ibid PP 106-109

There was a mixed response of the Muslims to his treatise. Some welcomed it, particularly the Muslims in government employment and others rejected it.

Besides, Sir Syed also wrote three letters justifying the eating of strangulated birds, particularly the hens with the confession that he had eaten them during his stay in England. These writings aroused anger not only in the Muslim clergy but also the common folk who believe that only the slaughtered animals including the fowls could be eaten on account of the fact that the Quran declares them permissible (*halal*). The Christians, however, exalted and encouraged such writings not only for religious purpose but also social and political objectives. Sir Syed who began the mission of religious harmony had also some political motivations. He wanted to serve his long cherished aim that the Muslim should mix up with the Christians to earn some reputation and create opportunities conducive to their progress without losing their cultural and religious identity.³

It is wrong to presume that the Muslim clergy stood in opposition of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan for the reason that he wanted to popularize the English educational system and that he emphasized the inculcation of scientific attitude in the Muslim elite. He was mainly criticized for his revolutionary religious thought. The Muslim clergy hardly opposed the modern educational system. Shah Abdul Aziz and others issued mandates allowing the learning of English and modern sciences. The Muslim scholars despite being the guardian of Islam never closed their eyes to the changing circumstances consequent upon the existing

³ Maktubat-e-Sir Syed ed by Ismail Panipati, Vol 1, PP 57-59, 122 & 178-183.

political system. They, however, could not tolerate Sir Syed's emphatic rational approach and wearied naturalism. The Muslims in general disliked his touchstones but respected him for his notable contribution in the field of education. Sir Syed, however, was criticized rather harshly by two of his strong opponents, Maulvi Ali Bakhsh and Imdad Ali. It may be noted that the two were government employees and also had modern education. Some of his friends like Mehdi Ali (Mohsinul Mulk) could not agree with his religious views.⁴

It would be appropriate to clinch the issue which worried the Muslims of the time. Sir Syed emphatically declared himself as an orthodox *Wahabi*, but his religious thought was bitterly criticized by the leading *Wahabi* thinkers like Qasim Nanautvi. He, however, abstained himself from signing the mandate (*fatwa*) declaring Sir Syed to be an infidel (*kafir*). It was perhaps because he and Sir Syed both were the students of same teacher Maulvi Mamluk Ali. Qasim Nanautvi, nevertheless was suspicious of his religious views.

The first and the foremost important issue, that worried the Muslims, was his denial of the miracles. Sir Syed, being a rationalist, could not believe in the miracles for he thought them to be against the Law of nature. He repeatedly advocated the Omnipotence of God, He being the maker of the natural Law would be pleased to see it accomplished rather defying it Himself. His Omnipotence lies in its enforcement yielding the desired results. He reiterated again and again that the concept of the prophet is not akin to the miraculous deeds. He therefore, rejected all the delineated miracles of all the different prophets. Similarly he also does not believe in bodily ascension of the

⁴ Sheikh Mohd Ekram Mauj-e-Kausar, PP 90-93.

prophet Mohammad (SAW).⁵ Sir Syed also denied his other miracles like the sundering of moon and making everything stationary at the time of his ascension. He interprets the events of ascension as a vision (*roya*). This denial of miracles was not agreeable either to the clergy or the Muslims in general. They therefore tried with all their might to look down upon him and impede his educational and welfare programmes for the Muslims of India.

The Muslims were also shocked when they went through his article on the granting of prayers by God. They follow it rather credulously that the prayers are granted if they are made faithfully and with all humility. Sir Syed believed in natural determinism and asserted with vehemence that the events are almost predetermined and no prayers could alter them. Ghulam Ahmad Qadiyani responded to this article and asserted that the prayers are granted in the manner, the medicine works on the patients. Even if the events are predetermined one never knows as what is to entail next. Ghulam Ahmad advocates that even if one agrees with Sir Syed on his natural determinism, the consequent predestinarianism is not acceptable for God alone knows the future. Man without its knowledge must pray with a hope of its being granted as he takes medicine with a hope of being cured. Ghulam Ahmad's demonstrative argument is convincing, Sir Syed offered no defense to his criticism.⁶

Ali Bakhsh and Imdad Ali were the most severe critics of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan. The former contributed two treatises *Shahab-e-*

⁵ Baljon, J.M.S. The Reforms and Religious Ideas of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, PP 90-91.

⁶ Akhri Mazamin-e-Sir Syed, ed. Malik Chunnuddin P-117.

Khan, Sir Syed Ahmad. Al-Dua Wa'l-Istijaba PP 1-8

Saqib and *Taid-e-Islam* in which some serious objections were raised against his religious thought.

The first treatise '*Shahab-e-Saqib*' prompted by small but significant article entitled 'the narrative of Adam' (*Adam Ki Sir Ghuzisht*), Sir Syed's woven discourse is, of course, interesting for the modern readers but exasperating to the clergy for the reason that it rejected the orthodox theological story of Adam's creation and the orthodox interpretation of the ensuing events related to the Adam's tale. Ali Bakhsh having gone through it made acrimonious remarks regarding his opponent in the above mentioned treatise.

Ali Bakhsh begins it with Sir Syed's rejection of the external existence of the devil. Sir Syed time and again refuted the physical existence of the devil as a separate entity. Ali Bakhsh being an orthodox theologian aridly attempted to reaffirm the independent existence of the devil and the angels. Sir Syed's interpretation, howsoever erroneous it may be, is more convincing and better delivered.

