

APOLOGETIC MODERNITY

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What is the conceptual status of modernity in the Muslim world? Scholars describe Muslim attempts at appropriating this European idea as being either derivative or incomplete, with a few calling for multiple modernities to allow modern Islam some autonomy. Such approaches are critical of the apologetic way in which Muslims have grappled with the idea of modernity, the purity and autonomy of the concept of which is apparently compromised by its derivative and incomplete appropriation. None have attended to the conceptual status of this apologetic itself, though it is certainly the most important element in Muslim debates on the modern. This essay considers the adoption of modernity as an idea among Muslim intellectuals in nineteenth-century India, a place in which some of the earliest and most influential debates on Islam's modernity occurred. It argues that Muslim apologetics created a modernity whose rejection of purity and autonomy permitted it a distinctive conceptual form.

Since the middle of the nineteenth century, Muslims have been deeply concerned with the idea of modernity and its place in Islamic thought. In the Muslim world the term modernity itself was taken from languages like English, French or German and translated into some version of two Arabic roots describing the contemporary and the novel, for instance the abstract nouns contemporaneousness (*asriyyat*) and novelty (*jadidiyyat*), both nineteenth-century neologisms. These words still retain the memory of their translation, so that Muslim debates on the modern continue to occur within narrative spaces bounded by markers like East and West, Islam and Christianity.

Was this language of modernity wholly or partially foreign? Was it a sign of Christian or European dominance? Was there anything neutral, universal or Islamic about the modern? It was questions of these kinds that characterized Muslim debates on modernity, with markers like the East and West or Islam and Christianity, which in European thought tended to define the boundaries of the modern in a peripheral and merely descriptive way, becoming conceptually central in the Muslim world and historically grounded in imperialism. As a result Muslim debates over modernity generally took the form of defining a relationship, whether of acceptance, rejection or compromise, between East and West, Islam and Christianity. The dictated character of this debate, however, made the emergence of a systematic modernism in control of its own terms of

argument impossible, for Muslims were neither able to participate in European discussions about their modernity, nor to be acknowledged in them, even if these discussions formed the basis of their own sense of the modern. That is to say, the modernist debate among Muslims continued to revolve around historical oppositions that could not enter into any real, let alone systematic, relationship, so that relations between East and West, Muslim and Christian, were thought of in partial and fragmentary ways, like attempts to enter into conversation with someone speaking a different language. The closeness of its thinking to European thought, together with its inability to engage with and integrate the latter intellectually, made Muslim modernism essentially apologetic. And it is the partial and unsystematic nature of this apologetic modernity that I want to explore in the context of colonial India, if only to find in it something more than intellectual and political limitation. After all, the very weakness, incompleteness or derivative nature of Muslim apologetic needs to be explained in light of the manifest intelligence of its practitioners. Moreover, Islamic modernism provides the intellectual and political foundations for Muslim movements even today, which continue to rely upon its apologetic and unsystematic ways.

Scholars of modern Islam have all noticed its apologetic character but have spent little time attending to it. Most dismiss this tradition as being a sign merely of Islam's incomplete modernity and a product of the West's overwhelming might. Whether or not these scholars think Islam will survive the shock of this ever-renewed encounter with some sort of Euro-American modernity, they are united in seeing Muslim apologetic in negative terms as a lack and an absence whose positive alternative is naturally provided by the West. This is true even when the scholar concerned is a critic of European or American modernity who bemoans the passing of Islam's traditional world.¹ Indeed such sympathetic scholars despise Muslim modernism even more for sacrificing what they see as a glorious history to the requirements of an industrial age. But sometimes these scholars move beyond the sorry tale of Islam's incomplete modernity, and, sometimes inadvertently, provide its apologetic with the rudiments of ontology. A good example is the following sentence from Fazlur Rahman's book *Islam and Modernity*:

[Islamic] modernism could afford to be partial and unsystematic and could even afford to be slow—for at the theoretical level it was mostly a “defense of Islam” and hence chose to respond to those problems that the western critics had raised, while at the practical

¹ Among the most famous scholarly works on Islam's modernity are Hamilton Gibb's *Modern Trend in Islam* (1947) and Gustave von Grunebaum's *Modern Islam: The Search for a Cultural Identity* (1964).

level the urgency for a speedy and systematic reform was often difficult to feel owing to the absence of ultimate and concrete responsibilities for problem solving.²

Rahman, himself a celebrated exponent of Islamic modernism, traces its origins to the period of European dominance in the nineteenth century and to the emergence throughout the Muslim world of efforts at grappling with the fact of Europe's intellectual and political hegemony. It is in this context, Rahman thinks, that these efforts coalesced in a movement he calls Islamic modernism, which he defines in terms of its partialities and unsystematic character: a movement consisting on the one hand in a defense of Muslim beliefs and practices against European criticism, and on the other in an attack on these same beliefs and practices in the terms of European criticism.

