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*Reprinted from The Indian Historical Review Volume XIV
Numbers 1-2 Page No. 206-218*

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Religion of Islam is on the decline
Domination of infidelity is ruining Islam.
Had our forefathers not waged *jihād*,
India would not have flourished with Islam.
The power of sword ensured the domination of Muslims,
Had our forefathers been idle, what would have happened to Islam?¹

This poem truly reflected the state of mind among Muslim religious leaders and social reformers in India at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Their perception was that Indian Muslims who constituted a minority of 21 per cent of the population felt beleaguered both in their true faith and in their social status as compared to other sections of society. After the Islamic Moghul administration gradually gave way to British colonial power in the eighteenth century, Muslim religious thinkers and the tiny former Muslim ruling élite of princes, landlords, administrators and military commanders had to adjust themselves to their crushing fall from power and to the consequences of the minority status of their religious community. As the Muslim ruling élite was mostly connected with feudal and non-commercial activities, it felt severely hurt by the mounting pressures of emerging colonial capitalism. Muslim landed gentry was challenged by up and coming "commercial men" as communications and trade expanded and cash-cropping increased. Servicemen of the Moghul army found no employment. Muslims were progressively squeezed out of the local administration where they had occupied a pivotal position so far.²

In Search for A New Identity

As Muslim political and philosophical thought in India had to grapple with the threefold challenge of colonial rule, capitalist development and the consequences of the Muslims' minority status, Islamic concepts of society were to accept new realities. The new era of the rule of bourgeoisie over mankind had won an impressive political victory in the course of the Great Revolution of the French. It was prepared philosophically by eighteenth century European Enlightenment. Yet it was not before the second half of the nineteenth century that in the works of Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817-98) Indian Islam produced a rationalized view of the world that broadly responded to the requirements of the modern age of worldwide capitalist transformation. While

1 Hafeez Malik, *Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan and Muslim Modernisation in India and Pakistan* (New York, 1980), p. 260.

2 Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 140-43; F. Robinson, *Separatism among Indian Muslims* (Oxford, 1974), pp. 42-46, 116; B. Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband 1860-1900* (Princeton, 1982), p. 209 f.

Sayyid Ahmad Khan's reformist attempt to reconcile Islam with modernizing bourgeois influences still considerably predated similar developments in Arabia he lagged half a century behind the mainstream of Indian political and philosophical thinking. The ideas of the French Revolution and of Enlightenment had reached the shores of India with the help of Christian missionaries very early—at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century. The movements of Young Bengal and the Indian Renaissance were important stages through which the message of rationalism and religious reformism spread over India. Within the Indian context Sayyid Ahmad's concept and activities could vaguely be compared to those of Raja Rammohan Roy (1772-1833), the social and religious reformer from Bengal who had given strong impulses to a reformation of Hinduism. He wanted to restore authentic Hindu tradition and free it from later accretions. The Raja vigorously fought against prevalent Hindu religious practices like widow-burning and child marriage, against the belief in many gods, against worshipping idols and images. He was strongly in favour of a unitarian religious concept transcending all religions and regions of the globe, though he remained a devoted Hindu all his life. His drive for education to the Indians in English and the vernaculars lay at the roots of the Sayyid's own endeavour who in more than one respect felt directly influenced by Roy. Both also shared a strong affection for Britain, for its alleged civilizing influence on Indian society. But while Roy is forgiven his pro-British attitude due to some positive impact of British administration in India at that time, Sayyid Ahmad has often been sharply criticized for his pro-British stand at a time when the disastrous effects of colonial rule were quite obvious. This paper argues that the political servitude of Sayyid Ahmad Khan to British colonial rule did not stand in the way of a weighty contribution made by him to the enlightenment of the Muslim sections of Indian society.

It was no easy task for Muslim thinkers in India to favourably respond to new impulses. Complications were rooted in the structure of the Muslim community in India and in the challenges it faced. By no means did Indian Muslims constitute a coherent social or ethnic community. Unlike in the Islamic heartland of Arabia, Indian Muslims lived more or less dispersed. Beside a few Muslims of foreign descent, who were employed at the court and in the administration of the Moghuls, they mainly constituted local population groups hailing from different ethnic communities, castes and tribes all over India. However, such a wide variance in living conditions did not prevent Indian Muslim communities from striving for a common course in religious matters as well as partially in social and political affairs. The urge for unity was there, though it seldom tallied with reality. Emerging colonial capitalism did not much reduce differences among Indian Muslims. Divergent segments like government servants of the United Provinces (UP), the landed aristocracy of Punjab, the ulama of the seats of Islamic learning at Delhi, Deoband, Aligarh or Hyderabad, the traditional weavers of Gujarat or the cultivators of Bengal and of the Malabar coast—all had different interests. It was the Muslim educated urban classes of UP (where Muslims made up for only 15 per cent of the local population) who played a key role both in the reform of Indian Islam as well as in the formation of a bourgeois Muslim political movement in India. Mounting pressure from the colonial administration and tough competition from Hindu bourgeois classes, who more quickly adapted themselves to changing circum-