The other important point of criticism that Ali Bakhsh mentioned in this treatise is regarding Adam's creation. Sir Syed gave a scientific interpretation of Adam's creation. He, in the first place, used the word Adam in the lexical meaning and pointed out in his narrative the different stages, the human embryo passes through. He could not agree the un-natural creation of Adam. Sir Syed believed in the emergence of man through evolution. He also emphasized that man is born with different capacities which are realized gradually through the steps of civilization. Ali Bakhsh being an orthodox theologian reacted sharply to his naturalist theory of Adam's creation. Sir Syed recognizes man and

his different powers like animal and rational tendencies, their interaction and dominance over each other and the faculty of reason having the power of knowledge manifesting at different stages of civilization.

Ali Bakhsh also criticizes Sir Syed for having given the rational interpretation of the angels prostrating before Adam and the devil's denial to his obeisance. Sir Syed in his usual style explains the meaning of the two as the paradoxical powers in man one being complete obedience to the reason and the other being rebellious to its authority. He also points out that God being the Creator of all things, endowed man with these paradoxical powers resulting into good and bad actions. The theologians like Ali Bakhsh could not, however, agree to the view that God is the Creator of evil. He also disagrees Sir Syed's proposition that man learnt only the name of things for he could not know their reality.

Ali Bakhsh furiously criticizes the natural development of man which Sir Syed emphatically advocates all through his religious writings. He believes man to be an object of nature for his existence and growth. He also acquires some characteristics which are either conducive to the exploration or development of inborn qualities. He severely criticizes Sir Syed and the philosophers for their natural philosophy and mentions the objections of the theologians who considered the philosophy of nature as threat to dogmatic religion. Sir Syed despite being naturalist, is a thorough going religious person but his interpretation of different religious propositions and believes could

never convince the clergy and the common Muslims. He, therefore, invited criticism from several quarters.⁷

As mentioned earlier, Ali Bakhsh wrote another treatise under the title of "*Taid-al-Islam*" (the defence of Islam) where in, he critically examined some thirty convictions of Sir Syed, which in his opinion were blasphemous and could be regarded as faithlessness (*Kufr*). He wrote it with the motive of vilification and took it to Mecca to present before the eminent theologians as an evidence of his infidelity. He was successful in his mission and got issued the mandates of infidelity in his name. Sir Syed, however, was not much disturbed but wrote a full length reply to the charges of vilification against him. He always remained bold and in the pursuit of his endeavour.

The referred tract covers all his religious writings up to 1873 and brings to light the objectionable key points in them. Sir Syed gave a befitting reply in the name of "*Dafa'- al Buhtan*" (the defence of vilification) and published it in his periodical. Both these tracts are apologetic and polemical without having much force of argument or substance of paramount importance.

In the thirty convictions, seven are related to the unity of God.

8-9 & 11-12: Concerned with nature of prophet hood in the modern context.

⁷ See Shahab-e-Saqib for detail

- 10 : Deals with the existence of angels.
- 13 : Related to resurrection and future life.
- 14 : Related to human freedom and divine omnipotence.
- 15-18 : Related to *Shariah* and principle of jurisprudence.
- 19-30 : Single disputed questions pertaining to Law and creed.⁸

We shall describe these convictions one by one.

1. In Ali Bakhsh's opinion, Sir Syed believes in the eternity of the World considering gross matter as the necessary concomitant of God's essence being so it is an attribute of God and thus identical to His essence. The world is eternal because it has come into existence out of that matter.
2. The divine Essence is not the sufficient cause of the existence of everything. The first cause is only the cause of a first effect. Whatever further effects come afterwards, they will be established by their own respective cause. (Thus) inevitably the divine Essence will be established as the deficient (*naqisah*) and not the sufficient cause of everything.
3. The matter being essential is imperishable which is in contradiction with the Quranic verse that is everything will pass away. S. LV. 26.
4. The world being material, presupposes the essence of God being composed of matter and non-matter.

⁸ Journal of Islamic Culture 51 (1977) PP 262-263 & See Taid-e-Islam for detail.

5. It is regarding the essence and the attributes being identical to each other. Their identity brings out the problem of distinguishing one attribute from the other. All become a similar.
6. The divine essence is the Law of nature itself. Once determined, there is no possibility of a change there in.
7. It is related to causality. There is a rational possibility of more than one cause. All these convictions are related to the unity of God. Ali Bakhsh comprehends that the unity of God is on account of these beliefs.
8. Ali Bakhsh points out that Sir Syed considers reason to be the sufficient guide and that the revealed scriptures are not needed for our guidance. The task of a prophet is to interpret the laws of nature and follow them.
9. Ali Bakhsh also criticizes him on the denial of the miracles for the reason that they are against the laws of nature.
10. Ali Bakhsh also objects to Sir Syed's interpretation of the existence of the angels and the Satan as the virtuous and the rebellious powers of man. He criticizes Sir Syed for his delineation of the Quranic narrative of Adam and the angels prostrating before him and the disobedience of the devil to God, on account of Adam being made up of inferior elements.
11. He criticizes Sir Syed for commenting upon the Quran and interpreting it in accordance with the opinions of natural philosophers by way of harmonizing them with the Quran.

