

## CHAPTER 4

# ISLAMIC LIBERALISM IN INDIA: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

This chapter supplements the main argument of the preceding pages. It briefly traces the genesis of Islamic liberalism in India through the ages and also discusses its prospects in India and Pakistan. The object is to bring Islamic liberalism into focus at a time when it appears to be in permanent retreat in the face of an ever-advancing movement of Islamic revivalism or fundamentalism (by whatever name it may be called) in the Muslim world as a whole.<sup>56</sup>

### I

Islamic liberalism is a much wider term than Islamic modernism, since liberalism and fundamentalism, as basic religious attitudes, are as old as religion itself and cut across different religions. Generally speaking, mystics and poets of all religions tend towards liberalism, while theologians and jurists towards fundamentalism.

Islamic liberalism does not imply any rigid religious, political or economic system of ideas, but is, primarily, an approach and attitude toward the nature and function of religion as such, as also the Islamic articles of faith. Islamic liberalism is thus compatible with a wide spectrum of views on politics or economics.<sup>57</sup> A person who may rightly be called a liberal Muslim in one epoch may well be deemed to be non-liberal in another. There

is a scale of liberalism and there are also types of liberalism, as a religious response, depending upon one's intellectual and cultural orientation. However, we shall have to give a minimum core content to Islamic liberalism for the purpose of a fruitful discourse.<sup>58</sup> Difficult as it is to give an absolutely non-controversial formula or definition, I have used the expression 'Islamic liberalism' as implying three basic beliefs:

(a) The acceptance of a monotheistic world view and the special status of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ as the recipient of the Quran, which has a special status in the universal and perennial process of Divine revelation for guiding the ceaseless spiritual and moral growth of mankind.

(b) The acceptance of a system of symbolic acts and practices fixed by the Prophet ﷺ, concerning man's *I-Thou* relationship with God and a few absolutely unequivocal directive principles, basic commands, and intrinsic values given in the Quran, but not necessarily or primarily any detailed policy or fixed rules governing every sphere of human activity. This implies separation between the church and the state.

(c) The acceptance of religious faith, as such (including Islam) as an individual's existential response, grounded in the depths of his being, to the inscrutable mystery of the universe, and not as a logical or rational certainty. This further implies a sense of humility and fellowship with all sincere believers (be they Muslim or not) and sincere respect for the genuine faith of others rather than any sense of superiority to non-Muslims.

Islamic liberalism thus rejects the view that any epoch in Islamic history, as the golden past, is the perfect and final norm of what and how things should be done for all times and that any attempt at improvement violates the sanctity of the Prophet's ﷺ example. Islamic liberalism holds that the finality of revelation or the special status/perfection of the Prophet ﷺ does not preclude our striving for the ceaseless growth of the ideal or norm itself as held by the Prophet ﷺ or his pious companions.

Islamic liberalism also rejects the approach of contemporary revivalist movements according to which Islam affirms the organic unity of the church and the state and is a complete guide to the total conduct of life. Islamic liberalism holds the primary function of religion to be spiritual

‘ontogenesis’ or growth through an integrated system of discipline based upon broad directive principles of the Quran without reducing religion to legalist or institutional engineering. According to Islamic liberalism, this latter task should be left to the cumulative collective wisdom channelized through the democratic process in Muslim as well as plural societies, as the case may be. In brief, Islamic liberalism encourages the pursuit of secular wisdom and continual progress through the exercise of responsible freedom by the Muslim in the major area of human activity, in cooperation with the larger human family.

Islamic liberalism rejects the view that all other religions are aberrations from the one and only straight path and should, therefore, be displaced by persuasion, if not by force. Islamic liberalism accepts the approach of cultural pluralism that there are several paths leading to the same goal even as different languages serve a common purpose, while religious absolutism holds that there is only one correct grammar of symbols and rites leading to salvation.<sup>59</sup>

Islamic liberalism thus rejects the concept of exclusive salvation; that all non-Muslims (no matter what their character and conduct) ultimately would go to hell, while all Muslims (no matter what their character and conduct) alone would go to heaven after due expiation for the evil done by them in this life. Islamic liberalism holds that good and evil, virtue and vice cut across religious labels, and so does salvation, since God is the ‘*Lord of the worlds*’ rather than of the Muslims alone.<sup>60</sup>

As already described in the preceding chapter, liberalism in modern Christianity developed under the impact of the industrial and secular revolutions in Western Europe in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Until this time all religions (rather than Islam exclusively) had the basically ‘totalist character’ of providing an integrated code of conduct for all spheres of life. The revolution in Protestant Christianity in the 18<sup>th</sup> century transformed this totalist character, or rather started the process of transforming it, into an existential interpretation of the mystery of the universe, particularly of the appearance in history of Jesus, the Christ. Modern liberal Christianity is the cultural product of and constituted by this transformed conception of the essential function of religion.

Among the other major religions of the human family Hinduism has been most receptive to this new conception of the essential function and jurisdiction of religion in the total economy of human life (under the impact of Christian Modernism), thanks to the vision and perspicuity of Hindu reformers; Rammohun Roy, Vivekananda, Gandhi and others. As we all know, contemporary Hinduism, as expounded by Radhakrishnan or Aurobindo, is a far cry from the Hinduism of the Manusmriti which regulates every detail of human life, while the current of Islamic liberalism, initiated in India by Sir Syed and some of his contemporaries, is getting lost in the sands of contemporary fundamentalism. There are, however, good sociological reasons for holding that the present trends would be reversed and that the Muslim world would gradually return to liberalism, as a mature orthogenetic response to an ever-changing human situation, rather than as an imitation of the Christian or Hindu religious responses to recent situational challenges.<sup>61</sup>

The orthogenetic movement of Islamic liberalism would however take a pretty long time, at least a century if not more, from now to become a dominant cultural force, in view of the established fact that religious response, at its best, must arise from the depths of the human psyche. Traditional patterns of religious response linger on for centuries, and ancient sentiments, memories and aspirations cast their shadows and hold captive the believer's will to believe on traditional lines.

The inherent difficulty of making an easy and smooth transition towards a liberal reinterpretation of a hallowed thought and value system is further complicated by the endemic clash of political and economic interests of men and the resultant fear and hatred at both macro and micro levels of society. Nations clash with nations, and groups within them clash among themselves just like mortal enemies, as if, the survival of one were impossible without the total subjugation of the other. This unfortunate feature of the human situation generates abysmal fear, hatred and insecurity in the human family, rendering a free, rational and creative response to the human situation practically impossible. Clinging to his past, praying and hoping for miraculous help out of Divine mercy, the believer readily abjures rational striving to solve his problems.

Much more tragic than man's cultural inertia and resistance to new insights and inner growth is the conscious or unconscious effort of powerful

and wealthy nations to use weaker sections of the human family as means rather than as ends in themselves. It is futile blaming the great powers for their desire to cling to their power and privileges through aggressive nationalism, since the evil of egoism, embedded in man's depths, is only the other side of the Divine spark in humanity. Egoism, both individual and collective, is the root of man's struggle for survival and power, and both individuals and groups would disintegrate without some measure of the egoistic striving for preserving, if not expanding, one's own level of well-being even at the expense of others. Nevertheless, moral and spiritual geniuses do arise from time to time and transcend the limitations of their own society and culture and, with charity for all and malice towards none, strive for the well being of the entire human family. Such souls are often heard and obeyed, albeit, very marginally and haltingly. And a reluctant humanity moves, slowly and circuitously, now advancing, now retreating, now finding the way, now losing it, towards a relatively less imperfect human condition, in some part of the great human family, for at least some duration which keeps alive human hopes for a better scheme of things, on a bigger scale, in the long run. Such is the human story as seen in history's mirror, with the eye of hope but without the spectacles of illusion.

