

Introducing Jamal Khwaja And His Works

Jamal Khwaja has written seven major books, numerous articles and scholarly essays. Anyone interested in the intersection of Islam and Modernity will find Khwaja to be a reliable guide. Readers of his work will be informed, inspired, and intellectually liberated. Muslim readers will feel emotionally aligned with the Quran and find themselves empowered to live as authentic Muslims in the heart of the multi-cultural global village.

Khwaja's work is the definitive contemporary discussion regarding Islam and Modernity. Explore it. You will be profoundly rewarded.

Some illuminating excerpts from his works are presented below. They will enable the readers to see for themselves the clarity, range and depth of his writings.

For more information, visit www.JamalKhwaja.com

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About Jamal Khwaja



Jamal Khwaja was born in Delhi in 1928. His ancestors had been closely connected with the Islamic reform movement, inaugurated by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, the founder of the famous *M.A.O. College*, Aligarh in the second half of the 19th century, and the Indian freedom movement under Gandhi's leadership in the first half of the 20th century. After doing his M.A. in Philosophy from the *Aligarh Muslim University*, India, he obtained an Honor's degree from *Christ's College Cambridge*, UK. Later he spent a year studying the German language and European existentialism at *Munster University*, Germany. At Cambridge he was deeply influenced by the work of C.D. Broad, Wittgenstein and John Wisdom, apart from his college tutor, I.T. Ramsey who later became *Professor of Christian Religion* at Oxford. It was the latter's influence, which, taught Khwaja to appreciate the inner beauty and power of pure spirituality. Khwaja was thus led to appreciate the value of linguistic analysis as a tool of philosophical inquiry and to combine the quest for clarity with the insights and depth of the existentialist approach to religion and spirituality.

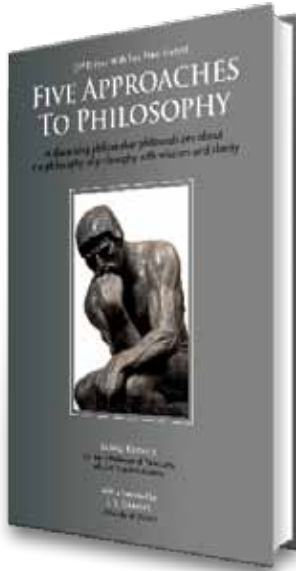
Khwaja was appointed Lecturer in Philosophy at the *Aligarh Muslim University* in 1953. Before he could begin serious academic work in his chosen field, his family tradition of public work pulled him into a brief spell of active politics under the charismatic Jawahar Lal Nehru; the first Prime Minister of India. Nehru was keen to rejuvenate his team of colleagues through inducting fresh blood into the *Indian National Congress*. He included young Khwaja, then freshly returned from Cambridge, along with four or five other young persons. Khwaja thus became one of the youngest entrants into the Indian Parliament as a member of the *Lok Sabha* (Lower House) from 1957 to 1962. While in the corridors of power he learned to distinguish between ideals and illusions, and finally chose to pursue the path of knowledge rather than the path of acquiring authority or power. Returning to his *alma mater* in 1962, he resumed teaching and research in the philosophy of religion. Ever since then Khwaja has lived a quiet life at Aligarh. He was Dean of the *Faculty of Arts* and was a member of important committees of the University Grants Commission and the *Indian Council for Philosophical Research* before retiring as Professor and Chairman of the *Department of Philosophy* in 1988. He was a frequent and active participant in national seminars held at the *Indian Institute of Advanced Study*, Shimla.

He was invited to deliver the *Khuda Bakhsh Memorial Lecture* at Patna. He was one of the official Indian delegates at the *World Philosophical Congress, Brighton*, UK, in 1988, and also at the *International Islamic Conference Kuala Lumpur*, Malaysia, in 1967, and the *Pakistan International Philosophy Congress, Peshawar*, Pakistan, in 1964. He has visited the USA and several countries in Western Europe. He performed *Hajj* in 2005.

Khwaja's written works include:

1. *Five Approaches To Philosophy: A discerning philosopher philosophizes about the philosophy of philosophy with wisdom and clarity.* 1965.

2. *Quest For Islam: A philosophers approach to religion in the age of science and cultural pluraism.*1977.
3. *Authenticity And Islamic Liberalism: A mature vision of Islamic Liberalism grounded in the Quran,* 1986.
4. *Essays On Cultural Pluralism: A philosophical framework for authentic interfaith dialogue.*
5. *The Call Of Modernity And Islam: A Muslim's journey into the 21st century*
6. *Living The Quran In Our Times: A vision of how Muslims can revitalize their faith, while being faithful to God and His messenger.*
7. *The Vision Of An Unknown Indian Muslim: My journey to interfaith spirituality.*



I. Five Approaches to Philosophy A Discerning Philosopher Philosophizes About The Philosophy Of Philosophy With Wisdom and Clarity

This monograph attempts to describe the different, approaches to philosophy, their situational and conceptual fields, their inter-relations and limitations. The possibility of combining them into, a multi-dimensional approach is also discussed.

The key notion underlying this essay is that the actual doing of philosophy must be rooted in a critical and comparative meta-philosophy. Most philosophers are so busy in establishing truths, or analyzing words and sentences, as the case may be, that they tend to neglect meta-philosophy. This leads to methodological isolationism and a polemical instead of an irenic approach to philosophical problems.

