

Sir Syed Ahmad Khan's Responses to Orientalists' Works on Islam: A Critical Study of William Muir's Life of Mahomet

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ABSTRACT:

Sir Syed Ahmad Khan (1817-1898), an influential Indian scholar, was interested in the study of biblical Scriptures and Christian theology. His writings on Biblical scriptures became a turning point in the history of religions in India. Sir Syed developed his views on Biblical scriptures on the basis of his study of Quranic passages. He also published books and articles on Islam as a response to works written and published by Western scholars such as William Muir.

The religious controversy that arose between Sir Syed and William Muir of the Indian Civil Service was both theological and historical. Muir's works on Islam and Sir Syed's writings on Biblical subjects and his reply to Muir's works on Islamic subjects has something to do with a religious controversy that already occurred between Muslim Ulama and Christian missionaries in India at that time.

In this direction, this paper attempts to make an analysis of the responses of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan on the writings William Muir, especially his "Life of Mahomet".

Key words: *Sir Syed Ahmad Khan; William Muir; Seerah; Orientalism.*

Introduction:

The mid-nineteenth century witnessed a new phase of intense in Christian missionary activities among Muslims under European imperial domination. The exigencies of imperial administration had brought the Europeans into closer contact with the subject Muslim population. This closer contact together with the evangelizing intentions of the time suggested the abandonment of the previous policy of mere vilification of the Prophet and the adoption of at least an apparently logical and persuasive approach to the Prophet of Islam. Carlyle's suggestion thus fell in line with the need of the times.

As Muir mentions in the preface to the first edition of his work, he undertook its preparation "at the instance" of Pfander. The first edition of the work in four volumes was published between 1858 and 1861. A second edition, excluding the sections of the sources and pre-Islamic Arabia, was published in the early seventies of the century. A third edition of it was published in 1894. A revised version of this third edition, with the inclusion of the section on the sources was published in 1923. Recently, in 1988, the original first edition has been reprinted.

Muir's book *the Life of Mahomet*, like other biographers of the Prophet, discusses in detail the account of the Prophet's life from his childhood until his death. Within that period, the author also discusses social, religious and political conditions of the peninsula of Arabia before the emergence of Islam, the establishment of Islam and its spread from Mecca to Madina.

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It is obvious that an analysis and evaluation of the works of these scholars would give us an idea of the state of the orientalist's approach to the *Sūrah* in the middle of the nineteenth century, at the beginning of the twentieth century and during its later part, as well as of the evolution of their ideas and opinions since the mid-nineteenth century till the present time.

William Muir: Life and Works

He was born at Glasgow and educated at Kilmarnock Academy, at Glasgow and Edinburgh Universities, and at Heileybury College. In 1837 he entered the Bengal Civil Service. Muir served as secretary to the governor of the North-West Provinces, and as a member of the Agra revenue board, and during the Mutiny he was in Charge of the intelligence department there. In 1865 he was made foreign secretary to the Indian government. In 1867 Muir was knighted (KCSI), and in 1868 he became lieutenant governor of the North-Western Provinces.

Similarly the orientalist generally deny the Islamic historical belief regarding Islam being part of the Abrahamic tradition. Since most of the orientalist were either Christians or Jews, they would deny that Islam was link in the same chain of Abrahamic religious traditions.

On Abrahamic Traditions:

In this regard the orientalist, in general, fail to accept the tradition that Prophet Ibrahim ever came to Mecca, and that Hajar and Isma'il were ever left there by him and that the *Ka'bah* was built by him. They also assert that it was Isma'il and not Isma'il (p.b.t.), who was intended to be sacrificed. Muir has given these assumptions a proper and scholarly shape. Those who came after him, have mainly reproduced his arguments and assumptions.¹

Muir whilst believing that traditions connecting Abraham and his family with *Ka'bah* existed even before Islam, but says that it has no fact in it. On the basis of several conjectures and pre suppositions, he says that though the existence of the Abrahamic tradition was extensive and universal, it is "Improbable" that it "should have been handed down from the remote age of the patriarch by an independent train of evidence in any particular tribe, or association of tribes". According to him, "it is far more likely that it was borrowed from the Jews, and kept alive by occasional communication with them".²

Muir wrote in his "*The life of Mahomet*" that "there was no trace of anything Abrahamic in the essential elements of the (pre Islamic) superstition. To kiss the black stone, to make the circuits of the *Ka'bah*, and perform the other observances at Mecca, Arafat and the valley of Mina, to keep the sacred months, and to hallow the sacred territory, have no conceivable connection with Abraham, or with ideas and principles which his descendants would be likely to inherit from him".³

The Sources and the Orientalists

It is well known that some orientalist have been instrumental in discovering, editing and publishing a number of original Arabic works and manuscripts. The present section is not intended to recapitulate that aspect of their work, far less to detract from the value of their work in this respect. Here only an attempt has been made to indicate the salient aspects of their attitude to and use of the sources in dealing with the Prophet's life.⁴

For the orientalists Quran is simply a book of legends composed by Prophet Muhammad. They do not acknowledge it to be the word of Allah. Every effort is made by them to ascribe the authorship of Quran to the Prophet. A modern scholar has summarized the attitude and intention of the orientalists in this regard as follows:

- (1) That the Quran is based on the ideas and facts derived from the systems of Judaism and Christianity prevailing in Arabia at the time.
- (2) That it represents the Prophet's ideas of socio-religious reforms arising out of his time, environment and circumstances.
- (3) That the Prophet derived his literary style mainly from that of some ancient Arab poets.
- (4) That the language of Quran is not quite pure Arabic is claimed but contains a large number of Foreign words.⁵

S¹ rah of the Prophet Muhammad:

The personality of Prophet Muhammad has been a constant target of attack by the orientalists. The early orientalists were particularly keen to malign the character of Prophet Muhammad. The orientalists of 16th, 17th and 18th centuries were so enthusiastic in highlighting the negative aspects of the Prophet that they tunneled the boundaries of character assassination. Their excitement in this regard is understandable in view of the fact that these were mostly missionary peoples and so had very little information about the original sources of the Prophet's biography.

The orientalists of 19th century had, in general relatively academic and scholarly bent of mind. Therefore we do not find that enthusiasm among them as in their predecessors. But still the fact remains that the majority of the 19th century orientalists were missionaries as well and so could not remove the inherent bias from their mind regarding Islam and Prophet Muhammad.

Among the permanent themes that we find among the 19th century orientalists for attacks and allegations on Prophet Muhammad and his life are:

1. Early life of the Prophet Muhammad.
2. His illiteracy.
3. His family life including his many marriages.
4. His battles.
5. The episode of gharḡ n¹ q.
6. His marriage with Aisha.
7. Wa F y.
8. Alleged reports of fits & charm.
9. Death penalty to the Jew prisoners of war

Firstly it seems that the orientalists have made numerous assumptions on the early phase of the Prophet's life. The first thing to notice about the orientalists' views about the Prophet's early life is their attempt to show that he belonged to an unimportant and humble family of Mecca.⁶

The name of Prophet Muhammad has also been made a point of controversy. As we know at least two names are found for the Prophet in Islamic literature as well as in the Quran: Ahmad and Muhammad. The orientalists have added some different names as well just to create doubts about his personality. For example in his biography of the Prophet Sprenger⁷ has mentioned a name *Qutham*.

Following Sprenger, Muir also passes some comments about the Prophet's name. He did not of course refer to the name 'Qutham', but otherwise attempted to create confusion about the name, particularly the name 'Ahmad'. He suggested that

this latter form was adopted by the Muslims and became favorite with them for their confrontation with the Christians and Jews because it fell in line with the "supposed" prophecy about their Prophet in the Bible. Muir wrote:⁸

"This name (Mohammad) was rare among the Arabs but not unknown... Another form is Ahmad. Which having been erroneously employed as a translation of 'The Paraclete' in some Arabic version of the New Testament, became a favorite term with Mahometans, especially in addressing Jews and Christians; for it was the title under which the Prophet had been in their books predicted".

Muir further stated that the "word Ahmad must have occurred by mistake in some early Arabic translation of John's Gospel, for the comforter, or was forged as such by some ignorant or designing monk in Mahomet's time. Hence the partiality for this name, which was held to be a promise or prophecy of Mahomet".⁹

The incidence of *Shaqq-i-Sadr* (splitting of the chest) is an important event in the early life of the Prophet Muhammad. Many Traditions (hadith) of the Prophet Muhammad spoke of this incidence. As it is reported in the books of hadith where the Prophet Muhammad was a minor and was with his foster mother $\text{¶ al-}^{\text{J}} \text{mah}$, two angels from heaven descended, split the chest of Prophet Muhammad, brought out his heart, cleared it and put it in place. The orientalist have great doubt about it. They almost unanimously denied its happening. They would show various discrepancies and contradictions in the various versions of the story on the one hand and declare it as against the laws of nature on the other hand. These orientalist are so much opposed to its authenticity that some time they label the wildest of allegations. A few of them even explain the incidence of *Shaqq-i Sadr* as one of those occasions of the Prophet's "childhood disease of epilepsy".

For example to support this theory of epilepsy, Muir cites in a foot-note to his text the work of Ibn Hisham; but disregarding the fact that in Wustenfeld's edition of that work as also in all other editions the material expression in the report is *usiba'* Muir reproduces it as *umiba* which is apparently a strange and meaningless expression. He then gives out its meaning as "had a fit". If he had in fact followed a faulty manuscript or printed copy of the work, it would have been proper to refer to that. Muir did not do so. On the contrary, when Syed Ahmad Khan pointed out in 1870 this gross mistake on Muir's part,¹⁰ the latter simply omitted the foot-note in question from the subsequent edition of his book without altering or modifying his assertion, for which the foot-note had originally been given as evidence. Thus, even though the mistake and misuse of the source were pointed out, the allegation was persistently advanced. Yet Muir, following his predecessors, has done so and has made the unwarrantable observation that "fits of a nervous or epileptic nature" were "the normal marks" in the constitution of Muhammad of "those excited states and ecstatic swoons which perhaps suggested to his mind the idea of inspiration, as by his followers they were undoubtedly taken to be evidence of it".¹¹

