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The legacy of Sayyid Ahmad Khan in the postcolonial age

Sir Syed Memorial Lecture

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Anyone who wishes to gain a picture of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan, this 'front rank reformer and key thinker who set for his time the terms of the intellectual debate between Islam and the modern world' (AMUAA, 2013) will be especially indebted to the work of Professor Francis Robinson and Professor David Lelyveld, in particular their studies: *Separation Among Indian Muslims* and *Aligarh's First Generation.* In addition, the Sir Syed Ahmed Memorial Lectures and panel discussion staged last year by the Aligarh Muslim University Alumni Association, in which both these scholars spoke and participated together with Professor Mushiral Hassan, are available online and are an invaluable stimulus to further discussion. Professor Hassan's remark that our subject is today 'well-known but little read' has been at the forefront of my mind in forming this presentation in which I intend to probe the conundrum further by focusing on Sayyid Ahmad's legacy in the context of postcolonial critical thought. I shall start with his ideas about religion, before moving on to a discussion of the political and cultural context of his work.

Sayyid Ahmad's religious thought may be situated within a discourse concerning religion and the modern which, from one perspective, was opened by western Christian intellectuals when they came into contact with other world religions during the colonial period. From another perspective, Sayyid Ahmad's writings on religion can be linked to a nineteenth-century western debate about Christianity staged between on the one hand those we would now consider to be religious traditionalists and on the other liberal reform-oriented Christian thinkers comparable to Sayyid Ahmad himself. This debate resurfaced again in Western Europe in the immediate post Second World War period but has since fallen off the radar

largely because the West is now predominantly post-Christian and post-religious. The religion versus modern debate has always been firmly rooted in the paradigms of Enlightenment rationalism. Today it is informed by the statements of atheists such as Sam Harris, the late Christopher Hitchens, and the very much alive Richard Dawkins, who while they may come from different intellectual starting points, each owe their dogmatic antagonism toward religion to the Enlightenment. Militant atheistic secularism, considering itself to have 'defeated Christianity', now finds in Islam the last recalcitrant embodiment of a 'fanatical' 'pre-modern' religiosity.

In academic and philosophical circles postmodern thought, arising in the last three decades of the twentieth century, supposedly 'deconstructed' the foundational ideas of the Enlightenment. However, while it has been argued that postmodernism has decentered the Enlightenment narrative as Westocentric, patriarchal, and elitist, British Muslim thinkers like Ziauddin Sardar (1997) and Ahmed S Akbar (2004) argue that as far as the non-western world is concerned postmodernism represents a continuation of Westocentrism and the political and cultural hegemony of the West.

Which is perhaps to say no more than that the influence of Sayyid Ahmad on the Islamic *umma* lost out to that of his contemporary Jamal al-Din al-Afghani. Readers of Albert Hourani's *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age*, while making due allowance for the fact that al-Afghani attacked Sayyid Ahmad for his connection to the British Empire, should also note that the Iranian in his work *al-Radd ala'l dhahriyyin* (Refutation of the Materialists) condemned Sayyid Ahmad for identifying religion with the laws of nature. In Hourani's words, al-Afghani charged him with 'implying…that there was nothing which transcended the world of nature, and that man was the judge of all things. Or so it seemed to al-Afghani…' (Hourani, 125) Lelyveld confirms Sayyid Ahmad 'was prepared to simplify received doctrine to forgo transcendental acceptance of the supernatural…by taking great pains to provide naturalistic explanations for specific miracles related to the Qu'ran'

(Lelyveld, 110). While capable of taking rationalistic and unorthodox positions himself, as seen in his debate on religion and science with Ernest Renan in Paris in 1883, al-Afghani's legacy would turn out to be by far the more potent of the two. This, to judge purely on events, was because al-Afghani was more astute than Sayyid Ahmad when he estimated that the defence of Islam depended on maintenance of what perhaps the majority of Muslims have considered the fundamentals, rather than making concessions to modern thought. Islamic modernism, after all, would be defeated because of its close association in the minds of orthodox religious leaders with the atheistic and materialist West.

