

RATIONALE FOR THE INDIAN MUSLIMS' PHILOSOPHY OF LOYALISM TO BRITISH COLONIAL RULE IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

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It is historically taken for granted that the Great Revolt of 1857 in the South Asian Subcontinent delivered a *coup de grâce* to the Muslim community there, which had already been suffering under the East India Company's rule prior to this uprising. Indeed, in every walk of life, Indian Muslims found themselves trailing far behind their Hindu fellow countrymen, who had made steady progress under foreign rule. It was against this gloomy background unfavourable to the Muslim community that some Muslim figures in the Indian Subcontinent realized the necessity of adopting a loyalist approach towards the British Colonial Government, as the only bittersweet solution to save Islam and Muslims from further disgrace and avert total collapse.

The main focus of attention in this article is on the person of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan,¹ one of the greatest Muslim educationists, writers and reformers during British rule, considering his historically decisive role in shaping Muslim destiny in the Subcontinent up to independence, namely the creation of an independent Muslim state, Pakistan.

After gauging the circumstances in the Subcontinent, Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan realized the urgent need to persuade his co-religionists to let bygones be bygones and come to terms with the British rulers. Indeed, in accordance with his approach, Sir Sayyid Ahmad's immediate objective was to defuse the state of tension and misunderstanding that characterized Muslim-British relationship, following the downfall of the Mughal Empire as well as the happenings of 1857,

¹ Sir Sayyid (also Syed) Ahmad Khan (1817-1898), born into a well-off family, was a Muslim jurist, educator and author who entered the service of the East India Company as a clerk in the Judicial Department, and later rose to the position of sub-judge. S.M. Ikram, 'Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan', in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, UK, 2001, CD-ROM Edition.

and to establish, instead, a good rapport between the two (Ali Khan 61). Towards this end, he strongly advised Muslims to adopt a loyal attitude towards the British Colonial Government.

In reality, the happenings of 1857 and their negative impact on the Indian Muslim community established the absolute superiority of the British in the South Asian Subcontinent. This was a significant factor that convinced Sir Sayyid Ahmad of the fact that the British might was invincible (Muhammad xii), and that its confrontation would not be a sane endeavour (Taha and Afzal 101). Consequently, he urged his co-religionists to wake up to this reality and make some sacrifices in order to adjust to the new situation.

This adjustment, according to him, was to accept the British as their masters, given the fact that, as he realized, all current circumstances indicated that they, the British, would not cease to be so, at least, in the foreseeable future (Aziz 19). In this respect, Aziz Ahmad stated that “an adjustment of some sort with Western civilization in general and with the British Government in India in particular became a condition for survival” (Ahmad 55).

To put it differently, Sir Sayyid Ahmad thought that it would be a wise decision and in the interest of the Muslim community to be on good terms with the British Government (Aziz 19). Besides, in his opinion, the adoption of a pro-British attitude was a *sine qua non* for any betterment of the Muslim community since the latter were “the patrons par excellence” and “were responsible for distributing the limited quantity of ‘loaves and fishes’ available” (Masselos 120).

In attempting to read Sir Sayyid Ahmad’s mind through his writings and speeches, K.K. Aziz affirmed that the pro-British attitude of this Muslim reformist was by no means the result of a thoughtless sentiment; on the contrary, it was based on three main convincing reasons.

In the first place, he believed that loyalty to the rulers was the one and only remedy currently available to the Muslim community in order to remove the enmity and hatred that featured their relationship with the British Government as well as to “wipe off the stigma of Muslim instigation of the mutiny” (Aziz 19). For that reason, he published, in 1860, a book entitled *The Loyal Muhammedans of India*, in which he highlighted the services that many Muslims had rendered to the British at the height of the Great Revolt (Muhammad xi). He even declared that the Muslim community was worthy of praise for its support to the British, as S. Muhammad reported him as stating:

It is to the Mohammedans alone that the credit belongs of having stood staunch and unshaken friends of the Government amidst that

fearful tornado that devastated the country and shook the Empire to its core. (Aziz 19)

By the same token, Sir Sayyid Ahmad also attempted to convince the British officials of the Muslims' firm loyalty, and hence, no need to look at them with suspicious eyes (19).