12. Ali Bakhsh objects to his belief that there is no change of words (*tahrif-e-lafzi*) in the Old and the New Testaments. There is only the possibility of the alteration of meaning (*tahrif-e-manawi*). Ali Bakhsh naturally adheres to the common belief that the earlier scriptures have undergone both type of changes.
13. The resurrection of the bodies, the description of the heaven with all its comforts and the hell with all its tortures, Sir Syed believes, are allegorical and should not be taken in the literal sense. Ali Bakhsh as a theologian adheres to the commonly accepted belief and condemns him for such comments.
14. It is concerned with the free choice and the divine compulsion. Sir Syed being an advocate of natural determinism favours Asharah views between the free choice and the divine compulsion. It is, however not tenable.
15. Sir Syed's skepticism regarding *hadith* has been the subject of criticism.
16. He blames Sir Syed for not believing in the possibility of the general consensus (*ijma*) or the independent opinion of the majority.
17. Ali Bakhsh also accuses him for not following the principles of jurisprudence formulated by the eminent scholars or the analogous reasoning of the four Imams blindly. It is true that Sir Syed believes in free thinking having his own independent opinion even in religious matters. He therefore rejects blind following.

18. Ali Bakhsh rightly objects to Sir Syed's conviction that no religious injunction is against the law of nature and does not contradict the modern rational sciences. He also points out that the revelation confirms the law of nature and the prophets help in its enactment by directing the people to enforce it properly. This view, of course could not be acceptable even to the common Muslims.
19. Sir Syed's interpretation of *Jihad* in terms of modern war between the two nations also came under heavy criticism. Ali Bakhsh also ridicules him for such interpretation.
20. Sir Syed has also been criticized for considering the *Sirah* literature as sloth in comparison to the classical fiction and epic literature like the Arabian nights and *Mahabharata*.
21. Ali Bakhsh criticizes Sir Syed for considering the existing religious literature as the source of corruption.
22. In order to preserve the beliefs of Islam one must not teach religious books in company with the modern sciences.
23. Sir Syed has repeatedly asserted that there must be a concurrence between the word of God and the work of God. He, therefore suggests that the word of God must be followed only to the extent that it corresponds to nature. Ali Bakhsh being a theologian could not comprehend the content of the argument.
24. Ali Bakhsh charges him with some motivated accusations for some of his declarations. He criticizes Sir Syed for thinking that

no actions amount to infidelity provided that the person believes in the unity of God.

25. The twenty fourth and the twenty fifth what appeared to a bundle of false allegation. Ali Bakhsh has accused Sir Syed for something he never said and for the interpretations, he never made. He has been criticized for his comments on religious duties. Ali Bakhsh makes people understand that Sir Syed disregarded all religious duties unless they are testified by reason and nature. He gives the example of *Salat* (prayers) *Zakat* (holy tax) and *hajj* (the holy pilgrimage), which Sir Syed denounced for not being established by the authentic sources.
26. Sir Syed is also criticized for misinterpreting the Quranic verse regarding the creation of seven heavens as being metaphorical. S. LXVII, 3.
27. The Quranic descriptions of the levels of the human existence in the form of embryo is unacceptable.
28. Eating the flesh of the strangled animal is not forbidden.
29. Sir Syed is also believed to have denied the polygamy as being a Islamic declaration.
30. Sir Syed has often denounced the miracles like bodily ascension of the prophet and the splitting of his breath for the chastisement of his heart. All such events are unnatural. Ali Bakhsh like other Muslims criticizes him for the same.

In response to his latter tract, Sir Syed wrote equally polemical and apologetic treatise "*Dafa' al Buhtan*" (the defence of false allegation) having little substance in its contents. Sir Syed nevertheless answered these allegations one by one. We shall summarise them as under.

1. Regarding the eternity of the world Sir Syed emphatically denies and reiterates his conviction about the eternity of God. Whatever, Ali Bakhsh has said, are his words. Regarding the attributes he acknowledges that he subscribes to the views of Mutazila.
2. Sir Syed never asserted the possibility of more than one cause and never denied the first being an efficient cause. In fact he only asserted that the first cause is the cause of all causes. Thus the criticism of the opponent is baseless.
3. Regarding the imperishability of the world Sir Syed clarifies that he never believed, what has been attributed to him. In fact he asserted that only the countenance of God shall remain when every thing is perished. Sir Syed, here agrees with Ibn-al-Arabi and advises his opponent to go through his philosophy.
4. Sir Syed rebutting the charge that he ever believed in the essence being composed of matter and non-matter. He vehemently denies it and holds that the one who believes in it deserves all curse.
5. Regarding the identity of the essence and the attributes Sir Syed admits it to be his belief but the conclusion, arrived at by the opponent that the attributes can not be distinguished from one another is totally wrong. He needs to study the doctrine with care and prudence.

6. Regarding God being bound by the law of nature. Sir Syed regrets his inability to comprehend the meaning of nature and its law. The law of nature is nothing but the act of God and nature is nothing but His creation, a term equivalent to *Fitrat-al-Allah (qanun-e fitrat)*.

7. Replying to the rational possibility of the second cause Sir Syed points out that Ali Bakhsh has wrongly attributed it to him. Sir Syed in one of his articles explained the position of Ibn *Kammunah*. His doubt about the possibility of second cause is imaginary. Ali Bakhsh, however could not understand the contention and wrongly ascribed others views to him.

