

Formation of Muslim Elites in British India: Sayyid Ahmad Khan and the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College

C A R I M O M O H O M E D

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Abstract: After the Indian Mutiny of 1857-1858, also known as the Sepoy Revolt or Uprising, and the end of the Mughal Dynasty, India became under the direct rule of the British Government, and there were a considerable number of Muslim political intellectuals who sought to reform and revitalize Islam in India and as a whole. The responses were various and the debates would surpass geographical boundaries, anticipating questions which are relevant even nowadays, like gender relations, new forms of religious institutionalization and the role of religion in politics. The aim of this paper is to analyze the thought of Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817-1898) and the educational impacts of his Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College, also known as the Aligarh Movement.

Keywords: Ahmad Khan, Islam, India, 19th century, Aligarh Movement.

Resumo: Após o Motim de 1857-1858, também conhecido como a Revolta ou Rebelião dos Cípiaios, e o fim da Dinastia Mogol, a Índia passou a estar sob o controlo directo do governo britânico, e houve um número considerável de intelectuais políticos muçulmanos que procuraram reformar e revitalizar o Islão na Índia e como um todo. As respostas foram várias e os debates ultrapassariam fronteiras geográficas e antecipariam questões que são revelantes ainda hoje em dia, como as relações de género, novas formas de institucionalização religiosa ou o papel da religião na política. O objectivo deste artigo é o de analisar o pensamento de Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817-1898) e os impactos educacionais do seu Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College, também conhecido como o Movimento de Aligarh.

Palavras-chave: Ahmad Khan, Islão, Índia, século XIX, Movimento de Aligarh.

Introduction

Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, in a trend that had begun at the 18th, many thinkers in the Muslim world felt that Islam was going through a period of social decline, political weakness and economic disintegration, expressing itself in different regions where reform movements and schools, while taking into account spiritual and environmental differences of each region, showed an essentially similar character. This pushed those thinkers to propose projects of deep reform in beliefs, ideas and practices based on them. These reformers were convinced that their opinions, policies and programmes were fundamentally similar to those of early Islam, and among the reformist phenomena there were clear differences as to the main theme: some insisted more on purification than others, some were more proactive; and their forms also varied according to local differences and different religious historical experiences. However, the general view presented a clearly defined character: an invitation to return to primitive Islam, the end of moral and social abuses, the general deterioration which the *umma* (the global Muslim community) had undergone over the centuries, since the fall of Baghdad in 1258 at the hands of the Mongols, and, as a proposed solution to these problems, the adoption of an attitude of moral and religious positivism¹.

The second half of the 19th century was a period of great richness in the history of the modern Islamic movement, when a group of Muslim intellectuals, in different parts of the world, rigorously examined the fundamentals of Islamic jurisprudence. The central theological problems at the core of these examinations focused on the validity of the knowledge derived from sources external to the *Qur'an* and the methodology of traditional sources of jurisprudence: the *Qur'an*, the *hadith* (traditions of the Prophet Muhammad), *ijma* (consensus of the Muslim community), and *qiyas* (analogical reasoning). The epistemological step adopted was to reinterpret the first two, the *Qur'an* and the *hadith*, and to transform the last two, *ijma* and *qiyas*, in the light of scientific rationalism. Among those who had a strong impact were al-Afghani (1838-1897), Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817-1898), Muhammad 'Abduh (1849-1905) and Amir 'Ali (1849-1928), who presented Islam in a way that was consistent with modern ideas and rational sciences. They were fascinated with what the West had achieved in technological and scientific progress: the Newtonian conception of the Universe, Spencer's sociology, Darwinian ideas and even Western style of life. All of them argued that, since Islam was a world religion, it was capable of adapting to the changing environment of each age,

1 K. Humayun Ansari – Pan-Islam and the Making of the Early Indian Muslim Socialists. *Modern Asian Studies*. Cambridge. 20:3 (1986), p. 510; Ahmad Dallal – The Origins and Objectives of Islamic Revivalist Thought, 1750-1850. *Journal of the American Oriental Society*. 113:3 (Jul.-Sep. 1993) 341-359; Fazlur Rahman – *Islam*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1966. [Portuguese translation used: *O Islamismo*. Lisboa: Arcádia, 1970, p. 284-285].

particularly since the use of law and reason was characteristic of the perfect Muslim community².

Although the felt need for reformist thinking was endogenous, with movements which proposed a fresh rereading against the inherited traditions³, the shock of European expansionism beginning in the later part of the 18th century, early 19th, the expansive social and intellectual power of Europe, seen not only as an adversary but also as a challenge, in some cases an attractive one, brought a new element which reinforced that feeling. The power and greatness of Europe, science and modern technologies, political institutions of European states, and social morality of modern societies were all favourite issues, forcing the formulation of a fundamental problem: how could Muslims acquire the strength to confront Europe and become part of the modern world?

According to Albert Hourani, the first clear attempts to answer this question came to light in the writings of the officials connected with the reforms in the middle of 19th century in Istanbul, Cairo and Tunis. Some were written in Turkish, others in Arabic. Particularly important was the work of Khayr al-Din Pasha al-Tunisi (c. 1822-1890), leader of the last attempt to reform the Tunisian government before the French occupation. In the introduction to his book, which would have a strong impact on the thought of Al-Afghani and Sayyid Ahmad Khan⁴, he explained his aim:

“First, to urge those who are zealous and resolute among statesmen and men of religion to adopt, as far as they can, whatever is conducive to the welfare of the Islamic community and the development of its civilization, such as the expansion of the bounds of science and learning and the preparation of the paths which lead to wealth... and the basis of all this is good government. Secondly, to warn those who are heedless among the generality of Muslims against persistence in closing their eyes to what is praiseworthy and what conforms with our own religious law in the practice of adherents of other religions, simply because they have the idea fixed in their minds that all the acts and institutions of those who are not Muslims should be avoided”⁵.