Rahman traces the origins of this interest in modernity to the questions that Europeans began to ask about Islam in the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. What, for instance, was the allegiance of Muslims to the Caliph residing in Constantinople? This was the earliest form of a Western concern with pan-Islamic loyalty. Under what conditions was *jihad* against Christian rulers incumbent upon Muslims? This was the earliest form of a Western concern with war as an Islamic obligation. As Rahman shows, such questions, which served to differentiate East from West, Islam from Christianity, were also taken up by nineteenth-century Muslim writers, who repudiated European theories about pan-Islamic or *jihad* politics and tried to reform Islam itself away from such injunctions in the name of modernity. But their sense of modernity was cobbled together out of disparate European ideals like civility, rationality and the like, without any attempt to develop a coherent theory of the modern. For Muslim ideas of Islam's modernity were neither independent nor systematic, but plotted according to European concerns, themselves partial in every sense of the word.

Instead of following a well-trodden path in bemoaning the derivative or incomplete character of this modernity, one that did not control the terms of its own debate, Rahman describes its apparent weakness as a luxury. In the period of colonial dominance, he claims, attempts to modernize Islam in the way of, say, reforming its canon law could afford to be partial and unsystematic because Muslims could not control or change the society in which they lived. Their interest in pan-Islamic or *jihad* politics was largely theoretical, so were their attempts remake Muslim societies in modern terms. If their dependence on European categories of modernity made Muslim modernists partial, in Rahman's formulation, their inability to put into effect a project for Islam's modernization made them unsystematic as well. Taken together, both these factors added up to

² Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 85.

a sense and practice of Muslim modernity that I am arguing was fundamentally apologetic in nature. But it is precisely this apologetic modernism, dismissed by others as mere weakness, which Fazlur Rahman describes as a luxury, holding that the circumstances of European domination afforded Muslims the opportunity to become modern partially, unsystematically and even slowly.

I shall return to what exactly the luxury of this apologetic might consist of, but I want to suggest here that the fragmentary nature of such thought also allowed its practitioners to be modern in curious and not-quite-European ways. In what follows I want to argue two points. In the first place I want to suggest that the very “weakness”, or what Rahman calls its luxurious character, allowed Muslims to think of modernity in intellectual rather than political terms, and that this in itself gave the advocates of modernity some degree of autonomy. Thus while the British in India, for example, thought that pan-Islamic loyalty or *jihad* posed questions that were as much political as anything else, Muslim modernists were able to regard them as essentially theoretical because they pertained to the workings of a world over which they exercised no political control. For modernist politics were fragmented, made up in equal measure of remnants from the precolonial past (like dealing with religious institutions but no longer civil ones) and cast-offs from the colonial present (like being appointed to minor administrative positions but having no say in the imperial order).

The second point I want to make is that this apologetic modernism was produced in the name of Islam as a new historical entity, designating a moral community transcending the particularity of royal, clerical or mystical authority. We know that it was only during the nineteenth century that the word Islam, of rare occurrence in the Quran and premodern Muslim texts in general, came to be used as a category of identity embracing all Muslim practices.³ Before this it had been used mostly to relate theological categories, such as obedience (*islam*) and faith (*iman*), to categories of Muslim identity such as religion (*din*), sect (*firqa*), school (*mazhab*) and mystical order (*tariqa*), to say nothing of the more or less profane identifications of royal authority. There was no idea of Islam as a totality of beliefs and actions that not only transcended the remit of specific authorities like those of clerics, mystics and kings, but could also become its own authority as an independent historical actor designating a new kind of moral community.

One might even say that “Islam” and the question of its modernity were born at the same time, insofar as this Islam emerges in modernist debates as a historical agent and authority in its own right, constituting the totality of Muslim beliefs

³ See for this Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *On Understanding Islam* (The Hague: Mouton Publishers, 1981), 41–78.

and practices as a community with its own volition, ethos or spirit.⁴ But for Islam to have a spirit it needed to possess a body as well, and this was provided by its culture (*tahzib*) or civilization (*tamaddun*), within which all prior forms of Muslim identification were made to disappear. The cultural body of Islam, in other words, produced the spirit that governed it, whether this was conceived in the name of Montesquieu, Hegel or Feuerbach. While I shall not be dealing with the question of Islam's spirit in this essay, I do want to point out that in addition to spiriting Muslim authority away, it constituted a radically new locution. It would not have been possible to talk about the spirit of Islam before the nineteenth century, because Islam itself had not yet come to exist as a singular culture or civilization, the sum total of Muslim beliefs and practices.