8. Concerning the nature of prophet Sir Syed analyses the accusation of Ali Bakhsh. He admits that he considers reason to be the true guide of man and that reason possesses a discerning power to distinguish between the good and the evil. Revelation confirms it. He understands reason to be a distinct feature between Islam and infidelity. Sir Syed further clarified that he never opposed the ascendancy of the prophet. Furthermore, he addressed Addison and Steele as prophets only in the metaphorical sense in which Firdausi, Anwari, Khaqani are deemed as prophets. Regarding the seal of the prophet Sir Syed rejects it to be his belief and calls the upholder as unbeliever.

9. Ali Bakhsh also pointed out that Sir Syed did not believe in miracles for the reason that they are against the laws of nature. In his response Sir Syed explains that he never rejected the miracles provided that they had some evidence. Nature is a complex phenomena where in occur many phenomenal accidents which are beyond our comprehension. The miracles, thus confirm the intricacies of nature.

Regarding the prophecy, Sir Syed believes it to be a potentiality present in the form of *habitus* manifesting in the act of revelation. He denied the allegation of conceiving the prophets only as natural Philosophers.

10. Sir Syed denies the accusation that he does not believe in the existence of the angels. He is, however of the view that the word *malak* has been used to signify the human powers, but he has never denied the possibility of some other being over and above man called as angels. Regarding the existence of Satan, Sir Syed admits that he believes in his existence but only inside the man and quoted Rumi in his support.

11. Sir Syed also denies the allegations regarding the principles of the exegesis and harmonizing the Quran with the philosophical doctrines. Sir Syed conceives that the principles of exegesis are man made. He also understands that the Quran is in complete harmony with nature.

12. Here again Sir Syed answers objections of his opponent with the remark that his intentions are to be realized.

13. In his response to these accusations Sir Syed has tried to analyse his statement which may be agreeable in one sense and objectionable in the other. In case of their being objectionable Ali Bakhsh lacks the clarity of meaning.

14. Sir Syed thinks that Ali Bakhsh has distorted his views. Sir Syed supports the doctrine of free choice as a natural disposition of man.

15. Regarding this allegation, Sir Syed answers that he believes in the authenticity of *hadith*.

16. Here again Ali Bakhsh has described the truth. Sir Syed never ruled out the possibility of general consensus or the opinion of the scholars. He only pointed out that the unclear verses of the Quran are still controversial and the general consensus of the community or the independent opinion of the scholars has not been sought.

17. Concerning the blind following (*taqlid*) and independent opinion (*ijtehad*), Sir Syed explains his convictions that: (i) the principles of jurisprudence are man made and may be disagreed with. They do not tantamount to the revelation. (ii) No person except the prophet should be followed blindly. The analogous reasoning of the Imams and the opinion of the scholars may not be accepted without substantive evidence.

18. Under these points of criticism Ali Bakhsh has turned the assertions of Sir Syed upside down. Sir Syed believes that the obligation of *Shariah* corresponds to the nature of God and that their veracity is confirmed by true sciences (*uloom-i-haqqah*). Ali Bakhsh also accuses him to have shown disregard to the prophet. Sir Syed asserts that the prophet has to be followed in the precept of revelation. In the worldly affairs as he admits himself people understand them better.

19. Regarding the *jihad*, Ali Bakhsh misinterprets him. Sir Syed never considers *jihad* to be equivalent to the modern wars fought for the personal or collective motives between the two countries. On the contrary, he held that the holy wars (*jihad*) were fought for the expansion of the word of God and not for the subjugation of the slaves.

20. Related to the *Sirah* literature Sir Syed upholds that the books of Hishami and Ibn Ishaque are replete with errors and unsubstantiated events. He however does not condemn the *Sirah* literature.

21. In connection with the religious literature Sir Syed clarifies to have said that the classical *Kalam* should now be replaced with the modern *Kalam* to answer the challenges of the rational modern sciences. He also admits that the Quran and the tradition should be practiced strictly. He further asserts that the traditions followed by one school are rejected by the other. The *Sahih Bukhari*, the commonly acknowledged authentic collection of *hadith*, is either fully or partially disregarded by one or the other school.

22. Ali Bakhsh accuses Sir Syed for preferring modern sciences to religion. Sir Syed rebutting the charge clarifies that Islamic faith is strong and rational and cannot be shaken by the study of English and modern sciences. He, however, admits that the existing religious literature is not capable of facing the challenges of modern sciences. The emergence of modern *Ilm-al-Kalam* is however needed.

23. Here again Sir Syed clarifies what we observe in the workmanship of nature is in total agreement with the Quran i.e. the Quran provides the theoretical basis for the comprehension of the natural phenomena. He also admits that faith is the first condition of salvation. Good deeds are not enough for entering into heaven. God may forgive every sin except polytheism.

24. Here Ali Bakhsh makes serious allegation on Sir Syed. He gives a list of heinous actions like denying the Prophet hood, prostrating before the idols and so on.

Sir Syed answers it with full force of his argument and denies to have said or advocated all or any one of them any where in his writings. Regarding the prostration he clarifies that unless the head is bowed with

the conviction that the prostrated idol is God it is no sin. Thousands of devout Muslims prostrate before the tombs of the saintly spirits, but they are not declared as *Kafir* because they don't believe in them as God. Their prostration is a sign of respect to the illumined soul. Sir Syed, however denies to have justified such actions like the wearing the cross, having the mark of adoration on the forehead (*tilak*) or worship the idols etc but he advocates that meeting the Hindu, Parsi and Christian friends on their festive occasions and sharing joy with them is not covered under resemblance (*tashabah*) and therefore no sin.

