

Sir Sayyid and the Religious Foundations for a Pluralist Society

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Despite the many studies concerning Sir Sayyid's religious thought, speculation lingers regarding the actual intent of his engagement with the Bible, the sacred scripture of the 'People of the Book'. This is more directly addressed in *Tabyīn al-kalām* (1860–1865), but these are also indirectly featured in his writings from 1847 to 1898.¹ As Bruce Lawrence enquired long ago, 'But why would any Muslim, since he accepts the Qur'ān as God's final revelation to the last prophet, be motivated to read pre-Qur'ānic scriptures?' This is a question, Lawrence wisely notes, that 'is as difficult as it is central' to the study of this person and of this period.² Now on the occasion of Sir Sayyid's bicentennial, I would like to explore the motivations that may have propelled this exploration that was both extensive and prolonged.

As is seen in this edited volume, Sayyid Ahmad was a prolific writer and his interests ranged across diverse fields of enquiry. However, it is generally agreed that no study of this important figure can be considered complete apart from careful consideration of his religious ideas. A survey of the literature indicates that two works are of particular benefit for assessing this subject: Bashir Ahmad Dar's *Religious Thought of Sayyid Ahmad Khan* and Christian Troll's *Sayyid Ahmad Khan: A Reinterpretation of Muslim Theology*.³ Dar correctly illuminated the influence of Muslim rational philosophy upon Sayyid Ahmad's thought, and he also emphasized the continuity of Sayyid Ahmad's ideas within the progression of Muslim reformists. Troll built upon Dar's foundation and successfully consolidated Sayyid Ahmad's manifold ideas into a theological system.

So in the estimation of these two erudite scholars, why does Sir Sayyid engage in concerted biblical study? In exploring this question, it should first be noted that both Dar and Troll examine *Tabyīn al-kalām* as a component

part of Sir Sayyid's progress as a writer. This may explain why each affirms the importance of *Tabyīn* and dedicates chapters to its analysis, but give far less attention to Sir Sayyid's application of the Bible in *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*. It is apparent that attention was ultimately upon larger matters, namely a close examination of our author's rationalist paradigm. Still summary remarks can be detected in these secondary sources as we will explore. Sayyid Ahmad's objective, in Troll's adept analysis, is to develop 'a new Muslim apologetic theology' (*ilm al-kalām*), and *Tabyīn* is an integral part of this endeavor.⁴ Sayyid Ahmad sought to demonstrate that revealed religion is reconcilable with science, and that Islam—even more so than Christianity—is compatible with rational and natural philosophy. In short, the *Tabyīn* is apologetic.

Dar's stance is considerably different. Dar succinctly summarizes Sayyid Ahmad's purpose in composing *Tabyīn* as follows: 'In order to give a helping hand to the Muslims in their fight against Christians, Sayyid Ahmad Khan undertook the most onerous task of writing a commentary on the Bible.'⁵ In this light, *Tabyīn* was composed in the spirit of the 1854 Agra debates (*munāẓarah*) whereby opponents are confronted 'from their own armouries' (to use William Muir's phrase).⁶ 'Sayyid Ahmad', Dar argues, 'accepted the Bible to be a truly revealed book which, as he tried to prove, did not corroborate the mysteries of the Christian religion but upheld the Qur'ānic point of view in every controversial question'.⁷ In this light, the study of the Bible is portrayed as a 'most onerous' demonstration of self-sacrifice in the 'fight against Christians'. For Dar, *Tabyīn* is polemic.

Both studies address the motivating purpose in composing the *Tabyīn*, but neither answer is fully conclusive. It is amply clear that Sir Sayyid dedicated considerable time and financial resources to the study of the Bible, but the reason for this remains elusive. I would like to explore in these pages a different possible motivation and to posit that Sayyid Ahmad's purpose in engaging with the Bible is better understood when considered within the pluralistic tendencies that undergird his religious thought. As I have argued elsewhere at greater length, Sayyid Ahmad affirms the coherence of the revelation recorded in the Bible and Qur'ān.⁸ The texts are perceived as interrelated; the one elucidates the other. And this proceeds from a presupposed view of how the Creator interacts with creation, or more specifically how revelation descends into the human realm. This understanding of how the cosmos operates stimulates and reinforces for Sir Sayyid a pluralist view of religion, and this informs a more cogent reason for the composition of *Tabyīn* and subsequent use of the Bible in *Tafsīr*.

