

Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and his Bible Commentary

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ABSTRACT

Sir Syed Ahmad Khan (1817-1898) was a multi-faceted scholar, intellectual, educationist and Muslim apologist of the 19th century in British India. His various efforts in different fields for furthering the cause of Muslims) especially after the trauma of defeat in 1857) established his position as the foremost voice of the oppressed Muslims of the time. In his desire to win the favor of the British, Sir Syed took the unprecedented step of writing a commentary on the Bible stressing those areas of common ground accepted both by Christians and Muslims. In doing so, Sir Syed conceded far more than what he thought he could gain from the opposite party. As a result, his Bible commentary was opposed by the Muslims, ignored by the British, and resulted in a failure

Sir Syed's attempts, to neutralize the antagonism of his British masters, especially after the traumatic events of 1857, gathered speed. Contrary to his expectations, these efforts brought him into disrepute among the very people whose cause he claimed to espouse. They were seen as acts of abject appeasement to the ruling power. However, the British, always on the lookout for those who favoured their colonial presence, rewarded him for what they saw as his pro-British activities. Sir Syed's many books, essays, addresses and whirlwind tours of the country made him a one-man propaganda machine. Sir Syed even went so far as to question those bases of Islam that he saw would prevent a rapprochement between the ruler and the ruled, the conqueror and the conquered. He devoted his energy to explain away, without authority, the basic Islamic positions on these vital issues. As time passed, this pensionary of the British and minor functionary of the imperialist administration became more and more convinced that the British were somehow God-ordained to rule the subcontinent in perpetuity. He, therefore, pursued those ends which would establish better relations between the Muslims and the Christians even if in their pursuit certain vital interests of Islam would have to be sacrificed.

Keeping this goal in view, Sir Syed planned a study of the Christian scriptures aimed at pointing out the common beliefs that existed between the two. For this, he purchased a printing press, imported Hebrew fonts, sought instruction in Hebrew from a Jew, obtained many books on the Bible and had them translated into Urdu, as he could not himself read English. The difficulties incurred by him may be imagined, as Col. Graham writes, when it is borne in mind that he was ignorant of English; that all the works accessible regarding his subject were written in that language; and that he had to have these various books translated into Urdu. Undeterred by these difficulties, however, he worked at the commentary for years. *Suraiya Husain in Sir Syed Ahmad Khan aur un ka 'ahd* (Aligarh, n.d.) gives a list of 40 books consulted by Sir Syed. These include

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various translations of the Old and New Testaments in Arabic, Persian and Urdu. Thus the decade of the 1860s was devoted by Sir Syed to this paramount task. The first volume titled *Tabyīn al-kalām fī tafsīr al-torah wa al-injīl 'alā millah al-Islām* (=‘the clear exposition of the words in the explanation of the Torah and the Injil according to the Muslim community’). This appeared in 1862; the second appeared in 1865 ‘printed and published by the author at his private press’ at Ghazipur; the last volume appearing from Aligarh – in the quaint spelling. The title pages of the first edition have been reproduced in *Kitābiyat-i-Sir Syed* (Lahore, 2008) ed. *Ziauddin Lahori*. The entire text has been reprinted in two volumes by *Maktaba-e-Akhuwwat* Lahore in 2006.

The first volume of the Bible commentary consists of ten discourses and two appendices. These are not textual elaborations (*tafsīr*) of the Biblical verses but original essays based on the Muslim approach to the previous scriptures. Among the ten discourses the following contain material of relevance to a comparative survey:

- a. What was the number of books descended (*sic*) from God to Prophets and are they all included in the Bible?
- b. What is the opinion entertained by the Mohomedans (*sic*) regarding corruption of the sacred scriptures? In these discourses, Sir Syed gives not the Muslim orthodox opinion but his own peculiar and deviant views.

In the second volume, there is a general introduction to the Old Testament – especially of its first five books which are called the Pentateuch. This is followed by a similar introduction to the Book of Genesis.

By taking certain points of dispute between Christians and Muslims and smoothing them over, Sir Syed claims to develop further inter-religious understanding. Among them are:

- The creation of the universe
- The *Sabbath*
- The nature of the devil
- The Fall (in its different versions)
- The deluge (whether total or partial)
- The discrepancies of the Bible in its Hebrew, Greek and Syrian versions.

The third volume shifts the focus of study from the Old Testament to the New Testament. It begins with a short account of the development of Christianity from its emergence up to the rise of Islam mentioning the various schisms that took place. The chief text that is studied is the Gospel of Matthew. A lengthy (and unnecessary) genealogy of Jesus is given tracing fourteen generations between him and Abraham. The chief point of difference between Sir Syed and the Muslims regarding Jesus is that Sir Syed denies the Virgin Birth; the difference between him and the Christians is that he denies the Immaculate Conception. Sir Syed accepts Joseph, the Carpenter, as the husband of Mary and natural father of Jesus. The various miracles of Jesus are rationally, though

unconvincingly, explained. A detailed analysis of the various positions adopted by Sir Syed (from a Christian point-of-view) is given by C. W. Troll in his *Sayyid Ahmad Khan: a reinterpretation of Muslim theology*, Karachi, 1979.