25. Sir Syed vehemently rejects all allegations that Ali Bakhsh has made here. He never condemned asceticism, supererogatory prayers, remembrance of God etc. He only rejected monasticism which is against Islam and always supported the ascetic practices of the prophet and his companions.

Sir Syed never defied five times of prayers (*namaz*), thirty days fast during *Ramadhan* or other obligatory fasts. He only disapproved other kinds of fast. Sir Syed also never showed his resentment for the holy pilgrimage (*hajj*) to Mecca. He only condemned to perform it with the borrowed or dishonestly earned money. He also disapproved buying and selling the slaves at Mecca. He also denied to have stated, drink with little alcohol or gambling involving less money as *halal*. In short he responded to all such baseless charges.

26. Sir Syed also denied to have opposed the Quranic verse [SLXVII. 3;LXXI; 15] declaring God as creating seven heavens being contrary to the modern sciences. He in fact calls it 'in order'.

27. Ali Bakhsh charges him to have denied the genesis of the embryo given in the Quran as against the modern sciences. Sir Syed considers it to be perfectly in conformity with the modern sciences.

28. Rebutting the charge of the strangulated animals Sir Syed asserts that he has written only about the birds and the poultry and referred to the related verse [S.1. 6].

29. Sir Syed also denied that he ever advocated against polygamy.

30. The last is related to the bodily ascension of the prophet in which Sir Syed follows the school of Ayesha Siddiqah, the mother of Muslims, who along with many companions believed in spiritual ascension.⁹

The study of the two treatises namely *Taid-al-Islam* and *Dafa' al Buhtan*, both are polemical and defensive. It is true that *Taid-al-Islam* carries through the spirit of vilification. The author Ali Bakhsh might have written it with the spirit of vengeance. One may agree with Sir Syed who noted the motive of the opponent while remarking against the points of criticism raised therein. Sir Syed often made genuine complains against the opponent that he has either changed the meaning or misrepresented his ideas. More often than not, Ali Bakhsh has put his own words into Sir Syed's mouth. There is no doubt that Sir Syed is a revolutionary religious thinker. He has his own interpretations but his ideas nevertheless are not opposed to Islam. Ali Bakhsh without going deep into the matter raised objections to many of his ideas. Both these treatises if carefully studied appeared to be a bundle of allegations against each other without having much argumentation profundity and substance. Sir Syed in the end of his defense tries to envisage two

⁹ See *Dafa' al Buhtan* for detail

reasons compelling Ali Bakhsh to write his tract. The first was perhaps the cheap popularity and immediate joy of being called a devout Muslim, and the second was to add something to the heap of his sins before going to Mecca for holy pilgrimage. Here he does not seem to be serious or critical. It was calumnious attempt to tarnish the image of Sir Syed in the eyes of the Muslims living in India and abroad. Maulvi Imdad Ali, who was another important critic of Sir Syed, also had similar motives. In the end both these opponents became a member of college committee and helped Sir Syed in the promotion of his educational mission.

His journey and stay in England dragged him into many controversies of political and religious nature. Critics like Imdad Ali emulated his popularity among the British and reacted to it rather sharply by accelerating the emotions particularly of Muslims reminding them of his loose religious convictions. The Indian Muslims, who still held social and cultural animosity and political rivalry did not approve of his close relationship with the British elite and developed some kind of acrimony towards the favours that he received from the British citizens and their government in India. The critics of Sir Syed like Imdad Ali got strength from such development like the publication of the Urdu translation of Elphinstone's book on 'The History of India' in which the word fraud was used for the prophet Mohammad (SAW). Although Sir Syed inserted there in the passages from the discourse of G. Sale and *Tarikh-i-Tabri* to avert the effect yet the Muslim masses could not be appeased. His critics, however took full advantage of the arisen situation. Imdad Ali having professional antagonism and political rivalry started notorious campaign in the Muslim masses against Sir

Syed's religious thought and educational programmes. He began it by writing an article against Sir Syed's famous tract on the dining of the Muslims with the Christians. Imdad Ali tried to find out the incoherencies that Sir Syed left perhaps deliberately to build up his argument. Later on Maulvi Imdad Ali converted it into a treatise known as *Mazahirul Haque*. His initial meek opposition became stronger till he himself became the member of college committee, *Khazinat-al-bazait*.

Imdad Ali attacked Sir Syed more vehemently when he saw his periodical, *Tahzibul Akhlaque* being received enthusiastically by the Muslim masses. Sir Syed's periodical gave way to the rise of many newspapers like *Nur-al-Afaq* and *Nur-al Anwar* from Kanpur, *Lauh-i-Mahfuz* from Muradabad, *Terhawin sadi* from Agra, *Ashaat al-sanat*, a monthly from Lahore. All the newspapers mentioned above published damaging articles to thwart his reformatory mission. Through these newspapers his opponents spread misconceptions as regards his religious ideas and educational reforms. The critics convinced the Muslims that he intends to teach *Shia* religion in his college and also favours to erect statues of himself and his friends in the college compound. Both the news were sufficient to add fuel to the fire. However, the matter was clear with the publication of Syed Mahmud's report on the future college programmes where in the Muslims were assured that Sir Syed would not enforce his religious ideas upon the college students. It satisfied many Muslims but the critics, like Imdad Ali instigated the Muslims not to give donations to college funds.