2 Mansoor Moaddel – Conditions for ideological production: the origins of Islamic modernism in India, Egypt, and Iran. *Theory and Society*. 30:5 (October 2001), p. 669; and Mansoor Moaddel – *Islamic Modernism, Nationalism, and Fundamentalism: Episode and Discourse*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005, p. 42-45.

3 Rudolph Peters – *Idjithād and Taqlīd in 18th and 19th Century Islam*. *Die Welt des Islams*. New Series. Leiden. 20:3-4 (1980) 131-145.

4 Aziz Ahmad – Sayyid Ahmad Khān, Jamāl al-dīn al-Afghānī and Muslim India. *Studia Islamica*. Paris. 13 (1960), p. 59-60; Ruth Soule Arnon – Muslim Revivalism and Higher Education. *History of Education Quarterly*. Urbana-Champaign. 22:4 (Winter 1982), p. 470.

5 Cited in Albert Hourani – *A History of the Arab Peoples*. London: Faber and Faber, 1992, p. 306. For more details see Khayr al-Din Pasha Al-Tunisi – *Réformes nécessaires aux États musulmans: essai formant la première partie de l'ouvrage politique et statistique intitulé: la plus sûre direction pour connaître l'état des nations*. Paris: Paul Dupont, 1868. Original title: *Mukaddime-i Akwam al-Masalik fi Marifetul Ahwal al-Memalik*. Tunis, 1867-1868, later published in Istanbul in 1878. English translation by Leon Carl Brown; Khayr al-Din al-Tunisi (ed.) – *The Surest Path. The political treatise of a nineteenth-century Muslim statesman, a translation of the Introduction to The Surest Path to knowledge concerning the condition of countries*. Harvard University: Center for Middle Eastern Studies, 1967.

As the century went on, and with the rise of the new educated class in the 1860s and 1870s, a split appeared among those who supported the reforms, a division of opinion which was about the bases of authority: whether it should lie with officials responsible to their own sense of justice and the interests of the political order, or with a representative government produced by elections. The split between generations of Muslim thinkers went deeper than this, however. The second generation was aware of a problem implicit in the changes which were taking place. Reform of institutions would be dangerous unless rooted in some kind of moral solidarity: what should this be, and how far could it be derived from the teachings of Islam? Such a question became more pressing as the new schools began to produce a generation not grounded in the traditional Islamic learning, and exposed to the winds of education and learning blowing from the West.

Early reform movements in India: the case of Shah Wali Allah of Delhi

Qutb al-Din Ahmad ibn 'Abd al-Rahim (1702/03-1762), known as Shah Wali Allah, lived in a period of historic transition for India, as in his time the Mughal empire started to collapse, with small semi-independent states emerging and the Sikh and Hindu communities challenging Muslim power. He left a vast written work, covering different fields such as the *Qur'an*, the *Hadith*, Jurisprudence, Sufism, Prophecy, *Shari'a*, Economics, Society, Philosophy and also Poetry⁶.

During the 18th century, the Mughal Empire, as an effective system of political control in India, started to collapse. The last years of Aurangzeb's (1618-1707) rule (1658-1707) were characterized by revolts and, after his death, in 1707, wars of succession and the ascension of local and provincial powers brought to an end the political and military unity that had been created by Mughal rule⁷. Hindu and Sikh princes competed with local Muslim commanders, and with Afghan and Persian invaders, for supremacy inside the sub-continent, but no local power was able to impose a position of lasting strength. In time, Great Britain would take over the control of most parts of India but, in the 18th century, the British were just one more amongst innumerable competitors.

In the opinion of Shah Wali Allah, society's decadence had its causes in the lack of a strong faith, disunity between Muslims and a deep moral degeneration. As a solution he proposed a rational interpretation of Islam. Jointly with rational arguments, he presented traditional dialectics and tried to resolve the question of disunity proposing

6 For a complete bibliography of Shah Wali Allah's work, see Muhammad Al-Ghazali – *The socio-political thought of Shah Wali Allah*. New Delhi: Adam Publishers and Distributors, 2004, p. 109-115, and G.N. Jalbani (ed. and trans.) – *Teachings of Hadrat Shah Waliyullah Muhadith Dehlvi*. New Delhi: Kitab Bhavan, 1997, p. 242-244.

7 G.N. Jalbani (ed. and trans.) – *Teachings of Hadrat Shah Waliyullah Muhadith Dehlvi...*, p. 144-145.

a reconciliation between the different juridical and theological schools, defending Sufism at the same time, into which he had been initiated by his father, Shah 'Abd al-Rahim (d. 1719).

Shah Wali Allah adopted measures for the reconstruction of Muslims' culture, politics and ideological orientation, and his proposals covered fields such as beliefs, social structure, politics, economics, legal and juridical concepts, philosophical and metaphysical ideas, in an attempt to address the needs of this world and the hereafter. In his works, the interaction between the issues of 18th century Islamic history and the special conditions of India is clear. On one hand, he was the culminating point of Islam's evolution that had been put in movement by the ascension of the Mughals and the beginnings of Naqshbandiyyah revivalism, and, on the other, his work furnished the foundation for virtually all important future Muslim movements in India.