stances, made UP Muslims very clearly feel the need to bring about changes in Muslim religious and political thought. Muslims from other Indian regions, where they even constituted a majority (Bengal and Punjab) but were largely engaged in politically less sensitive employment like land cultivation, were less vocal in this respect. In this sense it was no coincidence that Sayyid Ahmad Khan from UP advanced to the peculiar position of a spokesman articulating, through the experience of his own plight, the fate and faith of a whole social stratum which set out on the path from tradition to modernity.

A True Muslim and A Loyal Subject of the Crown

Coming from a high-ranking Muslim noble family with a long record of competent and loyal service to the Moghul Empire as well as to the East India Company, Sayyid Ahmad Khan represented a nearly ideal choice for this position.¹ In 1837 he entered British colonial service. The Rebellion of 1857 found him at Bijnor where he turned against the rebels in order to rescue the British community of the district. By that time he had not yet sensed the urge for change. His biographer, Altaf Hussain (1837-1914), whose pen name was Hali, made clear that his early religious works were rather traditional and conservative. They included an "exhortation to orthodox Sunnis to take a stand against heresy", a treatise to prove "that the sun revolves around the earth" and a defence of the Naqshbandi order's practice of bringing the image of one's spiritual guide before the mind's eye.²

It was the Rebellion and its consequences for the Muslims that made Sayyid Ahmad ponder over the state and the prospects of his community. Politically, Indian Muslims, and especially the old noble families, received a heavy blow after the unsuccessful Indian uprising of 1857-58. Leading opinion in the British colonial administration tended towards indicting them for incitement and their substantial support of the Rebellion.³ Accepting the minority status for Indian Muslims, Sayyid Ahmad did not entertain any hope for greater accommodation of his community by force or confrontation. He thought that consensus was the only way of change open to Indian Muslims. Unwavering political loyalty to the British in his eyes was no acquiescence to racial discrimination and injustice. It was the prerequisite to secure British acceptance of Muslim demands and to obtain the consent of Muslim noble families. Sayyid Ahmad argued that he was in favour of consolidation of British government, not because of any love of the British, but only because he saw "the welfare of the Indian Muslims in

1 Sayyid Ahmad's maternal grandfather Khwaja Fariduddin Ahmed was the most famous of his relations. He served both the East India Company and the Emperor. From 1797 to 1803, he was superintendent of the Calcutta Madrassa followed by postings as company agent at the Persian and the Burmese courts and crowned by the office of Prime Minister of the Moghul Empire from 1815 to 1819, G.F.I. Graham, *The Life and Work of Sir Syed Ahmed Khan* (London, 1909), pp. 265-68.

2 Hali, *Hayat-i-Javed* (New Delhi, 1979), pp. 37-38.

3 W.W. Hunter, a senior official in the colonial administration, observed in his report on the state of the Muslim community that "the Mohammadans have now sunk so low that, even when qualified for Government employment, they are studiously kept out of it by Government notification", *Our Indian Musalmans: Are They Bound in Conscience to Rebel Against the Queen?* (London, 1871), p. 167f.

that consolidation". And he felt "that they can emerge from the present state of decline only with the help of the British government".¹

Sayyid Ahmad vividly lamented the darkness of the traditional Muslim mind in India. Muslim noble families refused to open Muslim India to new influences. The Sayyid traced the reasons why Indian Muslims kept aloof from English education to four sources: (i) "to their political tradition", meaning their bygone supremacy in Indian politics; (ii) to their "social customs", implying their contempt for non-Oriental English education which they considered inferior and little less than embracing Christianity; (iii) to their "religious belief", finding philosophy and logic at variance and modern geography and astronomy altogether incompatible with the tenets of Islam; and (iv) to their "poverty", pointing to their weak social position in different walks of life.² He therefore thought it necessary for members of the Muslim community to impress on their co-religionists the advantages accruing from English education. Sayyid Ahmad understood his task as one of "reform and enlightenment".³ The pillar of his social reform programme was to be education which he saw as the only remedy to "all the socio-political diseases of India".⁴ It was not Oriental but English education he aimed at because he wanted education of the highest available standard of the time. Oriental learning to him was a means to preserve the backwardness of the Indians as it barred them access to modern scientific knowledge. He even suggested a combined Oriental-Western dress style for men in the form of English trousers, a Turkish long-fitting coat and a fez.