Maulvi Imdad Ali also published a Journal as a counterpoise of *Tahzibul Akhlauqe* in the name of *Imdad-al-Afaq Berjam Ahlul Nifaaq*¹⁰⁰ and distributed it free of cost among the Muslims. In addition to it he prepared a questioner and sent it to almost all the eminent theologians (*Ulema*) of India and obtained their mandates declaring Sir Syed as an infidel. Some of them put their seal and other certified the mandates on the basis of the received questioners (*Istafat*). To his satisfaction, Imdad Ali got some sixty mandates against his opponent and also got it confirmed that the donation offered to such institution was not permissible. In his questioner Imdad Ali severely attacked his religious views and presented them before the *Ulema* in a distorted form. Abdul Hayee Farahangi Mahli a revered *alim* of Lucknow, issued considerably a long mandate reviewing his religious ideas, but in a prejudiced manner. It is notable that no scholar except Qasim Nanautvi tried to know Sir Syed's views regarding the basic articles of faith. All of them were swayed by the circulated questioner without giving Sir Syed the opportunity to defend himself.¹¹

As stated earlier Sir Syed was criticized for his religious views. All the theologians of India, and with their connivance the Muslim clergy abroad alongwith politicians like Jamaluddin Afghani also made acrimonious remarks and issued the mandates of infidelity against a thorough going rationalist. The Muslim clergy in India, however without carefully looking into his views declared him an unpleasant person without giving little consideration for his exalted services in the field of education. Maulana Qasim Nanautvi, who once was his fellow student

¹⁰ Muhammad Shan Sir Syed Ahmad Khan- A political biography, PP 69-71.

¹¹ Baljon, J M S The Reforms and Religious Ideas of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan PP – 88-92

Fikr-o-Nazar, Namwarane-Aligarh PP 218-229.

stood as an exception and stayed away from signing the collective mandate. Maulana Qasim Nanautvi the founder of Deoband despite having differences in the educational thought acted rationally. In a small note he asked Sir Syed three questions regarding God, the prophet and Satan. Sir Syed gave him a satisfactory answer. Having received it he rejected the Ulama's declaration.

Maulana Qasim Nanautvi though refused to sign the document yet was critical of the religious views of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan. In his treatise which is in the form of epistle he has unequivocally stated that Sir Syed had formulated his religious ideology after deep contemplation, careful consideration and persistent argument. Qasim Nanautvi, thus with a pinch of satire acknowledged his eminence and recognized his disposition having rational and scientific temperament.¹²

Sir Syed having gained some strength from his refusal gathered courage to know his opinion on some basic principles related to Islam, which he had already deliberated upon. The above referred principles are summarized as under:-

- i. God is the creator of the whole universe;
- ii. The word of God and the word of the prophet can never be against the work of God;
- iii. The Quran is the speech of God, its words are neither against nature nor scientific facts;
- iv. The Quranic verses apparently against nature or scientific facts have either been misinterpreted or misconceived;

¹² Nanotawi, Mohd Qasim 'Tasfiyah-al-Aqaid. Merutt, 1298 A.H. PP - 1-5.

- v. All the verses of the Quran revealed on the prophet are preserved in original without any omission and commission.
- vi. The words of no man barring the prophet are taken to be true without confirmation. Their rejection is a kind of polytheism of prophecy (*Shirk fi Nabuwah*);
- vii. The actions (*Sunnah*) of the prophet pertaining to religion must be followed in letter and spirit, but his actions pertaining to the world may not be imitated;
- viii. The defined commands are religious in character and must be followed. Other affairs based on opinions may be disagreed with;
- ix. Man can not be accountable beyond his capacity. The ingredients of faith and the commandments pertaining to salvation must be rational;
- x. The permissible and the forbidden are good and evil by their nature and definition;
- xi. All the commandments of Islam are in conformity with nature;
- xii. Man possesses both capacities, those which are conducive in the performance of an act and those which dissuade him from doing a particular act. God has the knowledge of both these capacities, but His knowledge does not deny man the free choice of using these capacities;
- xiii. The religious duties are revealed obligations;

- xiv. All the actions and assertions of the prophet are veracious. Ascribing expediency to him is ominous.¹³

The principles mentioned above are the basic issues that Sir Syed has frequently deliberated upon in his religious thought. But in their description particularly in this letter he has, with effort, simplified them.

The epistle begins with a note of humility which perhaps was his disposition. Going ahead he begins to examine these principles critically, but as Sir Syed had wisely made them agreeable, his criticism could not become acrimonious. His basic point of criticism is that one should be clear in religious discourse and should not make comments and pass judgments without being a genuinely great scholar of the field. Regarding the harmony between the word of God and the word of the prophet with the work of God, Qasim Nanautvi perhaps rightly points out that the harmony can not be sought or conceived without having ample knowledge of several religious sciences related to the Quran and the tradition. Qasim Nanautvi also agrees with Sir Syed's conviction that the tradition must be commensurate with the basic spirit of the Quran, but he again contends that the spirit of His word cannot be comprehended by a prudent scholar. It requires eminence in divine sciences. Qasim Nanautvi also agrees to the principle that the word of God conforms to nature and scientific facts. But he again questions the authority of the believer in such a principle. Thus in brief the seemingly opponent, Qasim Nanautvi is never bitter. His words are mild. His accent is soft and his mood is sober. Unlike his contemporaries Ali Bakhsh, Imdad Ali and other theologians he made a careful perusal of

¹³ Maktubat-e-Sir Syed, ed. Ismail Panipati, Vol. 1, PP 24-27

his principles and very meekly challenged his authority in the religious sciences.¹⁴

It was natural that the theologians (*Ulema*) emphatically opposed Sir Syed's religious thought besides them, his friends, who rendered every support to his mission and stood by him through thick and thin could also not agree with his religious ideas. His companions like Mahdi Ali (Mohsinul Mulk), Mushtaque Husain (Viquarual Mulk) and Muazmilullah Khan Sherwani always showed descent to his religious ideas. Among them Mahdi Ali who otherwise imitated his style in writing and narration never accepted, Sir Syed's religious views.