TABYĪN AS APOLOGETIC

Christian Troll, as already noted, read *Tabyīn* as a component of Sayyid Ahmad's theological *apologia*. The commentary fragments are considered within the progressive development of Sayyid Ahmad's religious thinking, and rightly so. This is the stated intent for republishing the religious writings as an *oeuvre* in *Taşānif-i Ahmadiyah*. Troll successfully displayed how the venture of biblical study provided Sayyid Ahmad with the opportunity to experiment with hermeneutical tools that proved helpful for the larger modernist project of stripping away the barnacles of tradition believed to encumber pristine religion. The apologetic argument is that once the clutter is removed, then true Islam will emerge as reconcilable to the 'new sciences' and correctly perceived as compatible with the highest orders of human intellect.⁹ The inclusion of the Bible within its canon of scripture is a testament to the genius of Islam.

Although Troll's assessment of the theological paradigm has stood the test of time, one questions whether this explanation sufficiently accounts for the nuance of Sayyid Ahmad's attitude towards the Bible. Sir Sayyid's position, Troll writes, is that 'the present-day Jewish and Christian Scriptures can and must be assessed positively, as being witness to *tawhīd*, the basic message of Islam. Fundamentally, the Muslims share with Jews and Christians a belief in the Scriptures as the revealed word of God'.¹⁰ However, Troll's account overlooks an important point that is fundamental for grasping Sir Sayyid's view. Troll assumed that Sayyid Ahmad omits the 'apostolic writings of the New Testament'.¹¹ Otherwise stated, some portions of the Christian New Testament are accepted as *bona fide* but not others. If this is accurate, then *Tabyīn* is a conciliatory study of selected biblical portions, but hardly a positive assessment of the Christian New Testament. For if the apostolic writings are omitted, then Sayyid Ahmad has merely found a circuitous manner to restate longstanding objections to the Christian canon, namely that of the New Testament writings, only the Gospels contain the revealed *Injīl*.¹²

However, a focused reading of Sayyid Ahmad's writings on the subject reveals a more complex view of scriptural contingency.

Sayyid Ahmad's assessment of the apostolic writings in the New Testament sheds new light on his paradigm. The key to recognizing this is found in the analogous application of the *wahy matlū/ghayr matlū* taxonomy to the Bible and to the *Qur'ān*. These are mainstream categories drawn from '*ilm al-ḥadīth* and their primary function, as Abdullah Saeed explains, is to qualify Sunnah 'as fully equal to the *Qur'ān* in religio-ethical authority'.¹³ Sunnah contains *matlū/*

ghayr matlū revelation, some which is granted by word (*alfāz*) and other by topic (*maḍmūn*). In *Tabyīn* Part 1, Discourse Three, Sir Sayyid clarifies in no uncertain terms, 'God protect us [from Satan] (*Na'udhbillāh*)! The revelation of the earlier (*sābiqīn*) prophets is no less than that which was granted to the Prophet Muḥammad'. Clearly the author rejects in the sharpest terms any attempt to demean one form as lesser than the other.

The taxonomy reflects the classical consensus derived from the writings of Muḥammad ibn Idrīs al-Shafī'i (d. 819) where Sunnah is defined as 'coextensive' and of equal ethical-legal authority as the Qur'ān.¹⁴ As Abu Hamid Muḥammad al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) would later explain:

God has but one word, which differs in the mode of its expressions. On occasions God indicates his word by the Qur'ān, on others, by words in another style, not publically recited, and called Sunnah.¹⁵

Both Sunnah and Qur'ān are revelation (*wahy*): the Qur'ān is rehearsed (*wahy matlū*, from *talāwah*), Sunnah is unrehearsed (*wahy ghayr matlū*). The distinction is one of form and not of substance. Sunnah is not a different mode of revelation but it was transmitted differently and serves a different function.

This taxonomy by definition holds that the manner in which revelation is received does not augment its authority. And, Sayyid Ahmad attributes this exalted value to the revelation contained in the present Bible. Jesus' statements, along with some other un-specified Biblical portions are categorized as *wahy matlū*, and these are not of greater interpretative value than revelation granted in similar form in the Qur'ān, and the same is stated of the ghayr matlū portions recorded in the Bible and Hadīth. This paradigm is important because it opens the way for Sayyid Ahmad to engage not only with the Bible, which is so different in form than the Qur'ān, but also with the Apostolic writings which are so important to Christian theology.