## II

After a supposedly romantic reception given to Islam in the Malabar Coast of South India, which had very ancient trade relations with Arabia, Muslims became a militant force in Sind in 712, where they remained confined for the next almost 500 years.<sup>62</sup> Mohammad Ghori's ascent to the throne of Delhi in 1193 marks the beginning of a pervasive Muslim presence in North India, and the beginning of the long-drawn-out process of cultural interaction between Muslims and Hindus.

Co-existence and emotional distance between the ruling urban elite and the peasant masses marked the early period in Sind and elsewhere. The Sultans and the top nobility were, on the whole, tolerant of religious differences and their code of conduct towards their Hindu subjects (who vastly outnumbered the Muslims) was shaped by the requirements of statesmanship rather than the strict *shariah*. The Muslim ruling class was least interested in propagating their Islamic faith.<sup>63</sup> This led to a continual tension between the Sultans and the scholar jurists or the *Ulema* who held that the king should actively propagate Islam and be subordinate to the

*shariah*. A tug of war also existed between the sovereign and the nobles who wanted more power or influence than the Sultan thought safe or prudent in his own interests.<sup>64</sup>

Barring a few exceptional cases there was no persecution or forced conversion, though the Muslim elite naturally did occupy a privileged position in the realm and this must have prompted some Muslims to behave arrogantly and some non-Muslims to get converted to the creed of the ruling group. The view of Qazi Mughisuddin, the most learned divine in the reign of Al-lauddin Khiliji (d. 1316), concerning the proper method of collecting 'jizya' from non-Muslims, or the execution of the liberal Hindu saint, Buddhan Brahman, during the reign of Sikandar Lodi (d. 1517) do not go to disprove the general practice of tolerance in the realm. It is significant that Allauddin rejected the advice of theologians who thought on the lines of the learned Qazi. Indeed, Muslim rule could not, conceivably, have lasted so long if reciprocal tolerance and respect had been generally absent in Indian society. The tolerance shown by the Hindus was not due to any lack of spine as some Hindu fanatics are apt to allege (out of a desperate attempt) to rouse sectarian militancy in their passive co-religionists against the Muslim 'aliens' for having corrupted and destroyed '*Bharati Sanskriti*'. The tolerance shown by the Hindu masses as well as the classes sprang from their realistic appreciation of the then military and technological superiority of the Muslims who, indeed, led the medieval world in almost all fields of human endeavour, even as other members of the human family had done so in the ancient period, and the Western world does today. The Hindu concept of '*Isht-devata*' (free choice of deity), which had been the established basis of the inter-sectarian tolerance of all religions of Indian origin, was (in actual practice) extended and applied to the Muslim rulers and nobility and later to the masses, most of whom were converts from Hinduism as such. Though exceptions prevailed in a land of such vastness and variety as India the extension generally given to the above concept of '*Isht-devata*' gave spiritual legitimacy to the *de facto* tolerance shown by the Hindus.

Turning to the part played by the Muslims in the long-drawn-out process of emotional and cultural integration, the Muslim rulers and cultured classes were quite susceptible to the fabulous charms of Hindustan; its fauna and flora, music and dance, myths and fables, divergent seasons and festivals, and, last but not least, the unsurpassed spontaneous grace of its womenfolk. The predilection of the cultured classes for the artistic and sensual elements of the culture of their adopted homeland was made

the butt of attack by puritancial theologians and jurists who took pride in the fact that the religion of Islam was singularly free from the admixture of myth, fantasy, music and sculpture found in the styles of Hindu and Christian piety. But all their exhortations failed to prevent the cultured Muslim classes from appreciating the rich art and culture of Hindustan. Likewise, no denunciation of interest or usury stood in the way of the Muslim landed gentry from borrowing money from Hindu moneylenders or traders. Nor did the ill conceived exhortations of some theologians to the rulers and the nobility to avoid trusting and befriending non-Muslims and giving them high positions in state services prevent the closest political and military cooperation and alliances on purely secular lines. Thus, both Muslims and Hindus freely employed each other for military, professional, commercial and domestic purposes, though there was a total ban on inter-dining and inter-marriage. This, however, did not stand in the way of a sharing of the common joys and sorrows of life, and mutual trust and loyalty definitely cut across religious lines.<sup>65</sup>

In the above process of emotional integration of the diverse ethnic and religious elements of Indian society the most crucial role was played by the *Sufi* saints, especially those who wrote poetry or were drawn to poetry and music. With a few exceptions, the *Sufi* approach to Islam was far more flexible and liberal in contrast with the approach of the theologians. The *Sufi* saints held universal love and humanitarian kindness (irrespective of caste, colour or creed) to be equally important as formal Islamic worship. This universal tolerance and kindness and their exemplary character attracted the Hindu masses and prepared the soil for their peaceful mass conversion, especially among the economically weaker and culturally backward sections of an essentially rigid caste-ridden society. The better-placed and educated Hindus also developed a sympathetic understanding of Islamic concepts and values through their contacts with the *Sufis* and association with friendly Muslim quarters in the enterprise of daily life. Moinuddin Chishti, Baba Farid (d. 1265) and Nizamuddin Auliya (d. 1325) symbolized the emerging Catholicism. Baba Farid wrote poetry in Punjabi and appreciated Hindu piety and spirituality. No wonder, Guru Nanak included this poetry in the Granth Sahab.

Early co-existence thus ripened into co-discovery of the great wealth of the ancient Hindu and medieval Islamic cultural streams. This made the enlightened sections, among both Hindus and Muslims, aware of the basic

similarities between the two religions behind the differences in doctrine or idiom. Nanak (d. 1539) and Kabir (d. 1518) symbolize this approach. At the same time secular contacts and needs led, in the course of time, to the growth of the common language of Hindavi or Persianized Hindi (now known as Urdu) which first became a literary vehicle in the Bahmani Kingdom of South India and latter flowered in Delhi, Agra and Lucknow. The poets Amir Khusro (d. 1325), and Malik Muhammad Jaisi (d. 1542) and the Sultans, Quli Qutab Shah of Deccan (d. 1612) and Zainul Abidin of Kashmir (d. 1470) represent this emerging cultural synthesis. A fusion of cultural values thus gradually took place in literature, music, architecture, painting, gardening, manners and dress, and last, but not least, in religion itself. Indeed, what is Sikhism if not the fusion of Hinduism and Islam in the Indian environment? But, as we all know, the ban on inter-marriage remained as absolute as ever. Perhaps, the fact that Hinduism itself prohibited inter-caste marriage prevented the rise of a movement against the ban on Hindu-Muslim marriage. In any case, the ban on inter-dining and inter-marriage could not prevent the practice and the ethic of genuine mutual understanding and friendly cooperation in all matters; domestic, civic and political, subject, of course, to individual alignments in the conflict of interests and the struggle for power; features which are inherent in the human situation, irrespective of time and place.<sup>66</sup>

The movement of religious liberalism reached its peak with Akbar (d. 1605). Instead of viewing it as a cultural mutation or sudden reversal it would be more accurate to regard Akbar's religious approach as a 'Utopian culmination' of a long-drawn-out process whose logic had clearly been grasped by the genius of Al-Beruni (d. app. 1040) in his monumental work on India.<sup>67</sup>

Akbar's robust commonsense, intellectual curiosity, sense of fairplay and intuitive wisdom led him from the idea of mere tolerance of diverse faiths to the higher idea of the unity of spirit and purpose behind different forms of religion. This is why he did not object to his Hindu wife retaining her own faith, and even provided a temple for her within the palace. Akbar's genuine commitment to liberalism is also reflected in his befriending and trusting numerous Hindus in every walk of life and at the highest levels, civil and military! Non-Muslim religious scholars were also made eligible for state grants for the first time.