By claiming that their weakness allowed for an intellectual rather than political approach to the question of modernity, I do not mean to say that Muslim modernists in colonial India had no community-building agenda, only that the lack of political responsibility permitted them a thoughtful reflection upon the notion of authority. And this was done in the universalistic terms of Islam as a new category of identification that ended up displacing particular authorities altogether. I want to claim that this reflection upon authority in the name of a new Islam went beyond the purely instrumental concerns of these modernists to constitute a specific way of thinking, one that has outlived them and that survives to this day.

THE INDIAN ROPE TRICK

India provides us with among the earliest and most influential traditions of Muslim modernism, exemplified from the middle of the nineteenth century by the Aligarh Movement. Named after the town in northern India that housed its most prominent institution, the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College, later Aligarh Muslim University, the Aligarh Movement was also primarily a north Indian phenomenon, but one whose influence extended much beyond the borders of India. This movement was founded following the abortive Indian Mutiny against British rule of 1857–8, and was led by a group of men who belonged to a class of professional or salaried gentry (*shurafa*) that had furnished administrators to precolonial states and now attempted to do the same for colonial India. Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan, a minor aristocrat and official, was the founder and acknowledged leader of the Aligarh group, which called itself a party or school in English, and a movement or *tahrik* in Urdu, and whose important activities, the college apart,

⁴ The exemplary text here is Sayyid Ameer Ali, *The Spirit of Islam* (1873), itself derived from earlier works like Sayyid Ahmad Khan's *Life of Mohammed* (1870).

comprised the Muhammadan Educational Conference and voluminous writings, including a journal, the *Tahzib ul-Akhlaq* (Refinement of Morals).

The historiography describes Aligarhism as a reform movement, in this way stranding it semantically between the Protestant Reformation and the English Reform Bills, thus suggesting that it possessed the strengths of neither and the weaknesses of both. Since colonial times scholars have stressed the incomplete nature of Aligarhism, faltering between the categories of religious reform on the one hand and social reform on the other, and have presented the movement as a hybrid that achieved neither a complete religious reformation for Islam nor a complete social reform of it. For instance, Sir Sayyid's attempt to reform the Muslim religion is said to have achieved so little success that his famous rationalist commentary on the Quran, which repudiated its account of miracles and insisted that women were the equals of men, was too radical to be taught at the college he himself had founded, thus accomplishing neither a religious nor a social reformation of Islam. Aligarh's basic mission was therefore simply to inculcate English education and Victorian morals among the Muslim gentry in order to equip them for positions within the colonial bureaucracy. The Aligarhists also called what they did a reform, using for this both the English word and an Arabic term (*islah*) meaning something like "betterment", but they did so in a very different sense from the historiography. On the one hand they used the word reform in a polemical sense, implying by it the corruption of contemporary Islam, for which traditional authorities like the aristocracy (*umara*) and the clergy (*ulama*) were to be blamed. But on the other hand Aligarhists used reform in an apologetic sense, deliberately situated in the uncertain colonial zone between two proscribed passions: religion and politics. And in these two senses of the word, distanced from Reformation as much as from Reform Bill, we already see a meditation upon authority resulting from the luxury of modernism's weakness.

Let us look at an Aligarhist definition of the modern, in order to demonstrate, however briefly, the radical implications of its apologetic. The following passage, by Aligarh's founder, Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan, is taken from an essay on traditional and modern religious thought published in the journal *Tahzib ul-Akhlaq*:

By the ancient period [*zamana-e qadim*] we would like to mean our history [*zamana-e ma*] before the Prophet's advent. But since Muslims very quickly returned to that period and closed their eyes to the light of modern times [*zamana-e jadid*], we were forced to extend the ancient period into the thirteenth-hundredth year of the Prophet's advent.⁵

⁵ Sayyid Ahmad Khan, "Mazhabi khayal zamanah-e qadim awr zamanah-e jadid ka", in Muhammad Ismail Panipati, ed., *Maqalat-e Sir Sayyid*, Vol. 3 (Lahore: Majlis-e Taraqqi-ye Adab, 1961), 23. This and all subsequent translations, unless otherwise noted, are my own.