This only confirms that the other important dimension to Sayyid Ahmad's work, the political, has been undermined still further by developments in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The set of conditions that gave rise to what we will call the postcolonial universe which came into being after the Second World War has not only made Sayyid Ahmad's pro-western stance appear outmoded and rooted in the colonial context; owing to its openly declared indebtedness to western codes of thought, many in the Islamic world would today dismiss that stance as untenable. It is interesting that Hourani chose 1939 as the date when ideas of 'the liberal age' ceased to have purchase in the Arabic and Islamic world. Some have argued this date is quite late, but it does fix the period of Islamic modernism in such a way as to allow us to incorporate within it the great Indian seam that began with Sayyid Ahmad and ended with the death of Muhammad Iqbal. (In 1943, Wilfred Cantwell Smith wrote that progressive Islam in India had stagnated; having passed through 'a passive, liberal phase', it had 'finally become conservative', and was ready 'to become reactionary' (Smith, 56).)

Therefore in two key respects, foundational positions taken up by Sayyid Ahmad have proved unacceptable to widely held constituencies within today's world. First, his effort to connect religion to the modern fails because those who created the idea of the 'modern' are now no longer religious - if they ever were. And secondly, his aim of aligning Muslims with

the civilization of the modern world involved making concessions which are contrary to the thinking of orthodox religious leaders – as of course was the case during his lifetime - who consider that world to be both inimical to and the chief enemy of Islam.

If to my audience this appears too clinical and brutal an assessment of Sayyid Ahmad's legacy, I ask you to bear with me as I attempt to reconfigure that legacy in terms of possible alternatives to the contemporary impasse created by the developments in the postcolonial and postmodern world which I shall describe to you. In brief, my discussion will now proceed to juxtapose Sayyid Ahmad's views alongside those on the confrontation between Islam and western-led modernity expressed by two present-day Muslim thinkers, S Sayyid and Ali A. Allawi in their respective works, *Recalling the Caliphate* (2014) and *The Crisis of Islamic Civilization* (2009).

S. Sayyid is a leading theorist of the relationship between postmodernity and Islam. The main thrust of his work to date has been interrogation of the place Islam has been designated in the globalized world of modernity which the West declares as its own origination and in which it predicates its continuing centrality. Ali Allawi is a political figure as well as an historian of Islam. Though they might appear to occupy opposing positions on the role, in particular, of Islamism in the contemporary Islamicate world, in point of fact both thinkers start out from similar assumptions. These are: i) the situation of Islam in the modern world has been and continues to be postulated as 'a problem' ii) the measure of Islam's 'weakness' is its place in a world order originated and controlled by the dominant West.

For those who know his life and work, these formulations are not very distant from the ones Sayyid Ahmad was addressing in later Victorian times. Post 1857, the Indian Muslims were looked upon by the British rulers as at one and the same time a community maladjusted to the needs of western education and modern government, and a potential threat to the order of imperial India. Such views were promulgated in William Hunter's *The Indian Musalmans*, whose effect was considerable, Francis Robinson informs us, because five weeks after its

publication in 1876, the viceroy Lord Mayo was killed by a Muslim assassin (Robinson, 104). In later crises, home grown or international, in which they were either involved or deemed to possess an interest, India's 'Muslims were not trusted' (126). Sayyid Ahmad's response to this situation was both to emolliate the British, and to husband the resources of Indian Muslims. And while it may be the case, as Robinson points out, that his concern was initially for the Muslim elite in the United Provinces, as can be seen in his creation of the Anglo-Oriental College, the scope of this influence extended to Muslims throughout India (125).

Sayyid states: 'the interrogation of Islam has become one of the most pressing questions of our time'. He continues: 'The Muslim question refers to a series of interrogations and speculations in which Islam and/or Muslims exist as a difficulty that needs to be addressed' (Sayyid, 3). His intention is not to endorse the validity of 'The Muslim question', but, on the contrary, to amplify the agency of Muslims and ironise the anxiety the West entertains towards them. Here Sayyid enacts mimicry of the continuation into the twenty-first century of a line of thought that goes back to and is embedded in William Hunter's statement on Muslims' troubling insubordination in British imperial India. Sayyid's stance can be characterised as a belonging to an Islamic mode of postcolonial thinking. His purpose is designed to subvert the dominant discourse of our time, intensified since the destruction of the twin towers in September 2001, and disseminated by the power of the West. We might well ask, and it is part of my task today to do so, where that takes us in our assessment of the legacy of Sir Sayyid Ahmad.