Rather unfortunately, however, (possibly due to his lack of formal education and the ambitions of some of his advisers to elevate their own ranks as high priests of a new dispensation) Akbar was led towards founding a new religion in place of being content with a mere liberal interpretation of Islam.<sup>68</sup> Though neither force nor bribery was used in propagating the royal religion (which could win only two dozen or so adherents), this step shocked Muslim opinion. This 'spiritual adventurism' and perhaps some actual or alleged excesses committed by Akbar or with his acquiescence led to a mounting opposition from Muslim fundamentalism and puritanism, represented by Shaikh Ahmad Sarhandi (d. 1624). This slowed down the momentum of the liberal movement and its inner growth and consolidation in court circles and Muslim society after Akbar.

The debate and the conflict between liberal humanist values and a rigid legalist totalist approach to religion lasted throughout the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Saints like Sarmad (d. 1661), Mian Mir (d. 1635), Mohibullah Shah (d. 1648) and the scholar prince Dara Shikoh (d. 1659) championed the cause of liberalism, while Aurangzeb (d. 1707) supported Islamic legalism and totalism, dominating the scene for approximately sixty years.

Aurangzeb was not a bigot or anti-Hindu, as has come to be believed in many quarters, due to an understandable confusion between his politics and his religious convictions. Indeed, his valor, learning and moral integrity continued to command the respect, not only of the Muslims, but also of the vast majority of the Hindus till the very end. Yet, there can be no doubt, whatsoever, that Aurangzeb not merely checked and reversed the syncretist 'spiritual adventurism' of Akbar or Dara Shikoh, but that Aurangzeb's approach to Islam prevented the orthogenetic flowering and evolution of Islamic liberalism in the Indian environment.<sup>69</sup>

After the death of Aurangzeb in the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Indian society was plunged into socio-political turmoil, civil wars, foreign invasions and intellectual stagnation. While the West went on advancing in political liberalism, science and technology on the foundations securely laid by Bacon, Descartes, Spinoza, Newton, Leibniz, Adam Smith and others, political decay and cultural stagnation set in throughout our country. South India fared better for a time under Hyder Ali and Tipu Sultan in Mysore and the Nizam in Hyderabad, but this did not last long.

In the turmoil of the 18<sup>th</sup> century arose Waliullah of Delhi (d. 1763), the greatest Muslim theologian of the age, and virtually, the first translator of the Quran (into Persian). Waliullah stood for a liberal and permissive approach to differences within the Sunni Muslim sects and *Sufi* schools of thought. Intellectually highly gifted, as he was, as a theologian and social critic Waliullah, was not a critical philosopher and historian analysing man's moral, religious and mystical experience as was, in fact, being done by his Western contemporaries; Voltaire and Kant, who stood on the shoulders of their predecessors. Waliullah's magnum opus, written in Arabic, contains several reports (without any critical scrutiny) of the sayings and doings of the Prophet ﷺ of Islam, and his theological approach was not free from elements of intolerance and ethnocentricity, also found in Shaikh Ahmad Sarhindi of the previous century.

Other notable Muslim liberals of the 18<sup>th</sup> century; the poets, Sauda (d. 1780), Khwaja Mir Dard (d. 1785), Mir Taqi Mir (d. 1810), Mazhar Jane Janan (d. 1781), Bedil (d. 1720), and the liberal theologian of Firangi Mahal, Lucknow, Nizamuddin (d. 1748) (who formulated the syllabus for higher secular studies still in vogue in Islamic seminaries in India) had a more humanist and tolerant approach. But their tolerance and liberalism were rooted more in *Sufi* ways of thought than in the secular and scientific temper that was steadily emerging in the West due to advances in Mathematics and natural science as also the rise of democratic values of respect for individual freedom and rights of man due to advances in the social sciences. The remarkable 18<sup>th</sup> century which saw in the West the birth of the liberal religious revolution and the American and French revolutions, saw in India only the birth of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, and that too on British initiative.

In general, the 18<sup>th</sup> century in India is a long tunnel of stagnant darkness; civil strife, the collapse of moral integrity, and a total loss of national dignity and direction for the sake of a disgusting short-term search for power or wealth. Yet, religious liberalism, in a broad sense, prevailed in Indian society, since the endemic struggles for short-term power ran on secular or regional, rather than religious or communal lines. Thus, not religious kinship, but political ambition or military strategy, devoid of all ethical considerations, decided the choice of one's allies or opponents, collaboration or confrontation, loyalty or betrayal, in both individual and collective life. This applies, without exception, to the Mughals, Rajputs, Marhattas, Jats, Afghans, Rohillas and European adventurers in North India and to

the henchmen of Tipu Sultan and the Nizam in the South. In fact, Hindu Marhattas and Rajputs showed greater respect and kindness, than the Muslim Rohillas and Afghans, to the nominal Mughal suzerains confined to the Red Fort in Delhi. Likewise, Hindu generals displayed greater loyalty than several of their Muslim counterparts to the dynamic, secular, but unlucky Tipu Sultan of Mysore.<sup>70</sup>

### III

The exposure of the Hindu elite of Bengal to Western thought from mid 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards acted almost like dynamite blowing up the centuries-old crust of stagnant concepts and values, and the symbol of this awakening is, of course, Ram Mohun Roy (d. 1833). The long interaction with Islam had weakened the grip of an ethnocentric and chauvinistic mentality, increasing the receptivity of the Hindu mind to the new ideas and values represented by the rising British power. High class urban Hindus, in fairly large numbers, were attracted to the scientific and spiritual humanism of the West rather than to official Christianity, and the *Brahmo Samaj* movement emerged in 1828 as an attempt to reinterpret the ancient Hindu tradition. Later on Vivekananda and Dayananda, and after them, Tagore and Gandhi reverently pruned the tradition as 'insiders', giving their own conception of the essential core of the 'eternal religion' (*sanatana dharma*). They criticized the tradition and yet claimed to belong to it. More importantly, Hindu society, in general, did not reject this claim, though many quarters tenaciously fought back the reformers in losing battles.

