

The Woking Muslim Mission of the Lahore Ahmadiyya Movement

Speech by Professor Humayun Ansari

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(*Note:* Humayun Ansari, O.B.E., is Professor of History of Islam and Culture at the Department of History, Royal Holloway, University of London. He is author of the book *The Infidel Within*, a history of Muslims in Britain.)

As an historian of Islam and Muslims, one of the questions that has recently intrigued me is why, at least to my knowledge, there hasn't been much reflection on the contribution that Lahore Ahmadiyya Movement has made to Islamic thought in Britain. I find it puzzling because through my own work I have come to realise that this lack of recognition of its significance in British Muslim history is due to the prevalent religious prejudices and ignorance. What I want to do today is offer an appreciation of intellectual achievements of Mission in the many decades of its existence.



The immensity of it comes from the realisation that if it wasn't for Khwaja Kamal-ud-Din, the Woking mosque might have disappeared completely. For after Leitner's death in 1899, the site fell into disuse and his heirs were on the point of disposing of it when the Khwaja, on a visit to England in the summer of 1913, by chance came upon the deserted and derelict mosque and decided to stay. When Leitner's heirs tried to have him evicted, he refused to go, had its disposal stopped, got the heirs to accept the establishment of a Trust to hold the title deeds, and proceeded to lay the foundations of the Woking Muslim Mission.

The Khwaja immediately understood that in Britain, Islam had been maligned for centuries and how this had generated intense hostility towards its perceived values and its adherents. On the political front, Turkey was increasingly at the receiving end of trenchant criticism, the blame for its miserable, backward and uncivilized state lying, it was alleged by western critics, squarely with the Islamic ideology of its rulers and its people.

The Mission began countering these perceptions. Its strategy was broadly assimilationist. Hence, in order to create an intellectual space for Islam in Britain it

sought to establish some degree of consonance between it and Christianity, the overwhelming religion in Britain.

Another one of the Mission's objectives was to build a viable Muslim community in Britain, in part at least through conversion. But, it quickly became apparent that in order for Islam to prosper in Britain, it would have to be indigenized as it had been elsewhere; and this would not happen if it continued to be perceived as an "alien" and "exotic" religion practised by people who were attributed by the majority population with traits that made them inferior in their eyes.

Very early on the Mission realized that, if they were to make any headway on conversion, they would have to be creative and adopt an approach with which their audience was familiar. Consequently, the policy of the Mission was to present, as much as possible, their arguments in a form that would be least likely to produce antagonism. Contentious polemics were carefully avoided. Nothing was said that could possibly offend anybody's religious susceptibilities. Common ground was consciously sought. Audiences were encouraged to do their own thinking. In keeping with, by now, well established traditions of discussion and persuasion, they applied rational methods to explain the practice and social positions that they believed were intrinsic to Islam. They were able to present their ideas which suggested that Islam could be relevant to their lives in the British environment, that it was not an "alien" presence in their midst.

Much of their work was conducted with a light touch in a convivial atmosphere with due regard for the social etiquette, conventions and customs, modes of conduct and practices current at the time. British cultural forms were adopted to give as little an impression of "strangeness" as possible. Lectures by eminent Muslims were followed by refreshments and music. For instance, on one such occasion a newly arrived Sufi, Maulavi Inayat Khan, presented a rendition of Indian Classical music on the sitar, and a number of English ladies performed on the piano and violin. Importantly, they were able to present their ideas which suggested that Islam could be relevant to their lives in the British environment, that it was not an "alien" presence in their midst.

Throughout the inter-war period, it was modernist Islam, in contrast to the much more ritualized, albeit disparate, practices of South Asian Islam which have come more recently to dominate the British scene, that was ascendant. People associated with the Woking Muslim Mission, such as Abdullah Yusuf Ali, wrote pamphlets which tried to establish a de-politicized progressive terrain for discourse on religion. By joining such institutions as the World Faith Conference, these Muslims developed the notion not just of inter-faith dialogue but also that the religion of all reasonable people was the same.