In order to implement his education programme Sayyid Ahmad founded the Ghazipur Scientific Society for translation and literary work in 1864 which he relocated to Aligarh in April of the same year. There, in 1866 a building was erected known as the Aligarh Institute which eventually was transformed into the Mohammedan Anglo-Oriental College in 1877. In 1920 the struggle of its founders finally bore fruit when it was elevated to a Muslim University. The "Aligarh movement", as the drive for modern Muslim education came to be called, made a weighty and lasting contribution to the political emancipation of Indian Muslims.⁵ It was a close friend of Sayyid Ahmad, Sayyid Mahdi Alf Khan (1837-1907), called Mohsin al-Mulk, who participated in the famous Muslim deputation to the Viceroy in 1906 when the Muslim League was recognized. Shibli Nomani (1857-1914), another friend of Sayyid Ahmad, held a post as Professor of Persian at Aligarh and was the only well-known *alim* to attend the early sessions of the Muslim League. With certain marked exceptions like Badruddin

1 Cf. A. Ahmad, "Sayyid Ahmad Khan, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Muslim India", *Studia Islamica*, Vol. 13 (Paris, 1960), p. 65.

2 Shan Mohammad, ed, *Speeches and Writings of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan* (Bombay, 1972), pp. 93-96.

3 Sir Sayyid's statement before the Education Commission under W.W. Hunter in 1882 in *Speeches and Writings*, p. 94.

4 Graham, *Life and Work*, p. 48.

5 Besides Aligarh, which enjoyed a more secular reputation, there existed influential Muslim education centres on purely religious basis at Deoband, advocating a traditionalist/anti-British line, and Lucknow the moderate Nadwa seminar. A. Schimmel, *Islam in the Indian Subcontinent* (Leiden, 1980), pp. 204, 209.

Tayyabji (1844-1906) and Abul Kalam Azad (1888-1956), the Indian National Congress (INC) did not succeed in incorporating the Muslim element into the national movement. This was largely due to Sayyid Ahmad's agitation for non-cooperation of Indian Muslims with the INC. He thought that participation in the INC would harm the interests of his community. Indian Muslims, he supposed, were not fit to stand in competitive elections to representative bodies and for enrolment to public services along with their Hindu brethren.¹ Sayyid Ahmad's arguments met with overwhelming response which showed his strong political hold over the Muslim middle strata in the 1880s when his influence was without parallel, though not unchallenged. His rejectionist stand towards the INC earned him the esteem of the colonial government and the wrath of the young Indian national leaders. Also fellow Muslim reformers and activists of the "Aligarh movement" like Nazir Ahmad (1831-1912) and Shibli Nomani criticized his pro-British line of thinking and action.²

Reason, Nature and Islam—The Seeds of Intellectual Revolt

Notwithstanding his contrary political attitude, it was his critical approach to the doctrinal legacy of Islam for which he is rightly remembered even today. For this he was severely attacked by the pious, dogmatic "right" of the Islamic social spectre. They called him an infidel and "Naturalist". *Fatwas* (religious decisions, injunctions) from prominent Islamic institutions were sought and invoked against him.³ Their target was his new, modern *ilm al-Kalam* (Koranic theology) which he thought necessary, as he stated in Lahore in 1884, to "either refute doctrines of modern sciences or undermine their foundations, or show that they are in conformity with Islam".⁴ In his reformist fervour he relied upon a long line of Muslim thinkers. Islamic reformism in India was triggered off by the decline of Moghul power after the death of Emperor Aurangzeb in 1707 well before the advent of British colonial rule on Indian soil. Indian Muslim reformers like Shah Waliy Allah (1703-62) rejected the medieval legacy of Islam and urged a return to the original, puristic Islam of the times of its founder Mohammad. They wanted to free Islam from *bidaa*, the impious innovations by which they meant the Hindu cultural patterns and all shades of Sufism, the mystic folkways of Islam that permeated India, which they thought were responsible for weakening the stand of Islam.⁵

Though Sayyid Ahmad remained under the influence of Shah Waliy Allah, throughout his life he was not content with purifying Islam from later innovations. From 1859, when Sayyid Ahmad made his first public speech in a mosque, he consciously started reflecting on the intrusion of a different and new social order, culture and ideology

1 Cf. his lecture in Meerut in 1888, Shan Mohammad, op. cit., pp. 180-95.

2 Schimmel, op. cit., pp. 200-3.

3 One of his most outspoken opponents was sub-judge Haji Ali-Bakhsh Badauni who secured a *fatwa* of *kufr* (infidelity) from Hijaz against him in 1873, though he later reportedly reconciled himself to the college and raised money for it, Metcalf, op. cit., p. 325.