Excerpts:

The present human situation is characterized by scientific uniformity and progress in the midst of philosophical controversy and religious and cultural diversity. This is perhaps the most significant feature of the contemporary situation. This generates the basic conceptual field for the critically oriented contemporary philosopher. It may be called the meta-philosophical field. Methodological, questions like the nature of philosophical, metaphysical, ethical and logical statements, the theories of meaning and truth, the nature and dynamics of philosophical or ethical controversy etcetera, arise within this field. Controversy and disagreement in the midst of progressively expanding scientific and technological standardization appear as anachronisms to the contemporary mind. It is impelled to find the causes and the cure of this incongruity. This leads to an unprecedented interest in meta-problems of almost all the branches of knowledge. The value judgment underlying this quest is that avoidable controversy or conflict is bad and must be overcome. The contemporary analytical and meta-philosophical approaches are the new instruments to serve this basic value, even as previous metaphysical systems were the instruments of serving and defending some value system or other, embedded in past cultural traditions. In other words, harmony or agreement is the motif of contemporary meta-philosophy. It may be said that this is the motif of all philosophy and religion as such. This is probably true. But the range of harmony sought by contemporary philosophers is immensely wider than the range previously sought. Moreover, there is a distinction between a democratic harmony among autonomous individuals freely committing themselves to values, and the harmony that ensues as a result of the commitment to an external *Authority*. No doubt the philosophical theologian claims that since his acceptance of the *Authority* is based upon universally valid reasons, the harmony that accrues is rooted in reason rather than a dogmatic or arbitrary surrender to an *Authority*. (Pages 6-7)

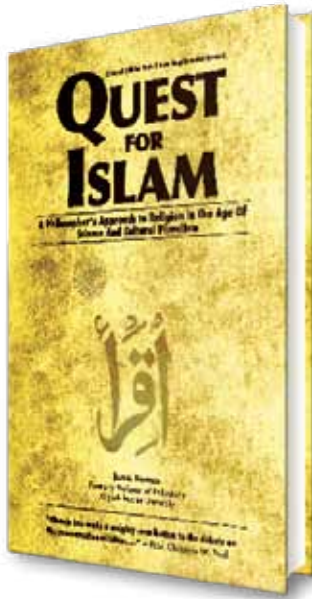


If philosophical theories and systems are conceptual patterns, then how and in what sense can they be true or false? A landscape or a musical composition may be good or bad. But there is no sense in judging them to be true or false. If, however, philosophy claims to be a conceptual picture of the universe, as a portrait is of an individual, say, Napoleon, then the terms true or false are applicable to philosophy. But in the case of a portrait, we have the original subject as well as the painting, and the two can be compared. Now where is the original subject in the case of the universe? Surely, the observed features of the universe are there. But a philosophical theory is not descriptive. Consider the case of a number of architects, each pressing his design for acceptance by the town planners. There is no standard or Platonic design, with reference to which the claims of the architects could be tested and settled. Even if there were such design, but was in principle inaccessible, there would be no point in claiming truth for a particular design. All that legitimately could be claimed by an architect was that his particular design had such and such advantages under specified conditions, apart from aesthetic value. *(Page 45)*



The choice of a valid conceptual field on the basis of the criteria suggested is ultimately a function of reflection and not of investigation of facts. Thus the possibility of eventual disagreement between philosophers cannot be eliminated, even though the choice is not arbitrary. Two persons may agree to the rules and yet differ in their application. Philosophical disagreement is thus unavoidable. No approach can eliminate disagreement without any remainder. But the type of disagreement that remains on the multi-dimensional approach would be the unavoidable minimum like the unavoidable minimum friction of a well-constructed and well-oiled machine or moving body. It would be a fraction of the disagreement that results from a non meta-philosophical or a mono-dimensional approach. The disputes about the nature and tasks of philosophy are a function of a one sided fixation upon selective Paradigms of philosophical questions and answers. The monopolistic grip of selective instances of a general concept is a fairly widespread phenomenon. Marx's theory of the determinants of social change, Freud's theory of the determinants of neuroses, the different theories of truth or of knowledge, the different theories of the nature of ethical judgments etcetera are all reminders of how the fondness for particular instances or paradigms leads to a general theory concerning the subject matter. Rather than accept or reject any particular theory of philosophy, we must try to see how far it is illuminating, and how far misleading. *(Page 106)*





2. Quest For Islam

A Philosopher's Approach To Religion In The Age Of Science And Cultural Pluralism

Quest for Islam is a systematic exposition of Islam in the light of contemporary knowledge by a practicing Muslim. A seminal work, it successfully resolves intellectual difficulties created in traditional interpretations by new knowledge. Among other things it organically integrates core Islamic values with the requirements of plural societies and secular democracies. It thus adds a fresh dimension of value to the Islamic thought-cum-value system. It will appeal greatly to Muslim intellectuals perplexed by the assault of modernity on traditional values and institutions.

Excerpts:

The universe has some basic features which may be said to be its warp and woof, and which remain the same throughout history, e.g., the features of law and order, harmony and beauty of nature, man's moral sense, as distinct from concrete moral codes, the struggle for survival of the species and of individuals, pain and suffering, hope and joy, birth, growth, decay, and death. Natural science does not concern itself with the significance or meaning of these features of the universe, that is, whether they are just accidental features and could therefore disappear from the cosmic scene, as accidentally as they appeared, or whether they stand rooted in the constitution of the universe and thus have an ontic status or permanent reality. Now the way in which one interprets these features simultaneously influences the personality orientation of the individual, and is, in turn, influenced by the original bent of the personality itself.

In other words, there is a dialectical relationship between the existential interpretation and the personality orientation. The interpretation becomes important, since it influences man's inner responses to the universe in a most subtle manner, though the interpretation has no prima facie bearing upon man's empirical, ethical, or aesthetic response. But the fact is that different existential interpretations constitute different ways of treating the universe or relating oneself to it, and this inevitably influences the individual's life-style and also raises the question as to which particular style is right, and why so. To give an analogy, the practicing scientist does not concern himself with the question whether or why nature behaves uniformly, but takes it for granted, as if it were self-evident or necessarily true, or because it works. But the denial of causal uniformity does not involve any logical contradiction; nor can it be logically proved.