First of all, we should remember that Sir Sayyid was not subservient to the British when it came to what he considered the fundamentals. As Professor Lelyveld pointed out in last year's lectures, he demonstrated great courage in challenging Muir's biography of the Prophet – part of a two volume history on the beginnings of Islam which we would now categorise as a colonial work hostile to its core, on which Edward Said wrote: 'his attitude toward his subject matter was fairly put when he said that "the sword of Muhammed, and the Kor'an, are the

most stubborn enemies of Civilisation, Liberty, and the Truth which the world has yet known'" (Said, 151). On this most important of issues Sayyid Ahmad was prepared to draw a line – and to use the discourse of anti-colonial struggle - to resist the coloniser. On his visit to Britain in 1869-70, he experienced the same response to the power of the West - admiring, self-searching and self-humbling (Lelyveld, 105) - which we find in the writings of other non-western nineteenth-century visitors to Europe. These included the Arab Muslims Tahtawi and Khayr al-Din, both portrayed in Albert Hourani's work, to which we could add the Moroccan travellers discussed by Ahmed Idrissi Alami in his recently published study *Mutual Othering* (2013). Nor should we fail to put on record that the sense of wonder and disempowerment non-westerners felt in the face of nineteenth-century European cultural and political achievement was registered by non-Muslims as well.

This response to intercultural encounter is often overlooked by postcolonial writing, and for obvious reasons. Initial admiration of the coloniser invariably turned to other emotions; for example, when in the 1950s the young student and future African novelist Chinua Achebe (2000) read representations of his native Nigeria in British colonial literature, he felt his homeland to be under attack. David Lelyveld writes about Sayyid Ahmad's attitudes towards modernity in terms of the troubled consciousness of the Muslim soul for which westernization is a double-edged sword. The upper class Islamic culture of the UP is of course long gone, as are the codifications he gave to the mottos *adab*, *akhlaq*, and *ilm*. Sayyid Ahmad, as David Lelyveld reminded us, belonged to an elite; in supporting the British Empire he believed it could help him to create a new culture, rooted in the past, which was nevertheless modern and progressive. As Francis Robinson pointed out, he refused to support Sultan Abdul Hamid as Khalifa of all Muslims because he believed the British had given Indian Muslims the right to live freely – and this in spite of their actions against Muslim lands Egypt and Afghanistan (112). *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*. Britain's Muslims are still free to express themselves (as long as they eschew 'extremist' language) but British foreign policy continues

to upset the susceptibilities of at least a fair proportion of them.

How then should we evaluate the deepening of that troubled reaction to the modern world in the hundred and sixteen years since Sir Sayyid's death? From a postcolonial perspective the increasingly oppositional stance of some Muslim thinkers, writers and activists requires no apology or justification. On the contrary, it is to be expected given the persistent enlargement of the disparity in power between the western-led 'first world' and what used to be called the 'third world', which postcolonial thought conceives of as the resistant Other, and which includes many millions of Muslim subjects. Viewed in this way, the assertive voice of a Muslim postcolonialist like S. Sayyid is not only expected, and necessary, it is one to be respected, as when he writes: 'My preference is to see the contemporary emergence of Islam taking place in a world marked by the logic of postcoloniality '(Sayyid, 9). Islam's continuing presence in a world order in which the presence of the West is offset by that of the non-West is a proposition Sayyid has raised and argued for extensively, as when he claims 'This Islam, as a constant counter part to the Western enterprise, introduces contingence into the formation of western identity.' In other words, Islam's contestation challenges the West's image of itself as the dominant force in the world. It is also desirable because it continues to affirm that Islam has not been erased, as it would have been the case if the logic of western-led modernity had achieved total sway.

This is a situation that Ali Allawi is fully aware of when he writes at the beginning of *The Crisis of Islamic Civilisation*:

> The Iraq of the 1950s, in which I was raised, as well as the broader Arab and Islamic world, were at a stage when the secular elements in society – the ruling political class and the cultural and intellectual elites – had moved far away from an overt identification with Islam. It then appeared to be only a matter of time before Islam would lose whatever hold it might still have had on the peoples and societies of the Muslim world. Even the term 'Muslim' was unusual for the period; Muslim countries identified

themselves more in terms of national or ethnic status or ideological affinities…
Modernity was flooding in everywhere, and people seemed to want more of it. Cinemas
and snack bars, cabarets and country clubs, freely flowing alcohol and mixed parties:
Baghdad was turning into Babylon, its hedonistic predecessor of your…Secularism had
the Muslim world by the throat…Islam was ignored, marginalized or rejected by the
modernizing classes. It continued to provide some form of ethical scaffolding to people's
lives, but even that became frayed as people moved into a modern and urban
environment (Allawi, ix-x).