It is vital to observe that Sir Sayyid recognizes the New Testament writers as recipients of revelation (*ṣāhib al-wahy*) and that their writings are worthy of obedience (*wājib al-'amal*).¹⁶ Furthermore, it is crucial to note that our author insists that this paradigm remains squarely within the bounds of Islamic intellectual history. He justifies this position by stating that the Christian apostle does not operate in his own authority, but rather under the legislative dispensation (*rusūl*) of the Messiah (Ḥaḍhrat Masih). The apostles (*ḥawārīn*) receive revelation under this dispensation. The difference between these is the authority to legislate doctrine (*sharī'ah*).¹⁷ This is the means by which Sayyid Ahmad envelops the apostolic writings along with the Gospels. Once

the taxonomy is explained it becomes clear that Sayyid Ahmad envisioned a commentary not only of the Gospels but rather of the entire New Testament, as he clearly expressed in the opening of the *Tabyīn*: an exegetical commentary (*tafsīr*) upon the divine word (*kalām ilāhi*) that comprises the Old Testament (*ahad-i 'atīq*) and New Testament (*ahad-i jadīd*).¹⁸ In short, Sir Sayyid's commentary of the Bible—for whatever reason he set about the task—was intended to include the entirety of the present text as revered by orthodox Christians and Jews.

POLITICAL UNDERTONES

One concern brought forth by an apologetic reading of *Tabyīn* is that it casts a political tinge over Sayyid Ahmad's motivation. Though Troll only hints at this, others like Maulana Wahiduddin Khan remain adamant that Sayyid Ahmad's purpose was ultimately to incur colonial favour. Khan explained to me Sayyid Ahmad's ambition through an Urdu pun derived from the settee now in the Sir Sayyid Academy in Aligarh: 'When Sayyid Ahmad returned from England all he brought with him was a chair (*kursī*).'¹⁹ The insinuation is that Sayyid Ahmad's true motivation was to secure a place of prominence—a seat—in the colonial regime for himself, and for the Muslim elite. Seen in this light, Sayyid Ahmad's writings are an intellectual apology intended to mollify the British by presenting Islam as a natural ally to European Christianity.

The point here is not to deny that Sayyid Ahmad was a political actor, but rather to caution against the over politicization of his theology. Sir Sayyid makes statements that are clearly political in other writings, but these are absent from the 'reverent and prayerful' approach taken to the study of the Bible in *Tabyīn*. Furthermore, our author takes additional pains to restate his acceptance of the present text in *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, a project in which sympathy for the Bible produces no fathomable political opportunity. And, although a genuinely theological agenda does not preclude per se simultaneous political concerns, care must be given lest such analysis overshadow the spiritual nature of Sayyid Ahmad's vision for socio-religious renewal. If this is left unchecked, then the implication will endure that Sayyid Ahmad's apologetic theology, which includes his study of the Bible, was a means to perpetuate Muslim manifest destiny. This in turn fuels the well-worn narrative that Islam by definition necessitates political power and primacy over other religions, which is an idea that Sayyid Ahmad clearly and vigorously opposed.²⁰

In summary, Troll presents a magisterial account of Sayyid Ahmad's 'new *falsafah*' but contemporary readers must also factor in the soteriological consequences of this paradigm into the political equation. In other words, the way one regards the religious 'other' has serious political consequences, and this is an element of Sir Sayyid's theology that needs to be more fully addressed. As we will see below, Sayyid Ahmad's exegetical writings demonstrate a different mode of religious and civilizational interaction that is collaborative rather than competitive, and which overtly respects existing religious identities.

TABYĪN AS POLEMIC

Bashir Ahmad Dar's stance recognizes the apologetic nature of the work, but goes beyond this to claim that Sayyid Ahmad's purpose in penning *Tabyīn* is in actuality polemical. The study of the Bible is 'an onerous task' and a clever means to 'beat missionaries at their own game'.²¹ Dar likens Sayyid Ahmad to Ibrahim an-Nazzam (d. 845) or Ibn Rushd (d. 1198) who were compelled to imbibe 'new and foreign ideas' in order to protect the faith.²² Sir Sayyid is cast as a heroic defender of Islam who presses the limits albeit upholds the Qur'ān in 'every controversial matter'. Although he may appear at times to have ceded ground, this is shadow play intended to demonstrate the opponent's fallacy. This assessment of Sayyid Ahmad's position is severely limited and does not withstand scrutiny.

Unfortunately a severe bias colours Dar's otherwise intelligent study. He approaches *Tabyīn* with the fixed assumption that Sir Sayyid regards the biblical scriptures as inimical to Islam. He writes, 'Sayyid Ahmad was able to prove that as regards authenticity which could be accorded to a direct revelation from God, the Bible could not stand on a par with the Qur'ān in any respect whatsoever.'²³ This conclusion is mystifying because Dar gives blanket acceptance to the integrity of the Hebrew Bible, as reconstituted by Ezra (c. 440–480 BC) and affirmed by Jesus, but severe reticence towards the Christian New Testament. Dar explains, 'We [Muslims] don't consider that the Acts, Epistles, and observations of Apostles are to be taken as part and parcel of the New Testament itself.'²⁴ The 'New Testament' by this definition is composed of the *wahy matlū* recited by Jesus; all else is omitted. But again this does not account for Sayyid Ahmad's position or application of this technical taxonomy.