Be that as it may, according to M.A. Karandikar, the British idea of the Muslim community as being a "bunch" of disloyal elements still lingered among some high officials in London. For instance, in a speech given in the House of Commons on June 6th, 1861, Charles Wood, the then First Secretary of State for India, referred to the Muslim subject as "the bigoted Muhammadan, who considers that we have usurped his legitimate position as the ruler of India" (Karandikar 140).

On the other hand, Sir Sayyid Ahmad's idea of adopting a loyal attitude also resulted from his examining the current affairs in the Indian Subcontinent, which were characterized by the introduction of parliamentary institutions in the second half of the nineteenth century as well as the increase in the employment of natives in the Civil Service by means of open competition (Aziz 20).² For him, this situation represented a serious threat to the Muslim community since the latter were but a minority in India and would remain so for a long time.

In other words, the Muslim community was, numerically speaking, smaller than the Hindu majority; as corroborated by the historian S.R. Mehrotra, who asserted that the Hindus were four times more numerous than the Muslims. Therefore, in Sir Sayyid's opinion, every advance towards democracy in the Indian Subcontinent was tantamount to the oppression of the Muslim minority under the rule of the Hindu majority, since, as he put it, "we can prove by mathematics that there will be four votes for the Hindu to every one vote for the Mohamedan" (Mehrotra 78). In addition, he further wondered how Muslims could guard their interests since "it would be like a game of dice in which one man had four dice and the other only one" (78).

Again in this regard, K.K. Aziz quoted Sir Sayyid Ahmad as saying that "such political principles could only be applied to a country inhabited by one nation. In India every step towards a representative goal would be one more rivet in Muslim chains" (Aziz 20). Indeed, Sir Sayyid placed too much stress on the fact that Muslims and Hindus

² The process of introducing native Indians to the parliamentary institutions began shortly after the Great Revolt, namely following the passage of the Indian Council Act of 1861. S.R. Wasti, 'Constitutional Development: From 1858 to 1906', in *Muslim Struggle for Freedom in India*, Renaissance Publishing House, Delhi, 1993, p. 47.

constituted two different and unequal nations, being diametrically opposed in terms of interests, culture and religion (Masselos 124). Consequently, for the sake of their salvation and survival, Indian Muslims had to be loyal to the British who had the upper hand in the region.

Briefly speaking, Sir Sayyid was of the opinion that the Muslim community, being outnumbered and powerless, had only one option left open to them, namely siding with the British, or else, they would live under the mercy of the Hindu majority. As summed up by Percival Spear: "A democratic regime means majority rule, and majority rule in India would mean Hindu rule. Therefore the British cannot be dispensed with ..." (Spear 226).

Indeed, Sir Sayyid Ahmad was convinced of the fact that if the British were to withdraw from the Subcontinent, the Muslim minority would be swept off by the Hindu majority (Aziz 70). Here, it is worth recalling the fact that Muslims were no match for Hindus as the latter had been progressing by leaps and bounds while Muslims were mourning the loss of their power and prestige. Commenting on this, K.K. Aziz observes:

Sayyid Ahmad Khan foresaw that the Muslim minority was no match for the progressive Hindus and that if it also alienated the sympathies of the rulers its ruins would be complete. (70)

Hence, Sir Sayyid Ahmad came up with the conclusion that loyalty to the British was not a mere policy of opportunism, but also the dictate of political realism (Abbasi 14).

Sir Sayyid Ahmad's loyalist disposition to the British equally sprang from his conviction of the superiority of the Western civilization to the Oriental one (Aziz 20). This conviction was further enhanced following his trip to Britain in 1869, where he was impressed by the British culture and way of life (Hay 186), as corroborated by Shun Muhammad: "The English civilization and culture had impressed Sir Syed much earlier and a visit to England dazzled his eyes all the more" (Muhammad xviii).