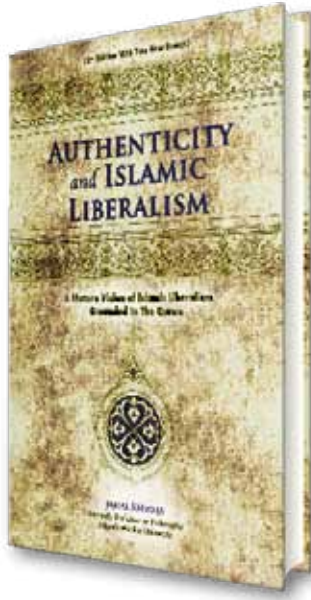
We accept it for two reasons: first, our actual experience suggests as if it were true; and, second, if it were not true, no point would be left in our scientific enquiries, which we deem as valuable and worth pursuing. Likewise, there would be no point left or, to be more accurate, the urge to pursue values would be far less intense, if values were chance and ephemeral products of the blind dance

of atoms, without the conservation and growth of values being ontologically guaranteed, despite all seeming obstacles. The concept of God is precisely one particular form of this faith. Belief in God implies that values like truth, goodness, and beauty are neither chance products, nor ultimate and un-derived features of the universe, but have their source in the ultimate and Supreme Being with whom man could establish an 'I-Thou' dialogue. The existential interpretation is neither a hypothesis, nor a partly justifiable postulate; it is a motivational re-enforcer that integrates the individual's thoughts and feelings into a stable inner way of life or mode of treating the universe, as distinct from ad hoc and ever variable responses or attitudes. *(Pages 4-5)*



If and when the interpretation does not harmonize with the scientific conceptual scheme, a revision of its concrete sense may remove the prima facie discord. We may say, for instance, that God's love for His creation is not the same as mother's love for her child, or that what appears as evil works as an instrumental good in a larger context. This task involves redefining, analyzing, explaining, making distinctions or comparisons either in the spirit of a free exploration of the given data or in the spirit of a defensive reconciliation between theology and science. In the former case, the role of reason is primary, while in the latter it is secondary. The theologian explores new meanings of traditional concepts in a spirit of defensive reverence to the tradition, while the philosopher freely reflects upon the validity of the religious interpretation. He checks whether the actual data of human experience harmonize with the religious interpretation. This activity, however, does not involve deductive or inductive reasoning but existential elucidation, that is, the illumination of one's hidden depth attitudes, choices, interpretative responses, or images. An existential interpretation, which is chosen by the philosopher, is thus functionally similar to, but genetically or methodologically different from, religious faith. An existential interpretation of some kind or other is unavoidable.

We can only opt for this or that interpretation, but we cannot opt to do away with all interpretation as such. We may claim to avoid all contact with metaphysics or religion, which we may view as the hallmarks of a pre-scientific mentality. Yet the fact is that we cannot live as integrated human beings without some kind of worldview or total perspective on the cosmos. And this total perspective, be it religious or philosophical, is at bottom always an existential interpretation of the basic features of human experience cosmic law and order, the mysteries of birth, growth and death, the beauty as well as the fury of nature, good and evil, joy and tragedy. Religious faith is the pre-logical acceptance of an interpretation because of its existential grip over the believer. *(Page 7)*



3. Authenticity And Islamic Liberalism

A Mature Vision Of Islamic Liberalism Grounded In The Quran

“Authenticity and Islamic Liberalism” is a collection of four original and highly stimulating papers on the liberal existentialist approach to religion with special reference to Islam in India. Each paper deals with an independent theme; yet, a consistent analytical existentialist approach makes them a well-orchestrated and balanced exposition of what may best be called “Islamic Liberalism”.

Excerpts:

Every religion has a nuclear core of basic beliefs and values embedded in a wide cultural matrix comprising myths, ancient collective memories, folklore, customs, stereotyped images etc. All these elements are enmeshed and the ordinary believer hardly cares to separate the nuclear core from the total cultural matrix of faith and practice. The total cultural tradition is the spiritual atmosphere in which he lives, moves and has his being. The German religious thinker of the 20th century, Bultmann, called the gradual process of distilling the nuclear core of the Christian thought and value system from the cultural matrix of the Christian tradition, the ‘demythologization of Christianity. This concept, however, has universal and timeless relevance to all religious traditions. Several creative thinkers and savants of Islam- Al-Beruni (d. app. 1040), Ibn Sina (d. 1037), Ibn Rushd (d. 1198), Al-Ghazzali (d. 1111), Ibn Arabi (d. 1240), Jalaluddin Rumi (d. 1273), Fariduddin Attar (d. 1229), Ibn Khaldun (d. 1406), Wali Ullah (d. 1763) and others attempted to grasp the essence of Islam.