Allawi, a modern Iraqi Shi'ih intellectual and politician now living in the United States, is
by no stretch of the imagination a radical, and neither is he a postcolonial Muslim theorist like
S. Sayyid. Implicit in Allawi's attempt to define and diagnose the problems that he believes
beset many Muslim countries today, is the sense that postcolonial assertiveness of the kind
favoured by Sayyid is not only not enough, it does not begin to approach a cure for the
malaise he is analysing. For Allawi, an organic process of decay – and here one thinks of
pessimistic European thinkers like Oswald Spengler who pronounced on the decline of the
West at the beginning of the twentieth century – has taken hold: an entire civilization, the
civilization of Islam, exists on the verge of dissolution. Allawi's is a challenging analysis, and
it does not help, in my opinion, to dismiss it or him as the product of over-acculturation to un-
Islamic modes of thought. Allawi is no stooge of the West. His work does not operate in the
same way as Bernard Lewis' similarly titled, *Crisis of Islam* (2003); he does not belong
among the professional pronouncers on Islam's doom. His concern is what he calls 'the
survival of and continuity of [the transcendental idea embodied in Islam from its inception] in
the face of the monumental challenges that modernity and globalization have raised' (Allawi,
xiv).

What Allawi has to say is in some ways in line with Sayyid Ahmad's, and other intelligent
Muslim observers' thoughts and insights going back to the time of al-Jabbarti and before.

They have pondered over the evidence of Muslim decline, desired reform but wondered from where it could come, and since the nineteenth-century measured this quandary against the burgeoning ascendancy of a civilization presided over by Christians and unbelievers. Under pressure of this awareness, often in desperation and assailed by their consciousness of the Muslims' weakness, as well as angered at the corruption of their lands, various, widely differing movements have arisen. Sometimes these have been moved by the claims of renewal embodied in a self-proclaimed *mujaddid* or mahdi; straining or moving beyond the bounds of orthodoxy, such as in the attempted Babi uprising in Qajar Iran, the Mahdist revolution in Sudan, or the Qadiani manifestation in late Victorian Punjab. Sayyid Ahmad's modernising educational movement at Aligarh was another form of response to this problem, as are the twentieth century developments of political Islam associated with Hasan al-Banna, Abul Ala Mawdudi, and Imam Khomeini.

Both of the contemporary thinkers whose work I am discussing consider political Islam to be a crucial aspect of the condition of Islam today. For S. Sayyid Islamism is a positive force that counteracts against the dominance of the West. It is vital because it 'projects and articulates a globalised Muslim subjectivity.' (Sayyid, 10) For Allawi political Islam, 'whatever we may think of it [has] embodied the hopes and fears of millions of people around the world.' (Allawi, xi) In its worst form, experienced by him at first hand in Iraq, it has been the cause of 'murderous violence unleashed by Wahhabi-inspired Islamists…accompanied by laborious jurisprudential "justifications".' (xii) The deeds of the Muslims politicians Allawi encountered, of whatever hue, demonstrated 'by and large [that they] seemed to have cut themselves off from the wellsprings of Islamic ethics.' However, political Islam is for him 'only an aspect of the overall problem of Islam in the modern world…a manifestation of the ailment rather than the ailment itself.' (xiii) Reading his study one comes to the conclusion that he views Islamic politics as *both* a reaction to western global hegemony and an evidence of the decline of Muslim civilization.

It would be possible to leave the matter there – and more often than not this is what modern critics of Islam do. The implication is that Islamism is a futile codification of a superseded pre-modern world view that cannot be recuperated in the twenty-first century and that attempts to recuperate it lead to violent impasse, ever more extreme, ever more violent, as we see around us today. Alternatively, Islamism, especially in de-territorialised spin-offs like Osama Bin Laden's franchise, has been formulated as a mutant form of modern or postmodern revolutionary nihilism. Even allowing for the postcolonial validity of Sayyid's arguments, many, probably most *non-Muslim* postcolonialists will shy away from his conclusions, because despite its notional oppositional valence, Islam as an embodiment of religious consciousness per se has no place in their predominantly secular world-view. A minority, it is true, have attempted to contort it into a form of consciousness that only the tiniest few among the ranks of Muslims can even conceive of, and which the overwhelming majority would never countenance.