The Muslim response during the same period was quite different. Muslims had recently lost their political supremacy in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century to the British whose religion and culture were felt as anathema. Moreover, the emerging way of life did not hold any promise of future betterment of worldly prospects for the Muslims for whom court or military service had been the traditional avenues of advancement. Disillusionment, frustration and despair of the future conspired to generate among the Muslims of North India a tenacious sectarian militancy under the leadership of Saiyid Ahmad Barelvi (d. 1831). Inspired by the school of Waliullah, he led a crusade even against the liberal and tolerant Sikh ruler of Punjab, Ranjit Singh (d. 1827). Likewise, Shariatullah of Bengal (d. 1840) launched the *Faraizi* movement in eastern India seeking to purify Muslim society of corrupt and un-Islamic

elements. The Muslims thus had to wait till the third quarter of the century when Sir Syed (d. 1898), helped by a galaxy of brilliant associates,<sup>71</sup> created a wind of change and opened a new window to the contemporary human situation, enabling the Indian Muslim to think afresh on the central meaning of Islam in an ever-changing world. Some other distinguished Islamic liberals of the same period also worked on similar lines: Salar Jung I of Hyderabad (d. 1882), Badruddin Tayabji (d. 1906), Khuda Bakhsh (d. 1931), Abdul Latif (d. 1893), Chiragh Ali (d. 1895), and Amir Ali (d. 1928). The founder of Ahmadi Islam, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (d. 1908) also contributed (albeit, in his own unique way) to the task of thinking afresh.

Amir Ali's work, *The Spirit of Islam*, was the most widely read classic of Islamic liberalism of the period, while Chiragh Ali's work, *Proposed Political, Legal, and Social Reforms in the Ottoman Empire*, 1883, is the most radical and consistent essay in Islamic Liberalism. While Amir Ali's approach is apologetic rather than philosophical, Chiragh Ali's was far too ahead of his time to strike a responsive chord in the then situation. However, none among the liberals possessed the charismatic personality of Sir Syed who influenced the Indian Muslim mind and Muslim politics more than anybody else.

As a forward looking person, deeply impressed with the achievements of Western science and technology and the spirit of Victorian liberalism, Sir Syed first established a Scientific Society to promote the study of science among Urdu speaking people and, later in 1877, the *M.A.O. College*, Aligarh. He wished the college to be a place for 'free enquiry, large-hearted tolerance and pure morality'. Believing that the Quran was the 'word of God' he wished to interpret it in the light of human reason which together with revelation (confined to the prophets) was God's gift to man. Denying miracles, Sir Syed held that the interpretation of the 'word of God' must harmonize with science, which described the 'work of God', that is, nature governed by uniform laws, which are essentially Divine commands.

Holding that the Islamic law (*shariah*) was not an integral part of the immutable essentials of faith (*deen*), Sir Syed declared that the *shariah* should be changed to suit the ever-changing conditions. He rejected the traditional division of society into the 'land of Islam' (*darul Islam*) and the 'land of war' (*darul harb*) and the related concept of 'holy war' (*jihad*) as an integral part of the essentials of faith. Putting forward the concept of '*darul aman*' (areas under non-Muslim rulers where Muslims lived in peace and had full rights

to practise the essentials of faith) Sir Syed pleaded for full cooperation with the British rulers whose character and scientific achievements he admired.

Sir Syed stressed the spirit and the essentials of Islam rather than following the details of the legal corpus or established ritual and custom. He held that Muslims should join the national mainstream of secular progress, not as atomic 'community-blind' individuals, but on a corporate basis, as members of the Muslim community within the Indian nation. This task implied coming to terms with modern education and the British. And this was perhaps the farthest limit of Sir Syed's political and social vision beyond which his lights became as blurred as those of the Deoband school under the leadership of Muhammad Qasim (d. 1880) who, drawing inspiration from Waliullah, was dead against British rule and Western education and values.<sup>72</sup>

Sir Syed's grasp of modern thought and his self-proclaimed rationalism were, however, so unsophisticated that he honestly held that the existence of God and the prophecy of Muhammad ﷺ were rationally demonstrable. Liberal as he was in the religious sense, Sir Syed was not fully aware of the conceptual foundations of Victorian liberalism; Cartesian doubt, scientific method, spiritual autonomy, respect for the individual, equality of man, sovereignty of the national will, parliamentary democracy and rule by majority and separation between the church and the state. Sir Syed's religious liberalism was, thus, nothing more than a simple Islamic monotheism, freed from the gloss of traditional Muslim theology and law (*shariah*) combined with the spirit of universal tolerance and a sense of special kinship with Christianity and Judaism. This approach was admirably calculated to enable the Muslims to cooperate with, and to prosper (along with other communities of India) under the protection of permanent British rule or paramountcy, while retaining a good Islamic conscience. But what this approach lacked was a social and political philosophy, which could yield long-term political goals for Muslims and other Indians. In other words, Sir Syed's religious liberalism was geared to short-term goals and the ideal of 'the loyal Indian Mohammadan', but not to the long-term needs and problems of the Muslim community and the country, as a whole, after the passing phase of British rule came to an end.

While the earlier Hindu liberalism of the *Brahmo Samaj* had really captured the religious and political imagination of the educated urban Bengal, the Islamic liberalism of Sir Syed remained almost a closed book for those

very Muslims who eagerly obtained degrees from the M.A.O. College as passports for entry into government service. Thus did the process of superficial westernization continue among the upper and professional classes of Muslims without their modernization or exposure to Victorian liberalism, or even to Sir Syed's own version of Islamic liberalism, unlike the relatively steadier growth of the liberal secular outlook in several enlightened Hindu quarters in cosmopolitan Calcutta, Bombay and Madras in the wake of English education, *Brahmo* and other kindred movements.

One should, however, not be too harsh on the failure of the Muslims to respond in the way the Hindus did. The idea of secular democracy favored the interests of the Hindus (because of their overwhelming majority) while it created grave apprehensions and fears among the Muslims in view of the long-standing caste and communal divisions of Indian society. Muslims naturally felt apprehensive of being reduced to a 'perpetual minority', at the mercy of the majority, in a political set-up which was formally and, in theory, secular, but which, in practice, might become almost totally sectarian on the principle of one man, one vote. In other words, while the ideal of democracy coalesced with and promoted the interests of the majority community, the ideal clashed with the practical interests of the minority. The now well-established sociological principle of 'the situational evocation of ideas and attitudes' was brought into play, obstructing the growth of secular liberalism among the Muslims while promoting it among educated Hindus.

The fears and apprehensions of the Muslims eventually led to what some modern historians have called 'Muslim separatism' in India. Separatism may or may not be conjoined with liberalism. After Sir Syed's death the leader, of Muslim separatism; the Agha Khan (d. 1957), Syed Husain Bilgrami (d. 1926), a distinguished civil servant of Hyderabad, and some other founder members of the Muslim League (most of whose members were liberal in a restricted sense); succeeded, in 1906, in getting the active support of the then Viceroy, Lord Minto, for the demand of separate Muslim electorates. This was the nuclear idea, which eventually developed into the idea of a separate Muslim state. The Muslim divines of Deoband, steeped in Islamic fundamentalism, on the other hand, gradually turned into staunch allies of the liberal Indian National Congress which (paradoxically) had been founded by the British civil servant, A.O.Hume (d. 912). Such are the fascinating mazes and mutations of history.<sup>73</sup>

## IV

Lacking any long-term political vision of independent India, Sir Syed went on making *ad hoc* political moves in the context of the developing political situation for preserving rather short-term Muslim interests as he conceived them to be. This approach failed after his death, in 1898, to satisfy the younger educated generation due to the political psychological fallout of the conflict between Ottoman Turkey and Greek Slav nationalism in the Balkans from the first quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards.<sup>74</sup>

The liberation of Greece in 1829 was followed by the wresting of independence from Turkey by a string of Balkan states with the passage of time. This conflict was purely ethnic and political, but it gradually acquired religious overtones for Indian Muslims, more especially after Turkey's entry into the First World War against Britain. The decline of Turkey's political and military strength had jeopardized the custody of the Muslim holy places (Mecca and Medina, traditionally under Turkish control) and greatly agitated the Indian Muslims. Sir Syed's liberal stance of separating religion from politics, his unqualified and absolute support to the British government and his calculated aloofness from the aspirations of the liberals of the Indian National Congress, founded in 1885, thus gradually lost its relevance, giving way to a rather confused patchwork synthesis of pan-Islamism and nationalism.