As stated earlier, there were two basic points of disagreement : -
(i) Sir Syed's closeness to the Christians (2) interpretation of the Quran in accordance with modern science. The former is evident from his two treatises, the one on the word *Nasara* and the other on dining with the Christians, and his exegesis of the Bible.

The British thought that the Muslim writers used it in a derogatory sense meaning *Nazareth* which Jews use it for Jesus Christ as one belonging to *Nazra* symbolizing wilderness and rusticity. Sir Syed explained the word *Nasara* and stated that the Muslims use it in the Quranic sense where in it means the helper. He quotes verses from the Quran and asserts that the nomenclature is not offensive.

The exegesis of the Bible was also not welcomed either by the Muslims or the Christians. Sir Syed's mission which began enthusiastically was defeated by the Muslim masses. The Muslims

¹⁴ Nanotawi, Mohd Qasim Tasfiyah-al-Aqaid, Merrut, 1298 AH, PP 5-29.

believed, and still do so, that the Bible was abrogated where as Sir Syed emphasized that it was in pristine form.

Sir Syed was also bitterly criticized for his exegesis of the Quran. Sir Syed considered all religious literature as replete with false traditional Jewish tales and fables fabricated by the Muslim clergy; sometimes by way of explaining the really difficult text and sometimes to attain the desired objectives. Sir Syed, therefore felt the need of the *ilm-al-Kalam* and began it by writing the commentary of the Bible and thereafter the exegesis of the Quran. Sir Syed's presumption about the invalidity of the earlier theological knowledge was widely and invariably condemned by the Muslim clergy and the masses. Sir Syed's criticism of the *Sira* literature and exegesis was not factual, for, he himself substantiated his argument with the support of the earlier exegesis and the books of tradition. But he rightly pointed out that a great deal of *Sira* literature, traditions, exegesis and other books of theology included a lot of false convictions, superstitions and fictions. There was, however, a need to remove all such false believes which had nothing to do with faith or true Islam.¹⁵

Mahdi Ali raised pertinent objections about Sir Syed's apologetic response to one of his letters where in he criticized Sir Syed for interpreting the verses of the Quran in the manner to suit his basic touchstones, reason and nature. He rebuked him for inferring the meaning from the Quran against all norms and the principles so far evolved for the interpretation of the Quran. His objections irritated Sir Syed and he responded rather harshly and accused him of being

¹⁵ Preface of *Maktab-ul-Khulan* preface pp 1-18

culturally conditioned, following blindly the ancestral religion without applying reason to what he followed and practiced. Responding to Sir Syed's objection as to how he concluded that Mahdi Ali pointed out that the language of the Quran could determine the meaning of the text which could again be confirmed by the sense the Arab used the words in, idioms and the figures of speech. It should be, as he thinks, the way, the Quranic text be construed. Any other way of its interpretation would be tantamount to *tawil* one's own interpretation which Sir Syed himself detests.¹⁶ Mohsinul Mulk, however was never harsh like Ali Bakhsh and Imdad Ali. He always stood by him in the genuine efforts of educating Muslims of India and always helped him in his reformatory mission.

¹⁶ Ibid. PP 1-22

CONCLUSION

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Sir Syed asserted that in the wake of scientific development giving way to the emergence of natural sciences and presenting the traditional ones into the new forms, it is essential that religion must be explained in a different manner. In one of his articles he called his time as the age of skepticism. The younger generation which is well conversant with the natural sciences foster many doubts about the religious truths. The mist must be cleared from their mind. Sir Syed thinks that it is a similar challenge, Muslims faced in the early phase which ultimately became the cause for the inception of scholasticism (*Kalam*). It is therefore indispensable to begin new *Kalam* for the preservation of the religion, Islam. The natural sciences have explained the world in a different way which, the younger generation feels, does not correspond to the Quran and the tradition. Sir Syed honestly made an attempt to re-interpret the Quran by bringing out a categorical synthesis between the religious text and the discoveries of natural sciences¹.

Sir Syed has formulated two basic principles to determine the validity and the strength of the religious convictions. Reason and nature serve as touchstones to examine the authenticity of the doctrines or the basic articles of faith. The perusal of the history of Muslim philosophy would make it evident that the importance of reason has been exalted not only by the scholars of *Kalam* but also by the exuberant jurists².

¹ Maqalat-e-Sir Syed: ed. Ismail Panipati, Vol-1, pp 189-193.

² Saeeda Iqbal: Islamic Rationalism in the subcontinent, PP 172-181.