However, I would like to argue that in postcolonial terms we don't need to identify Islam as closely with Islamism as Sayyid seems to do; nor allow despair at the excesses of Islamism's jihadist mutations to obscure the validity and importance of postcolonial thinking about Islam. Postcolonialism was in a key sense inspired by Edward Said's *Orientalism*, and without that text S.Sayyid's task of de-centering the West from the modernity of today's world would have been substantially more difficult. Said's achievement, along with a handful of other mostly Arab intellectuals domiciled in the West, was to deconstruct the European and latterly American view that western civilization is universal, and to make possible our recognition of the persistence of Europe's Christian exclusivity within the encapsulation of its message of freedom, secularism, and democracy. The Turkish historian Huseyin Yilmaz argues:

In broad terms, the Eastern Question was about establishing a new world order. In other words, it was European intellectuals' self-proclaimed mission to accord order to the rest of

the world. Yet, more specifically, it was about envisioning Europe vis-à-vis the Ottoman empire, for it represented an alien civilization still surviving on the same continent these Europeans saw as the dispenser of modern civilization, uncompromised by inferior races and cultures. The Eastern Question in this way became integral to the process of purifying Europe from cultural contamination by enlightening or driving out Asiatic elements. (Yilmaz, 27)

However, in late Victorian and early twentieth-century England, there were a tiny few who rejected this racial religio-cultural chauvinism and who were able to imagine the opposite: English converts Abdullah Quilliam and Marmaduke Pickthall resisted the eradication of Europe's Islamic heritage and the exclusive coupling of modernity with western Christendom (Nash, 2013). They both went so far as to argue that Islam was better able to align itself with the higher values of the modern world, including rationality and science, than was Christianity. Pickthall in particular, in his exposure of the calamitous breakdown of the idea of progress in the carnage on Europe's Great War battlefields, may well have agreed with the Sudanese postcolonial novelist Tayeb Salih (1997), that Europe contained within itself the deadly germ of a thousand years of violence. We can look around us and still see the evidences of this, from the European-originated wars of the last century to the American-led ones of the last few decades.

This exercise of ruthless power had been witnessed by Sayyid Ahmad and his compatriots in the retribution meted against the raisers of the Great Rebellion of 1857. The British had conducted their own 'war on terror', demonstrating their superior thoroughness by staging mass hangings and blowing sepoys to pieces by tying them to the mouths of cannons. He had supported their authority during the rebellion and judged it would be suicidal to challenge their rule again afterwards. Yet, much as he marvelled at the superiority of their modes of governance and social organisation, this admiration did not lead him to wish to give up his Muslim identity. I suspect that almost everyone in my audience today would have expected

Sayyid Ahmad not to have relinquished such an important factor in making the modern palatable. He stood firm in his principles, which according to his own lights involved the avoidance of extremism and the creation of a new Islamic entity as embodied in the Muhammadan (but not exclusively sectarian) Anglo-Oriental College. The aim of Orientalists like William Muir, Alfred Lyall, and their ilk, was to brand Islam incapable of adaptation to the modern world. The mere fact that Sayyid Ahmad deigned to think otherwise and placed so much effort on trying to ensure Muslim identity was not erased, should be enough to have earned him the gratitude of millions.

Many Muslims in today's world are eager to be modern and to be Muslim. In spite of the countervailing force of Islamophobia, Muslims have maintained the European foothold the Ottomans gained for Islam. Empire and globalisation have brought South Asian Muslims in particular to Britain in large numbers. Their presence, alongside Hindus and followers of other faith traditions not indigenous to the UK, has been beneficial to both themselves and their hosts, and contributed to the model of multicultural society, which imperfect and by some contested though it is, bodes well for Britain's future as a postcolonial entity, capable of leading the way towards a genuinely global society. Religion must continue to have a place in the world of the future, and Islam, as the latest of the world's great religions, will, as it has in the past, continue to play its role in the spiritual destiny of mankind. Sir Sayyid Ahmad, by promoting his belief in the co-existence of Islam alongside other faiths will, when the long view is taken, be seen to have played his part in the pursuance of that great project.

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