Like other Islamic revivalists from 18th century, Wali Allah was not concerned about the modernising challenge of the West, and his reformism came from the interaction between local conditions, that were changing, and the Islamic dimension. The starting point for Islamic thought in modern India was inspired more by endogenous factors than exogenous, a fact that gives a special characteristic to Islamic revivalism in the context of modern History. Two big issues framed his work: the decline of Muslim community as a whole in India and the disunity and conflict inside the community. Shah Wali Allah did not organize a formal movement nor did he create a special association. The structures he developed were schools, through which he expected to provide the foundations for a revitalisation of Islamic thought and so restore the Islamic position in India. Although his attitude of coexistence with other religions was tolerant, he tried to eradicate from the Muslim Indian social mores the practices and the rituals inherited or taken from Hinduism, something that Aurangzeb had tried before with the court ceremonials.

The stress on the study of the *hadith* was also present in his work. Wali Allah's studies of *hadith*, like his interpretation of Sufism, shows his double concern about reconciling the divisions inside the Muslim community and bringing Islamic practice into accordance to the Islamic ideal. One of the dividing lines was the separation of Sunni Muslims into different juridical schools (*madhab*). In his work, Wali Allah subordinated the study of the Law to the study of the *hadith*. Wali Allah rejected the practice of *taqlid* if it meant a blind obedience to the teachers of the juridical school's traditions. Instead, he believed that *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) was necessary and that the two unquestionable sources for Islamic Law were the *Qur'an* and the *Sunna* and, so, the study of traditions had precedence to the imitation of former jurists⁸.

8 Aziz Ahmad – The Role of Ulema in Indo-Muslim History. *Studia Islamica*, N. 31 (1970) [Paris: Maisonneuve & Larose] p. 1-13; G.N. Jalbani (ed. and trans.) – *Teachings of Hadrat Shah Waliyullah Muhadith Dehli...*, p. 57-81; John Obert Voll – *Islam: continuity and change in the modern world*. New York: Syracuse University Press, 1994, p. 58-60 (Contemporary Issues in the Middle East).

Shah Wali Allah was conscious that the ethical and religious decadence of Islam in 18th century was something general and, addressing a very wide field of readers in India and abroad, he wrote in Arabic and Persian, continuing the work begun by Sheikh Ahmad Sarhindi (1564-1624) in the 17th century, consisting in the channelling of the tides of mystical origin in traditional Islam. His effort was based, in part, on a synthesis that stressed a formula of commitment on what the different legal schools of Islam shared between them. He explained the juridical concept of *ijtihad* as an effort to understand the principles of canonical Law, and, although he was a rigorist, he opened the way to future modernists of Indian Islam, like Sayyid Ahmad Khan in the 19th century and Iqbal and Mawdudi in the 20th.⁹ For example, for Muhammad Iqbal, Shah Wali Allah was “perhaps the first Muslim who felt the urge of a new spirit in him”¹⁰.

The principles of *qur’anic* exegesis, contained in his work *Al-Fauz al-kabir fi usul al-tafsir*¹¹, introduced a new dimension in the field of *tafsir* (the interpretation of the *Qur’an*). Before Shah Wali Allah, and because there was the idea that the text could not be translated, *qur’anic* commentary was an exclusive field for specialists. So, Wali Allah emphasised a direct approach to the *Qur’an* and took the initiative of translating it into Persian¹², *lingua franca* of cultivated Muslims in the sub-continent¹³, allowing the common people to access it directly, to understand and to explain the teachings of the *Qur’an* without recurring to a third party.

Shah Wali Allah’s approach to the Science of Hadith was characterised by his view that the *Sunna* was, more than something independent, essentially a commentary to the *Qur’an*, leading him to consider that there was an organic relation between both. In the field of Philosophy and Scholastics his work *Hujjat Allah al-Balighah*, his *magnum opus*, made a significant exposition of his vision of an Islamic worldview¹⁴. Very important in the fields of History and Biography were the works *Izalat al-Khafa’ ‘an Khilafat al-Khulafa’*, which dwells on the original caliph model, *i.e.*, of the first four caliphs, especially the deeds of the first two caliphs and their place in Islam, and *Surar al-Mahzun*, a short biography of the Prophet Muhammad.

9 Abul Kalam Mohammad Shahed – Socio-Political Reform of Muslims in the View of Shah Waliullah and Sayyid Abul A’la Mawdudi. In Ahmad Sunawari Long; Jaffary Awang; Kamaruddin Salleh (eds.) – *Islam: Past, Present and Future: International Seminar on Islamic Thoughts Proceedings*, 7-9 December. Bangi: Department of Theology and Philosophy – Faculty of Islamic Sciences – Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 2004, p. 40-50.

10 Muhammad Iqbal – The Human Ego: his freedom and immortality. In Idem – *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*. London: Oxford University Press, 1934. Edition used: New Delhi: Kitab Bhavan, 1974, 6th reimpression, 1998, p. 97.

11 Shah Waliyullah – *Al-Fauz al-kabir fi usul al-tafsir (The principles of Qur’an commentary)*. New Delhi: Kitab Bhavan, 2004.

12 Shah Waliyullah – *Fath al-Rahman al-Tarjamat al-Qur’an*. Karachi, 1984.

13 Makhdum Nuh (d. 1589) from Hala, Sind, is considered to be the first one to have translated the *Qur’an* into Persian. Cf. G.N. Jalbani (ed. and trans.) – *Teachings of Hadrat Shah Waliyullah Muhadith Dehli...*, p. 7.

14 First published in Bareilly (India) in 1870, an English translation was made under the title *The Conclusive Argument from God* by Marcia Hermansen. The first part of that translation was published by E.J. Brill at Leiden in 1995.

Many currents of educational, intellectual and spiritual thought, that sprung up in India after Shah Wali Allah, reclaimed themselves from his reformist ideas, like the Modernists from Aligarh, *Ahl-i Sunnat wa al-Jama'at*, *Ahl-i Hadith*, *Jama'at-i Islami* or the educational centres of Deoband, Farangi Mahal and *Nadwat al-'Ulama*¹⁵.