The allegations of epilepsy and fits by orientalist are, as a matter of fact, directed to create doubts over the *Wa F y*. Although some orientalist, have not accepted the theory of epilepsy, but has almost admitted the line of Muir's arguments as far as its implications-namely the ingenuineness of the prophecy was concerned and have explained the revelations in terms of what is called

Muhammad's "consciousness", that is, what he thought or "sincerely" believed to be "inspiration" but which was nonetheless not from God. This point will be taken up for further discussion at a later stage of this work. Here it must be pointed out, however, that Muslims do not take the so-called "excited states and ecstatic swoons" as evidence of inspiration, as Muir asserts.¹²

The incident of Prophet Muhammad's meeting with the monk Bahira has found special attention among the orientalist biographers. As reported in S¹rah works while Prophet Muhammad, as a young boy, was travelling to Syria with his uncle for trade purpose he came across a Christian in, namely Bahira who recognized the signs of Prophet hood in him and told him about it. The orientalists have taken keen interest in this incidence but have treated it as one of those occasions where the Prophet became familiar with Christian teachings in his childhood and youth.

This incident is shown in such a way as to support their theory that the Prophet Muhammad had acquired a previous knowledge of Christianity in various ways and that he made use of that knowledge when he gave himself out as a Prophet. They would even inflate this reported meeting with Bahira into "several sessions of tuition and learning" in the doctrines and scriptures of Christianity, though in none of its forms the report gives the impression of anything more than a very brief meeting and an incidental discussion mainly on the topic of the scriptural prophency about the coming of the Messenger.

Syed Ahmad Khan: Life and Legacy

Syed Ahmad Khan was born in Delhi on the 17th of October 1817. On his father's side he was a Husaini Syed. His lineage can be traced back through 36 generations to the Holy Prophet.¹³ It is likely that Sir Syed's ancestors first came to India during the reign of Shahjahan, and from that time until the reign of Akbar Shah II maintained more or less permanent connections with the royal family.¹⁴

Although Sir Syed had many other important tasks to do, in his life like his program of the upliftment of the educational conditions of Muslims etc, he spared quite some time from his busy life to reply and answer the questions and allegations of Western Christian scholars against many Islamic issues.

1. The Abrahamic Traditions

The question raised by William Muir regarding the origin of *Ka'bah* and its historical and religious significance has very beautifully been taken up by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan. According to William Muir, the tradition is not a Muslim tradition but simply an Arab fiction.

According to Sir Syed William Muir out rightly denies all the facts and basis his erroneous assumptions on simple hypothesis. But for this his denial of that indisputable truth, a truth which has never been, in the least degree, questioned by any historian except him, he brings forward no substantial and convincing reasons. Weak in their very selves, as are the grounds upon which he bases the truth of his erroneous notion, they appear to us to be the following:

First: He takes it for granted that the settlement of Ishmael, near Mecca, and the circumstance of Joktan's being the patriarch of the Arabians, are all mere fictions and fables, devoid of all historical truth and probability. We have, however,

with the assistance of the manifold Arabian local traditions of the scriptures, and that of many of the European historians, indisputably proved every one of the above circumstances to have been facts established and acknowledged by history, both sacred and profane.

Secondly: Sir William conjectures and supposes, with much self-gratulation, that "there is no trace of anything Abrahamic in the essential elements of the superstition. To kiss the Black Stone, to make the circuit of the *Ka'bah*, and perform the other observances at Mecca, Arafat, and the Vale of Mina, to keep the sacred months and to hallow the sacred territory, have no conceivable connection with Abraham, or with the ideas and principles which his descendants would be likely to inherit from him; such rites originated in causes foreign to the country chiefly occupied by the children of Abraham. They were either strictly local, or, being connected with the system of idolatry in the south of the peninsula, were thence imported by the Bani Jorham, the Caturah, the Azdites, or some other tribe which emigrated from Yemen and settled at Mecca."¹⁵

To this point Sir Syed Ahmad Khan perfectly proved, to the satisfaction, it is hoped, of all impartial and unprejudiced readers, that the Black Stone and the temple of the *Ka'bah* possess a manifest and close connection with the religious practices of Abraham and his descendants; that it bears the name of "The House of God," or *Beth-el*, an appellation which is the distinguishing characteristic of all such altars erected by Abraham himself, and the *Ka'bah* was also built by Abraham in conformity with those religious practices, according to which, after a lapse of time, descendants of his second son built the temple of Jerusalem.

Thirdly: He says that "the native systems of Arabia were Sabeanism, Idolatry, and Stone-worship, all closely connected with the religion of Mecca."¹⁶

From what we have observed, it will be perfectly seen that the practice of the "Stone-worship," which Sir William Muir represents to have been exclusively native to Arabia, originated with Abraham, Jacob, Isaac, Ishmael, and Moses themselves, who used to erect pillar like, isolated, and naked stones, to pour oil over them, and to worship them in every way.