4 Sayyid Ahmad Khan's lecture in Lahore, 1884, quoted in F. Rahman, *Islam*, p. 217.

5 Malik, op. cit., p. 256.

into the daily life of Indian Muslims. It was his reflection upon the Christian influence, the polemics of Christian missionaries, that made him write the first Muslim commentary on the Bible, *Tabin al-Kalam* (1862). This text showed a remarkable theological flexibility for that time, though the eclecticism of his approach left both Christians and Muslims, even reformist-minded ones, critical and dissatisfied.¹ He wrote a series of "Essays on the Life of Mohammad" (*Khutbat-i Ahmadiyya*, 1870) in response to William Muir's *Life of Mahomet* (1858) in which he defended Islamic social values against resurging Western criticism that Islam was incompatible with tolerance and would unavoidably lead to *jihad*, a holy war, against the British. Referring to historical analogy, he argued that Christian conquerors were not less cruel than Mohammedans.²

From defence of the basic tenets of Islam he graduated to their reinterpretation.³ It first became obvious in his commentary on the Bible. This line of thinking continued and culminated in his commentary on the Quran (*Tafsir al-Quran*, 1880-95).⁴ In the process of developing his point of view he arrived at fifteen principles of exegesis of the Quran which he evolved in his correspondence with ulama,⁵ Mohsin-ul-Mulk,⁶ and his most prominent adversary, the founder of the Deoband Muslim seminary, Mohammad Qasim Nanotawi. The latter responded by formulating his own credo in fifteen points fashioned in the traditionist Hanafi mode of thinking.⁷ Both interpretations of the Quran remained until today model arguments for Islamic modernists and traditionists alike. When the Sayyid used theological arguments in favour of modern sciences and education he hoped to win over orthodox Muslims clinging to tradition. He himself was educated as a traditionalist. So it was the exegesis of the Quran that became a self-offering means to the reform of Islam. Emphasizing that God's message descended upon the Prophet's mind whereas its scriptural revelation in the form of the Quran was conveyed in a language comprehensible to all, Sayyid Ahmad pleaded for an historically and semantically critical approach to the textual interpretation of those Quranic verses and traditions where the meaning of the commandments was in doubt. Sayyid Ahmad differentiated between "intrinsic value" of the revelation which could not but conform to Nature and Reason and "extrinsic value" whose evaluation was changing with times. This starting point for exegesis offered him the choice of a wider interpretation of doubtful passages. For this he used a philological and metaphorical approach. The exegete would have to be aware of all the rhetorical figures of Arab

1 A. Ahmad, op. cit., p. 57.

2 Shan Mohammed, op. cit., p. 60.

3 The most competent and detailed analysis of Sayyid Ahmad's reformist approach to Islam is given in Christian W. Troll, *Sayyid Ahmad Khan: A Re-interpretation of Muslim Theology* (New Delhi, 1978). On the same subject see also Malik, "Religious Modernism", op. cit., pp. 255-79; and Metcalf, op. cit., pp. 321-29.

4 Sayyid Ahmad Khan, *Tafsir al-Quran*, 6 vols (Aligarh, 1880-95); Vol. 7 (Agra, 1904).

5 Sir Sayyid's letter to the Ulama of Saharanpur, 1873 or 1874, *Maqalat-i Sir Sayyid*, 16 vols (Lahore, 1962-65). The following exposition of the Sayyid's points of exegesis is based on its English translation quoted in Troll, op. cit., pp. 276-78.