Shibli<sup>75</sup> (d. 1914), brilliant historian and man of letters, Abul Kalam Azad (d. 1958) in his early phase, and Mohammad Ali (d. 1931) showed the new way. and numerous Muslims came under the spell of the pan-Islamic movement which predates the Congress struggle for independence. Both the movements, however, reached their peak when they coalesced under the joint leadership of Gandhi and Mohammad Ali during 1920-1923. Deeply committed as were Mohammad Ali, Azad and other prominent *Khilafat* leaders to the cause of Indian freedom and Hindu-Muslim unity, they abandoned Sir Syed's religious liberalism in favor of a totalist approach against which Sir Syed had so courageously struggled under the auspices of the *Aligarh movement*.<sup>76</sup> In other words, the *Khilafat* movement was not just a political reversal of Sir Syed's undeniably over-zealous commitment to the British crown, but also a sort of religious regression from Sir Syed's version of Islamic liberalism and a return to a modified totalist approach to Islam. The cooperation offered by the *Khilafat* leaders to the Congress and the massive

participation of Muslims in the freedom struggle, under Gandhiji's leadership, was not rooted in a clear-cut Islamic liberalism (wedded to separation between the church and the state) but rather in a most confused totalist or fundamentalist conception of Islam (wedded to the idea of an organic unity of religion and politics in Islam). Even Azad (who in his later mature phase was to become the pillar of Islamic liberalism) at this juncture thought on totalist lines holding that the institution of *Khilafat* was an integral part of the Islamic faith and that defending and helping the *Khalifa* was the religious duty of the Muslims. He also stood for a separate and distinct political identity for the Muslim community (cooperating with the Hindu community) in a state conceived as a federation of distinct communities, rather than as a sovereign territorial state composed of individual citizens having equal rights. Mohammad Ali's speeches and writings also reflect the same position. His declared stand on what he would do in the event of Afghanistan attacking India in the name of Islam, and his subsequent opposition to the application of the Sharda Act (banning child marriage) to Muslims sprang from his essentially totalist, as against Sir Syed's liberal, approach to Islam.

Electrifying and tremendous as was the effect of the *Khilafat* movement, in terms of mass political awakening and the growth of nationalism, it indirectly led to the considerable weakening of Islamic liberalism and the idea of separation between the church and the state. The *Ulema* from Deoband and other Muslim theological centres rubbed shoulders with Congress liberals (both Hindus and Muslim) in a united struggle for India's liberation from British rule, little realizing how utterly different were their visions of a free India and also of the proper role of religion in the modern age and in a plural Indian society.

That the totalist approach to Islam and its corollary of pan-Islamism were unrealistic in the modern era was shown by the decision of the Turkish National Assembly, under the supreme leadership of Mustafa Kamal (d. 1938), to divest the then *Khalifa* of all political powers and functions in 1923, and the final abolition of the institution as such in 1924.<sup>77</sup> It is significant that Jinnah, who was later to emerge as the architect of Pakistan, had, on principle, remained aloof from the *Khilafat* movement in its hey-day.<sup>78</sup>

The *Jamia Millia Islamia* (National Muslim University) founded at Aligarh in 1920 under the patronage of the veteran Deoband divine and

freedom fighter, Mahmudul Hasan (d. 1921), and with the active blessings of Gandhiji, was the cultural expression of the political partnership between the *Khilafat* and the Congress movements, and of pan-Islamism and Indian nationalism. At this stage the thinking of the *Jamia's* first Vice-Chancellor, Mohammad Ali, was perhaps, relatively closer to Islamic liberalism, as defined in this essay, than the views of Azad, contained in his book *Masalae Khilafat wa Jazirae Arab*, Lahore, 1920, on the issue of *Khilafat*. Yet, with the exception of Hakim Ajmal Khan (d. 1928), M.A. Ansari (d. 1936) A.M. Khwaja (d. 1962), Syed Mahmud (d. 1971), and one or two others, the *Khilafat* leaders and supporters, in general (including Mohammad Ali himself), lacked a philosophical basis or rationale for reconciling the full demands and implications of nationalism with those of institutional Islam which the *Khilafat* leaders (quite unlike the then secular liberal Jinnah) made the emotional rallying point for the Muslim masses. What inspired their emphasis on communal harmony and national unity was not territorial nationalism, but their (correct) political perception that effective help to the *Khilafat* cause needed a united front of Hindus and Muslims, just as Gandhiji knew that it was a precondition for Indian independence. It is, therefore, hardly surprising that the abolition of *Khilafat* in 1924 led to a slump in the political honeymoon of Hindu and Muslim political activists during the early twenties.

A.M. Khwaja who had somehow managed to keep the infant *Jamia* alive, in the face of the waning away of the early enthusiasm and despite tremendous financial odds, shifted the *Jamia*, in 1925, to Delhi where Zakir Husain took over charge the following year.<sup>79</sup>

Zakir Husain (d. 1969) and the young liberal intellectuals who gathered around him at the *Jamia*: Abid Husain (d. 1978) and M. Mujib, together with some older liberals, such as Aslam Jairajpuri and Shafiqur Rahman Kidwai, had very clear notions of the relationship between religion and politics and were committed to Islamic liberalism. But Zakir Husain's efforts at the *Jamia* in Delhi centred on providing sound primary and secondary education in a broadly liberal Islamic and patriotic atmosphere rather than on higher studies or research on Islamic liberalism. Substantial as was the *Jamia's* contribution to adult literacy and children's literature in Urdu, it could not make any effective impact upon the Indian Muslim mind. In the final analysis, the resources of the *Jamia* were too limited for the magnitude and complexity of the task. Much later, in the fifties and the sixties, however, Abid Husain and Mujeeb did valuable work in this direction.

In the thirties and the forties a number of distinguished Muslim intellectuals, in different fields and in different parts of India, enriched the content of Islamic liberalism.<sup>80</sup> These liberals looked at Islam, in varying degrees, from an historical perspective and clearly de-linked political and economic questions from the sphere of religion. They, however, lacked the moral courage to spell out their views and to develop them to their logical conclusion. Rejecting the pre-sociological pseudo-rationalism of Sir Syed, these neo-liberals moved towards a more pronounced, though as yet unnamed, religious existentialism stressing man's authentic '*I-Thou*' relationship with God, rather than the organic unity of the church and the state, as the central meaning of Islam.

Some neo-liberals also gave a new turn to Urdu literature from the thirties onwards. Their poetry, short stories, novels and other works helped to generate a liberal atmosphere congenial to the growth of religious liberalism.<sup>81</sup> Some among the neo-liberals came under the spell of Marxism which undoubtedly marks the beginning of a new era in man's history.