After all these unfortunate conjectures and gratuitous fictions, he hazards a "supposed history of the rise of Mecca and its religion;" and after having supposed everything and taken it for granted, he naturally, and as a matter of course, falls in to the impossibility of reconciling the production of his own fertile brain with Arabian history; but his pen is no less vigorous and telling than his imagination is airy and active, so that, in one moment, by bringing his fancy in to play, he surmounts all impossibilities by a few strokes of his pen. But as these emanations from his quill are neither historical facts, nor local traditions, nor scripture truths, but the mere off spring of Sir William's wonder-working fancy, and, destitute as they are of all support and corroboration from reliable authority, we do not think it worthwhile to give them a place in our Essay.¹⁷

2. Remarks of Sir William Muir respecting Mohammed's Pedigree

Sir William Muir alone stands against the unanimous opinion of the learned, and by his gratuitous conjectures contradicts the most glaring facts, unquestionably proved by history, both sacred and profane. He remarks as

follows: "To the same spirit we may attribute the continual and palpable endeavour to make Mahometan tradition and legends of Arabia finally with the scriptures of the Old Testament, and with Jewish tradition. This canon has little application to the biography of Mahomet himself; but it has a wide and most effective range in reference to the legendry history of his ancestors and of early Arabia. The desire to regard, and possibly the endeavour to prove, the Prophet of Islam a descendant of Ishmael, began even in his life time... thus were forged the earlier links of the Abrahamic genealogy of Mahomet, and numberless tales of Ishmael and the Israelites, cast in a semi-Jewish, semi-Arab mould".¹⁸

The above remark, the production of Sir William Muir's own which three grand divisions include nearly all the inhabitants of Arabia, whether the nomadic Badouins, who wander from place to place with their cattle, or the comparatively civilized ones who are peacefully settled along the coast, making, at the same time, a distinction between the aborigines and the Aliens. Such being the case, we shall treat of the inhabitants under the three general heads above-mentioned.¹⁹

A) *The name of the Prophet*

William Muir rejects *al-Waqid*^d's report regarding the nomenclature of the Prophet Muhammad, pointing out several discrepancies. According to *Waqid*^d the Prophet was named as Ahmad on the instance of his mother ' *minah* who told that she was told so by the Angel. The name Ahmad was rare in Arabia. According to William Muir Arabs learnt this name from Jews and Christians or some other soothsayer and that a Prophet so named was about to rise in Arabia. The parents, in the fond hope thought that his child would turn out to be the expected Prophet.²⁰

Sir Syed Ahmad Khan goes by what *Waqid*^d told. He emphasizes that the Prophet was foretold by the name of Mohammed, in the Old Testament, and by that of Ahmad in the New; it was highly necessary, therefore, that, in order to fulfill these prophecies, God should make known to ' *minah* the appellation of Ahmad, an appellation that was never, or but very rarely, given to Arabians.²¹

B) *The Insinuation of Epilepsy and other Remarks*

A very common allegation of the Orientalists on the Prophet Muhammad is that the latter had fits during his childhood. They generally call it the fit of epilepsy. An incident of the Prophets childhood is generally reported in this regard in which the husband of *al-mah*, once reported to her that the child Muhammad got fainted and unconscious for a while. The European Orientalists stretch it too far to stand the mental imbalance of the Prophet Muhammad.²²

Sir Syed Ahmad Khan had emphatically rejected their allegation by quoting several historical proofs and proving reasonable arguments:

He says that if we take for granted the circumstance happened just as William Muir has mentioned, even then it is easy to nullify the inference which Muir had drawn Muir had made Hishami as his authority: Sir Syed Ahmad Khan points out that the intention of *al-mah*'s husband where he reported this to his wife was not correctly understood due to lack of proper understanding of Arabic.

Sir Syed says that the translation of the passage from Hishami is incorrect. "We have in our possession an edition of Hishami's book, printed and published at Gottingen in 1858, under the care and supervision of Dr. Ferdinand Wustenfeld,

and we here quote the original passage verbatim, as well as its translation in to English".²³

"ﷻ *al*^l *mah* said she was told by his (the Prophet's) foster -father (ﷻ *al*^l *mah*'s husband) that 'O ﷻ *al*^l *mah*, I fear that the infant has received an evil spirit that is, is under the influence of an evil spirit therefore let him be sent back to his family".²⁴

The fact that ﷻ *al*^l *mah*'s husband did not mean to infer, by these words, that the infant was suffering from any actual disease, is also verified by the following remarks of 'L *minah*, made by her on the occasion of ﷻ *al*^l *mah*'s returning the infant to her. "Ah!" exclaimed she, "didst thou fear that he was under the influence of evil spirits".²⁵

We do not find in Hishami the word Omeeb, mentioned in William Muir's note, p.21, v.i.; neither does that word imply "had a fit," as the writer had been led to understand. In Hishami there is given the word Oseeb, as we have mentioned above, and as shall be perfectly shown hereafter. As there is but very little difference in the appearance of the two words, William appears to have fallen in to a mistake, from having quoted a faulty manuscript. Sir Syed finally concludes:

"After considerable research we have at length ascertained that this false and ridiculous notion is to be attributed: first, to the superstitions of the Greek Christians, and secondly, to the faulty translation of the Arabic text in to Latin".²⁶