6 Sayyid Ahmad Khan, "Tahrir fi usul al-tafsir" (Principles of Exegesis) (Agra, 1892).

7 Mohammad Qasim Nanotawi, *Tasfiyat al-Aqaid* (Delhi, 1890), translated in *Muslim Self-Statement in India and Pakistan 1857-1968* (Wiesbaden, 1970), pp. 60-76.

eloquence in the Prophet's day. An expression like "we shall roll up the heavens as a recorder rolleth up a written scroll" (Q. 21,104) had to be seen as product of the early Arabs' world of imagination.¹

Sayyid Ahmad's reinterpretation aimed at freeing Islam of the dead weight of the four medieval schools, the *fiqh*. His main instrument in this became the resurrection of the supremacy of God and His Word, sent through the Prophet to the people. The essence of Islam, he argued, had gradually been relegated to the backyard of religion by un-Islamic, unauthentic tradition, by its narrow interpretation on the part of the ulama, by superstition. The equation of "Work of God", that is, Nature as created by Him, with the "Word of God", that is, the revealed text of the Quran, served him as centrepiece of his *ilm al-Kalam*. As there was nothing in Nature that could contradict God's message, those commandments of the Quran as well as established tradition which contravened the Laws of Nature became irrelevant. Modern sciences were the reflection not only of Nature but also of His Divine Will and thus turned out to be compatible with Islam. He also applied this concept to man's place in the universe. If man was God's creature there could be nothing in God's message to contradict His own Work, that is, human capacity, human will and human reason. Just like his European forerunners, he put man in the centre of the universe when he stated that religion was created for man and not the opposite.

The category of reason occupied a central place in the Sayyid's theological framework. In a letter to Mohsin al-Mulk he stated:

If you either presume that man was made for religion, that is, for the worship of God, or you say religion was made for man, in both circumstances there should be something in man—as distinct from other living beings—that enables him to carry this weight and fulfil his obligations, and this special matter is reason (*aql*). Whatever religion is given to man, therefore, cannot lie beyond the grasp of human intellect/reason (*aql*). (I'm sorry that in no way you understand the difference between human reason and personal intellect.) If it [religion] is beyond human intellect man cannot follow it. Otherwise he would be equated to a bullock or a donkey obeying orders.²

Man himself, his wishes and abilities, his intellect and mental horizon was made the yardstick of his theology, not God. Applied to the interpretation of unclear passages of the Quran, the Sayyid saw no reason "why a word's meaning inconsistent with rational arguments (*dalil aqli*) or contrary to the very Laws of Nature (*qanun-i fitrat*) proclaimed by God Himself should not be rejected in favour of some other meaning".³ He demanded a certain degree of secularization when he stated that Muslims were obliged to obey the *sunnat* in religious matters whereas in worldly affairs they were allowed, that is, not compelled to do so. Sayyid Ahmad's negation of the ulama's and

1 Troll, op. cit., p. 162.

2 Sayyid Ahmad Khan, "Tahrir fi usul al-tafsir", in *Maqalat-i Sir Sayyid, Vol 2, Tafsiri Madamin* (Lahore, 1961), pp. 206-7.

3 Ibid., p. 248.

the traditional *fiqh*'s exclusive right of interpretation of Islam also stemmed from his emphasis on God's exclusive authority. He rejected unreliable conjectural tradition (*hadith*) as construed after the death of the Prophet and his companions, and denied miracles and saints.

Nanotawi in his rejoinder emphasized that God retained power to issue commandments even after the universe was created. Not the proofs of reason in themselves, that is, reality were the touchstone of truth or error but the Word of God and authentic Prophetic tradition. He particularly stressed that man was not capable of judging God's commandments whether they were intrinsically good or bad. God only required "the ability to act", but "no knowledge of secrets and...expediences". The motion of human will was and remained "dependent" upon God's Will. Reward and punishment resulted from dependent actions as they reflected respect for His Will. Obviously, Nanotawi experienced certain difficulty with the Sayyid's recognition of the Laws of Nature for which scientific proofs existed which were hard to reject. So he quietly reduced the semantic meaning of Nature to the "innate" characteristics of man equating Nature with a "state which for the spirit within man is of the same importance as health for the body".¹ He then came to the conclusion that inner qualities could hardly be considered the touchstone of the soundness of Quran and tradition. He strongly defended the status of the ulama who held mandatory authority delegated by God that differed from the authority of the Prophet only by degree. *Ijtihad* he considered permissible only within the limits of Quran and tradition exercised by true religious scholars. The latter, however, were not to be found among contemporaries. With underlying reference to Sayyid Ahmad he acidly remarked: "Indeed, they consider themselves to be skilled in religion as a monkey who has fallen into a pan of indigo considers himself to be a peacock".²

The Sayyid and European Enlightenment

The religio-political and socio-reformist heritage of the Sayyid has been thoroughly documented and widely interpreted so far. But the point which still remains inconclusive relates to his position in the universal historical frame that opened with the French Revolution. In the scientific literature of Western countries he was often called a social reformer concentrating on his education programmes or a modernist emphasizing his contribution to reform traditional Islam.³ But this limited piecemeal evaluation does hardly do justice to his peculiar position at the crossroads of social processes in India, in Islam and in world history.