Though Marxist intellectuals among Indian Muslims are understandably few in number, they have helped in the growth of Islamic liberalism by forcing discussion upon basic religious and cultural issues. Marxist writers have helped to awaken Muslims from their 'dogmatic slumbers', as it were.<sup>82</sup> However, educated Muslims, generally, prefer the gentle breeze of liberal reform to the stormy winds of revolution. Since Marxism is a particular version of the historical and sociological approach to society, no honest observer of the human condition should ignore the indirect but powerful role of Marxist writers in the complex process of the evolution of liberal ideas and values. While many disillusioned liberals might, one day, turn to the 'panacea' supplied by Moscow or Peking, many more who stand disillusioned with the results achieved so far are likely to turn away from it and return to the original liberal fold.

As pointed out earlier, Sir Syed's Islamic liberalism had lost its relevance and directive power by the first quarter of the present century, since Sir Syed's approach, being devoid of a consistent long-term political vision, led to a sort of isolation of Muslims of India from the mainstream of Indian nationalism as also from pan-Islamism. The *Khilafat* leaders claimed to have supplied this vision. But, as we have seen, their political vision took no account whatsoever of the growing power of territorial nationalism in the

Islamic world itself and elsewhere and the emerging religious modernism, under the impact of science, on human society in general.

This inadequacy is explicable since the *Khilafat* leaders, generally speaking, could not lay claim to any thorough familiarity with modern Western thought. But the case of Mohammad Ali, and, more especially, of Iqbal was different.

Well versed in both Islamic and Western thought, Iqbal was the most gifted and qualified Muslim luminary of the age to nourish and foster Sir Syed's nascent Islamic liberalism in the light of modern thought. And, indeed, he did attempt to do this in his famous work, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*. Unlike Sir Syed's confused rationalism, Iqbal put forward a systematic theory of knowledge, which does justice to the claims of reason as well as intuition or feeling, holding that it is wrong to dismiss feeling as mere subjective emotion devoid of any epistemic status. His rejection of the proofs of God's existence and his avowedly existentialist approach to religious faith is a definite advance upon Sir Syed's religious rationalism. This existentialism could well have flowered into full-fledged Islamic liberalism, as defined in this essay, if Iqbal could have wielded greater historical and sociological perspicacity. But, instead, Iqbal reversed Sir Syed's religious liberalism in regard to the crucial issue of the proper jurisdiction of religion.

Though Iqbal could be called an Islamic liberal, in a broad sense, his liberalism remained ambivalent and halting because he neglected the sociology of religion. Despite a fairly wide range of his central argument in his attempted reconstruction of religious thought, Iqbal nowhere raised the crucial problem of the function of religion in the contemporary human situation. By and large, Iqbal accepted the totalist approach to Islam. Rejecting the more or less unconscious thrust of Sir Syed's thinking in the direction of a pragmatic separation between the church and the state, Iqbal once again, forcefully and categorically, affirmed the doctrine of the organic unity of the church and the state as the differentia of Islam, and held that without such unity religion loses all social relevance and becomes mere ritualism. This meant dismissing without much ado Sir Syed's pioneering efforts to find religious legitimacy for 'functional secularism', that is, a secular approach for Muslims living in a plural society, in regard to political, economic, social and cultural matters.

Though Iqbal's concept of organic unity of the church and the state in Islam together with the stipulation of an 'open' or dynamic approach to *shariah*, may work well (up to a point) in a predominantly Muslim society, it cannot possibly fully satisfy the legitimate needs and interests of Muslims living in a plural society. Such Muslims would always tend to look upon themselves and actually would be looked upon by others as second class or 'candidate Muslims' in relation to the 'full' Muslims who live in an Islamic society where the church and the state are one. In other words, Iqbal's version of Islamic liberalism cannot possibly have a universal appeal for Muslims. Even the predicament of Pakistan today, in the name of the programme of Islamization (thanks to the evergrowing impact of Maududi's ideas after Jinnah's death) is, to a great extent, the legacy of the philosopher-poet.<sup>83</sup>

Azad presents an interesting contrast with Iqbal in regard to the issue of the proper function and jurisdiction of religion. Azad started out in his early *Al-Hilal* and *Al-Balagh* phase with a totalist approach to Islam, but moved away from it after the Turkish revolution under Mustafa Kamal.

The collapse of the institution of *Khilafat* made Azad aware of the difficulties inherent in the very concept as such in the present human situation and turned his early Islamic fundamentalism towards the liberal principle of separation between the church and the state. It seems the change, or rather the evolution, in Azad's thinking was greatly facilitated by his studies in the history and philosophy of religion as a preparation for his monumental commentary on the Quran. Gradually Azad veered round to the modern view of human society as a federation of plural functional associations—religious, political, economic and cultural— for satisfying human needs in different spheres without one sphere encroaching upon the other. It must be noted that this evolution in Azad's ideas was due to the maturation of a deeply religious and fully integrated personality, rather than a political compromise or strategy to further his political ambitions, as was unfortunately and uncharitably, alleged by Azad's detractors. The same remarks apply to some other public figures notable for their patriotism and secularism on the one hand, and sincere commitment to Islam, on the other.<sup>84</sup>

## V

The Pakistan demand originally adumbrated by Iqbal in 1930 and officially adopted by the Muslim League in 1940 was a political demand of Muslim liberals, of some hue or other, who were dissatisfied with their Hindu counterparts in the Congress rather than a religious demand rooted in Islamic fundamentalism. The leaders of the Muslim League, most notably Jinnah; the political architect of Pakistan, were definitely disposed towards Islamic liberalism rather than the totalist approach which was mildly and, somewhat ambivalently, held by Iqbal, who is looked upon by many as the spiritual architect of Pakistan. That there was a measure of contradiction between the approaches of the political and spiritual fathers of Pakistan was not given much significance before its establishment. And this is understandable.

The Pakistan concept was, in essence, an ideology of the modern educated urban Muslim who felt himself disadvantaged or discriminated against by the majority community. The demand, however, also harmonized with the traditional totalist approach to Islam, which remained more or less dormant in the Muslim psyche, despite Sir Syed's pioneering approach of Islamic liberalism. The idea of a state of Muslims, run by Muslims, and for Muslims, in accordance with the Quran and the sunnat, thus deeply stirred the religious imagination of the educated urban Muslim even (rather specially) in the minority provinces which, however were to be outside the proposed Pakistan.

Paradoxically, the Deoband and other Muslim divines, on the whole, did not support the demand which (again paradoxically) drew support from the Indian Communists on the principle of self-determination of nationalities within India. The Deoband and other Muslim divines vigorously opposed the political thesis that Hindus and Muslims were two nations; the thesis Jinnah put forward as the basis for the partition of the country. They also rejected the religious thesis emanating from a rather small dissident group of Deoband and other *Ulema*, that the practice of Islam, in its entirety, demanded living as a citizen of an Islamic state as Pakistan was proposed to be. Though a lot of confusion prevailed in different quarters the general elections of 1946 (based on a limited franchise and separate Muslim electorates) gave an overwhelming Muslim mandate in favor of Pakistan. However, it is significant that more than thirty per cent of the Muslim votes were cast

against the Muslim League or, in other words, against the concept of Pakistan. The overwhelming victory of the League was in terms of the number of seats won in the legislatures (due to the one man, one vote system) and not in terms of the number of Muslims who stood for partition.<sup>85</sup>

The emergence of independent Pakistan and several other Muslim states after the Second World War has strengthened the appeal of pan-Islamist ideas of Jamaluddin Afghani and the totalist approach of Islam, which, as pointed out earlier, was common to all religions until mid 18<sup>th</sup> century. It was precisely this totalist approach, which had been courageously rejected by Sir Syed.