Wali Allah's theological seminary in Delhi produced a group of theologians between the late 18th century and the early 19th, including his son, Shah 'Abd al-'Aziz, who declared that India, under the British East India Company, was *dar al-harb* (abode of war, in opposition to the abode of Islam, *dar al-Islam*), and one of his disciples, Sayyid Ahmad of Rae Bareilly (Brelwi) (1786-1831), transformed this reformist school into a *jihād* movement¹⁶, being generally considered as the introducer of Wahhabism on a large scale to India, and thought to have been influenced by that doctrine when he visited Mecca, in pilgrimage, in 1822-3. Men were recruited and funds were collected for the *jihād* in a vast area in the North and East of India. Sayyid Ahmad and his companion Shah Muhammad Isma'il (1781-1831), known as Shahid (martyr) and grandson of Shah Wali Allah, died in 1831 in Balakot, in a battle against the Sikh, although killed by local Pathans, who were Muslims¹⁷. Their followers, although weak and lacking on funds and men, continued the *jihād* against the British, from Sithana to the Western frontier. In 1870-71, some pro-British 'ulama issued *fatawa* (plural of *fatwa*) dissociating themselves from the movement, but the *jihād* activity went on until 1890¹⁸.

Meanwhile, Hajji Shari'at Allah (c.1764-1840) had founded in Bengal another movement of reform in the beginnings of the 19th century, known as the Fara'idi movement, characterized by three factors: 1) an anti-British trend, visible in the declaration that India had stopped being *Dar al-Islam* and had become *Dar al-Harb*; 2) an economic and social reform against the rich landowners, and in favour of the peasants and workers; 3) purification of Islam from Hindu ideas and Sufi excesses. This movement was later continued by Shari'at Allah's son Dudhu Miyan, who died in 1864¹⁹.

15 Muhammad Al-Ghazali – *The socio-political thought...*, p. V.

16 Ruth Soule Arnon – *Muslim Revivalism and Higher Education...*, p. 466.

17 G.N. Jalbani – *Abaqat of Shah Muhammad Isma'il Shahid: being an exposition of Shah Waliyullah's Sataat & Lamahat*. New Delhi: Kitab Bhavan, 1994, p. x-xiii.

18 Marc Gaborieau – *Le mahdi oublié de l'Inde britannique: Sayyid Ahmad Barelwī (1786-1831), ses disciples, ses adversaires. Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée*. Aix-en-Provence. 91-94 (2000) 257-274.

19 Fazlur Rahman – *Islam...*, p. 275-278. On the question of Wahhabism in India and the suitability of this designation to the described movements, see Qeyamuddin Ahmad – *The wahabi movement in India*. Calcutta: Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyay, 1966; and the reviews to his work by D. Mackenzie Brown – *The American Historical Review*. 73:4 (Apr. 1968), p. 1225-1226 and Hafeez Malik – *The Journal of Asian Studies*. 29:3 (May 1970), p. 717-718.

Sayyid Ahmad Khan and the Aligarh movement

Ideological debates and religious disputes in 19th century resulted in the rise of several important issues in the wider Islamic world such as: 1) The empirical versus the Islamic sciences; 2) The rational basis of law versus the *Shari'a*; 3) Western civilization versus the abode of Islam; 4) Gender equality versus male supremacy; and 5) Constitutionalism versus the Islamic conception of sovereignty. In their re-examination of Islamic worldviews, Islamic modernists pointed to the methodological and conceptual inadequacy of Islamic orthodoxy. In India and Egypt, the active presence of the followers of the Enlightenment, the Westernizers, and the Evangelicals, resulted in the rise of a pluralistic discursive field, where modernist Muslim scholars faced a multiplicity of issues²⁰.

In 1832 the Reverend Midgeley John Jennings (d. 1857) arrived at India, and became, in 1852, chaplain of the Christian population of Delhi, and hoped to convert the local population to Anglican Christianity, thus ending with the local “false religions”, a sentiment shared by many Evangelical British in India, who were expecting not only to rule and manage the country but also to “save” her, using their influence through the British East India Company to convert the country. The British Empire was the proof that God was on their side: to propagate the faith would augment even more that empire. Some Evangelical figures, such as the Reverends Henry Martyn (1781-1812), Joseph Wolff (1795-1862) and, especially, Carl Pfander (1805-1865), were important missionaries with an aggressive posture of “frontal attack” against Islam, exemplified by the publication of books such as *Mizan al-Haqq (Balance of Truth)*, first published in 1829²¹, or *Remarks on the nature of Muhammadanism*²².

The impacts on the Indian Muslim community were felt and, at an intellectual level, Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817-1898) became preoccupied mostly with theological issues, Chiragh 'Ali (1844-1895) with legal reforms, Mumtaz 'Ali with Islamic feminism, and Shibli Nu'mani (1857-1914) and Sayyid Amir 'Ali (1849-1928) with historical Islam and hagiographical studies²³. Shibli Nu'mani was an associate of Ahmad Khan and

20 For further details see Mansoor Moaddel – *Conditions for ideological production...*, 2001.

21 Carl G. Pfander – *The Mizan'ul Haqq (Balance of Truth)*. London: The Religious Tract Society, 1910. For further details see William Dalrymple – *The last mughal: the fall of a dynasty, Delhi, 1857*. London: Bloomsbury, 2007, p. 58-63 and p. 126-127; Mansoor Moaddel – *Islamic Modernism, Nationalism, and Fundamentalism...*, p. 52-62; Avril Ann Powell – *Muslims and Missionaries in Pre-Mutiny India*. London: Curzon Press Ltd., 1993 ; and Christian W. Troll – New Light on the Christian-Muslim Controversy of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Century. *Die Welt des Islams*. Leiden. New Series. 34:1 (April 1994), p. 85-88.