According to Dar's account Sayyid Ahmad limits the actual contents of the 'New Testament' to portions that are direct verbatim revelation. He supports

this claim by a reference from *Tabyīn* Part 1 where he paraphrases Sir Sayyid as stating: 'We Muslims, although holding all the books of the Old and New Testament to be genuine and true, are yet guided more particularly by the mere text of them (i.e. those verses which contain prophetic utterances), than the narratives and tales to be found in them.'²⁵ This rendition, whether intended or not, presents Sayyid Ahmad in a devilish light as one who fogs the audience with a conciliatory statement about accepting the books as 'original and true' but then deviously clarifies that this refers only to the 'text' (*matn*) of oracles cobbled from the quoted utterances. Such an interpretation completely discounts painstaking measures taken by Sayyid Ahmad to explain that his definition of *matn* includes recitative and non-recitative revelation (*matlū* and *ghayr matlū*). And, that the recitative (*matlū*) occurs as verbatim (*alfāz*) and as subject (*maḍmūn*). Hence, by overlooking these definitions Dar undermines the paradigm set forth by Sir Sayyid to justify a serious reading of the Bible.

One consequence of this is that Dar completely missed the purpose of the *Tabyīn* exercise. Sayyid Ahmad sought to rationalize a parity of the Qur'ān and the Bible so that these could be read as peers. He asserted that the revelation found in the 'before books' was not less than that found in the Qur'ān. And this is not a theoretical statement bemoaning the purity of a misplaced original; but rather Sayyid Ahmad is describing his estimation of the texts in hand. He has directly confronted the recurring circular argument that the 'before books' must be judged by their approximation in form and content to the Qur'ān. He replaces this paradigm by affirming the blend of text (*matn*) and contextualizing narrative (*riwāyat*), or oracle and chronicle, as the historical norm in prophetic revelation prior to the Qur'ān. To ignore this, Sir Sayyid writes, is 'to blind oneself to the history of revelation'.²⁶ Hence, form is rejected as the means for assessing the authenticity and authority. Dar does not perceive this and consequently portrays Sayyid Ahmad as a devious polemicist.

POLEMIC VIEW ALSO HELD BY SOME CHRISTIANS

Some Christians have also projected Sayyid Ahmad as a sly opponent, but again this is not convincing. Records from the 1875 missionary Conference on Urdu and Hindi Literature in Allahabad, for example, cite Sayyid Ahmad's 'Broad Church Mohamadenism' as a direct impediment to the educationist strategy for bringing about societal conversion to Christianity. However, the detailed records of the proceedings make no mention at all of *Tabyīn*.²⁷ Frustrations voiced by foreign missionaries were not based upon his writings on the Bible, but rather on his demystification of traditional lore.

Indigenous Christians on the other hand, some who were converts from Islam, regarded Sayyid Ahmad's writings as disingenuous. Imād al-Dīn Lāhīz, assistant Bishop Valpy French in Lahore, presented the most extensive rebuttal to *Tabyīn* in *Tanqīd al-kheālāt*.²⁸ Here again the central argument is against the lens of philosophical rationalism applied to revelation. Lāhīz claimed that Sayyid Ahmad misrepresented normative positions in order to make the religion more palatable to 'thinking persons'. Dar makes no effort to conceal his personal aversion for Lāhīz and his erroneous reading of Sayyid Ahmad's theology. However, though Dar and Lāhīz differ on their assessment of Sayyid Ahmad's orthodoxy, both polemicists agree that his aim in composing *Tabyīn* was to secure Islam and undermine Christianity.

However, the editorial writings in Nūr Afshān, a recently recovered archive from this era, tell a different story.²⁹ These contain first hand accounts from some of the most prominent indigenous Christians of the time; and these regard *Tabyīn* in an overtly positive manner. In fact both Thakur Dass, Pastor of Charles Forman's Naulakha Presbyterian Church in Lahore, and Rev. Rajib 'Alī at Allahabad Seminary, take Lāhīz to task for his antagonism towards Sayyid Ahmad. 'Alī thoughtfully summarizes the sentiment in quoting Jesus' statement that 'those who are not against us are for us.'³⁰ This subject cannot be carried forward here due to space constraints, but there is ample evidence for Christian support of *Tabyīn*, particularly Part 3 on the Gospel of Matthew, but also subsequent disapproval of the naturalist theology that becomes more acute over time.