Besides, Sir Sayyid's fascination with Britain and her civilization, which he attributed to western education, made him castigate his countrymen back home, Muslims and Hindus alike, for their benightedness and ignorance. This could be reflected in the strong language that he employed in a letter that he sent home while he was in London in which he wrote:

Without flattering the English, I can truly say that the natives of India, high and low, merchants and petty shopkeepers, educated and illiterate, when contrasted with the English in education, manners

and uprightness, are as like them as a dirty animal is to an able and upright man. The English have every reason to believe us in India to be imbecile brutes. (Symonds 28)

Apart from that, Sir Sayyid Ahmad wanted to prove to those who raised their eyebrows over his loyalism, mainly the most orthodox elements of the Muslim community, that loyalty to the British Government did not conflict with the Islamic faith. In order to back up his statement, he asserted that “God has made them (the British) rulers over us,” and that the Prophet Mohammed said that if “God place over you a black negro slave as a ruler you must obey him,” hence, the Indian Muslims should be pleased with the will of God (Mehrotra 180).

In addition to that, he put stress on the premise that both religions, namely Islam and Christianity, were monolithic creeds which had originated from the same source and had more convergences that united them than divergences that divided them. In this regard, Spear reports that Sir Sayyid Ahmad stressed the resemblance of “fundamental Islamic and Christian ideas with their common Judaic heritage” (Spear 225).

Thus, as part of his efforts to delineate the similarities between Islam and Christianity, Sir Sayyid Ahmad wrote a book entitled *Tabiyn al-Kalam Fi Tafsir al-Tawrat wa al-Injyl Ala Millat al-Islam (The Mahomedan Commentary on the Holy Bible)*, which he published in 1862 at his own expenses (Malik 83-84). By this work, Sir Sayyid Ahmad blazed a trail in undertaking such a venture since, according to Hafeez Malik, no Muslim scholar had previously dared to write a commentary on the Old and New Testaments (Malik 84). Yet, his sole objective was to explore areas of harmony and to foster sympathetic understanding of Christianity among the Muslims, as well as to prove that these two monolithic religions had never been opposed to each other (Muhammad xi). In this respect, Shun Muhammad quoted him as saying that:

No religion upon earth was more friendly to Christianity than Islam; and the latter had been more beneficial and advantageous to Christianity ... Islam fought against Judaism in favour of Christianity, and openly and manly did it declare that the mission of ... Jesus Christ was unquestionably ‘the Word of God’ and ‘the Spirit of God’. (Quoted in Muhammad xi-xii)

Then, he added:

Mohammedans as all people guided by a sacred Book believe in the necessity of the coming of Prophets to save mankind and have faith in these books. Mohammedans have full faith in the divine nature of the Christian Gospels. (Quoted in Hasan 54)

Furthermore, according to M.A. Karandikar, Sir Sayyid argued in his book that the message received from God by the Prophet Mohammed was the same message received previously by Jesus Christ, and that the latter was not corrupted, as many orthodox *ulama*³ alleged (Karandikar 140).

While on the subject, it is worthwhile to refer to the fact that many Western intellectuals, past and present, have lent support to Sir Sayyid Ahmad's idea of Muslim-Christian resemblances, by stressing the fact that both of Islam and Christianity represent two creeds that share almost identical characteristics and principles. One of these was Sir William Baker, a British writer, who insisted on the close affinity between both religions where worshippers believe in the same God (Aziz 71). The same author went further in stating that "the Muslim among all oriental races is the nearest to what a Protestant terms Christianity" (Quoted in Aziz 71). Again in this regard, Richard Fletcher, a twentieth-century British historian and Islamologist, stated:

There was so much that Muslims believed, or did, that was familiar to Christians. They believed in one God. They revered patriarchs, prophets and kings of the Old Testament—Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Elijah, David, Solomon. They venerated the Virgin Mary, to whom indeed one of the chapters or suras of the Koran is devoted (Sura 19). Respectful references to Jesus and his teachings occur repeatedly in the Koran. Like Christians they prayed and fasted, gave alms and went on pilgrimage. (Fletcher 18)