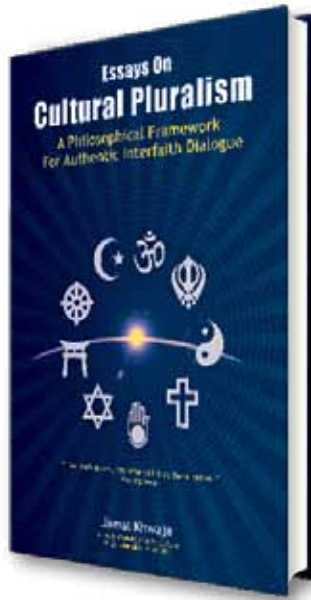
Sir Syed also attempted to distil the nuclear essence of Islam in the framework of modern thought, as he understood it. He was not a professionally trained philosopher, social scientist or historian. But his extraordinarily sharp intellect, intuitive insight and common sense, and above all, his intellectual honesty and moral courage enabled him to distil the nuclear core of Islam from its concrete historical forms in space and time. It is instructive to recall that in his earlier pre-critical phase, Sir Syed had adhered to the conventional ideas of his milieu, though even then he had come under the influence of the, relatively, liberal philosophical theology of Shah Wali Ullah of Delhi. However, soon after the failure of the great Indian rebellion of 1857 against British imperial rule, when Syed Ahmad was roughly forty five, he outgrew his honestly held ideas and values and became clearly aware of their limitations, without, however, ever rejecting the nuclear core of his Islamic faith. Those who were unable to appreciate the spiritual pilgrimage of the great man and the organic growth of his ideas charged him with having abandoned Islam or distorting the faith for ulterior motives. Half a century later Abul Kalam Azad passed through a similar experience. (Page 178)



Azad's principled separation of politics and religion, in the Indian context, is right. But his writings and public utterances do not make it sufficiently clear what course he proposed for predominantly Muslim societies. It needs pointing out that secularism is right not only in the case of mixed societies but also in the case of predominantly Muslim societies. The rationale behind this approach is that the social customs and the polity (which Muslims inherited from its original Jewish and Arab environment) must be de-linked from the core of the Islamic faith and value system. The primary scope of the shariah ought to be restricted to pure spirituality as the essence of religion (deen). Polity, in the modern age, ought to be guided by democratic decision making based on autonomous and informed enquiry, as is being done in the case of natural sciences. The first to affirm the principled separation of religion from politics were the founding fathers of the American constitution, although they themselves were deeply committed to the Christian faith and to value based politics. Their reason was that the union of religion and politics, inevitably, makes the established religion intolerant of other religions. This was the precise and precious lesson America had learnt from the experience of the European peoples.

The principled separation of church and state, however, does not mean or imply that politics has no need to be regulated by moral and spiritual values. I strongly feel that many who strongly oppose secular politics and insist that the lasting strength and beauty of true Islam lies, precisely, in preserving and promoting the 'organic unity of religion and state', consciously or subconsciously equate secular politics with immoral or unethical politics. They do so because of their still deeper conviction that morality and spirituality are not possible without belief in a personal God or without following religious laws or prescriptions in every walk of life. I submit that this belief is a half-truth. This is not the place to debate this complex issue. I have fully discussed this issue in my other published works. (*Pages 188-189*)





4. Essays On Cultural Pluralism

A Philosophical Framework For Authentic Interfaith Dialogue

Explore The Oneness Of The Human Family.

Ours are times when religion is systematically being used: unconsciously by some and deliberately by others, in the service of politics and personal gain, rather than spirituality. However, perceptive and honest minds among all religious communities view different religions as diverse “languages of the spirit”, each valid and nourishing in its own way.

An impartial study of different religions shows the underlying unity in the diversity of religions. All religions are attempts to satisfy the human sense of wonder and awe at the inscrutable mystery of the universe. This common function produces the unity while the diverse conditions in which different religions arise and grow produce the diversity.

Excerpts:

Now, though Mahavira and Buddha denied Brahman and the sanctity and infallibility of the Vedas, they both accepted basic moral and spiritual values and the principle of karma. It is therefore, reasonable to hold that the followers of Mahavira and Buddha, or for that matter, the followers of any other religious tradition (provided they eschew the moral evils or vices mentioned above) do not come under the purview of the above verses of the Gita. In other words, the approach of the Gita is so catholic that notwithstanding its own commitment to Vaishnavite Anthro-theism (faith in the divinity of Sri Krishna), it seems to permit the conceptual elimination of even God/Brahman from one's value system for agnostics and others. Possibly, this is the explanation of how and why both Jainism and Buddhism, after an extended period of conflict with Brahmanical orthodoxy, and even a measure of persecution by the custodians of the Vedic tradition, eventually came to be regarded as unorthodox schools or sects of Hinduism in the larger sense.

Blessed are the good and simple and authentic believers in a caring Personal God. Blessed are they who can plumb the depths of their being and can hear ‘the music of the spheres’ and see ‘the light of a thousand suns blaze forth all at once’, and act dutifully without attachment to fruits. Blessed too are they whose journey in inner space brings them to ‘*Brahman without attributes*’, and fortifies the ‘*Atman*’. But what about those whose honest and sustained quest for truth meets with a bewildered inner silence and the darkness of an unending night of the soul, and yet they remain sensitive to truth, goodness and beauty, and go on responding to the call of duty for its own sake? This is the crucial question facing and dividing humanity today. (Page 47)



An impartial study of different religions shows the underlying unity in the diversity of religions. All religions are attempts to satisfy the human sense of wonder and awe at the inscrutable mystery of the universe. This common function produces the unity while the diverse conditions in which different religions arise and grow produce the diversity. However the differences in belief, on a deeper analysis, turn out to be merely different ways of performing the same function in the basic economy of human life. In other words, different beliefs turn out to be different versions or species of a more basic generic belief. For instance, the belief that God reveals His will to a human messenger or prophet and the belief that God incarnates Himself in human form are two different versions or species of the more fundamental conviction that God intervenes in history to guide man on the right path. Neither of the two beliefs is fully intelligible or transparent to the human mind and both are full of mystery. Likewise, the basic Aryan belief in repeated rebirths in this world and the basic Semitic belief in one single eschatological rebirth are twin species of the more fundamental conviction that as a man soweth, so shall he reap in one form or the other. Both beliefs posit the continuity of life, either in the 'linear' or the 'cyclical' sense, and both motivate man to the same end. (Page 83)