This quotation provides us with a succinct example of what came to be the standard account of Islam's modernity, one whose apologetic reasoning is endlessly repeated to this day. It claims that modernity, defined in the usual loose terms as rationality, science and the like, emerged with Islam, was forgotten, and must now be rediscovered in Europe. This reasoning is apologetic because its concept of modernity is taken from European thought in a partial or unsystematic manner and read back to early Islam. But such anachronistic forms of justification, resulting entirely from the political weakness of a colonized population, also betray unsuspected depths, making for a novel history of the modern in Muslim India. For one thing the term modernity here is seen to emerge directly from Islam, thus passing by a European debate that would oppose or even reconcile these two. Islam, in other words, is coeval with modernity. What is more, the term as used by Sir Sayyid would deny its own opposition to the traditional. So of the two neologisms translating modernity, contemporaneity (*asriyyat*, more commonly *asr-e hazir*) and novelty (*jadidiyyat*), the Aligarhists tended to opt for the latter, whose meaning of newness was often conflated with the old theological word renovation (*tajdid*), derived from the same root and indicating religious renewal as a periodic phenomenon. A different history of newness, in other words, emerged from Aligarh's modernity, one whose relationship with vast areas of tradition can only be described as indifferent.

Such twists in the idea of the modern are hardly unique to the Aligarh Movement. Indeed Christian apologetics in Europe might well have approached modernity as idea and as event in similar ways. What made this colonial modernity different was the dominance it achieved among Muslim intellectuals, itself resulting, I would argue, from a certain luxury of thought that was inherent in their weakness, a luxury that Fazlur Rahman attributes to these men's inability to resolve the political problems facing Muslims in British India. So while studies of Aligarhism as a reform movement tend to concentrate on its instrumental or nation-building character, I intend to look also at the non-instrumental nature of its thought. For it is here, in the very helplessness of these men, that the movement's intellectual originality resides, as perhaps does its true legacy.⁶

⁶ Two biographies of Sayyid Ahmad Khan, one by a fellow modernist and the other by an English friend, set the tone by which the Aligarh Movement is dealt with in the historiography. The Urdu work, published in 1901 by Altaf Husayn Hali, emphasizes the religious and literary aspects of Sir Sayyid's reformation, while the English one, published in 1885 by Colonel G. F. I. Graham, focuses on his work as a social reformer. See Altaf Husayn Hali, *Hayat-i Javed* (Mirpur: Arsalan Books, 2000), and G. F. I. Graham, *The Life and Work of Sir Syed Ahmed Khan* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1974). Among the important studies of Sayyid Ahmad Khan and the Aligarh Movement are J. M. S. Baljon's *Reforms and Religious Ideas of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1949), Christian Troll's *Sayyid Ahmad Khan: A Reinterpretation of Muslim Theology* (New Delhi:

Let us pursue this originality, by way of illustration, in the passage from Sayyid Ahmad Khan quoted above. Summarized, it states that while modernity emerged with Islam, it was forgotten because Muslims retreated to the traditional world, only to rediscover this modernity in nineteenth-century Europe. What strikes one immediately is the fact that Sir Sayyid's history of Islam contains not one but two accounts of the beginning of modernity. What is more, in the first one—the rise of Islam—tradition follows upon modernity rather than the other way around. With its second coming—the rise of Europe—modernity certainly follows tradition, but in a curious way, since the latter becomes something deprived of any real presence. Sandwiched between two moments of modernity, tradition in this passage suggests only the inability of the modern to constitute a real universality, or rather a systematic totality binding together both Europe and Asia in a single unity—exactly the system of relations between conquerors and conquered that Muslim modernists could not achieve politically, and which was therefore shattered into oppositions like East and West, Islam and Christianity.

We are beginning to see that an apologetic thinking of this sort, despite its reputation for intellectual weakness, did possess some autonomy. I want to argue here that among the reasons for this autonomy is this apologetic's relation to its progenitor, in this case European thought. This relation is indirect and even parodying, because while Muslim apologetic lies very close to certain kinds of European thinking, it neither capitulates to the West nor establishes a dialogue with it. In the passage from Sir Sayyid cited above, it is clear that while the idea of the modern as a break with tradition is taken from Christian writers, as is its Western provenance and definition, the claim that Islam constituted the first of two moments of modernity is not only distinct, but also disengaged, from both the premises and the logic of a concept of the modern as something singular in nature. Indeed Sir Sayyid's claims for Islam's modernity are so disengaged from a European language of the modern that they could not be taken seriously by it, and in fact Muslim apologetic has never been engaged intellectually by the West.