The Mission's monthly journal, the *Islamic Review*, published out of Woking, became the primary vehicle for the expression and dissemination of the organisation's views and activities. From February 1913 when the journal first appeared, it held a virtual monopoly of the British Muslim press; and it remained the principle organ of Muslim opinion in Great Britain until the 1950s. Thus, for around 40 years, the journal provided an indispensable medium and means of communication between Muslims based in Britain and wider British society, interpreting matters of Muslim interest and events (as it understood them), though we should note that a significant portion of Muslim opinion always dissented from the position that the *Islamic Review* took on various religious and political issues.

In the very first issue of *Muslim India and Islamic Review* (the title was later abbreviated to *Islamic Review*), its editor set out in some detail the reasons for its inauguration. The Foreword began with a prescient critique of the press in Britain whose voice, it believed, "acts as an effective agency to mould the trend of events". Put simply, the press was misrepresenting Islam and Muslims to the wider public. It did so "by withholding information which is distasteful to it, or which conflicts with the view of affairs to which it desires to give currency — in a word, with its policy". For the *Islamic Review* the problem with several of the most influential newspapers seemed to be the fact that they did not ask: "Is this information correct?" but rather: "Will this be agreeable to, or support, the policy outlined by our leaders?" For the journal, the press supported "party-policy at any cost and conceal[ed] or distort[ed] and minimise[d] everything which it th[ought] had got counteracting effects". For the *Islamic Review*, "Muslims were the greatest sufferers of all other communities through misrepresentation in Europe", partly as a result of misinformation and partly due to ignorance. It believed that the negative attitudes of the British people would undergo radical change if it could only "[diffuse] in this country more correct ideas than those which at present prevail as to the essential features of Islam and the characteristics of those who profess that religion, and [to dispel] the many gross errors — sometimes due to malice, more often to mere ignorance — which are current in Europe as to its doctrines, ethic, and practice". Isn't it remarkable how astute and ahead of its time the *Islamic Review* was in identifying the Islamophobic discourse at the time?

This, in a nutshell, was the corrective that the *Islamic Review* proposed to offer. Through the *Islamic Review*, the Mission's leading lights elaborated their views on the position of women in Islam, polygamy, prohibition on drinking alcohol and eating pork, usury, gambling and circumcision, fasting, zakat (wealth tax) and prayer, and many other issues which aroused controversy or seemed at variance with Christian practice. Instead of highlighting the differences between Christianity and Islam, they

emphasized the commonality of the Abrahamic tradition of which the two religions, along with Judaism, they claimed, formed an important part.

It is fascinating to see how they addressed some of the fundamental issues on which they might have felt vulnerable and under attack, for example, the question of apostasy and the punishment for it, the question of *purdah* (veiling) and women's position in Islam, slavery, halal food, and approaches to music and art. Muslims involved with the work of the Woking Mission, therefore, were prepared to enter into rational discussions and debates whenever the occasion demanded. They accepted the intellectual traditions and conventions of British society and conveyed their ideas in that mode. In all these ways, we can observe an on-going engagement with wider society.

The entry of Turkey in the war on the side of Germany and its proclamation of jihad in November 1914 calling on Muslims all over the world to rise up against its enemies caused considerable unease and debate. These dilemmas for Muslims, not surprisingly, were discussed on the pages of the *Islamic Review*. While more radical Pan-Islamists, taking their cue from the Ottoman proclamation of jihad, called on Indian Muslim soldiers to refuse combat against the Turks, those writing for the *Islamic Review* rejected this. Their arguments drew instead on those that had been articulated by nineteenth-century Muslim modernist reformers such as Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and the leader of the Ahmadiyya community, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, both of whom had categorically rejected the notion of armed insurrection against their rulers. In his booklet, *The British Government and Jihad* (1900, p.17), the latter had declared: "I have come to you with an order: jihad with the sword has ended from this time forward, but the jihad of purifying your souls must continue". Khwaja Kamal-ud-Din was also moved to warn that "sedition and anarchical movements were strictly prohibited in Islam".