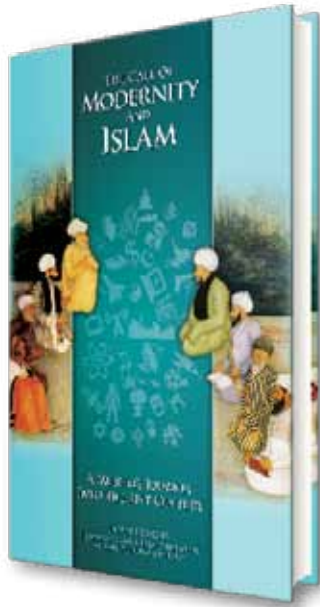


If one looks at history from the humanist perspective the political or religious conflicts of the human family in the past turn into humanity's march (in circuitous and halting stages) towards a global federal unity. The victory of an Alexander and the defeat of a Porus in India, the almost total destruction of Baghdad by a Halaku and the devastations in north India by a Nadir Shah, the compassion of an Asoka, the statesmanship of an Akbar, the aberrations of a Hitler, all become the achievements or failures of the human family. With charity for all and malice toward none, the historian passes judgment on the deed, rather than the doer. His standards remain consistent, but he takes into account that human ideas and ideals are subject to the law of evolutionary growth. In short, his range of sympathy gradually becomes universal instead of remaining congealed at a particular parochial level determined by his birth or early conditioning.

It is significant that the data of history are not given to the truth seeker, as are the data of nature to the scientific investigator through sense perception or experiments under controlled conditions of observation. The data of history are themselves, in part, constructs out of surviving remains of past things or events. Moreover, no two historians select exactly the same set of data out of the total range available. Historians select their own unique 'effective' data for a systematic narrative and analysis of the past. The historian fits these data in his favored framework of ideas and values out of several alternatives available. No such framework, as such, can be proved as conclusively true or valid. Yet, one must have some basic frame of orientation (as pointed out by Erich Fromm) in order to understand or existentially respond to the human situation in totality.

Religions and philosophies, in different ways, perform this function. They hold their effective data together and enable one to arrive at a total perspective on the human situation as such. Thus, a historian having a *Hindutva* frame of orientation would tend to view Sultan Mahmud's destruction of the Somnath temple, Gujarat, in the 10th century as an Islamic attack on Hindu India. A historian with a humanist sociological orientation would view the same episode as a medieval Sultan's lust for booty. This admission, however, does not amount to unrelieved relativity of historical interpretation as such.

Let me explain this point further. A reliable contemporary Persian record of Mahmud's time states that after returning to his capital, covered with glory and laden with booty, the Sultan sent some valuable gifts to a venerated divine of Ghazna; Qazi Abul Hasan Baulami. The Qazi returned the royal gifts and severely chastised the Sultan for violating the *shariah*, which prohibited the desecration of any place of worship. Obviously, the honest and bold response of the Qazi had no effect upon the Sultan and the general course of events in medieval time. However, the above authentic story makes it quite clear that the primary '*leitmotif*' of the medieval Sultans was personal aggrandizement and expansion of power, not the promotion of Islam or forcible conversion. In this sense and to this extent, therefore, the humanist interpretation of history becomes more valid than the *Hindutva* interpretation that rejoices in Muslim baiting and distortion of the past. By the same token those Muslims who glorify Sultan Mahmud as an Islamic hero misinterpret or distort Islam and also harm Muslims and entire humanity. (Pages 133-134)



5. The Call of Modernity And Islam

A Muslim's Journey Into The 21st Century

The Call Of Modernity And Islam is a timely and welcome anthology of ten scholarly essays that focus creatively on the urgent need to re-energize Islamic culture and institutions.

The essays span an enormous disciplinary range. Professor Khwaja moves back and forth with consummate ease between religion, science, philosophy, history, and the social sciences to paint a fully integrated, big picture of the encounter between Islam and modernity.

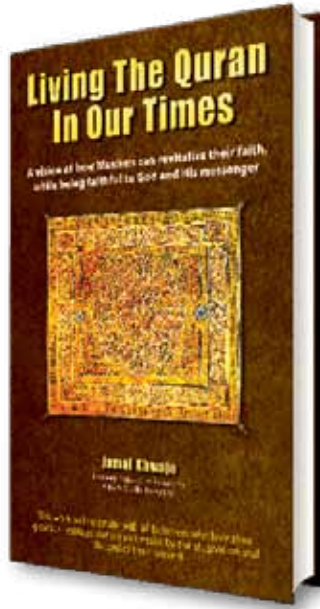
Excerpts:

The predicament of Muslims in the modern age is that their religious tradition stands for the unity of religion and state, while the modern mind stands for the separation of religion and state. The Islamic tradition is that Islam is not merely a spiritual discipline, but a complete way of life, including a polity (*shariah*). Though not inspired like the Quran, the *shariah* is deemed as all embracing and sacrosanct. Only the *ulema* are empowered to modify it according to a definite procedure. But it would be absurd to claim or expect that the *shariah* should be binding on the Parliament of a sovereign secular state. Muslims in general hold that a sovereign secular democratic state is bound to fall headlong into 'Satanic' politics and the amoral pursuit of power. In other words, they equate the separation of religion from politics with immoral politics. They honestly tend to hold that the secular approach to politics destroys or erodes true Islam, which is a seamless and complete map of conduct according to Divine guidance.