A SPEECHLESS INTIMACY

It is a mistake to see Islamic modernism's relationship with European thinking in terms of a dialogue. There was certainly much trafficking with colonial narratives and categories, and of course there were attempts to have things understood by the colonial administration, but there was no intellectual dialogue. Indeed the more that English terms and models were employed by the Aligarhists

Vikas Publishing House, 1978), and David Lelyveld's *Aligarh's First Generation: Muslim Solidarity in British India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978). The last is a fine institutional history of the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College (later Aligarh Muslim University).

the less meaning they often possessed. In 1870, for instance, Sir Sayyid wrote in England and published, in English, his book *Life of Mohammed and Subjects Subsidiary Thereto*. This work was written to refute Sir William Muir's *Life of Mahomet*, and it would be easy to think of it as the very model of intellectual dialogue. Yet even a cursory glance at Sir Sayyid's volume is enough to disabuse anyone of this suspicion. For one thing the *Life of Mohammed* is explicitly written for an Indian Muslim audience, as is clear from the way Sir Sayyid describes Muir's biography:

When this work appeared, the curiosity it excited among the reading public was only equalled by their impatience to peruse it, but no sooner was it found that the simplest and plainest facts connected with Islam and Mohammed had been strained and twisted and distorted, in short, subjected to the Procrustes' process in order to make them the indices or exponents of the author's prepossessions and prejudices, then the interest created by the announcement of the work fell, *instantly*, to zero. As to the young Mohammedans who were pursuing their study of the English literature and were perfectly ignorant of their own theology, the perusal of the work under consideration raised in their youthful mind the question, if what Sir Wm. Muir has written is a misrepresentation of plain and simple facts, what are those facts in reality?⁷

Sir Sayyid presses home the strictly apologetic purpose of his work in the following passage, making it abundantly clear that he used English to appeal to young Muslims who had been educated in that language:

It being indispensable that the reader should know something respecting the works connected with the present production, all of which are in the English language, and will materially assist him in forming a correct opinion of my humble efforts; and as, moreover, the work was specially intended for the use of those Mohammedan youths who are pursuing their English studies, it has been written in that language; but being myself wholly ignorant of that splendid tongue, so as to be unable even to construct a single sentence in it, I here publicly and sincerely express my deep obligations to those friends by whose literary assistance I am now enabled to submit to the attention of an indulgent and intelligent public the first volume in its complete and digested form.⁸

Though it was written in English and published in England, Sir Sayyid's book was not intended to engage English scholars of Islam in a dialogue, and the fact that it did not in fact attract their attention is quite typical. Because there was no intellectual engagement with Aligarh's modernism on the part of British or European writers, we shall see that these modernists could treat the threat presented by colonial knowledge in the same way as that posed by classical

⁷ Syed Ahmed Khan Bahador, *Life of Mohammed and Subjects Subsidiary Thereto* (Lahore: Sh. Mubarak Ali, 1979), xix.

⁸ *Ibid.*, xx.

antiquity. In both cases the challenge was perceived intellectually, as coming from a set of axiomatic ideas, rather than politically, as a challenge coming from a people. For Sir Sayyid, therefore, the use of English played a very specific role, that of appropriating the West's modernity for Islam without incurring the obligation of entering into a dialogue or debate with it. This is the only way, for instance, that we can understand Sir Sayyid's repeated use of the English phrases "word of God" and "work of God" in his Urdu commentary on the Quran, for they do not contribute anything more to the text than their Urdu equivalents. In other cases Sir Sayyid's use of English terms ran counter to their Urdu equivalents, as with the English subtitle *The Mohammedan Social Reformer* for his journal *Tahzib ul-Akhlaq*, itself an Arabic term linked to a tradition of ethical writing going back to classical antiquity.

What Muslim apologetic did, then, was to hollow out European terms and categories to make room for another way of conceptualizing modernity within them, and in so doing to construct a relationship with imperial thought that was as little dialectical as it was dialogical. For example, we can see from Sir Sayyid's definition of modernity that its Western provenance was neither opposed to nor taken up as a point of departure for self-definition, but instead only qualified and added to, in a way which made the notion slightly more capacious while quite transforming it in the process. In other words the intellectual transformations of Islamic modernism were derived from a logic of accommodation which was apologetic in character, not from a dialectical encounter with or reaction to the West.

This lack of a dialectical encounter with the West had the further consequence of ensuring that Islamic modernism failed to develop a system of thought or even a way of thinking systematically, for its accommodations were not developed intellectually and therefore had no histories. Thus having stretched a European concept of modernity to include Islam in a way that is almost inadvertently radical, Sir Sayyid lets it go instead of extending his thinking of modernity in any systematic fashion, seemingly content to let it stand as a fragment. However, this was not a strategy applied only to Western terms and categories, for in his famous commentary on the Quran Sir Sayyid attributed both the principles and content of his exegesis to Muslim thinkers in the past, though he could only do so by selecting these thinkers in almost random fashion, and by fixing on fragments of their work and not their views taken as a whole.