On the question of apostasy, for instance, in contrast to the support expressed by some British Muslims from 1989 onwards for the fatwa of Ayatullah Khomeini in which he passed the death sentence on Salman Rushdie for such an offence, they categorically denied that the punishment was the death penalty. The Quran and Hadith were invoked to demonstrate the validity of their position. They declared that Islam respected individual freedom of religion and conscience. However, they also acknowledged that 'fanatics' existed in all religions who might insist on capital punishment for apostasy.

They felt unhappy about the existing Blasphemy Law which, in their view, only provided protection for a "state religion" (this has now been repealed). In contrast to some of the recent British Muslims, who, in the 1990s, not only ignored the offer to remove the offence of blasphemy from the statute books, but also argued in favour of

the preservation of the “established” status of the national church, they called for the disestablishment of the Church of England.

Purdah in the British environment was deemed to be quite impracticable. Indeed, it was suggested that the abolition of the *purdah* system “would be a blessing if done gradually, with the symbols gradually eroded and the meanings kept intact”. Unsurprisingly, British women who converted to Islam were never asked to use the veil. Public gatherings organized by the Mission and its offshoots were generally mixed affairs, as were the religious festivals and the larger congregations.

Similarly, on the question of halal meat, the *fatwa* of Muhammad Abduh (the rector of Cairo’s famous Islamic seminary Al-Azhar), allowing the consumption of meat which had not been properly ritually slaughtered, was accepted (Abduh had sanctioned it in line with the Islamic principle of necessity or *darura*). Music was not thought to be “in the bad books of Islam”; it was considered to be a fine art and outside the confines of religion it might be “a real blessing for humanity”.

Similarly, any strictures against art, were, it was argued, aimed at killing polytheistic propensities and not to discourage art itself (by contrast many of Britain’s post-Second World War Muslims have been induced to view both music and art much more disapprovingly). Muslims involved with the work of the Woking Mission, therefore, were prepared to enter into rational discussions and debates whenever the occasion demanded. They accepted the intellectual traditions and conventions of British society and conveyed their ideas in that mode. They despatched open letters to politicians espousing views on issues of importance to British Muslims. The columns of the local and national press were used to good effect; lectures and talks were given; public meetings were addressed; non-Muslims were invited to visit the mosque and engaged in constructive dialogue; questions were answered through the rational method. The broadest possible definition of “Muslim” was used. Converts were accepted as Muslims if they declared their belief in the prophethood of Muhammad alongside the prophethoods of Abraham, Moses and Jesus.

In all these ways, we can observe an on-going engagement with wider society. The aim was to integrate Islam and Muslims organically into the fabric of British society.

Even more important was the emergence of the Woking mosque as a symbol of the world-wide Muslim community in Britain. Woking acquired symbolic and organizational centrality in the inter-war period for British Islam primarily because it was able to establish and build intimate connections with influential Muslims in the capital city — Khwaja Kamal-ud-Din, Lord Headley, Maulana Sadr-ud-Din, Marmaduke Pickthall, Mushir Husain Kidwai, Syed Ameer Ali, were the leading

lights of the Mission. Muslim dignitaries invariably made a point of attending at the mosque on their visits to Britain.

Implicit in the visits by prominent figures from such diverse environs and denominational backgrounds was the acceptance of the non-sectarian character of the Mission. The Begum of Bhopal and the head of the Shia Ismaili sect the Agha Khan, for example, were welcomed with the same degree of dignity and warmth as the Sunni Amir Faisal of Saudi Arabia or King Faruq of Egypt.

The Mission would have had little chance of success if those from the indigenous communities had got even a scent of the sectarian divisions which had come to bedevil Islam on the Indian subcontinent. The Mission remained utterly non-sectarian and ecumenical with its leading members warning on many occasions of the damage that sectarianism would wreak. Aware of the dangers inherent in allegations of any kind of doctrinal bias, Kamal-ud-Din and the later imams consciously rotated those who led the congregations. On many occasions, members of the congregation representing a diversity of Muslim nations and followers of different schools of thought were invited to lead the prayers, demonstrating a fundamental unity and their acceptability to all those who attended. These included, among others, the Saudi Minister Hafiz Wahba, Abdullah Yusuf Ali, Marmaduke Pickthall and the Grand Mufti of Palestine.

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