22 Carl G. Pfander – *Remarks on the nature of Muhammadanism: traditions*. Calcutta: Baptist Mission Press, 1840.

23 For more details on how Amir 'Ali tried to explain, in his books, Muslim history from a viewpoint which used the political language of English liberalism, and how his political creed framed his vision of History, justifying his political positions, see Carimo Mohamed – Islam, Historia y Liberalismo en Sayyid Amir Ali. *Revista HMIc – història moderna i contemporània*. Barcelona. 10 (2012) 198-212.

taught Persian and Arabic at Aligarh, but became critical of the college after leaving it in 1898 in an attempt to penetrate and, indeed, lead the *Nadwat ul-'Ulama* in Lucknow²⁴.

After the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857-58, the leading figures of the Muslim community in India posed a series of questions about their future. The answers were many and three types can be distinguished: 1) Traditionalists, established in Deoband²⁵ and Bhopal; 2) Shibli Nu'mani's, who helped to establish the *Nadwat ul-'Ulama* in Lucknow, which attempted to be a middle way between the former and; 3) the Modernists, starting with Sayyid Karamat 'Ali (1796-1876) and his disciple Sayyid Amir 'Ali, both from Bengal²⁶, culminating with Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan, from the United Provinces (nowadays Uttar Pradesh). The Modernists, who were deeply influenced by Western modern liberal thought, tried to interpret Islam in a rational way, inspired also by the idealised vision on the Mu'tazilite school, and Sayyid Ahmad Khan eventually came to the conclusion that the Muslims of India had to accommodate themselves with the British²⁷.

Born on 17th October 1817 into an important family from Delhi, which belonged to the Mughal aristocracy, Sayyid Ahmad Khan's ancestors claimed to be direct descendents from the Prophet Muhammad through his daughter Fatima and his cousin and son-in-law 'Ali²⁸. Ahmad Khan's family had migrated to India through Iran and Afghanistan, and, after his father's death in 1838, he started to work as a civil servant in a Civil Court under the British East India Company in Delhi, dedicating himself to the writing of various subjects like History, Sciences, Theology and Civil Law. At the same time, he re-read the Muslim medieval classical works and produced his first historiographical work, which dwells on the ancient buildings and monuments of Delhi and surroundings²⁹.

The events of 1857 caught him in Bijnaur as a civil judge, and his journal between May 1857 and April 1858 became a monograph with the title *Tarikh-i Sarkashi-i Bijnaur*, which is a history of the Mutiny in Bijnaur³⁰. In 1859, Ahmad Khan published a book

24 David Lelyveld – Disenchantment at Aligarh: Islam and the Realm of the Secular in Late Nineteenth Century India. *Die Welt des Islams*. Leiden. New Series. 22:1-4 (1982), p. 97-98.

25 Barbara Daly Metcalf – *Islamic revival in British India: Deoband, 1860-1900*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

26 Michel Boivin – Nature, raison et nation dans le modernisme shi'ite de l'Inde britannique. *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée*. Aix-en-Provence. 101-102 (juillet 2003), p. 83-105.

27 Muhammad Aslam Syed – Muslim Response to the West: Muslim Historiography in India, 1857-1914. *Journal of the American Oriental Society*. Ann Arbor. 111:1 (Jan.-Mar. 1991), p. 193-194.

28 The biographical information on Sayyid Ahmad Khan is based on Muzaffar Iqbal – *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*. Available at <http://www.cis-ca.org/voices/k/syydkhn.htm>. Last accessed 21/06/2012; Hafeez Malik – Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan's Doctrines of Muslim Nationalism and National Progress. *Modern Asian Studies*. Cambridge. 2:3 (1968) 221-244; Hafeez Malik – Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan's Contribution to the Development of Muslim Nationalism in India. *Modern Asian Studies*. Cambridge. 4:2 (1970) 129-147; Mehr Afroz Murad – *Intellectual Modernism of Shibli Nu'mani: an exposition of his religious and political ideas*. New Delhi: Kitab Bhavan, 1996, p. 1-4; Fazlur Rahman – Muslim Modernism in the Indo-Pakistan Sub-Continent. *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*. Cambridge. 21:1-3 (1958), p. 82-88.

29 Sayyid Ahmad Khan – *Asar-oos-sunnadeed: a history of old and new rules or governments and of old and new buildings in the district of Delhi in 1852*. [S.l.]: W. Demonte, 1854.

30 Available at <http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00urdu/asbab/bijnor/index.html>. Last accessed 03/08/2010.

in Urdu, *Risalah-i-Asbab-e Baghawat-e Hind* (*Causes of the Indian Mutiny*), later translated into English, in which he criticised the mutiny of the previous years, arguing that there had been only one cause for it, all the others being a consequence: the fact that the natives of India blamed the government for the diminishing of their position and dignity and for maintaining them in a lower position. In addition, the natives blamed the British for daily suffering and for being afraid of abuse at the hands of the officials³¹.

What happened to the Muslims after the Mutiny shocked Sayyid Ahmad Khan greatly and he pursued the task of rapprochement between the British, on one hand, and the Indians and Muslims on the other. It was on this period that his book on the causes of the revolt was written³², exposing the errors of the administration of the East India Company as well as what the native population thought were the actual objectives of the Company: proselytism of Christian missionaries and subsequent conversion of India; in the economic field, the fiscal and financial monopolies of the Company, the smashing of local industries with the objective of creating a market for British exports; the huge fiscal burden in northern India, causing misery; destruction of political and military organization; and the deep discrimination and despise that the Company had for the native population.