Here, then, is the luxury of apologetic thought, whose very weakness, whose partial and unsystematic nature, permits it to disengage from categories peculiar to the West and so achieve a degree of autonomy that is by no means bereft of intellectual adventure. This is an important point to make, since much of the scholarship on Islamic modernism assumes as an article of faith that its relationship with the dominance of Europe must be oppositional or at least

reactive, and therefore that Muslims must define themselves in dialectic with the West. But opposition or reaction entails neither dialectic nor self-definition. So, in his *Life of Mohammed*, Sir Sayyid Ahmad sought to refute Sir William Muir's biography of the Prophet not simply by proposing his own interpretation backed by Muslim sources, but rather by using quotations from other European writers to prove his argument. Such a procedure does not even allow the West to stand as a straw man, let alone as some kind of dialectical negation.

Islamic modernism pressed up against European categories of thought but did not enter into a dialectical relationship with them, which is why it was partial, unsystematic and in fact apologetic in the first place. It is equally important to point out that the partial and unsystematic nature of Islamic modernism also means that it had no autonomous being either, or rather that its autonomy was not based on constituting some full presence as an alternative to Christianity or the West. The fact that Muslim writers tracked the modernity of Europe so closely, even parasitically, only adjusting it in places to accommodate themselves, surely means that their own modernity could not itself be a dialectical category of identity, which is to say some kind of alternative modernity. Indeed it could even be seen as providing evidence for the impure and derivative character of Europe's modernity, by pointing to its descent from medieval Islam.

While the new Islam or Muslim community of the modernists was certainly a positive presence, we might see its modernity not as another or alternative mode of being so much as a method or practice, one approaching the West in an indirect and even parodying way. Thus while relations between the gentlemen of Aligarh and their British rulers had little to do with dialogue or dialectic, they were still relations of intimacy. In the historiography this intimacy is labeled loyalism and left at that, as if loyalty was something self-explanatory and attributable merely to the ignorant, cowardly or mercenary impulses of its unpatriotic adherents. As it turns out these loyalists were far less British than their nationalist or anti-imperialist compatriots, who really did engage in dialogue and dialectic with their masters, though only because they had become so much like them and were indeed their products. Quite apart from the reasons of self-interest that supposedly kept them loyal, the Aligarhists enjoyed a peculiar kind of intimacy with the British, one that was based neither on acceding to Christianity or the West nor on repudiating either. It was precisely an intimacy based on apologetics, which is the most common but least noticed quality of Muslim thought and behavior in the nineteenth century.

CLASSICAL ETHICS FOR A STATELESS MODERNITY

Islamic modernism had been hollowed out of European categories to allow for a thoughtful experience of the modern. For Aligarhism this experience was

conceived primarily in terms of ethics, which was derived from the concept of culture or refinement (*tahzib*). Indeed culture was to provide one of the most common ways of thinking about Muslim modernity during this period. The term was often used in compounds like “contemporary culture” (*tahzib-e hazir*), or “refinement of morals” (*tahzib ul-akhlaq*), the title of Aligarh’s journal. This latter phrase refers to an Arabic work of the same name, Miskawayh’s eleventh-century treatise on ethics, whose title subsequently entered Islamic history as a common name for the subject. The phrase “refinement of morals” also belonged to a tradition of ethics deriving from classical Greek thought, one concerned with the meaning of behavior in general rather than with religious or social reform in particular. But what did this concern with behavior mean in its Indian setting? On the one hand an aristocratic social code that had been grounded in classical ethics was appropriated in order to define a set of national characteristics peculiar to Islam, which was now being seen as constituting the totality of Muslim beliefs and practices, and therefore belonging to the Muslim community as a whole. On the other hand this very nationalization of ethics in terms of the Muslim community indicated an unwillingness or inability on the part of the Aligarhists to identify themselves in terms of the legal and political categories proper to a state.

Modernity was being conceived in the classical terms of a beautiful life rather than in those of citizenship, even though this art of living had now come to constitute the morality of a new kind of national community, which did not participate in the life of a state. Ethics, in other words, was not a kind of citizenship, and Islam was not a kind of state, but both might well have served as ciphers for the citizenship and state that were denied to colonial subjects in general and minority populations in particular. The Muslim community for which the Aligarhists spoke was in fact a nation in suspense, one that struggled to position itself in a non-demographic space to avoid a politics determined by categories of majority and minority. Sir Sayyid was therefore deeply suspicious of the newly founded Indian National Congress, which was in this period as reformist and loyal as he would like, because of its attempt to represent Indians demographically.

It was the principle of representation that Sir Sayyid found so dangerous, realizing that it would show up Aligarh’s own unrepresentative position among India’s Muslims while at the same time defining them all merely as a demographic minority in the colonial state. He thus attacked the congress as a Hindu organization by default if not by design and tried unsuccessfully to link Hindus and Muslims at a regional level by rank, language and ethnicity rather than separating them by number countrywide.⁹ He even refused to conceive of

⁹ Sayyid Ahmad Khan, “Siyasat awr ham”, in *idem*, *Khutbat-e Sir Sayyid*, Vol. 1 (Lahore Majlis-e Taraqqi-e Adab, 1973), p. 30.