In order to trace connections between the concept of Reason and Natural Law as advocated by Sayyid Ahmad and European Enlightenment one has to recall what enlightenment does stand for. W. Bahner correctly observed that it was changes in ideology and politics connected with bourgeois emancipation in the last period of the

1 Nanotawi, op. cit., p. 70.

2 Ibid., p. 66.

3 Malik elaborates on the Sayyid's status as "social reformer" and on his "modernistic interpretations" of Islam, Malik, op. cit., pp. 258-66; *The Encyclopedia of Islam* (New Edition Vol. A-B, Leiden-London, 1960, p. 287), calls him an "educational reformer and founder of Islamic modernism in India."

transitional stage from feudalism to capitalism which gave birth to movements of Enlightenment. Yet one can hardly agree with his reservation about using the term "Enlightenment" for ideas and movements after the French Revolution.¹ If it is assumed that capitalism spread worldwide in several waves which were all part and parcel of a continuous, though by no means homogeneous, process then there is no reason why outside France in particular, and outside Europe in general, the new classes and strata growing in the fold of emerging capitalism should not have produced ideas and movements of emancipation similar to European Enlightenment. The objective remained the same; to break loose from the ropes of the past and to establish a new bourgeois identity, reasonable, rational and secular.

Sayyid Ahmad picked up the threads of traditional Islamic reform movements. But that alone would not have resulted in a worldly, emancipative position of Enlightenment. He needed the catchwords Reason, Nature and Education with which he was provided through his close contacts with the British both in India and especially in England during his stay in 1869-70. Over there, in Europe, he was most deeply influenced and impressed by both the free and liberal conduct of affairs in public and the idealistic, enlightened ideas and concepts of a rational and human life. He adopted ideas of the utilitarian frontrunner J.S. Mill (1806-73) who himself had been associated with the East India Company for a considerable part of his life where he held the senior post of Examiner, the virtual head of the administrative side of the Company's affairs. The utilitarians were the pragmatic offspring of English Enlightenment favouring a reasonable and rational conduct of social and political affairs, also as applied to India. As early as 1864 Sayyid Ahmad recommended the translation of Mill's *Principles of Political Economy*, a standard work of the time, in order to convince the Indian public at large to go into the finer details of the economic mechanism of British rule over India which would prevent unfair criticism of British conduct.² With reference to Mill who stated that the "rights and interests of every or of any person are only secure from being disregarded when the person interested is himself able and habitually disposed to stand up for them", he appealed to his country fellows to heed this advice meticulously. And it was education the Sayyid relied upon most to perfect Indian Muslims much in the same way as the representatives of French and English Enlightenment had reasoned with regard to their objectives.

When the Sayyid wrote his commentary on the Bible he came across European, and particularly English, concepts of religious reformism. Troll discovered a close parallel between Sayyid Ahmad's approach in his *Tabayrn al-kalam* and that of a book repeatedly quoted in the *Tabayrn*, authored by John H. Pratt, the Archdeacon of Calcutta: *Scripture and Science not at Variance* (1st edn, 1856). Pratt endeavoured to show "that it is impossible that Scripture . . . can, when rightly interpreted, be at variance with the works of Divine Hand", for the "Book of Nature and the Word of God emanate from the same infallible Author, and therefore cannot be at variance".³

1 W. Bahner, "'Aufklärung' als Periodenbegriff der Ideologieggeschichte. Einige methodologische Überlegungen und Grundsätze", in *Studien zur Philosophie der Aufklärung*, Bd. 1 (Aufklärung-Gesellschaft-Kritik, Berlin, 1985), p. 26 f.

2 Graham, op. cit., p. 54.

3 Troll, op. cit., p. 155.

During his stay in England the Sayyid continued his intensive studies of historical and philosophical literature. He was busy collecting material from Latin, German, French and English sources which he got translated to complete his "Essays on the Life of Mohammad" which responded to Muir.¹ After his return he modelled his own "torch of reason", the "Mohammadan Social Reformer" (*Tahdhib al-Akhlaq*) published between 1870 and 1896, with some intervals, from Aligarh on the monthly *Spectator* issued by Addison and Steele that was famous for its part in forming an enlightened public opinion in England.