According to Sir Syed Ahmad Khan its translation is thus: "Then ﷻ *al*^l *mah*'s husband said to her, 'I fear that the infant has contracted, therefore return him to his family; and she brought the boy to his mother;'" while the version of the Arabic into Latin runs thus: "*Tunc maritus ﷻ *al*^l *mah*; multum vereor, inquit, ne puer inter populares suos morbum Hypochondriacum contraxerit. Tollens itaque eum ﷻ *al*^l *mah* ad matrem ejus Aminam reduxit;*" its English rendering being: "Then ﷻ *al*^l *mah*'s husband said, "I am greatly afraid of the boy's catching the Hypochondriacal disease from some of his companions; therefore, taking him from ﷻ *al*^l *mah*, he carried him back to his mother, 'L *minah*;" It should be observed that by the "Hypochondria cal disease" is probably meant epilepsy, or the falling sickness.²⁷

The mistake occasioned in the text is that, instead of the expression *fa alhakeehe*, which means "reach him", is used that of *bil hakkeeyute*, which implies "right", or "indeed;" but when the translator found that he could not reconcile the passage with the whole text,-for how could he?-he omitted the meaning of the word in the translation. Again, upon coming to the word Oseeba, he translated it "contraxerit," or "caught," but not finding in the original what he caught, and it being necessary, both for the sense of the passage, as well as for grammar, to find some object which he caught; he supplied it, at a guess, by Hypochondria, the falling sickness.²⁸

The fact is that when the Arabs used such ambiguous expressions, they meant there by the influence of the evil spirit.

The origin of this mistake appears to have been rooted in the superstition of the ancient Greeks. "Owing to the mysterious and extraordinary character of the convulsions of epilepsy, it was always supposed by them to be due, in a very special manner, to the influence either of the goods or of evil spirits".²⁹

Two objections here present themselves. First, why should Arab idioms, and the modes of expression peculiar to that language, be interpreted conformably to

Greek superstition? Secondly, admitting that the Arabs really did ascribe the falling sickness to the influence of evil spirits, it seems very odd and unreasonable that, wherever such an expression is mentioned, we should understand there by that nothing but epilepsy is meant; especially when we know to a certainty that the Arabs attributed to the influence of evil spirits the cause of all such things, the nature where off they did not know themselves. In support of what is here said, we quote the opinion of a very learned, judicious, and liberal author, who says, "The assertion so often repeated, that Muhammad was subject to epileptic fits, is a base invention of the Greeks, who would seem to impute that morbid affection to the apostle of a novel creed, as a stain upon his moral character, deserving the reprobation and abhorrence of the Christian world." Nor can we omit quoting here the opinion of the profound historian Gibbon, who observes "His epileptic fits, an absurd calumny of the Greeks, would be an object of pity rather than abhorrence". In another place he remarks: "The epilepsy, or falling sickness, of Mohammed is asserted by Theophanes-Zonaras, and the rest of the Greeks, and is greedily swallowed by the gross bigotry of Hollinger, Prideaux, and Maracci; the titles of two chapters of the Koran can hardly be strained to such an interpretation; the silence, the ignorance of the Muhammadan commentators is more conclusive than the most per empty denial; and the charitable side is espoused by Ockley. Gagnier, and Sale".³⁰

We now proceed to consider, under a medical point of view, the false and groundless imputation of Greeks that Mohammed was afflicted with epilepsy: "Epilepsy is a form of disease characterized by sudden insensibility, with convulsive movements of the voluntary muscles, and occasionally arrest of the breathing, owing to spasms of the muscles of respiration and temporary closure of the glottis. The epileptic not uncommonly gets insane, often loses his memory, and becomes subject to a certain want to acuteness, and a depression of spirits which unfit him for the regular business of life. Disorders of digestion are also frequent, and there is a constant want of tone and vigour in all the bodily functions, which communicate a habitual expression of languor to the epileptic. Added to this, it can hardly be a matter of surprise that the knowledge of his infirmity should deeply influence the mind of the epileptic, and produce a distaste for active occupations, especially for such as expose him to more than ordinary observation". Our duty now, therefore, is to inquire if all or any one of the symptoms were to be found as occurring in any portion of the Prophet's life, from his infancy until his death.³¹

No historian, whether Muhammadan or Christian, mentions that any one of the above symptoms was to be found in Muhammad, but, on the contrary, they have all unanimously affirmed that Muhammad was vigorous and healthy, both in his infancy and his youth. Indeed, William Muir himself says that "at two years of age she" (ﻫﻲ ﺍﻟﻤﺎﻫ) "weaned him and took him home; that 'L minah was so delighted with the healthy and robust appearance of her infant, who looked like a child of double the age, that she said 'Take him with thee back again to the desert" etc., etc. In this youth he is said to have been strong, healthy, and robust. He walked very quickly, and firmly trod the ground. Through the whole of his life he was exposed to great perils and hardships, all of

which he bore with unflinching patience and courage.³²

C) *Polygamy*:

Islam has been targeted by the Orientalists on the following three issues particularly: (1) Polygamy (2) Divorce (3) Slavery. These three issues, allege Orientalists "Maintained and perpetuated; - striking, as they do, at the root of public morals, poisoning public life and disorganized society".