This is the spiritual predicament of traditional Muslims all over the world including the followers of Mawdudi's school of Islamic thought that is, relatively, liberal, but falls short of the fully integrated and spiritualized religious sensibility of the modern mind. Western educated Muslims in general, and, particularly, those belonging to plural societies are, increasingly, becoming aware of this predicament. But they lack the moral courage and the credentials to question the validity of the time honored traditional approach and the exclusive authority of the *ulema* in such matters. Another reason why the educated Muslim laity is reluctant to assert itself is the lack of proper grounding in religious learning and the Arabic language. These perplexed believers silently wait for the day when the *ulema*, on their own, will take the initiative to revise or redefine the proper scope of the *shariah*. The *ulema*, hardly aware of the complex issues of modernity (understandably) suffer and, unconsciously, go on the defensive when confronted with the immense gap between medieval learning and the much more developed natural and social sciences in the modern age.

I submit, in all humility, they, in the best interests of all concerned, should ponder on the full implications of four basic truths: (a) granted that all Muslim believers must accept the Quranic text as infallible, no human interpretation of the text can claim to be infallibly true; (b) interpretation, in some form or other, necessarily, enters into all efforts at understanding the Quranic text; c) the proper understanding of any communication involves a frame of reference within which the 'addressee' interprets the words or expressions used in the original communication; (d) the frame of reference as well as the concrete meanings or usages of words necessarily change in the course of time. These truths apply to all communications or languages including the 'Word of God'. It follows that whosoever interprets the Quran, whether one be an Arabic speaking lay person or scholar, necessarily, interprets the Scripture relative to one's own set of Arabic usage and understanding of the context of the communication. (*Pages 48-50*)





6. Living The Quran In Our Times

A vision of how Muslims can revitalize their faith, while being faithful to God and His messenger

In the past, authentic Muslims, including the closest Companions of the Prophet, often differed sharply in their political and social beliefs. In our times the challenges posed by modernity have made such differences especially toxic. In this work, the Author clarifies the core teachings of perennial Islam and their continuing relevance to our daily lives.

Excerpts:

Perennial Islam, as joyful submission to one Supreme Creator and acceptance of the Quran as the ‘Word of God’, revealed to Prophet Muhammad, is one thing; the surrender to a static shariah conceived as a perfect and total guide for the believer in every walk of life is quite another. To remain rooted in the perennial spiritual values of the Quran, as exemplified in the life and character of the historical Muhammad, the ‘Seal of the Prophets’ is one thing; to hold that this implies that believers should actively strive to become ‘carbon copies’ of the Prophet’s actions and life style is quite another. Rootedness in the basic Quranic values does not imply a mechanical and unreflective adherence to Quranic injunctions without making a distinction between ‘intrinsic’ values and ‘instrumental’ rules. Likewise, genuine reverence and love for the Prophet does not imply uncritical acceptance of the many miracles or myths found in the popular versions of the Islamic faith, especially the dramatic detailed events and dialogues mentioned in the stories of the Prophet’s journey (*meraaq*) to God’s Throne. To deny such myths or miracles in no way diminishes his sublime spiritual status and his authentic mystical experiences or his amazing achievements as an historical figure. Muslims generally believe that Prophet Muhammad must have possessed supernatural powers on the ground that earlier prophets performed miracles. Prophet Muhammad being the greatest, God must have endowed him with similar, if not greater, powers, so it is held to be the case. Muslims commonly cite the Quranic verse (54:1) as evidence that Prophet Muhammad performed the miracle of splitting the moon (*shaqq ul Qamar*). Numerous saints and mystics of Islam are also credited with possessing extra-ordinary powers through Divine grace. Sufi tombs attract numerous devotees (both Muslim and others) who seek the intervention of the saints in securing various material benefits for themselves. However, the Quran gives no warrant at all for accepting this traditional image of Prophet Muhammad. Indeed, the Quran categorically denies that Prophet Muhammad possessed supernatural powers with the sole exception of the gift of Divine revelation (*wahee*). In other words, the Quran is the only miracle, which Prophet Muhammad claimed to possess. (Page 6)



Millions and millions of Muslim believers will surely and rightly continue to venerate Prophet Muhammad as the perfect exemplar for humanity. An ever-swelling number of non-Muslims of eminence now also acknowledge the administrative, moral and spiritual genius of Prophet Muhammad as one of the super-architects and shapers of human destiny on the world scale. But the crucial question is what should be the concrete form, in the modern age, of a true Muslim's veneration for Prophet Muhammad. In answer to the above crucial question I submit that true reverence and fidelity to Prophet Muhammad consists in trying to make his basic values and objectives, rather than the details of the Prophet's conduct, the pivot of our own lives and activities.

The promotion of Prophet Muhammad's basic values (even if this task today requires modifying his instructions given in particular situations) is the real meaning of following his example (*sunnah*) in an ever-changing world. This is, precisely, what Khalifa Omar had done. The following considerations should help perplexed Muslim believers to realize this liberating truth. First, development or growth takes place in different fields of human activity despite interruptions, retrogressions and reverses. This applies not only to factual knowledge but also to human ideals, values and institutions. Thus have arisen fresh interpretations of the good life. Universal human rights, rule by consent, peaceful transfer of power, tolerance of dissent, gender equality, equality of opportunity are some of the ideals that are the fresh characteristics of the modern age.

Static norms of perfection cannot but arrest the natural movement of ideas and ideals. No particular stage of development can be said to be perfect. It may be thought that for the committed Muslim, at least, the Quran is beyond the shadow of imperfection. But the crucial point is that the Quran has to be understood by human beings whose conceptual framework is bound to change with the passage of time. This framework will always remain subject to various imperfections or limitations. Thus, even if we concede the Quran, as the Word of God, to be perfect, its human understanding will always remain a matter of perfection aspired to rather than perfection achieved. Ceaseless growth towards perfection rather than perfection as such is all that man can hope for. Second, a clear distinction should be made between basic values and instrumental rules. The Muslim segment of the human family will not advance forward, but move in ruts alone, if Muslims do not sift the instrumental prescriptions of the Prophet from his basic goals and objectives. The making of this distinction between basic objectives and the means for realizing them should not be confused with the rather facile view that the end justifies the means.