Sir Syed's 'commentary' on the Bible has certain features which make it unique among the various work of the author:

- a. It is not a commentary (*tafsīr*) in the sense of a Muslim commentary of the Quran. It is a collection of critical essays on certain aspects of Christianity that tends to stress the common ground (rather than the differences) between the Christians and Muslims. The main contention of Sir Syed is that there is no fundamental difference between the account of Christianity given in the Bible and that given in the Quran.
- b. The first and the second volumes have the English translation in parallel columns to the Urdu text. The third volume is entirely in Urdu. There are words and extracts in Hebrew given within the various texts. The total number of pages of the three volumes is 923 in large format.
- c. After the War of 1857, Sir Syed felt that such a work (viz. a sympathetic study of the Bible) would bridge the gulf between the ruler and the ruled and reduce the friction that existed between the two communities. The supreme irony is that its target audience (the British) ignored it *in toto* while the Muslims were infuriated with the many deviations from consensual truth. They saw in it a cover for unabashed appeasement of the ruling class. Far from building a bridge between the two communities, it set them even further apart. The professed aim of Sir Syed was frustrated. According to J.M.S. Baljon, "on account of the small interest the public took in this undertaking, he lost enthusiasm for it."¹ There is, however, a favourable reference to it in the book by Col. Graham².

Like many of Sir Syed's ventures, this endeavour ended fruitlessly. Some of the material used in the Bible commentary was used by Sir Syed for his commentary of the Quran written towards the end of his life. This was also incomplete, being a commentary on half of the Quran. His commentary of the Quran also raised a storm of protest. In it, Sir Syed reproduced many of his old objectionable arguments which remain unsubstantiated such as his futile attempt to equate the 'Word of God' with the 'Work of God'. According to Aziz Ahmad, Sir Syed's "Biblical apologetics has therefore to rely on his exegetical subtlety."³ The initial spur for the Bible commentary may have been his desire to ingratiate himself with the British who rewarded him for his 'loyalty' by conferring distinctions and degrees. The only objection that Sir Syed makes against the British is the widespread missionary activity by Christians. In his *Causes of the Indian Revolt*⁴, Sir Syed mentions one reason for the outbreak of the revolt as being the unchecked and malicious propaganda by missionaries who appeared to be paving the way for a mass conversion of Indians to Christianity by holding public meetings, addresses and debates⁵. His own approach to points of difference was to tear out of context verses from the Quran and to state that they

were identical to those in the Bible in meaning and intent. As A. Maiello writes: “(Sir Syed) sacrificed scholarship and objectivity to political expediency. His immediate goal was the elimination of English mistrust... He tried to stress the similarity of the two creeds.”⁶ Sir Syed failed to convince the English despite his powerful advocacy of ‘unity’ among the two religions. He felt that the fault lay with the Muslims for they contributed to the gulf between themselves and the Christians by assuming a rigid attitude towards religious differences. He tried to advocate what he called ‘obedience to the laws of Nature’ in order to soften the rigidity of the Muslims. This has been stated in some detail by Murray Titus in *Islam in India and Pakistan*, (reprinted Karachi, 1990, pp. 202-204). Sir Syed was unable to dent the Christian prejudice against Islam and its denial of the divine origin of the Quran and the Prophethood of the Holy Prophet. Similarly, Sir Syed’s attempt – weak in its exposition – to assert that the Christian scriptures predicted the advent of the Holy Prophet of Islam never made any headway among the Christians. In short, Sir Syed conceded much to Christians and gained no concession in return. As A. Maiello writes, “Sir Syed may be regarded as the father of modern Islamic apologetics in the subcontinent.”⁷ What began as an attempt at unity promoted, only further disunity.

Interestingly, Sir Syed was aware of how his approach to the Bible would find favor neither with the Muslims nor with the Christians. In his letter to J. M. Arnold, (author of *The Quran and the Bible*), Sir Syed explicitly admits, “Muslims will attack me so long as I live. Christians are unhappy with my *tafsir* (of the Bible). I agree with Biblical teachings but I do not find support for the Trinity in it.”⁸

In conclusion, we may quote the words of Alan M. Guenther regarding Sir Syed’s efforts at fostering Christian-Muslim unity: “Sir Syed Ahmad Khan’s commentary and his efforts in this direction were seen as a preliminary step to the conversion of India as a whole to Christianity.”⁹ But this is quite an unjust allegation against a sincere Muslim, with whom we may disagree.

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