In summary, the polemical interpretation is not convincing for many reasons. Dar does not consider our author's technical terminology in sufficient detail. His appraisal also fails to explain Sir Sayyid's continued engagement with the Bible, which is directly addressed in *Tahrīr* and then demonstrated in *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*. As is often the case, polemics reflects the mood of a context. Dar was intent on presenting Sayyid Ahmad as a guiding light and cultural mentor for the new nation of Pakistan. Echoed in the study is an attempt to cast Sayyid Ahmad as a *bona fide* defender of the faith so as to resist competing ideologies that were gaining strength in Pakistan in the late 1960s.

TABYĪN AS PLURALISTIC

But neither an apologetic nor a polemic view sufficiently accounts for Sayyid Ahmad's engagement with the Bible. Exegesis in *Tabyīn*, and this is later corroborated in *Tafsīr*, demonstrates a conclusive acceptance of the present

Bible's inherent value as a source for elucidating the Qur'an. He bases this approach upon the authority of passages like Surah al-Baqarah 136 that is presented in the banner of the title page of *Tabyīn* Part 1: 'We [Muslims] make no distinction between any of them'. This position is further clarified in the exegesis of this verse in *Tafsīr*:

Now what will the ignorant people (*bevaqūflog*) say they have been given by their acceptance that was only for the Prophet of God (*paghambar Allah hi ke lie he*) in the east and the west, all who want instruction for the straight path.³¹

Sayyid Ahmad claimed that the earlier revelation is valued as no lesser or greater than the latter. Priority is placed upon belief in the One God who grants instruction and upon the commonality of faith rather than upon the chronology or historical circumstance of revelation. In effect, Sayyid Ahmad's paradigm leveled the playing field and fostered an ethos for a 'reverent, candid, and prayerful' study of the scriptures, the foundational sources of faith.³² These elements are indicative of a pluralistic motivation to study the Bible.

Pluralism is a term coined after Sayyid Ahmad's time but his writings and ethos reflect two of its principle descriptors. First, by pluralistic it is meant that Sayyid Ahmad recognizes that other faith traditions also have the potential for leading their faithful into eternal salvation.³³ Sayyid Ahmad wrote with full conviction that the biblical covenants (*sharī'ah-s*) in their present forms remain effectively salvific for their respective adherents. He expressly stated that 'neither the covenants nor the legal doctrines (*sharī'ah*) become superseded or abrogated, nor subsumed into the other.'³⁴ Wisdom from sound doctrine is beneficial in this life, but its ascription is not impingent upon salvation (*nijāt*). Salvation is accomplished through simple faith in God. This characteristic of pluralism is clearly evidenced in his work.

Second, pluralism implies active engagement with other religious traditions. Amir Hussain, building upon Diana Eck's definition, emphasizes that a pluralistic perspective does not circumvent difficult questions and profound differences, but rather is committed to engage these in order 'to gain a deeper sense of each other's commitments'.³⁵ This accurately accounts for Sayyid Ahmad's vision in orchestrating the *Tabyīn* commentary. The project created a space for Muslims, Christians, and Jews to discuss competing views through the reading of foundational texts. In the Ghazipur experience, a Jew named Salim, an un-named Christian translator, and Muslims like Sayyid Ahmad and Maulānā Ināyat Rasūl Chiriakotī laboured to produce the

commentary. Persons involved in the writing, printing, and publishing of the project were from multiple faiths. The topics discussed were substantive and addressed central areas of concern including the reliability of the Biblical text, but also complex doctrines such as the Trinity and Atonement that allowed for a more profound appreciation of another's faith. These two characteristic elements of pluralism are strongly present in this *Tabyīn*, and this contributes towards an assessment of Sayyid Ahmad's purpose therein.

What distinguishes Sayyid Ahmad from amongst these is the parity he assigns to the Bible and the Qur'ān. Our author holds that despite their tremendous differences, these texts elucidate one another. The fact that Sayyid Ahmad dismisses accusations of Biblical textual corruption (*tahrīf-i lafzī*) is not particularly astounding when considered against the backdrop of Muslim exegetical history.³⁶ In fact, many classical and medieval exegetes understood the Biblical text as intact.³⁷ Sayyid Ahmad has made an original contribution to the Muslim study of the Bible by the commendation of the Bible's authors and high esteem of the apostolic writings in the New Testament. And, though he presumes the essence of New Testament revelation to be a restatement of pristine Abrahamic monotheism, which is similar to forms of Deism but very distant from the orthodox Christian view, still Sayyid Ahmad strives for objectivity and applies the same interpretative guidelines to both the Bible and Qur'ān. Hence, what is truly noteworthy is how our author interacts with the Biblical text, and this is a signpost of a pluralistic regard for these traditions.