Besides the direct historical link between the genesis of Sayyid Ahmad's views and elements of European Enlightenment, there existed a remarkable conceptual closeness between his works and the classics of European Enlightenment. Metcalf spoke of "this characteristically nineteenth-century pre-eminence he gave to the Laws of Nature".² His views betrayed traces of the "siècle des lumières" and were reminiscent of Rousseau's *Social Contract* and *Emile*, of Voltaire's letters from England. The Sayyid's approach to science, education and religion was directly influenced by the *avant-garde* of the English Enlightenment, by Newton, Bacon, Locke and Hobbes. Practically he followed a deist concept when he equated the Work and Word of God. Like Voltaire and Rousseau who supposed God had simply set the clockwork of the universe going and then abstained from interference, Sayyid Ahmad asserted that God had given powers to man for his free use knowing full well that the exercise of His powers would never contradict His knowledge. In the chapter on the creed of a Savoyard Priest from *Emile* Rousseau strongly pleaded for reason: God could not have given him understanding in order to forbid him to use it. "To tell me to submit my reason is to insult the giver of reason", the priest contemplated.³ Man was free in his actions reflecting the freedom of God. In a dialogue between "Inspiration" and "Reason" Rousseau asked for recognizing such established facts, like the whole being larger than the part, as facts coming from God. To deny matters of fact would mean that God contradicted Himself.⁴ In Sayyid Ahmad's "Principles of Exegesis" we find an analogous moment. His friend, Mohsin-ul-Mulk, in a letter to the Sayyid called it "a matter of sorrow that you respect what educated people in Europe who are no strict followers of religion consider true, correct and irrefutable whilst you give such an interpretation and arrive at such an explanation of the passages of the Quran where those matters are mentioned that not even one word remains in its place". The Sayyid asks whether a statement that two plus two is four should be considered wrong when it comes from a non-religious man or not and if a very religious man says two plus two is five, should it be called true?⁵ Troll indicated that the Sayyid followed the convictions of Francis Bacon and J.S. Mill when he ascribed full demonstrative value to scientific proofs.⁶ Here he shows a strong positivist tendency typical of the

1 Malik, op. cit., p. 100.

2 Metcalf, op. cit., p. 323.

3 Jean Jacques Rousseau, *Emile* (Paris, 1762), quoted after the English translation by Barbara Foxley (London, 1966), p. 264.

4 Ibid.

5 Sayyid Ahmad Khan, op. cit., pp. 204-5.

6 Troll, op. cit., p. 170.

Enlightenment which regarded established facts of science and nature as a reflection of God's order of the universe.

More similarities can be detected in the Sayyid's criticism of the formal aspect of Islamic religion, of the ulama and the traditional law schools (*fiqh*), of superstition and of the cult of saints which resembled the vociferous attacks on the encrusted structures and obscure practices of the Catholic church in enlightened Europe. Towards the end of his life Sayyid Ahmad believed that true Islam would show itself in every religion.¹ This unitarian concept can also be traced back to Rousseau and the European Enlightenment, and was shared by other social and religious reformers from India like Ram Mohan Roy.

The adversaries of Sayyid Ahmad intuitively made out that the Sayyid's reformism of Islam eventually tended towards rationalizing this world to an extent where God had no right nor reason to exist. In his controversy with the Sayyid, Nanotawi pointed to some aspects of "veiled" atheism, a feature even more common in eighteenth-century Enlightenment than in movements formed under its influence thereafter. If the universe were the dominion not only of God but also of any other being like man, as Sayyid Ahmad suggested, "then certainly the permission of that other being would have to be taken for God to exercise a limited measure of sway".² The ulama, whose authority Nanotawi linked to that of the Prophet, could not be denied their right to religious pronouncement. Otherwise revelation itself and the legitimacy of the Prophet were in doubt and "then no proof of religion will be found".³ The counsel of the Sayyid would lead to considering "Prophets to be (merely) like ordinary men".⁴ If human power to act was not a divine gift but man was free to use his powers he received from God then "human will would not remain the creation of God".⁵ This was more than a tribute to heated polemics. It laid bare the dilemma of any attempt to rationalize God, the Irrational. One hundred years earlier Rousseau tried to solve these discrepancies by completely dissociating his "natural religion" from any revelation, any particular organizing and executing structure and from any ritual whereby he arrived at an understanding of religion as an exclusive matter of heart.⁶ The Sayyid lacked the feeling for the radical potential of his thought. His mental horizon was limited to the extension of Islam in India.