The totalist approach to Islam, has been most consistently championed by Maududi (d. 1979) in his voluminous writings in powerful Urdu prose. His dedicated life, the enchanting philosophical poetry of Iqbal (who also supports the totalist approach) and the emergence of several sovereign Muslim states in the comity of nations have brought the totalist conception into the focus of Muslim thinking in far-flung Muslim societies. A powerful struggle between competing approaches or interpretations of Islam is going on in Iran, Egypt, Turkey, Pakistan and also elsewhere with varying degrees of intensity. Though it is too early to predict the outcome of this struggle in the near future, it is evident that the totalist approach amounts to a reversal of the general direction of the history of religions which are gradually outgrowing the totalist conception that religion and politics, the church and the state, are one and inseparable.<sup>86</sup>

It is true that the contemporary Islamic totalist approach favors an open or dynamic *shariah*, and thus does not attract the charge of rigid blind conformity to the past. In this sense, therefore, it does represent a considerable advance upon medieval traditionalism. Nevertheless, the totalist approach does have implications and ramifications that obstruct the ceaseless growth of our ideas and our value system. In the final analysis, effective ceaseless growth requires, not merely *ad hoc* adjustments in the religious law, but the authentic and creative reinterpretation of basic values and their distinction from instrumental rules. Equally importantly, proper growth requires demarcating the valid jurisdictions of faith and reason, religion and science, spirituality and morality. Merely an open approach to the *shariah* (though useful up to a point) is not enough, until one realizes the proper function or the jurisdiction of religion in the total economy of human life. And

one shall not be able to do so until one studies the history of religions as a part of universal cultural history. Unfortunately, Muslim theologians and jurists, despite their prodigious religious learning and (in some cases) great integrity of character, totally neglect history and the social sciences in their official as well as private studies. As a result they just cannot look upon Islam as a developing process in social space-time. Moreover, the approach of the *Ulema*, in general, specially the scholarly protagonists of the Islamic Resurgence movement, becomes polemical or defensive instead of being analytical or exploratory.

The approach of the *Tableeghi Jamat*; the missionary movement initiated by Ilyas and Muhammad Yusuf of Delhi in the early forties and which has gradually become a worldwide movement in our times; is, on the other hand, utopian and simplistic. This approach emphasizes simple Islamic piety without attempting any solution of the complex problems of life, on the naive assumption that if we pray to God and are kind to our neighbours all our problems would automatically be solved by Divine mercy. This approach appeals, primarily, to those who are consciously or unconsciously seeking an emotional refuge from the complex demands of the human situation. The social psychological genesis of this movement is, thus, basically, similar to the rapid rise of *Sufi* orders in the Islamic world in the 13<sup>th</sup> century after the destruction of the once mighty Abbasid Caliphate.<sup>87</sup>

## VI

The social psychological impact of partition upon Indian Muslims was traumatic. The creation of Pakistan did not, and possibly could not; help those Indian Muslims who did not migrate to the proposed homeland. And, obviously, the vast majority have not. Indeed, it must have begun to dawn on them (belatedly) that Pakistan was calculated to cater to the interests only of Muslims living in the seceding regions rather than of the Indian Muslims as a whole. Some on this side might even be wondering now, was not their advocacy of Pakistan, after all, political suicide, under the spell of the magnetic personality of Jinnah in the shadow of Hindu chauvinism in some quarters?

Under the above conditions the protagonists of partition stood totally bewildered and demoralized, and the task of giving moral support and political direction to the Indian Muslims devolved upon the liberal national-

ist Muslims who had consistently stood for the unity of the country and a secular approach to politics. The pillar and symbol of the approach in post-independent India is, of course, Abul Kalam Azad. However, many other distinguished *Khilafat* and Congress veterans who had been repudiated by the urban Muslim electorate (under the spell of Pakistan) naturally came to the fore and responded to the need of their community in their hour of trial and the crisis of self-confidence. The changed political and social conditions were conducive to the acceptance of Islamic liberalism and its corollary of separation between the church and the state and a secular approach to politics. The historical vision and far-sighted statesmanship of Nehru who guided the nation for almost two formative and critical decades and the selfless service rendered by such dedicated souls as Azad, Syed Mahmud, A.M. Khwaja, Zakir Husain, Rafi Ahmad Kidwai (d. 1954) led to the policy of liberal financial aid to the Aligarh Muslim University which, only a few years previously, had served as the 'arsenal' for the fight for Pakistan.

Under the inspiring stewardship of Zakir Husain, who was later to become the President of India, and B.H.Zaidi, the University turned a fresh leaf in the direction of Islamic liberalism. The liberal approach and writings of the liberals mentioned above and of still younger liberals is helping, in varying degrees, the development and gradual consolidation of the liberal approach to Islam. Indeed this approach is very much a continuing process.

The founding of the *Islam and the Modern Age Society* in Delhi in the sixties under the patronage of Zakir Husain; the liberal approach of the journal bearing the same name; the spirit of free enquiry and unhindered discussion gradually gaining ground in the *Jamia Millia* and the Aligarh University; the ever-growing educational, professional and political opportunities for Muslim women unhindered by the purdah system; all augur well for the future of Islamic liberalism. Reputed centres of traditional Islamic learning and culture such as *Nadwa* and *Deoband* are also giving a fresh look to their old syllabi and methods of teaching, displaying receptivity to new ideas.<sup>88</sup>

Turning to the political scene, the emergence of Bangla Deshi nationalism in the seventies has made the Indian Muslim realize that religion cannot be regarded as the sole bond for uniting people, and that language and culture do play a crucial role in human affairs.<sup>89</sup> The gradual realization that the root cause of communal violence is not mutual hatred or antagonism, but

rather complex social conditions, administrative failures, and the machinations of unscrupulous politicians for promoting short-term-gains has led to mutual Hindu-Muslim cooperation on a secular and liberal basis. Moreover, the realization that repeated organized violence (though most harmful and tragic) fails to destroy Muslim prosperity, in the long run, or to disrupt the deeper mutual understanding and harmony of our people has helped all concerned to judge matters in a proper perspective.

The electoral power wielded by Muslims, as Indian citizens, with equal rights and responsibilities, the high offices of state that have been freely accessible to them, both in theory and practice, the prosperity flowing from the incredibly rapid developmental process in West-Asia, apart from local opportunities in small and medium industry and commerce, the steady educational and cultural advance cannot but steer Muslims, in the long run, towards Islamic liberalism, despite some negative factors that hold them back or lead them in other directions.<sup>90</sup>

## VII

It is important to ask why Islamic liberalism has not made much headway in India despite the sincere efforts of Sir Syed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and of Azad in the 20<sup>th</sup>. A brief reference to the 18<sup>th</sup> century would be helpful, to begin with.