In 1860-61, Ahmad Khan published his *Risalah Khair Khawahân Musalmanân: An Account of the Loyal Mohamadans of India*, in which he defended that the Indian Muslims were the most loyal subjects of the British Raj (Rule) because of their disposition and because of the principles of their religion, being convinced that the British had come to stay and that their supremacy, with that of the West, could not be doubted in the near future. So, Muslims should rethink their way of living, being at the risk of falling further. For him, the existing resentment was due to mutual prejudices and ignorance. His effort to mediate between Christianity and Islam took shape in his work *Ahkam-i Taâm-i Ahl-i Kitab*, dealing with the social contact between Muslims, Christians and Jews, and in a commentary to the *Bible*, where he tried to establish that both religions derived from the same source and that their similitude would be quickly recognized by whoever studied and compared them.

In that commentary, *Tabîyyan al-kalâm fi'l-tafsîr al-tawrâ wa'l-injîl calâ millat al-islam* (*The Mahomedan Commentary on the Bible*), he included, as an appendix, a *fatwa* issued by Jamal ibn al-'Abd Allah 'Umar al-Hanfi, the Mufti of Mecca, who said that as long as some of the rites of Islam were maintained in India, this was *Dar al-Islam* (Abode of Islam). The aim was to contain the *fatwa* issued by some Indian 'ulama saying that India had become *Dar al-Harb* (Abode of War). At the same time, Ahmad Khan tried

31 Sayyid Ahmad Khan – *History of the Bijnor Rebellion*. Translated by Hafeez Malik and Morris Dembo. Available at <http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00urdu/asbab/bijnor/index.html>. Last accessed 21/06/2012.

32 Sayyid Ahmad Khan – *Asbab-e-Baghawat-e-Hind* (*The causes of the Indian Revolt*). In Shan Mohammad (ed.) – *Writings and Speeches of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan*. Bombay: Nachiketa Publications, 1972, p. 15-33.

to make Muslims see that modern western education, with its emphasis on science and rational thought, would only be beneficial to the community, and also tried to synthesize it with Islamic religious thought, defending that in this there was nothing that opposed to the study of science and that there was nothing to be afraid of from its impact.

Arguing that the *Qur'an* should be interpreted according to each time and its conditions, Sayyid Ahmad Khan defended that the *Hadith* did not furnish an adequate basis for the understanding of Islam, and that religion had suffered many changes through time, especially with the additions and mixings of the specialists' opinions. So, it was necessary to extract all the "exotic" ideas and put them in their respective perspectives. Ahmad Khan conceived a new educational system, in which the responsibility to educate future generations would be on the Muslim community itself and in which the intellectuals would receive education in Islam and in Western sciences, becoming Aligarh's main educational basis, with future impacts in Indian Muslim society in the modernist trend.

Ahmad Khan created two schools in the cities of Muradabad and Ghazipur, having established in the first one, in 1864, the Scientific Society, which was moved in 1867 to Aligarh. The objectives of the Society were to translate works on Arts and Sciences from English or other European languages so they could be understood by the natives; to find and publish rare and valuable oriental works which did not have a religious character; to publish a periodical, the weekly *Aligarh Institute Gazette*; to offer lectures on scientific subjects or others that were considered useful. The main objective for Aligarh was to become the source of a new leadership for Indian Muslims, responding to the new conditions in the world and based on new kinds of knowledge, claiming this new knowledge for Islam, and protecting the faith and identity of their English-educated sons in the face of competing sorts of belief and allegiance³³.

Many translations of English works in the fields of History, Political Economy, Agriculture, Mathematics and others were published, and the institution of modern education and Western scientific knowledge as a way of reform and renewal of the Muslim community and/or Muslim countries was also common in other places like Egypt, the Ottoman Empire or Tunisia³⁴.

In 1866 the Aligarh British Indian Association was created, with more political aims in the sense of influencing the government's decisions in what was related to Indian Muslims, but with little impact. Ahmad Khan, who had been elected honorary Fellow of the Royal Asiatic Society of London in 1864, visited England in 1869-70, staying in the British capital for seventeen months with his two sons, Sayyid Hamid

33 David Lelyveld – Disenchantment at Aligarh..., p. 101.

34 François Siino – Sciences, savoirs modernes et évolutions des modèles politiques. *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée*. Aix-en-Provence. 101-102 (juillet 2003) 9-28.

and Sayyid Mahmud, a friend, Mirza Khuda Dad Beg, and an employee. Besides giving him the opportunity for contact with the local reality, the stay also gave him the chance of meeting the State Secretary for India and Queen Victoria herself, who gave him the title of Companion of the Star of India. His visit convinced him of the British superiority and allowed him to read William Muir's biography of the Prophet Muhammad, which disturbed him deeply, for religious reasons and personal ones, because the Prophet was his ancestor (hence his title Sayyid).

Based on information drawn from the study of some Muslim sources, *The Life of Mahomet*³⁵, written by Sir William Muir in response to a veteran missionary's request, amplified the thesis that Islam was a backward religion, and was acclaimed as a great help in the missionary enterprise. In that work, Sir William Muir talked about divorce, polygamy and slavery, and Sayyid Ahmad Khan wrote a refutation with the title *Essays on the Life of Mohammed and Subjects Subsidiary Thereto*³⁶, containing twelve essays, an endeavour which forced him to search for materials in the British Museum and in the India Office Library³⁷. Ahmad Khan was also able to visit Oxford and Cambridge Universities and some colleges, like Eton and Harrow, which would serve him as models for his Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College³⁸. Back to India in October 1870 and with a new orientation for his ideas and efforts, Ahmad Khan dedicated himself to the social and intellectual regeneration of Indian Muslims.