The Lasting Value of the Sayyid's Message

Because of his multi-cultural background it is no easy task to correctly and comprehensively evaluate the Sayyid's contribution to historical progress in India and in

1 Sayyid Ahmad Khan stated that "it was immaterial whether the Prophet was from China, America, Mongolia, Africa, India, or Iran, or if he preached God's message to savages or civilized man", Malik, op. cit., p. 279.

2 Nanotawi op, cit., p. 60.

3 Ibid., p. 63.

4 Ibid., p. 65.

5 Ibid., p. 71.

6 Rousseau, *Emile*, p. 198.

the Islamic world. His work was related to at least three lines of tradition: (i) to European thinking shaped during the Enlightenment period and remodelled under Indian conditions; (ii) to Indian political and philosophical thought; and (iii) to pan-Islamic ideas. In the Indian context his ideas and activities represented a rather belated and none too significant sideline of the bourgeois transformation processes. If it is assumed that a period of Enlightenment can be marked out in Indian history—an opinion held by veteran G.D.R. Indologist Walter Ruben who called Indian history between 1813 and 1885 a “genetic analogy” to French history between 1715 and 1789¹—then Sayyid Ahmad Khan probably set the concluding highlight in a movement started by the Indian Renaissance and by Ram Mohan Roy in particular. Yet under colonial rule trends of Indian Enlightenment were to remain restricted and inconclusive. It founded most of its hopes on education, even on the education of the despot, that is, the improvement of the colonial administration. Not before India gained independence in the twentieth century could the young aspiring bourgeois classes follow Robespierre suit and try to establish their hegemony. The Indian philosophical and political mind could never free itself completely from the ropes of the past, from religious fervour, superstition and miracle-mongers. Indian Enlightenment was compelled to coexist with religious romanticism and revivalism as well as with first trends of utopian Socialism, reflecting disillusionment with political reality in colonial India.

In the pan-Islamic context the Sayyid's concept of the reform of Islam seemed to be very advanced and radical. Here mention must be made of Jamaluddin al-Afghani who vehemently campaigned against the Sayyid. He was the other great “modernist” of Islam. Al-Afghani visited India twice and spent over a year there. He strongly rejected the Sayyid's religious rationalism and his political collaboration with the British colonial administration. Al-Afghani exhorted the Muslim world community to regain its lost identity and to defend itself resolutely against the intrusion of British colonialism. He was in favour of modernizing the Islamic tenets, yet not to the extent to which the Sayyid went. His main concern was political Islam. He called on the ulama to rise to the occasion to reform and defend Islam. Sayyid Ahmad did not share al-Afghani's political resolve and optimism. The ulama he deemed too weak and backward for such mission, the British too strong so that Indian Muslims could only lose out from a confrontation. As Aziz Ahmed rightly observed, Sayyid Ahmad was the strategist of defeat of Muslim India at the hands of the British while al-Afghani followed the defence strategy of a shrewd Afghan from the border line.² No doubt, battle lines were blurred in international Islam and India was no exception. The traditionalist Deoband seminary became a seat of anti-colonial Muslim resistance in India. The Sayyid, the most enlightened in Islamic religious thought, demanded that British colonial rule over India should preferably last for ever. And al-Afghani, who put his anti-British feelings in the strongest words, opposed the light brought into Islam by Sayyid Ahmad.

1 W. Ruben, “Bemerkungen zu einer Periodisierung der Geschichte Indiens im Rahmen der Universalgeschichte”, in *Asien, Afrika, Lateinamerika* (Berlin, 1973), Vol. I, p. 124.

2 A. Ahmad, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

No doubt, the Sayyid remained a controversial figure beyond his lifetime. Coming from a traditional background, he continued to be a deeply religious man. Taking in the ideas of liberalism and rationalism which had come to India through the mediation of the colonial power, Britain, he had tried to incorporate the categories of reason and natural law into Islam. By this, he provided the social and religious movements of Muslims in India and in the adjoining regions with the missing ideological link between eighteenth-century European Enlightenment and the challenges of capitalism which his co-religionists faced during his time. It is a valuable consideration for Marxist historical thought to view the influence of the ideas and movements of European Enlightenment not too narrowly either geographically or from their ideological and social background. Keeping in mind continuous religious tension in his homeland, South Asia, vocal movements of Muslim emancipation and Islamic revivalism, the influence of fanaticism and terrorism in the Islamic world, the Sayyid's attempts to offer the Muslims a rationalized understanding of the universe have not lost any of their meaning. The reformist, deist concept of Islam propounded by Sayyid Ahmad still retains its explosive potential so far unrealized.