"It is a great mistake" wrote Sir Syed Ahmad Khan "to suppose that by Islam polygamy is made compulsory upon its followers, on the contrary, the general practice of it is not even recommended, the privileged use of it being reserved for such as for physical reasons may stand in need of it, but in the absence of such an excuse the indulgence in it is wholly contrary to the virtues and morality taught by Islam".³³

Sir Syed Ahmad Khan further clarifies unfortunately, however, no small impediment is thrown in the way of a calm and candid investigation of the subject by the antagonism which exists between the manners, customs, and modes of thought of one nation and those of another. Thus, the very word polygamy suggests to Christians ideas so offensive that they enter upon any discussion respecting the practice with minds almost predetermined to find in it nothing but an unmitigated evil, and without inquiring how for it may be justified by the requirements of climate, the comparative number of the sexes, and by various physiological and social reasons.³⁴

Then Sir Syed Ahmad Khan proceeds to analyze the issue of polygamy in Islam. He discusses it from three distinct angles, namely, Nature, Society, and Religion.

As regard to the first point, Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, writes "It will be necessary to ascertain, if possible, what has been the will or intention of the creator of all living creatures as regards this subject, or, in other words, whether. He intended man to be universally polygamistic or not. Now this His intention, can we apprehend, be read clearly and indisputably in all the works of nature, for it is evidently impossible that His Will should be at variance with the productions of it; and, accordingly, from the unerring manifestations of nature we learn that such beings as are intended by their creator to be monogamistic invariably bring forth their youngs, in pairs, one of the two being a male and the other a female. Those, on the other hand, that are intended to be polygamistic are delivered of one or more, no relative proportion of sex being observed. According to this law of nature man falls under the second head; but as, by his position, and by the rare and precious endowment of reason, he is raised far above all other sentient beings, so is he required to use all those powers, rights, and privileges bestowed upon him by nature in common with the other beings around him, with caution, and in harmony with his physical, social, and political liabilities, as well as with the laws of hygiene and the influences of the climate in which he lives."³⁵

Discussing polygamy from the point of view of nature Sir Syed Ahmad Khan said "Man is, by his very nature, a social being; and therefore, as God saw "It was not good for man to be alone," he made "a help for him," which is woman- one who was destined to share with him the cares and the amenities, the sorrows and pleasures, of life; to increase his happiness and diminish his affliction by her tender

sympathy-one, lastly, who was to contribute, with himself, to carry out that great, that all-important command, "Increase and multiply, and replenish the earth". When, however, from whatever cause, this helpmate fails to perform her natural duty, some remedy must surely have been appointed by the all-wise creator to meet the exigency, and that remedy is polygamy-that is, the act of a man's marrying either more than one wife at one and the same time, or after divorcing the former one. The latter privilege is allowed to the wife in the event of the husband's incompetency, with this reasonable difference only, that man can have recourse to his remedy when he so wills, while the wife must first obtain a legal authorization for the act".³⁶

Sir Syed Ahmad Khan elaborates this point further in the following "If this remedy, whose necessity had been proved both by natural and social laws-the tendency of both which descriptions of laws is pretty nearly the same -had been denied to man. Society would have greatly suffered thereby, since man would have been led, in consequence, to commit vices and crimes of the deepest dye.

Again, in order to prevent persons from running into excess which is at all times bad, and sometimes dangerous-and to render it certain that the person so having recourse to polygamy was impelled by a real necessity, many stringent restrictions and binding regulations have been established, such as the observance of perfect equality of rights and privileges, love and affection, among all wives, etc. etc. These restrictions and regulations materially serve to prevent truly pious and religious persons from indulging in polygamy, for they almost immediately discover that by availing themselves of this privilege, without fulfilling its conditions and observing its regulations, which are so strict as to be extremely difficult to be complied with, is incompatible with the due and faithful discharge of their religious duties. No doubt the institution of polygamy affords many facilities to the libertine, as well as to all whose sole object in life is the unrestrained gratification of their animal appetites; but for this abuse of a beneficial institution they will be amenable to the great searcher of the human heart, who will, most assuredly, mete out to them the punishment due to their offence.³⁷

D) Divorce:

The provision of divorce as exists in Islamic jurisprudence has been a point of discussion among the modern thinkers, and social scientists. The orientalist because of their particular social and intellectual backgrounds have also raised many objections and criticisms on the provisions of divorce in Islam. First of all divorce itself is a matter of controversy. There are certain societies like Hindu society which does not conceive divorce in its social system at all. They believe marriage to be a lifelong affair which is terminated only with the death of any one of the two. However modern civil society has approved of divorce system for the betterment of individual and society. Modern society tends to believe in the advantages of divorce more and more as compared to its disadvantages.³⁸