In 1871 William Hunter published his *The Indian Musalmans*³⁹, with the aim of creating a better understanding between rulers and ruled, as a way to safeguard British power in India. Using as a basis the various trials after the Mutiny, he came to the conclusion that there was a causal relation between the Wahhabi activities and the permanent instability in the North-Western Frontier. For him, the movement was well organized and its leaders claimed all the functions of sovereignty over their constituents. The bonds that connected the members of that "secret order" were extraordinarily strong and permanent. The headquarters, in Patna, and the controlling machinery throughout rural areas for the "spreading of insatisfaction, sent a multitude of zealots carefully indoctrinated with treason and equipped with vast literature about the duty to wage war against the British. An uninterrupted flow of money and fiery recruits determined to extirpate the infidel crossed the border."

35 William Muir – *The life of Mahomet*. London: Smith, Elder, & Co, 1861.

36 Syed Ahmed Khan Bahador – *A series of essays on the life of Mohammed, and subjects subsidiary thereto*. London: Trübner & Co, 1870.

37 Muda Ismail Ab Rahman – The Responses of Sayyid Ahmad Khan to William Muir's Works on Islam. In Ahmad Sunawari Long; Jaffary Awang; Kamaruddin Salleh – *Islam: Past, Present and Future: International Seminar on Islamic Thoughts Proceedings, 7-9 December*. Bangi: Department of Theology and Philosophy – Faculty of Islamic Sciences – Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 2004, p. 1-6.

38 David Lelyveld – *Disenchantment at Aligarh...*, p. 87.

39 Sir William Wilson Hunter – *The Indian Musalmans: Are They Bound in Conscience to Rebel Against the Queen?*. London: Trübner & Co, 1871.

This picture described by Hunter caused a protest from the part of Sayyid Ahmad Khan, who characterized the book as misleading and historically inaccurate. In a recension to that book, *The Indian Musalmans*⁴⁰, he pointed out many incorrections in the affirmations of Hunter about the Wahhabi precepts, and made a critical history of that movement from 1823 until the publication of that book. For Sayyid Ahmad, the permanent transborder hostility against British rule had nothing to do with Wahhabi fomentations but with the continuing presence in the border of a large, non-loyal and terrified population, Hindu and Muslim alike, who had run away from British territory, after the Mutiny, to escape the wrath of the conqueror. The population sought shelter in the tribes and started a new life in an unknown environment, and there was nothing strange in the fact that those migrants received visitors and money from their families and others in India. Finally, the tribal enmity against authority in the country near the Indus River was something recurrent in Indian history, as illustrated by the expeditions sent in the past by the emperors Akbar (1542-1605), Shah Jahan (1592-1666), and Aurangzeb (1618-1707), all Muslim, and which had failed in their goal of subjugating the insurgents.

For Sayyid Ahmad Khan, Islam's demonization and the distortion of its history in the West were directly responsible for the political adversity to Indian Muslims. For him, a more objective approach to the past would make the West end its strong aversion to Islam and its followers, and would also ensure that even the Muslims rediscovered their own identity and their own ideals. History would be an instrument in the Muslim renaissance and this attitude influenced many like Shibli Nu'mani, Zaka' Allah (1832-1911) and Maulawi Mehdi 'Ali, known as Muhsin al-Mulk (1837-1907), among others.

Ahmad Khan was in the judicial service until his retirement, in 1876, moment from which he established himself at Aligarh and where the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College was created in 1875, and which would become, in 1920, the Aligarh Muslim University. In 1886 he established "The Muhammadan Educational Conference", which was held annually in many Indian cities, and the magazine *Tahdhib al-Akhlâq* (*Refinement of Morals: Mohammedan Social Reformer*), was published with the aim of educating and civilising Indian Muslims, with Ahmad Khan being its principal contributor until the end of the periodical in 1893. The essays written by him examined the foundations of Muslim society as well as its institutions, in the light of Reason and religious sanction. The *Tahdhib* attracted an audience which shared with Sayyid Ahmad the objectives of reform. While on one hand he tried to contain the forces

40 Sayyid Ahmad Khan – Review on Hunter's *Indian Musalmans*. In Shan Mohammad (ed.) – *Writings and Speeches of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan*. Bombay: Nachiketa Publications, 1972, p. 65-82.

of scepticism and irreligion liberated by Western influences, on the other, he strongly fought the opposition to Western education.

Although he had no expertise in Western sciences or Islamic ones, especially in the study of the *Qur'an* or the *Hadith* (something which earned him some criticism from some *'ulama*), Ahmad Khan tried to demythologize the *Qur'an* and its teachings. His interpretation of some fundamental aspects of Islamic teachings which could not be demonstrated by modern scientific methods found a strong resistance in some more traditionalist sectors but, in spite of that, he earned a widening popularity in the elite and, in the early 1880s, he became a very important figure in the Muslim community. Ahmad Khan wanted to reinterpret Islam, defending a modern *'ilm al-Kalam* with the aim of showing that “the Work of God (Nature and its laws) was according to the Word of God (the *Qur'an*)”, something that earned him the epithet of *Naturi*. For that reinterpretation, Ahmad Khan elaborated a *tafsir* (the interpretation of the *Qur'an*), which was published at the same time as it was being written. The work started in 1879 and it was completed with the author's death in 1898. This *tafsir* found strong resistance not only from the *'ulama* but also from some of his friends and admirers, like Nawab Muhsin al-Mulk, who were uncomfortable with the radical interpretations of some of the *Qur'an*'s verses. In response, Ahmad Khan wrote a little treatise with the aim of explaining the principles of his *tafsir* which was published in 1892 with the title *Tahrir fi'l-asul al-tafsir*, where he declared that Nature was the “Work of God” and that the *Qur'an* was the “Word of God” and no contradiction could exist between them⁴¹.