INCLUSIVIST AND EXCLUSIVIST READINGS

A pluralistic vision is possible because Sayyid Ahmad opts for an inclusive interpretation of Qur'ānic verses. Joseph Lumbard convincingly argues that there is ample support within Islam's foundational sources to accept the ultimate salvific efficacy of other faiths. However, the issue is one of interpretation. There are examples from the Qur'ān (5:69; 5:48; and 22:67) that apparently substantiate the acceptability before God of persons from faiths other than Islam, such as Surah al-Baqarah 62, 'Verily those who believe and those who are Jews, and the Sabians, and the Christians are those who believe in God and the last day and do righteous deeds, so they have their recompense with God. They shall not fear nor shall they sorrow'. There are other verses that present a far more exclusivist stance, such as 'Verily the religion with God is Islam' (Q3:19); and 'Who seeks other than Islam as a religion, it will not be accepted from him' (Q3:85). Lumbard is very concerned by what he sees as

the tendency amongst fellow Muslims to interpret *ayat* literally that present a more exclusivist bent, but a preference to interpret figuratively those that point towards greater inclusivism. Passages that support a more pluralistic view are 'explained away through creative and clever philology or are claimed to have been abrogated by later revelations.'³⁸ Whether Lumbard's observation is correct or not one cannot say, but he draws attention to what Sir Sayyid understood as core problem: the seemingly arbitrary approach to scriptural interpretation. It is precisely because of such interpretative dilemmas that Sayyid Ahmad advocated the search for a determined set of hermeneutical principles. This is most clearly stated in *Tahrir*, where he details that the search for interpretative principles as found within the Qur'an was the most pressing need of the day, and the means by which the Muslim community could become united.

PLURALIST ETHOS DEMONSTRATED

Sayyid Ahmad's vision for Muslim unity was not made at the expense of social integration with India's variegated religious communities. Calls for Muslim participation in educational and employment opportunities were consistently featured *Mohammedan Social Reformer* and his other writings, but there is also the direct call for active conviviality with persons of other religions. This is most clearly stated in reference to social integration with Christians and Jews, but it can also be noted and observed in relation to India's majority religious expressions as well. With regard to the former, this included the participation not only in social functions, but also religious functions to some extent.

In *Aḥkām-i Ṭa'ām Ahl-i Kitāb*, a text intended to convey the permissibility of table fellowship with 'People of the Book', Sir Sayyid concisely states that love is the true motivation for conciliation with other faiths. In the Qur'an there is love due to one's community, and there is also love that is due to all humanity.³⁹ It is this selfless love, he writes, that accounts for the early spread of Islam, and this is what can mend strained communal relations. Sayyid Ahmad demonstrated this ethic by partaking in meals and also by joining in Christian prayer, but the most lasting and compelling example is seen in his attitude towards the efficacy of worship. This topic is directly addressed in *Tabyin* Part 2 within the discourse on abrogation (*nāskh*). It is specified that the forms of worship established by earlier prophets (*anbiyā'*) remain valid: 'prayers, songs, and any forms of worship that have been permitted by any prophet. These are eternal and not subject to change.'⁴⁰ This conviction was further demonstrated

through his occasional participation in Christian '*namāz*' (the Urdu for *ṣalāh*), the term used by our author to describe Christian church services and devotional gatherings. It is worth emphasizing that Sayyid Ahmad was no mere spectator at such events, but rather an active participant. His facility and with these practices is readily seen in his invocation to joint prayer at the opening of the Scientific Society in Ghazipur, 1864:

Come now Gentlemen, let us bow in prayer and give thanks to the all-powerful God who has said that when two or three men are gathered to do a righteous work I am there present with them. What we have gathered to do is righteous and we hope that the Almighty God's grace will be upon us.⁴¹

Those familiar with the Gospel of St. Matthew in the Bible readily recognize the allusion to Jesus' statement 'when three or more are gathered in my name, I am there in their midst' (18:20). Again, Sayyid Ahmad's exposition on the topics of corruption and abrogation, and his use of biblical quotations in writings and prayer strongly suggest that the driving interest in the Bible was neither apologetic nor polemic, but rather reflective of a pluralistic vision for society that was grounded in theological reflection.

Although 'Abdul Hamid al-Farāhī's (d. 1930) is not traditionally recognized as a source for the study of Sayyid Ahmad Khan, the spirit in which he carries forward this ethic supports this conclusion. As a student and later faculty member at Aligarh, Farāhī worked closely with Sir Sayyid and this can be readily traced in his own theological trajectory. One example is particularly insightful:

The Qur'ān commands that faith be placed upon the concealed (*mutashābihāt*), that which is beyond comprehension; and there is no reason why this command should not be applicable to that found in other heavenly (*asmāni*) books as well. If interactions were conducted in this spirit then coexistence, then possibly reconciliation could occur and, over time, love would emerge (*moḥabbhat niklegi*) amongst the followers of these ancient traditions. A spirit of patient humility can foster a relationship of mutual learning.