The time in which Sir Syed Ahmad Khan was writing in defense of divorce was a period when divorce was considered a bad thing particularly in Indian society. The Orientalists have criticized not the provision of divorce and such but the precedence and bye-law as of divorce as exist in Islamic jurisprudence particularly

the provision of three $\| al\text{-}q\text{-}s$ at a time known as $\| al\text{-}q$ *Mughalliza*. Sir Syed Ahmad Khan has tried to answer the criticism of $\| al\text{-}q$ by orientalist on various parameters, including social, legal and religious. At the very beginning Sir Syed makes it clear that $\| al\text{-}q$ should not be considered as a rampant practice among Muslims. It is not a day to day affair as concerned by the orientalists. It is rather a remedy for turbulent marriages. Even more "recourse to it as a remedy can only be justified when its non-adoption would cause miseries still more unbearable, cares and anxieties still more annoying, and daily increasing animosities and mutual recriminations".³⁹

Sir Syed Ahmad Khan writes: "Our Prophet neither underrated nor overvalued divorce. He constantly pointed out to his followers how opposed it was to the best interests of society; he always expatiated upon the evils which flowed from it, and ever exhorted his disciples to treat women with respect and kindness, and to bear patiently their violence and ill-temper; and he always spoke of those who availed themselves of divorce in a severe and disparaging manner; so that many a person were led into the mistake that they who had recourse to divorce, and they who shed human blood, were guilty of crimes of equal atrocity. Not with standing, however, Muhammad's rooted antipathy to divorce, he gave it the importance and consideration it justly claimed and merited. He allowed it under circumstances when it could not fail to prove a valuable boon; when it either entirely removed, or at least greatly alleviated, the cares, troubles, and embitterment's of wedded life; and when, if not taken advantage of, society would suffer still more than it already did. In such cases divorce is far from being a disadvantage to society; it is, on the contrary, a blessing and an efficient means of bettering the social condition. Muhammad (*SAW*) did not restrict himself to merely allowing divorce to be adopted under certain circumstances; he permitted to divorced parties three several distinct and separate periods within which they might endeavour to become reconciled and renew their conjugal intercourse; but should all their attempts to become reconciled prove unsuccessful, then the third period, in which the final separation was declared to have arrived, supervened".⁴⁰

Criticizing the $\| al\text{-}q\text{-}i$ *Mughallazah*, Sir Syed Ahmad Khan narrates a Tradition as described in the following as to show the attitude and feeling of Prophet Muhammad (*SAW*) towards $\| al\text{-}q$:

Mahmood, son of Waleed, narrates a tradition that the Prophet was apprised of a certain individual who had given to his wife these three separate notices of divorce at one and the same time, and that then the Prophet, becoming exceedingly wrath, addressed the party thus: "Darest thou thus trifle with the commands of God, and that even in my presence?" Observing that the Prophet was greatly excited and angry, a person, approaching him, asked, "Shall I go and slay the offender?" for by the wrath of the Prophet he was erroneously led to suppose that the crime committed was grave enough to merit that severe punishment".⁴¹

In like manner the Prophet had said that "a woman, who demands divorce without strong and unavoidable necessity, will ever remain a stranger to the fragrance of Paradise". The reader will find all these traditions expressly mentioned in *Mishkāt*, in the chapter appropriated to "Divorce".⁴²

Sir Syed then concludes by saying: "Now, it will be evident to every reflecting reader that the indulgence of divorce allowed by Islam, under such circumstances as those

above specified, is not in the least repugnant to the laws of society, but, on the contrary, is greatly conducive to its health, prosperity, and welfare".⁴³

Now Sir Syed Ahmad Khan compares the concept of $\| a\eta q$ in various religions *vis- a- vis* Islam. Divorce is allowed in Judaism in all cases and under all circumstances. Christians admit its propriety and lawfulness.

In his deference of $\| a\eta q$ system in Islam as compared to Christianity Sir Syed takes the help of John Milton by quoting a long passage from him as under:

"Marriage, by its definition, is a union of the most intimate nature, but not indissoluble or indivisible, as some contend, on the ground of its being subjoined, they two shall be one flesh. These words, properly considered, do not imply that marriage is absolutely indissoluble, but only that it ought not to be lightly dissolved. For it is upon the institution itself and the due observance of all its parts, that what follow respecting the indissolubility of marriage depends, whether the words be considered in the light of a command, or of a natural consequence. Hence it is said, for this cause shall a man leave father and mother...and they two shall be one flesh; that is to say, if, according to the nature of the institution, as laid down in the preceding verses, the wife be an help-mate for the husband; or, in other words, if good-will, love, help, comfort, fidelity remain unshaken on both sides, which, according to universal acknowledgment, is the essential form of marriage. But if the essential form be dissolved, it follows that the marriage itself is virtually dissolved".⁴⁴

E) Slavery:

Sir Syed raised one more objection of William Muir and refuted the charge that there was no freedom of opinion in Islam, and that its followers had no right to their views and thoughts. The West thought that Islam was a religion of barracks where its regimentation denied the individuals their right to express their opinion on religious matters. Sir Syed cited the rigidity of Judaism where one had to blindly follow what was there in their religious texts. In Christianity this freedom was so liberally used that there was no end to splitting of Christianity into several denominations. Islam reconciled these two extremes, retained the rigidity and offered *ijteḥ d* or consensus. First priority was to follow the injunctions of the *Quran*; if the solution is missing in it, go to the sayings of the Prophet, or *hadith*; if the matter remained yet unresolved, the collective reasoning or *ijteḥ d* was the answer. When such step by step provision exists to meet the exigencies, it was not right to blame Islam.⁴⁵

Sir Syed pointed out there were two beliefs in Christianity on which it made no compromise. One was unity in Trinity and Trinity in unity; the other was that Jesus went up the cross to wash off the sins both of the past and the present. These two beliefs militate against nature and reason. Here free thought did not exist, as without belief in Trinity a person would not remain a Christian.⁴⁶ The sale of indulgences in Christianity was yet another issue which became a cause for increase in crime.