Third, a clear distinction will also have to be made between matters of personal taste and matters of morality and spirituality. Real and honest commitment to the values of the Prophet does not mean that the individual give up his inclinations and preferences in matters of taste.

Fourth, the reported sayings and doings of Prophet Muhammad are not sufficiently authentic despite the arduous efforts by dedicated and gifted Muslim researchers to separate the chaff from the grain. Though it is true that several Quranic texts are inexplicable or will remain vague unless read in the light of reported sayings or doings of the Prophet there is no justification for bracketing the Quran and the Hadees as equally authentic or binding. Respect for the latter does not mean unquestioning acceptance. Keeping the above four considerations in mind should help us to realize that the real meaning of fidelity to Prophet Muhammad is not the literal imitation of his conduct but the honest and intelligent endeavor to translate the basic values of the Quran and hence of the Prophet into practice in an ever changing human situation. (*Pages 8-10*)



Mere conformity to the instrumental rules without intelligently searching for what exactly right action means in the ever-changing human situation society will yield only marginal benefits. The principled acceptance of the semantic distinction between prescriptive Quranic verses referring to basic values and those referring to instrumental rules prepares the ground for the believer's own free commitment to basic values without any loss of spiritual autonomy. This transforms obedience to the 'Word of God' into the enjoyment of inner freedom. The Prophet's character beautifully exemplifies these basic values that can never be exhausted by the instrumental rules of the shariah. The character of the historical Muhammad, however, is a perennial source of inspiration to humankind in its ceaseless (but ever incomplete) aspiration for attaining perfection and truth. And the authentic and prayerful reflection on the Quran touches the deepest chord of the authentic human conscience, which is itself the Divine spark in humanity after the individual learns to deconstruct his or her natural ethnocentricity. This is, indeed, the miracle of the Quran. (*Pages 64-65*)



Reading or reciting my favorite Quranic surahs or verses in the original Arabic profoundly moves me and millions of Muslims and also many others. However, other scriptures can and do inspire others in the same way. I accept this fact with a sense of wonder and humility at the power of different 'sources of inspiration and inner light'. Individuals do get inner light and inspiration from a variety of historical sources, but the ultimate or apex Source is one. The crucial question is not where the light comes from; the crucial question is whether there is light in the inner world of the individual. Any deeply committed believer (no matter what his religion) who acts righteously (according to his authentic values), and concedes that his own faith or conceptualization of the Supreme Mystery of Being is not the only window to the inscrutable mystery, is, to my mind, a fellow pilgrim on the journey of the spirit. To give an analogy from the realm of human love, if one truly loves, no matter whom he loves, he/she attains to the highest level of bliss and blessedness. Obviously, in the realm of love every lover has his or her own beloved and this love brings one into the portals of the Divine.

The fruit of spirituality blossoms on different theological creeds. The essence of spirituality or religious faith, at its best, is the realization of the truth of the unity of all existence and the striving to translate this idea into concrete action. I would, therefore, submit that in the modern age the bare minimum connotation or core of the Islamic faith is as follows: all that exists is the creation of one supreme, self-existing being, and the Quran is the revealed 'Word of God' to Prophet Muhammad -- as the final exemplar and guide for the Muslims in the never-ending and ever evolving quest for the good life. This approach, however, does not imply that no other human exemplars and guides perform the same function for other believers. The ideal of spiritual pluralism is embedded in the Quran itself when we read it without the gloss of its various interpretations in the course of history, especially when one tries to discover the underlying spirit and thrust of the Quran and the authentic life of Prophet Muhammad, without importing myth or miracle, or resorting to the personality cult.

Creeds and dogmas of any historical religion may appeal to one but leave the other indifferent, may fascinate one but amuse the other. However, the divine flame of spiritual wonder, the wordless but prayerful surrender to the cosmic mystery and retreat into inner silence of the spirit (shoonya)

is, to my mind, the only 'jewel that shines by its own light'. Once we accept this we begin to see that different creeds, dogmas or thought patterns are, in essence, different languages or alternate linguistic systems for conceptualizing the mystery of the cosmos beyond human comprehension. Keeping alive the sense of wonder and awe while contemplating the totality (viewed as the Supreme Mystery) is, functionally the same as ever living in the presence of the Supreme Creator and ever engaged in 'righteous action'. This approach to Islam and all other religions promotes the good life far more effectively than believing that any one particular creed or dogma is a precondition of salvation. (*Pages 131-132*)





7. The Vision of An Unknown Indian Muslim

My Journey To Interfaith Spirituality

“In this book I have recounted important facets of the story of my inner intellectual and spiritual growth. It is the story of how, a relatively, dogmatic model of Islam developed into the paradigm that I now accept.

In one sentence my journey has taken me from an honest acceptance that Muslims alone will win salvation to an equally honest acceptance of the beauty and validity of inter-faith spirituality.”

Excerpts:

What is not generally known or fully appreciated today is the heroic resistance of some Congressmen (especially Muslim Congressmen) to avert partition. When the All India Congress Committee met to ratify the earlier decision of the Working Committee, jointly taken by the Sardar, Nehru, and others who had consented to partition, Maulana Hifzur Rahman, one of the most clear headed intellectuals among the *Ulema*, voted against the resolution. The case of Badshah Khan is the most tragic of all those who strongly and honestly resisted the idea of partition, but failed to avert the day when there was ‘darkness at noon’ on August fifteenth, 1947. The division of the Indian family must have been an inner torture for all Indian nationalists, but there were some silver linings of subjective satisfaction that their long struggle, appreciated by their own people, had borne some fruit. Gandhi became (very rightly) the father of independent India, Nehru its Prime Minister, Sardar the architect of its consolidation, Rajendra Babu the President of the Union, Azad the conscience keeper of the Party, Rajagopalachari, the wise old pilot of the ‘Rath’ of modern India, and so on. But Badshah Khan, the brave tragic hero, became a villain and traitor to his own countrymen and was put into prison in his own land by those he had liberated from foreign yoke. A tragedy of this sheer poignant intensity is, perhaps, without parallel in world history.