Again in the same line of thought, Chis Horrie and Peter Chippindale, so convinced of the close affinities between Islam and Christianity, claimed that in spite of their errors, Christians are believed to be closer to Islam than any other religion in the world. To substantiate their claim, they quoted a passage from the Holy Quran, the Chapter of Al Maidah, in which the Almighty, addressing the Muslims, stated:

And you will certainly find the nearest in friendship to those who believe to be those who say: We are Christians...And when they hear what has been revealed to the apostle (Muhammad), you will see their eyes overflowing with tears on account of the truth that they recognise; they say: Our Lord! We believe, so write us down with the witnesses. (Horrie and Chippindale 11)

(The Holy Quran, the Chapter of Al Maidah "The Table," verse: 83)

On the other hand, Sir Sayyid Ahmad urged his co-religionists to refrain from regarding the British as their enemies, but rather,

³ 'Ulama' is a term used by Muslims to refer to a group of learned people in religious affairs.

as friends. In doing so, he brought forth many arguments from his religious study and social experiences (Aziz 70). According to K.K. Aziz, Sir Sayyid wanted to convince the Muslim community of the fact that Islam was nearer to Christianity than any other religion in the world, and that it had more in common with the monotheism of Christianity than the polytheism of Hinduism (70). With regard to Hinduism, Syed M. Taha and Nasreen Afzal noted that its relationship with Islam was characterized by marked differences in the belief-system. As an example, both authors observed that whereas Islam, as a monotheistic and iconoclastic religion, believed in conversion through preaching, Hinduism did not, as it might adversely affect the caste-based society nurtured on inequality (Taha and Afzal 100-101).

Sir Sayyid Ahmad further added that Christians were referred to in the Holy Quran as the 'People of the Book,' namely Christians and Jews, and that Muslims should respect them (Aziz 70). In this respect, Richard Fletcher confirmed that the Holy Quran made it clear that it is incumbent upon every Muslim to respect the *Ahl al-Kitab*, the 'People of the Book' (Fletcher 20). To back up his statement, Fletcher cited the following passage from the Chapter 29 (The Spider) of the Holy Quran:

Dispute not with the People of the Book save in the fairer manner, except for those of them that do wrong; and say, 'We believe in what has been sent down to us, and what has been sent down to you; our God and your God is One, and to Him we have surrendered. (Quoted in Fletcher 20)

(The Holy Quran, the Chapter of Al'Ankabut "the Spider," verse: 46)

Moreover, Sir Sayyid Ahmad drew an analogy between both faiths in the social sphere to show to the Muslim community that they shared many common ideals and practices with Christians, unlike the Hindu community (Aziz 70). For that purpose, he wrote another pamphlet, entitled *Tuaam Ahl-e-Kitab*, in which he urged his co-religionists to get rid of their prejudices which prevented them from socializing with Christians (Muhammad xii). In his opinion, socializing with the British was an essential ingredient that would create friendly feelings with them, whereas aloofness would only lead to more misunderstanding (Aziz 74). Thus, for that reason, he encouraged his community to dine with Christians "at the same table with spoon, knife and fork" (Muhammad xii).

As a matter of fact, Masood A. Raja asserted that eating with foreigners, or non-Muslims, was often considered un-Islamic behaviour in the Muslim community. This, he believed, could be attributed to the strong influence of the Hindu community on Indian Muslims (Raja 163). Furthermore, Masood A. Raja confirmed that Sir Sayyid

Ahmad wanted to free his co-religionists from this prejudice by arguing that:

... as British were people of the book, breaking bread with them could not be considered a contaminating experience. ... this practice of not sharing food with non-Muslims was strictly un-Islamic and was caused by Hinduization of Indian Islam. (163)

In other words, Sir Sayyid Ahmad was of the view that in day-to-day life Indian Muslims were closer to the Christian rulers than to the idol-worshipping Hindus. As K.K. Aziz put it:

In social matters ... the Muslim found himself in more congenial company among the British. The two could, and did, intermarry and intermix in society without disagreeable taboos. With the Hindu one was always on one's guard against breaking some caste restriction or polluting a Brahmin household. (Aziz 74)

It should be noted that Sir Sayyid Ahmad's statement regarding intermixing with the British in social matters, such as dining and marriage, brought him a lot of anger and criticism from the orthodox *ulama*. Yet, in facing such opposition, he often quoted the Holy Quran and the *Hadith* of the Prophet as well as took support from some learned Muslim intellectuals like Bukhari, Muslim, Tirmizi, and many others, in order to prove that there was no restriction in Islam on such social intermixing with Christians (Muhammad xii).

On the other hand, Sir Sayyid Ahmad's determination to give a religious sanction to the concept of loyalism among his co-religionists led him to the extent of renouncing "jihad" against the British Colonial Government (Abbasi 23). In fact, in clear defiance of those radical elements of the Muslim community who called for a holy war against the non-Muslim rulers, Sir Sayyid advised Indian Muslims to shy away from any such attempt since "jihad," as a religious obligation, was not incumbent on Muslims in a country where they were offered protection (62).⁴ To put it differently, K.K. Aziz observed that in the Islamic tradition, "disobedience to those in authority is not permitted unless the ruler interferes with the religious rites of the Muslims" (Aziz 75). Thus, for Sir Sayyid Ahmad, that was not the case in the South Asian Subcontinent since the Muslim community there "enjoyed all protection—religious and otherwise" (Muhammad xii).

Indeed, Sir Sayyid Ahmad wanted to clarify the meaning of "jihad," a hitherto very controversial subject, which was often referred to in the Anglo-Indian press as a serious threat emanating from the

⁴ According to M.Y. Abbasi, Sir Sayyid Ahmad did not consider the Great Revolt of 1857 as a "jihad". *Ibid.*, p. 61.

Muslim community in South Asia (xii). In reality, the aim behind Sir Sayyid's attempt to elucidate the concept of "jihad" was twofold: on the one hand, he wanted to clear the minds of the British officials in Calcutta and London as well as the public opinion in Britain of the false assumption that "jihad" was "a duty of the Muslims against the Christians," and on the other hand, he wanted to explain to his co-religionists the circumstances in which Muslims could have recourse to "jihad" (xii).

In order to substantiate his claims, Sir Sayyid Ahmad made use of many *fatwas*, i.e., legal pronouncements or clerical verdicts issued by the *Hanafi*, *Shafi'i* and *Maliki muftis* (i.e. religious scholars) based in Mecca,⁵ in response to a question regarding the legitimacy of "jihad" in the Indian Subcontinent under British rule. According to M.Y. Abbasi, these *muftis* clearly declared that India could not be regarded as *Dar-ul-Harb*, or country of war, in which case "jihad" is a duty for every Muslim. Rather, it should be considered as *Dar-ul-Islam*, or country of Islam or safety, and that the ruler should be obeyed (Abbasi 22).

By the same token, Sir Sayyid Ahmad equally sought support from some moderate local *muftis*, or *maulvis*, as they are usually referred to in the Subcontinent, with regard to the question of "jihad." Like the *muftis* of Mecca, these Indian *ulama* or *maulvis* also repudiated the idea of a holy war against British rule in India since the conditions which were said to transform a country into a *Dar-ul-Harb* were not present there. Moreover, these local *maulvis* went so far as to interpret the resort to "jihad" in India as a "rebellion" (Abbasi 14). As an example, M.A. Karandikar cited the case of Moulavi Karamat Ali, who not so long ago had been a strong opponent of the British Government. This religious leader in the region of Bihar had issued a *fatwa* declaring that India under British rule should not be viewed as a *Dar-ul-Harb* and that it was "not permissible to fight a religious war against the British Government" (Karandikar 141).