Muslims as a national group in the demographic sense, recognizing inchoately the belief that Muslim politicians would voice in the century to come: that in spite of the size of the Hindu population, India's Muslims could not really be thought of as a minority, not least because they formed numerical majorities in sizeable parts of the country. It was the anomalous position of the world's largest Muslim population occupying the place of a minority that permitted the modernists both their intellectual autonomy and their universalistic claims.

Linking their movement to the tradition of classical ethics going back to the Greeks allowed the Aligarhists to do several things. First, it enabled them to look beyond the horizon of some purely colonial modernity by placing themselves in a genealogy within which the challenge of this modernity could be compared to that of Greek thought for early Islam. Even in his specifically religious writings, Sir Sayyid addressed the challenge of modernity by calling for the development of a new science of theology or *ilm al-kalam*, referring thus to Islam's earliest apologetic tradition, which had been formulated in response to the Muslim encounter with Greek philosophy in its classical as well as Jewish and Christian forms. This genealogy was an important theme in Aligarhist thought, and one that indicated very clearly its overwhelmingly intellectual as opposed to political approach to modernity. Thus Sir Sayyid's friend, the celebrated poet Ghalib of Delhi, compared the British conquest of India to the Arab conquest of Persia in his journal of the Indian Mutiny of 1857–8.¹⁰ What is interesting about this comparison is the fact that it puts the British in the position of the Muslims of yore, this being another example of the peculiar intimacy that loyalists enjoyed with their masters. Yet Ghalib's conquered Persia was, like her Indian counterpart, a civilization that had to be cherished and mourned. Other writers compared Christendom's conquest of Islam to that of the Mongols who destroyed the Abbasid Caliphate only themselves to turn Muslim. These genealogies tell us that the modernity associated with colonialism was being interpreted according to the universal standards of Islam's own history, in a way which allowed Muslims to situate themselves in a narrative space that extended much further than India and empire, whether geographically, historically or politically. Indeed it was only in this trans-historical realm that dialogue and debate between peoples or religions could occur, though only in the traditional form of conversations between those living and those long dead.

Such conversations extended even to the "word of God", with Sir Sayyid's commentary on the Quran demonstrating the sacred book's veracity by showing how its teachings conformed to the "laws of nature", as represented in nineteenth-century science. Victorian science was the most recent of the divine text's

¹⁰ Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib, *Dastanbuy* (New Delhi: Asia Publishing House, 1970).

many interlocutors, who had existed over a span of time that bracketed Greek philosophy with Victorian nature. That this was not a naive undertaking is clear from Sir Sayyid's commentary, where he recognized the implications of his apologetic:

It is said to us sarcastically (or tauntingly): "When the Greek wisdom, astronomy and philosophy spread among Muslims, then considered in agreement with actual reality, the doctors of Islam confirmed these portions of the Koran which seemed in agreement with those sciences, and tried to work out corroboration of those portions (of the Koran) which seemed opposed to these sciences. Today when it is known that those sciences were founded on wrong first principles, that their astronomy was absolutely opposed to reality, and when natural sciences have made more progress, you contradict those meanings which earlier doctors determined according to Greek sciences and adopt other meanings which agree with the sciences of the present day. It will be no wonder if in the future these sciences advance further and the things which today appear fully ascertained may be proven wrong. Then need will arise of establishing other meanings of the words of the Koran and so on. So the Koran will be a toy in the hands of people."¹¹

Sir Sayyid responded to this accusation by welcoming it "as glad tidings for it is our conviction that the Quran is in accordance with the reality of affairs".¹² In true apologetic style he chose not to dispute the taunt leveled at him but merely pointed out that he considered the Quran miraculous because it could bear differing interpretations over time, all of which might nevertheless be said to be true to the sacred text. This indeed is the only miracle acknowledged in the book, which he considered to be God's voice engaged in an interminable conversation through history. A similar consideration permitted Sir Sayyid to pen a chapter on "Prophecies Respecting Mohammed" in his *Life of Mohammed*. Following venerable precedent, he tried to show that the coming of the Prophet was foretold in Christian and Jewish scriptures. Far from contradicting the "laws of nature", this search for prophecies was in fact an attempt to make a trans-historical conversation possible between religions by exploring the various kinds of meaning that ancient and medieval texts could bear without betraying their logic in the process.

The intellectual genealogy of Muslim modernism also allowed it to undermine the categories of the colonial state, those of religion and politics, for example, which the language of ethics quite easily ignored. After all what did it mean to think about being Muslim upon the ground provided by ethics? One thing it meant was thinking about Islam not in the presence of the colonial state, whose

¹¹ *Introduction to Sir Syed's Commentary on the Quran* (Patna: Khuda Bakhsh Oriental Public Library, 1995), 18–19.