This is precisely the ethos Sayyid Ahmad desired. It is the belief that love can emerge and flourish through empathetic encounter, but that this required an attitude of sincere respect. The goal is not capitulation, but rather understanding. Sir Sayyid called for fellowship amongst Muslims and

Christians over the breaking of bread, but also in scriptural reasoning. True forgiveness is extremely difficult, but it is essential for life together.⁴² As Sayyid Ahmad reflected in *Tabyin* Part 3:

Haḍrat Masīh (Honored Messiah) has required the love for our enemies even from us [Muslims]. Great people succeed in practicing this more, but to even practice this to any extent is pleasing [to God]. And, if we do not enact it at all, then we are doubtlessly sitting in the boat of misfortune, set to drown in the sea of sin.⁴³

FORERUNNER IN INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

Professor Omid Safi has noted that pluralism remains an underrepresented facet of Islam in contemporary discourse.⁴⁴ Others like Umar Suhayl and Farid Esack, to name but two of many others, have made concerted efforts to temper more strident positions that seek to legitimize violence and avert a larger move towards greater substantive engagement with different faith traditions. Sayyid Ahmad is a forerunner for these modern voices. Let me be clear, I believe Sir Sayyid would have been happy for someone to enter the Muslim community, not because the former religion has failed, but rather because a person had come to believe that Muhammad's *sharī'ah* provides exceptional guidance for human flourishing. For Sayyid Ahmad, the central message of the Qur'ān is *tawḥīd*, and this elegant simplicity is the glory of Islam. It draws together the polyphonic voices from the history of revelation into an ecumenical community that is not bound by dogma but rather by affirmation of the One God, 'Lord of the universe'. However, as we have sought to explore in this chapter, Sir Sayyid's view is grounded in a particular understanding of what Islamic fidelity entails. And, any assessment of Sayyid Ahmad's purpose in composing *Tabyin* in particular, and in the development of his theology in general, must progress in this light.

One question that arises from this exploration is how Sir Sayyid came into this pluralist perspective. Those familiar with our author will recall that he enjoyed some depth of relationship with Unitarians like Keshab Chandra Sen and Ram Mohan Roy. Although such contact may have influenced his trajectory, one finds these peripheral because Sir Sayyid consistently appeals to Islamic tradition and sources to provide the language and intellectual framework in his religious writing. He is conscious of the need to work from within his own tradition. It is more likely that Sir Sayyid's stance towards

other religious traditions both predicts and proceeds from his experiments in *falsafah*.

As Troll convincingly demonstrated, Sayyid Ahmad ascribes to Ibn Rushd's Aristotelian dichotomy of primary and secondary principles. This paradigm comprehends the universe to operate according to original (primary) principles that continue throughout every generation, and in every land from the beginning of existence.⁴⁵ There are also protective (secondary) principles that have been formulated in infinite variations as *sharī'ah*. This assumes that there have always been those who responded to prophetic and natural revelation so that humankind has never been without divine guidance.⁴⁶ The first principles, particularly belief in the One God, are what ultimately matter. In this light salvation (*najāt*) is and has been readily available to all by means of repentance and simple belief in God. Ascription to any particular *sharī'ah* is not required. One outcome of this paradigm is that the salvific systems of other faith expressions remain effective, whether this be the covenants of the 'Jews and Christians, or of any *avatar* or divine manifestation'.⁴⁷ Salvation is not universally guaranteed, but it is available to any that repent and profess monotheistic (*tawhīd*) belief.

It is also possible that this pluralistic vision was nurtured by historical study. It is important to recall that while composing *Tabyīn* Sayyid Ahmad was also overseeing an edition of *Darbār-i Akbārī*, a voluminous account of Mughal rule. Our celebrated Ghalib famously ribbed Sir Sayyid as pathetically sentimental for this undertaking. He wrote, 'Railway tracks have been laid and steam engines are moving on them. Is your imagination still colouring the time of Akbar?'⁴⁸ But Ghalib, like many other subsequent readers, had overlooked the profound significance of the message recorded within these volumes. As Prof. Akhtar Wasey keenly observed, these are first hand accounts of Akbar's political doctrine called the 'Way of Reason' (*rāh-i 'aql*).⁴⁹ This is a pre-modern road map for pluralistic society where religious affiliation did not constrain political participation. It was an era when foundational religious texts were being translated and openly discussed as a means to promote not only human wisdom but also empathetic understanding. For Sayyid Ahmad, this marked the zenith of Mughal rule, and it offered a model for British India in his day. This seems to be an subject requiring further study.