Nature is another criterion which he uses to determine the variety of the religious propositions and doctrines. As we are that reason became the basic principle of *ilm-al-Kalam* which began in the early phase of Islam. It had various shades but all emphasizing the application of reason along with revelation. Sir Syed continuing the legacy borrowed it as a touchstone conducive to the foundation of his new *Kalam*³.

Sir Syed has frequently used the word nature. In fact he examines the religious truth by perceiving the corresponding elements in the nature and religious beliefs⁴.

There is a pertinent question regarding the authority of God and function of nature as an eminent force. He firmly believes in the oneness of God which is the core of Islam. He, being the creator, is the first cause, the prime mover and the first principle. He considers him to be a reality having life, knowledge, will and power as essential attributes through which he partakes in the events of the world which affect the life of man directly or otherwise. He gives allegorical interpretation to the concept of the heaven and the hell and also the promises of the warnings related to them in the Quran⁵.

Nature is the work of God, and that there is a complete correspondence between the 'work of God' and the 'word of God'. Sir Syed emphatically insists on the uniformity between the two. He was disparagingly called the naturalist (*nechari*). He in his defence wrote many articles and adduced Quran in his support. He also insists on the argument that nature being the creation of God helps man to

3 Maqalat-e-Sir Syed ed. Ismail Panipati Vol-1, PP 189-193

4 Tahdhib -al-Akhlaq 1296 A H 41-42 & Akhri Mazamin-e-Sir Syed ed. Malik Chunnuddin PP 115-116

5 Ibid 1313 A H PP 137-138 & Maqalat-e-Sir Syed, ed. Ismail Panipati Vol. 13 PP 348-354.

know the creator. The work of God, in short, is criterion to examine the veracity of the Word of God. The Quran has to be interpreted so as to establish full correspondence and uniformity between the two. With this objective in his mind he wrote the exegesis of the Quran⁶.

Sir Syed has repeatedly denied miracles, for, he thinks that the miracles are unnatural acts. Moreover they defy the laws of nature which can not be broken in any case. He has therefore interpreted all the stories in the Quran describing the miraculous deeds of different prophets either in allegorical manner or by using the words in some other reference or meaning. He has quoted the verses of the Quran and has given their different interpretation.

Besides, Sir Syed has also denied the independent existence of the angels and the devil. He has categorically asserted many a times that he believes in their existence as an article of faith but the form is different. His assertion that the angels and the devil exist in the human body in the form of rational and the animal tendencies is albeit supported, as he quotes, by many eminent exegetes and scholars yet he was vehemently criticized for his views regarding their existence by the contemporary theologians and other Muslims under their influence. Besides he also reinterpreted the concept of *jinn*. It would suffice to say that his explanation is natural and rational. With this understanding Sir Syed thought it indispensable to make a compromise between science and religion⁷.

As we are aware, that the two commentaries of the Sir Syed generated a great deal of controversy. They were welcomed only in a very limited circle. The commentary of the Bible was apparently

⁶ Ibid. Vol. 15 PP 146-153

⁷ Muqadmah Tafsir-e-Sir Syed PP. 1-43.

written to bring in a synthesis between Christianity and Islam, but as many Christian scholars observed, the purpose was the promotion of Islam. He either rejected the Christian traditions and stories narrated in the Bible or presented the corrected Islamic version making people to believe that the Islamic version is true and more rational and natural. Sir Syed's purpose was defeated. The Muslims also did not approve of his attempt for he believed against the Muslim faith that the Old and the New testaments are preserved in original but simultaneously admits the possibility of corruption there in. The Christians understood his confession as meaningful but belying.

He is, as we have seen through the pages, a staunch Muslim but never agrees to the traditional religion. He resolved to eradicate the superstitious elements from the religion, Islam and desired to explain its doctrines on the basis of the two principles reason and nature. Sir Syed's free enquiry, rational outlook and scientific thinking infused in the Muslim elite the spirit of science and true religion. He defied conventions. His religious thought, however, created awareness and bettered religious milieu.

Prof. Asloob Ahmad Ansari in his paper "Sir Syed: An apologist for rationalism" has subjected his two concepts; reason and nature to criticism. He is of the view that an intuitive apprehension of reality dawns upon, where logic and reason have landed us in the blind alley. Though, Sir Syed was conscious of the limitations of reason and was aware of the demarcated area of revelation was still concerned to bring about a synthesis between the two modes of cognition.

Sir Syed dealt critically with such sensitive issues as *Shaq-Sadar* (the splitting of the chest of the prophet) and the ascension of the prophet to the heaven and explained that the latter took place within the frame work of vision rather than at the mundane level. Sir Syed also cast doubt on the physical presence of the angel Gabriel as the harbinger of revelation to the prophet. He does not totally reject angelology but is not prepared to accept the conventional views of angels and *Jinns*. He regarded them as the benevolent and brutish powers: power of good and evil rooted in the individual. The fall of Adam from the paradise is considered by Sir Syed not as a form of punishment but as a means of trial and discipline.

In the same paper Prof. Ansari asserted that Sir Syed erroneously regarded Islam as *Din-e-Fitrat* or religion of nature where as it is not a *Din-e-Fitrat* but *Din-e-Haq* or religion of truth. As regards religious experience one may quote from his article “religious experience is generated in and wells up from the in most recesses of being; it is not cold and mathematically precise but is palpably warm and subjective and hence not susceptible to a mechanical application”.⁸

⁸ Prof. Ansari, Asloob Ahmad ed., Sir Syed Ahmad Khan a centenary tribute, PP 271-294.

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