¹² *Ibid.*, 19.

categories were not even addressed by this language, so much as in the absence of traditional sources of authority, since the colonial world here functioned only negatively, making possible a new set of relations between Muslims. Given the attenuation and even destruction of aristocratic, clerical and saintly authority in British territory, the Aligarhists were able for the first time to think about a collectively ethical way of being Muslim, one without an organic relationship with traditional institutions of authority. And it was this ethical Islam, the belief and practice making up a new moral community, that provided a background to Aligarh's modernity by rendering provincial terms like religion (*din*), sect (*firqa*), school (*mazhab*) and mystical order (*tariqa*), along with the various authorities linked to them.

To some degree this means that Aligarhist religion was secularized insofar as it now came to be part of the totality of beliefs and practices pertaining to a community: Islam having become a "way of life", as the modernist cliché would have it. This does not mean Aligarhists did not entertain religious beliefs or practices, only that these were now parts of Islam seen in terms of a moral and potentially national community that included many other things besides. Indeed the modernists spilt much more ink on such issues as education, comportment and attire, all familiar subjects of classical ethics, than on specifically religious matters having to do with God, scripture and the like. In other words traditional religion (being bound by certain authorities, faith in the primacy of divine action, and so on) was subsumed in a prospectively national culture for which ordinary Muslims were themselves suddenly responsible. As had happened in Europe, however, secularism in India ended by producing religion in the form of spirit, which is to say in the form of an abstraction purified of the very culture that gave rise to it. So it was Sir Sayyid's secularization of Islam that allowed him to place religion in the realm of pure spirit in his *Life of Mohammed*:

Now the religious idea differs from every other in this respect, that man's belief in everything, religion excepted, depends or is based on a previous conviction of its truth; the religious idea, on the contrary, appears to be innate, and is accepted, entertained, and acquiesced in, independently of any evidence of its truth, derived through the instrumentality of the external senses.¹³

The problem with spiritualizing religion in this way, of course, is that it was no longer attached to any institutional authority and so literally up for grabs. But the gentlemen who populated modernist circles could not allow Islam's religious spirit, to say nothing of its secular body, to become in any sense democratic. Religion was therefore defined as a set of divine prescriptions about behavior that itself came to represent popular volition insofar as it was not attached to

¹³ Syed Ahmed Khan Bahador, *Life of Mohammed*, vii.

any particular institutional authority, not least that of Aligarh, but appeared to emanate from Islam itself as the totality of Muslim beliefs and practices. It was the very secularization and nationalization of Islam as a moral community, then, which led to the fetishism of divine law as something that could be generally identified with because it was no longer tied to any particular authority. Indeed Islamic law, which became the subject of enormous debate among colonial officials and scholars towards the end of the nineteenth century, continued for Muslims to refer simply to a populist version of the old aristocratic discourse on ethics, as the conduct of a beautiful life. It was only in the new century that such law actually took on the characteristics of a juridical system, thus indicating at least a partial Muslim appropriation of political categories belonging to the state.

The modernist meditation upon authority I have been sketching was overtaken in the middle of the twentieth century by a politics organized around states and ideologies that counted liberal as much as fundamentalist Muslims among its votaries. But Aligarh's modernity continues to live amidst these new forms of Muslim belonging, which have inherited the modernist conception of Islam as an anthropomorphic authority, one embodying the totality of Muslim beliefs and practices. Liberal and fundamentalist forms of Islam have also inherited the apologetic character of modernist thought. Indeed Aligarh seems to have obtained copyright over the very idea of Islam's modernity in southern Asia, whose Muslims must still return to this nineteenth-century movement, if only to refine, denounce or even ignore it. So while Sayyid Ahmad Khan's commentary on the Quran is still not taught at the university he founded, its very absence gives form to the interpretations that have come after it by constituting their point of flight.

The Aligarh Movement's luxurious apologetic marked the beginning of an intellectual tradition that still colonizes all thinking on the subject of Islam's modernity. But instead of posing only a limit to this modernity, the movement offers Muslims today the opportunity as well as the basis for thinking it anew, especially at a time when Islam has been rendered stateless yet again by virtue of its globalization. The Indian history we have been exploring has a curious resonance in today's world of Muslim minorities and migrations, to which it now offers itself as a global opportunity. Indeed this opportunity might be inscribed in the very survival, otherwise unaccountable, of Aligarh's nineteenth-century apologetic, which, like the tortoise in the fable, has managed to beat the hare of Europe's modernity to the finishing line of history.