Conclusion:

Sir Syed Ahmad Khan had to play a triple role in religious affairs- defensive, possessive and reformative: His defensive role was expressed *vis-a-vis* the Orientalists, who were attacking Islam, its various doctrines, notions and teachings

and its Prophet. He was particularly annoyed by the works of William Muir whose work on the life of the Prophet, in four volumes, was the motivating factor for his plunge into religious studies. This involved painstaking research, journey to London, and intense hard labor consuming his time, energy and resources. One great advantage of this was that he used western sources, identified those European scholars who were fair-minded, and profusely quoted them in his essays. He had to labor hard to collect material from all European sources, English, French, German, Latin, Hebrew and others. He had to first understand, absorb and digest this material before he could use it to prove his point. The result of this venture was the opening of the vast vistas of knowledge on the three great religions of the world, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. He went to the root of these Semitic religions and examined them critically to say that Islam was the natural development of a long drawn process. It attempted to improve upon the things of the past being the latest model. By comparing what really was the position before and what changes were brought about by Islam, he attempted to refute many of the charges of William Muir and the missionaries of the time.

The Orientalists' of nineteenth century tried to malign the character of Prophet Muhammad; especially the missionary peoples who had very little information about the original sources of the Prophet's biography. As most of them were missionaries, so they could not remove the inherent bias from their minds regarding Islam and Prophet Muhammad. Muir has stated the incidence of *Shab-e-Qadr* as one of those occasions of the Prophet's "childhood disease of epilepsy", the allegations of epilepsy and fits are directed to create doubts over the *Waḥy*.

In spite of his busy schedule, Sir Syed Ahmad Khan had spared quite some time to reply to the allegations of Western Christian scholars against many Islamic issues, such as 'Polygamy', 'Divorce' and 'Slavery' as also numerous allegations on the life and character of Prophet Muhammad. The question raised by William Muir regarding the origins of *Ka'bah* and its historical and religious significance has very beautifully been taken up by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan. Regarding the nomenclature of Prophet Muhammad Sir Syed Ahmad Khan goes by what at *Waqid*¹ has reported and emphasized that the Prophet was foretold by the name of Muhammad in the old Testament, and by that of Ahmad in the New, it was highly necessary in order to fulfill these prophecies, God had made known to 'L *minah* the appellation of Ahmad, an appellation that was never, but very rarely, given to Arabians.

A very common allegation on Prophet Muhammad was that he had fits of epilepsy. Sir Syed had emphatically rejected their allegation by quoting several historical proofs and giving reasonable arguments. The three issues particularly Polygamy, Divorce and Slavery have been targeted by the orientalists. Sir Syed pointed out that many European scholars have spoken in favour of polygamy only because of physical necessities whereas Islam has taken into account not only physiological and biological considerations but also from the point of view of offering a remedy "for the betterment of conjugal life". Comparing the issue of polygamy as viewed in other religions Sir Syed points out that polygamy was not prohibited in any religions. Neither Judaism nor Christianity has prohibited it.

Sir Syed Ahmad Khan has compared the concept of \parallel *alḥ q* in various

religions *vis-a-vis* Islam and shows that Divorce is allowed in Judaism in all cases and under all circumstances. Christians admit its propriety and lawfulness.

On Slavery Sir Syed Ahmad Khan raised objections on William Muir and refuted the charge that there was no freedom of opinion in Islam, and that its followers had no right to their views and thoughts.

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- ¹¹ M.M.Azami. *On Schacht's Origins of Mohammeden Jurisprudence*. King Saud University, Riyadh & John Willy & Sons Inc, New York 1985.
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- ¹³ See appendix 1, for Genealogical Table.
- ¹⁴ Hali, *Hayat-i-Javed*, (Taraqqi-i- Urdu Bureau, New Delhi, 1979), pp-31-32.
- ¹⁵ Sir Syed Ahmad Khan. "The Abrahmic Tradition", *Essays on the life of Muhammad*, (London, 1870), p.,6.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p., 7.
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- ¹⁸ Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, "Pedigree of Muhammad", *Essays on the Life of Muhammad*, (London, 1870), p.11.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 11-12.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 13.
- ²² *Ibid.*
- ²³ *Ibid.*, p.15.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.16.
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- ³² *Ibid.*
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⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 15-16.

⁴⁴ Ismail Panipati, op.cit, Vol.VII, pp.379-389.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*