The extreme social and political turbulence of North India after Aurangzeb; a spate of civil wars, invasions from Afghanistan and Persia, and the eventual loss of Bengal to the British, forced Muslims into a protective shell. More importantly, there was no socio-cultural base for the emergence of Islamic liberalism, in the Western sense, as no scientific, industrial and secular revolutions had occurred in the previous decades. The percentage of literacy was extremely low, while printing was totally unknown. The process of change in India started in the third quarter of the last century, but the pace of change was rather slow. Though science, medicine and, to some extent, engineering had been introduced in Indian universities and colleges established by the British by the closing decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, no industrial advance took place until after the end of the First World War. Even until the Second World War the extent and range of industrial production in India was extremely limited. It was only after independence that the

industrial revolution really came of age in our society. Henceforth the pace of change is likely to be faster, thus paving the way for Islamic liberalism as a mature religious response in the age of science and technology. But at least a century would be needed to complete the process. After all it took England more than two centuries to establish religious tolerance (in the contemporary sense) in the universities of Oxford and Cambridge after the Glorious Revolution of 1688.<sup>91</sup> It is important to identify other factors responsible for the slow pace of change in our society. One crucial factor is the fear of the consequence of dissent from the religious establishment. Notwithstanding the clear Quranic verse that there is no compulsion in religion, the Muslim tradition condemns to death a born Muslim who renounces Islam. Though this penalty has been a dead one in India, thanks to the British dispensation, the fear of the consequence of dissent continues to linger on in the depth psyche of the Muslim. In any case he knows that the establishment, *suo moto*, may declare any Muslim to be guilty of heresy if not of apostasy, and make his life unbearably miserable or insecure.<sup>92</sup> To give a recent instance, Muslims opposed (on religious grounds) to vasectomy, as a method of family planning, threatened to boycott co-religionists who underwent the operation. Under these conditions it is easy to castigate liberal Muslim intellectuals or public men living in a democratic society for lacking the moral courage to declare in public what they think in private. But the moral courage needed is not easy for even a Sir Syed or an Iqbal in view of the painful realities of our situation.<sup>93</sup>

Paradoxical as it may appear, many liberals who are forced to silence their inner voice due to the fear of the consequence of dissent are pushed into communism. This weakens the growth of a liberal movement despite the presence of liberal ideas in numerous individuals who are scarcely suspected of being liberal and who perhaps hardly realize this truth about themselves. Though liberal and secular ideas have become a part of our political way of life, our religious thought system has not become correspondingly liberal. For numerous Muslims, therefore, liberalism remains a sheer political strategy in a secular and pluralist society rather than an authentic religious response, as it certainly was in the case of Sir Syed and Azad.

Well-educated Muslims as also the masses are in conscious or unconscious search for an Islamic interpretation that could give spiritual legitimacy or depth approval to their de facto political liberalism and secularism. This legitimacy will gradually come about if and when Muslim intellectuals help in developing liberal Islamic thought, which subsequently reaches the common

man in the form of popular Urdu and Hindi literature on Islamic liberalism. It was precisely the paucity of such literature in the years following Sir Syed's pioneering efforts in this respect that has hindered the growth of Islamic liberalism as an authentic religious expression. Without the base provided by a suitable and consistent Islamic thought system the mere advocacy of a de facto liberal humanist position would always be dubbed either as blind imitation of the West, because of its material progress and political dominance, or as sheer political expediency dictated by the unhappy minority status of Muslims in several parts of the world.

The movement for Islamic liberalism should not fight shy of identifying any irrational or unacceptable views that may be found in the tradition, no matter how respected their source. The plea that past is past and that criticism of venerable figures might lead to unpleasant controversy will never really help Muslims.<sup>94</sup> Indeed, if Muslim intellectuals shy away from the task of self-criticism of their tradition, others may take it up with undesirable results.

It is often objected that the liberal interpreters of Islam have no proper credentials to do so as they do not know Arabic or do not know it sufficiently well. This objection is meant to be purely methodological or academic, but, in reality, it signifies an inner resistance to new ideas and to independent thinking. If one were writing on Muslim theology, Quranic exegesis, or Arabic literature, surely a thorough knowledge of Arabic would be necessary just as a knowledge of Sanskrit or Greek would be essential for a historian of Indian or Greek thought. However, when the objective is to re-interpret the basic concepts and values of Islam in the light of modern thought, the primary methodological prerequisite is not thorough grounding in Arabic language and literature (though by itself highly enviable, indeed, for all Muslims) but rather an 'insider's insight' into Islamic concepts and values, and a genuine concern for their ceaseless growth in the light of man's ever-growing knowledge in an ever-changing human situation.<sup>95</sup>

To close this essay on a note of sociological anticipation, the prospects of Islamic liberalism are very favorable in democratic India because a plural society is more conducive to the inner acceptance of humanism and secularism than a homogeneous society. Nowhere else do the Muslims have the opportunity freely to reinterpret basic Islamic concepts and values, as a genuinely spiritual response claiming religious legitimacy, and not as a mere

political adjustment or strategy in a predominantly non-Muslim environment. Exclusively or predominantly Muslim societies, probably, would not follow a common road to Islamic liberalism or agree to the thesis of the separation between the church and the state. Countries such as Turkey and Indonesia where the secular revolution has already taken place are likely to preserve the separation between the church and the state and develop the politico-economic patterns of their own choice, while Pakistan and Iran and some others may insist upon a formal or structural link between the church and the state as the *sine qua non* of Islam, and yet (in the long run) restructure their polity and laws, as if, they had accepted Islamic liberalism.

It seems to me, no matter whether secularism be accepted or not, Muslim societies or states would not be able to resist some basic features of the '*Zeitgeist*' or spirit of the age; liberty of the individual, human fraternity, dignity of labour, equality of the sexes, the welfare state, technology, and so on and so forth. Since, however, the actual Islamic approach to the above-mentioned features of the '*Zeitgeist*' has not been uniform (as is indeed quite natural and understandable), Muslim countries, which retain the unity of the church and the state would have to face tremendous opposition from the religious establishment. The organic unity between the church and the state naturally gives substantial leverage to the religious establishment to veto any proposed change in the traditional system, or, conversely, to exercise pressure, in the name of Islamization, for purging the alleged un-Islamic features that may have entered into the Islamic body politic in the course of time.

In other words, while Iqbal's version of Islamic liberalism, that is, a dynamic approach to the *shariah* in the framework of an organic unity between the church and the state may work in a homogeneous Muslim society it would not work smoothly. Moreover, it would not work at all in heterogeneous plural societies, whether Muslims be the majority or the minority, as the case may be. Where Muslims preponderate, as in Malaysia, the non-Muslims would not feel very comfortable at having to live under the umbrella of the *shariah* or to have a somewhat second class status; where the Muslims are in minority, as in Thailand, Philippines, and other places, they will not feel comfortable at being citizens of a state which is 'alien', in the religious sense, making them feel rootless and homeless right inside their own homeland. To overcome this state of religious alienation and bring about an organic unity between the church and the state would mean mass conversion of their fellow-citizens to Islam or secession and continuing conflict or

tension on communal lines. Such a model of Islam and such a view about what a good Muslim should always be striving for sounds rather utopian and unconvincing to contemporary religious sensibilities, no matter what one's religion. In the final analysis, therefore, the delinking of the church from the state is the most fruitful approach to Islam and other religions, as well, in both homogeneous and heterogeneous societies.

It seems (on sociological grounds) that in the long run the majority of Muslims all over the world will turn to some form of Islamic liberalism on the lines of Azad rather than of Iqbal. And (paradoxically) on a dispassionate analysis, Jinnah's basic approach to religion would be seen to be closer to the person whom he bitterly opposed as a 'showboy' on the chess-board of Indian politics than to the august person whose political dream Jinnah (towards the close of his life) translated into reality without, perhaps, fully realizing the chasm in their respective approaches to Islam.