It is also plausible that the study of early Islamic history may also have stimulated Sir Sayyid's pluralistic vision. It is important to recall that Faiz al-Hasan Sahāranpurī, an authority on the first generations of Muslim in Arabia, was one of Sayyid Ahmad's teachers in Delhi, but then also an active

contributor in his writing projects. Sahāranpurī assisted in the preparation of *Tabyīn* and all other publications during an 8 year tenure with Sir Sayyid in Ghazipur and Aligarh that started in 1862.⁵⁰ Though he is not cited in these works, it is quite probable that he offered valuable guidance in the study of early Islamic sources consulted in *Life of Mohammed* (1870) and *Al-Khuṭbat-i Aḥmadiyya* (1887).

Sir Sayyid's interest in this formative period may shed light on a previously unexplained anomaly: the *nabvī* dating system. Those familiar with Sir Sayyid's works will have noted that all post-1870 writings are affixed with a *nabvī* date. The *hijrī* and Gregorian dates are not removed, but rather the *nabvī* is added. No explanation (to my knowledge) is given, and one can only speculate as to the intended symbolism. Of course the *hijrī* date marks the Muslim migration from Makkah to Madinah (622CE/1AH), a definitive step in community formation and self-determination. The migration also marked further cognizance of Islam as an independent 'Abrahamic' religion with a competing scripture. It is in Madinah that the direction of prayer changes from Jerusalem to Makkah. It is also here that a shift can be noted in the Prophet's role from beleaguered spiritual leader to liberating statesman. The *hijrī* system recalls this shift.

The *nabvī* date, however, emphasizes the totality of Muhammad's prophetic career. It does not begin at the *migration* or at the Prophet's birth, but rather commences with the recitation of the first words of the Qur'ān. The date underscores the prophetic reception of the Qur'ān as the definitive historical event. It reflects Sir Sayyid's emphasis upon the Qur'ān as the primary source for understanding Islam rather than the Prophet's manifold activities. The *nabvī* dating system reflects our author's determination to interpret the Qur'ān *fi al-Qur'ān* rather than through the lens of received traditions (*khabar/ahādīth*) used to reify many facets of religious orthopraxy.

Fred Donner's study of the community in Madinah indicates that there was a time when monotheistic faith was of greater importance than doctrinal particularity.⁵¹ In a similar vein, Daniel Brown's study on the development of tradition (*ahādīth*) draws attention to a time when the Sunnah-s of multiple persons were regarded as exemplary, some of whom had retained affiliation with an existing faith tradition.⁵² These studies stimulate questions concerning the earliest vision of the community's interaction with people of other faiths, and provide a more inclusive description of Muhammad and the first believers. This includes accounts such as when the Christians of Najrān were invited by the Prophet to offer prayers in his mosque, but also treaties with the Jews

of Madinah that bound the communities together in mutual support against common enemies. Pure Islam, in Sayyid Ahmad's understanding, results in a wide embrace and generous spirit of inclusion towards other communities. The *nabvī* calendar recalls this facet of Islam, and to call for the reinstatement of its pluralistic values.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have set forth the argument that Sayyid Ahmad's study of the Bible was stimulated by a pluralistic theology. This is most demonstrable by his rejection of dispensational supersession: the view that the authority of one legislative prophet supplants an earlier one. Sayyid Ahmad believed that prophetic examples and teachings (*sharī'ah-s*) remain effectively available throughout history.⁵³ The eternal bliss anticipated by the faithful in Islam is shared with the Christian and the Jew, and for Hindus and Buddhist as well, if they hold to monotheistic belief. A close reading of *Tabyīn* allows echoes to be heard of this theology that would become crystalized in the subsequent decades.

It is our hope that a clearer understanding of Sir Sayyid's motivations will contribute towards the ongoing scholarship concerning this seminal modern figure. One also underscores that Sayyid Ahmad understood his work to be logically consistent with preceding Muslim intellectual discourse. Recent studies, like those by Shahzad Bashir and Sheldon Pollock,⁵⁴ continue to challenge the assumptions pertaining to the pre-modern religious landscape in India in general, and in Persianate Islam in particular. The problem remains, as Pollock observed, that 'we cannot know how colonialism changed South Asia if we do not know what was there to be changed'. Sir Sayyid's writings continue to provide a valuable perspective on this elusive period and indicate that this was a dynamic intellectual environment. It is our hope that this brief study draws attention to the continuance and originality of Sayyid Ahmad Khan's ideas, and that these will contribute to the ongoing quest for human flourishing.

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