While on the subject, it is important to note that Sir Sayyid Ahmad did not consider the Great Revolt of 1857 as a holy war or "jihad" (Abbasi 61). Commenting on this, H. Malik observes that this Muslim reformist did not "consider the revolt as a war of independence planned in advance by patriots. In his eyes it was an insurrection triggered off by dissatisfied Hindu and Muslim soldiers" (Malik 222-223). This stance was backed up by a local cleric, Maulvi Qutb-ud-

⁵ These were three of the four classical schools of Islamic law (the fourth being the *Hanbali* school), named after the four learned religious men who were commissioned by the early Abbasid emperors to elucidate and write down the Islamic law (Horrie and Chippindale 130).

Din, who issued a *fatwa* (or a clerical verdict) stating that “the joint Muslim-Hindu struggle against the British in 1857 was not a “jihad” but a rebellion” (Abbasi 15).

Additionally, according to M.Y. Abbasi, some other Indian *maulvis* came up with different arguments to back up their view of India as being *Dar-ul-Islam* instead of *Dar-ul-Harb*. For instance, Maulvi Fazli Ali contended that so long as the British maintained a good rapport, based on “friendship and cordiality,” with the Sultan of Turkey, the Custodian of the Holy Places, it would be unjustified for the Muslims of India to wage a holy war against the “Ally of the Sultan” (Abbasi 14-15).

Again, in the same line of thought, Nawab Abdul Latif (1828-1895), who was an important pro-British Muslim figure in the South Asian Subcontinent, went to the extent of branding that faction of Muslims who entertained the idea of a holy war against the British Government as “injudicious and ungrateful” since they, the British, had stood by the Sultan of Turkey during the Crimean War (15).⁶ Besides, Nawab Abdul Latif also argued that the British government was on friendly terms with many Muslim leaders throughout the world, like the Amir of Afghanistan, who owed his existence to the subsidies offered by the British, and the Khedive (or Ottoman Viceroy) of Egypt. Thus, Nawab Abdul Latif concluded:

It was ... proper that the Indian Muslims should not wage a war against a 'Nation ever ready to help the Mahomedan, whenever and wherever there should be occasion for it.' (Abbasi 15)

Meanwhile, it is interesting to note that Sir Sayyid Ahmad's philosophy of loyalism to the British Government went beyond the geographical borders of the Indian Subcontinent. In other words, not only did he want his co-religionists to be loyal to the British Government in India, but he also urged them to support British imperial interests throughout the world (Abbasi 64). However, this tendency had an immediate negative outcome among the Muslim community in India since many Muslim nations in the world had conflicting interests with British imperial designs (64). Actually, in spite of the fact that Muslim Indians had adopted the Indian Subcontinent as their home for good, they still entertained the idea that they formed a part of

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 15. The Crimean War (1854-1856) was fought mainly on the Crimean Peninsula (currently part of Ukraine in Asia Minor) between the Russians and the British, French, and Ottoman Turkish. It was the fear of Russian expansion into the Mediterranean during the decline of the Ottoman Empire that prompted Britain to take part in it. D. Thomson, *England in the Nineteenth Century: 1815-1914*, London: Penguin Books, 1991, p. 157.

the larger Muslim world (Aziz 78).⁷ Thus, whatever affected Muslims anywhere in the world would automatically be felt among the Muslim community in India.

To sum it up, as a Muslim person Sir Sayyid Ahmad defended his loyalist policy on religious grounds, and in so doing, he resorted to several *fatwas* made by many moderate religious clerics, both inside and outside India. As an Indian Muslim, he advocated this loyalism as a political necessity (Aziz 70-71), or, to use M. Y. Abbasi's phraseology, a "necessary phase of historical process" (Abbasi 62). Nevertheless, it should be noted that Sir Sayyid by no means wanted his community to be subservient to the British; he only advised them to co-operate with them for their own good (63).

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⁷ With regard to this extraterritorial attachment of the Muslims of India, K.K. Aziz stated that they (Indian Muslims) "looked out of India to recover their Arab, Turkish or Persian roots and retain their pride as former conquerors" (Aziz 78).

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