Until the end of his life, Sayyid Ahmad Khan dedicated himself more and more to the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College, which produced a unique community of pupils and which, with time, would become the political and educational capital of Muslim India. The sister organization, All-India Mohammadan Educational Conference, founded by Sayyid Ahmad Khan in 1886, became a forum for the discussion of social and educational issues and an important factor in the promotion of Muslim solidarity throughout the sub-continent. Sayyid Ahmad Khan tried to stay away from “political” issues, giving more attention to Education, and his work was mainly educational and reformative. He never considered himself a politician and always tried to forge a political accommodation with the British. At the same time, and due to the fact that Muslims had become a “minority” in the context of the larger India, some Indian Muslims forged an emotional link with the Ottoman Empire, which also followed the Hanafi School of jurisprudence, and was considered the last symbol of Muslim pride.

In a communication addressed to one of his English friends, Sayyid Ahmad Khan said that the religion of Islam, in which he had full and abiding faith, preached radical principles and was opposed to all forms of monarchy, whether hereditary or limited. It

41 John Obert Voll – *Islam: continuity and change in the modern world...*, p. 112.

approved of the rule of a popularly elected president; it denounced the concentration of capital and insisted upon the division of properties and possessions among legal heirs on the demise of their owners. But the religion which taught him those principles also inculcated certain others: if God willed the subjection of Muslims to another race, which granted them religious freedom, governed them justly, preserved peace, protected their life and belongings, as the British did in India, the Muslims should wish them well and owe allegiance⁴².

Conclusion

Although Islamic modernists like Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Sayyid Ahmad Khan shared a modern reformist agenda, they had divergent political orientations and objectives. While Ahmad Khan held a position of political loyalty to the British⁴³, al-Afghani was deeply anti-colonial, anti-British and pan-Islamist, violently criticising Ahmad Khan, considering him subservient to the British⁴⁴.

Ahmad Khan was knighted as Knight Commander of the Star of India in 1888 and died in Aligarh in 1898. His work and thought influenced many who would play an important role in the intellectual and political affairs of Muslim India. The implications of the positions taken by Sayyid Ahmad Khan led to a variety of developments, either in opposition or developing his positions further.

The position of Sayyid Ahmad Khan was not accepted by all of the major Muslim teachers, and the richness of Indian Muslim thought at the end of the nineteenth century and the breadth of the foundations provided by Shah Wali Allah are clearly visible in the variety of the more conservative positions that had emerged by the end of the century. New educational institutions were a leading part of the more traditional revival. In 1867, an Islamic school was established at Deoband by scholars in the tradition of Wali Allah and their goal was to revive a rigorous study of the traditional Islamic disciplines and to provide a link between the Muslim community and its traditional identity. The Deoband School was relatively conservative in accepting the validity of the law schools and rejected compromises with Hindu customs and the adaptationism of Sayyid Ahmad Khan, establishing an international reputation with ties to the *‘ulama* of al-Azhar in Egypt⁴⁵.

The more conservative style was also manifested in other important schools. The oldest and most conservative of the major schools was the Farangi Mahal in Lucknow,

42 George Farquhar Irving Graham – *The life and work of Syed Ahmed Khan, C.S.I.* Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1885, p. 188.

43 Sayyid Ahmad Khan – *Speech of Sir Syed Ahmad at Lucknow*, in 1887 and *Speech of Sir Syed Ahmad at Meerut*, in 1888.

44 Aziz Ahmad – Sayyid Ahmad Khān, Jamāl al-dīn al-Afghānī and Muslim India..., p. 55-78; and Idem – Afghānī's Indian Contacts. *Journal of the American Oriental Society*. Ann Arbor. 89:3 (Jul.-Sep. 1969) 476-504.

45 John Obert Voll – *Islam: continuity and change in the modern world...*, p. 113.

which maintained a traditional curriculum and was relatively aloof from the arguments of the modernists and active traditionalists. A less conservative school was the *Nadwat al-Ulama*, established in Lucknow in 1894. Its leaders attempted to find a middle path between the modernism of Sayyid Ahmad Khan and the conservatism of Deoband and hoped to provide the training necessary for the *'ulama* to be able to reassert their role as the moral leaders of the Muslim community in India.

In the late 19th century a group known as the *Ahl al-Hadith* also emerged, which built on the tradition of *hadith* study that had been firmly established in India by Shah Wali Allah, emphasising the reliance on the *Qur'an* and the *Sunna*. Its members were unwilling to accept the teachings of the medieval scholars as binding unless they were directly based on the fundamental sources of the faith. The vigorous activity within the Indian Muslim community during the 19th century shows the dynamism of Islam in the early modern era. Movements were built on the Islamic foundations of the past but also reacted to the changing modern conditions, and the community was not isolated within the Islamic world. Sayyid Ahmad Khan was aware of the works of Khayr al-Din Pasha in Tunisia, and Chiragh 'Ali read the works of al-Tahtawi in Egypt as well as the writings of Khayr al-Din. The *Ahl al-Hadith* was influenced by nineteenth-century Yemeni scholarship, and virtually all educated Muslims were aware of developments in Egypt and the Ottoman Empire. The second half of the nineteenth century was a time of real Islamic resurgence in India, in intellectual and religious terms, despite the fact that it took place in the context of foreign politico-military control⁴⁶.

46 *Ibidem*, p. 114-115.