Little did the architects of a sovereign homeland for Indian Muslims realize that slightly less than half of the total Muslim population of India would be excluded from the proposed ‘homeland’. In other words, that almost half the Indian Muslims, even after the creation of the homeland, would still remain at ‘the mercy of the Hindus’ in independent India. Little did the ardent champions of Pakistan in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and other areas of Hindu dominance realize that the logic of Pakistan, as a Muslim homeland, would precipitate the parallel idea that India was or ought to be a Hindu homeland. Little did the ardent dreamers of Pakistan belonging to and living in India realize that those who did not go or could not go would have to live under the shadow of a continuing suspicion of divided loyalties. Little did the young hearts and minds of the dreamers understand the logic of politics and of human passions. (Page 203)



The root limitation of the RSS philosophical vision and interpretation of Indian history is its 'ahistorical' and totally abstract notion of the '*Rashtra*'. From the RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh) angle of vision the '*Rashtra*' is some eternal and pure Aryan collective entity that is the special creation or manifestation of the *Absolute Brahman*, and is, thus, something apart from the common rung of humanity. The RSS intellectuals and ideologues hold that the '*Rashtra*' is the pure historical microcosm of the *Brahmanical* macrocosm and *Bharat* is the territorial locus of this historical process. This stand implies that the language, thought, culture, customs, institutions of the Aryans of *Bharat* during the golden period of its sacred history (before the scourge of foreign invasions and conquests) were all perfect. Muslims and Christians corrupted them and attempted to destroy the soul of *Bharat*. The Muslims and the British eventually conspired to vivisect the body of 'Mother India' before being compelled to vacate the unholy aggression against India down the centuries. The RSS vision goes on to claim that the soul of India is immortal and destined to conquer all opposition. It is for *Bharat* to teach and for all others to learn the infallible wisdom and truth eternally enshrined in the Vedas. The wisdom of the Vedas is complete and needs no further growth through exposure to and dialogue with other thought systems, cultures and religions. In fact, all these are cultural or conceptual aberrations to be swept aside by Vedic wisdom of a resurrected *Bharat*, freshly emancipated from centuries of accursed foreign rule.

The above philosophical and historical vision and interpretation of Indian history is a species of a closed 'ahistorical' pattern of understanding the concrete growth of the Indian people in history. This type of conceptualization of history completely ignores the concrete processes of the growth of nations and the evolution of human ideas and ideals through continual interaction and dialogue. This approach totally brushes aside the mutual give and take between different wings of the human family in both peace and war. It also ignores the fact that the invader or foreigner of yesterday becomes the son of the soil tomorrow, provided he settles down, works, dies and mingles with the air and dust of his chosen land, just like those who may have arrived earlier on the common soil. (Pages 237-238)



I foresee that the leaderless Indian Muslims (presently confused, demoralized, in the grip of a besieged mentality) after two or three general elections will join the mainstream of secular Indian politics instead of functioning as vote banks for political managers, be they secular or religious. The bewildered Indian Muslim (including the erstwhile champions of a separate homeland for Muslims) are now realizing the tremendous folly they committed in 1947. They are fast coming round to the view that they should vote for the man who is honest and has the right agenda in view (irrespective of his religion or caste). I am pretty confident that well educated Muslims having a broad humanist outlook and vision will soon emerge on the Indian scene. The same applies to *Dalits* and OBC's (Other Backward Classes). Nitish Kumar of Bihar has already captured the imagination of the people of India, while Narendra Modi of Gujrat is more likely to take on the image of a boss who gets things done rather than of a statesman and democratic leader. And it is my faith in the genius of India that the common man is soon going to see through the dirty tricks as well as honest deceptions of our establishment. Young India is developing the clarity, courage and conviction to embrace the politics of integrity without importing religion, region or caste into the game of power.

The persons who win the free and fair vote of the people must honestly view themselves as servant leaders of the great Indian family, rather than the leader of any particular group. The servant leader will be fully alive to the fact that the Indian family, in its own turn, is an arc (a very large one indeed) of the still larger circle of humanity. Accordingly, he will fully understand the limitations of the dictum, 'my country, right or wrong' and will take the lead in applying the Gandhian-Nehruvian ethical approach to national and international politics. Today several Christians, upper caste Hindus and Muslims who are compassionate humanists stand rather marginalized in the corridors of caste centered Indian politics. This must go and the 'Obama Moment' should arrive. Reinhold Niebuhr and Gandhi inspired Martin Luther King. Likewise, Gandhi inspired Nelson Mandela. When will Gandhi inspire another Indian after Jawaharlal? When will it be? Who will it be? Where in India will it be? All I know is that it will be. Much earlier, Rabindra Nath Tagore had described the land of his dreams in his prayer in the *Gitanjali* in the immortal lines:

*Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high;
Where knowledge is free;
Where the world is not broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls;
Where words come out from the depth of truth;
Where tireless living stretches its arms towards perfection;
Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into the dreary desert sand of dead habit;
Where the mind is led forward by thee into ever widening thought and action:
Into that heaven of freedom, let my country awake.*

And I, as an Indian Muslim, dream of the day when every Indian Muslim heart will resonate with Tagore's prayer and will cease to bother whether the poet was a Muslim or a Hindu.
(Pages 257-258)



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