

**Trends in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Islamic Thought:  
An Overview of Sayyid Abul A'lâ Mawdudi and  
Sayyid Abul Hasan Ali Nadwi**

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The Qur'an and the Sunnah constitute the firm foundation on which the whole edifice of Islamic thought has been developed. From the early days of Islam, revelation (*wahy*) was taken as the source of guidance and direction, and reason and *ijtihad* were used both as tools for understanding and interpreting as well as for dealing with events and developing responses and policies. Throughout the history of Islam there is growth and development in Islamic thought. In spite of the fact that the Qur'an and the Hadith remain unchanged, as *ijtihad* proceeds, new opinions emerge. To address the new situations and changing circumstances according to the teachings of the Qur'an and the Sunnah and to adopt its primacy, the dynamic element of Islamic thought, *ijtihad*, played a vital role. Therefore, the *fiqh* (jurisprudence), *kalam* (theology), *falsafa* (philosophy), *tasawwuf* (mysticism) and other religious sciences are the manifestations of Islamic thought, which emerged as a result of evolution and development of Islamic thought itself as well as in response to new emerging situations. The growth and development of Islamic thought was inevitable, in order to face new situations in life and thought and to work out implications of the Qur'an and the Sunnah, that were not visible to the earlier people.

These branches of learning now appear to be independent of the Qur'an, but, as a matter of fact, they were direct and indirect outcome of the study of the Holy Book. These sciences grew over the ages as branches of that tree of knowledge which

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has its roots in the Qur'anic revelations. Its major and minor parts are logically connected to it. Just as from seed of a tree emerge the roots, the trunk, the branches, the leaves and despite blossoming widely, every leaf is connected to its root.

Despite the demise of pious *Khilafah* and consequent rift between political leadership and religious intellectual leadership, the religious scholars over the centuries continued to perform *ijtihad* to understand the situation of the ummah as a whole, and to look objectively at problems and to apply the values and principles of Islam in society and organizations. These branches of knowledge are in fact, the cumulative endeavour of the righteous scholars of Islam, evolved in the course of centuries to make Qur'an and Sunah applicable to new situations of life and thought. The historical methodology of Islamic thought used, as we know today is represented by the science of *usul al fiqh* (principles of jurisprudence) which, in turn, is represented in its general principles and axioms by the rational foundation and basic concepts of the Islamic mind. Therefore, Islam did never wink at the lapses of its followers. It was always on the alert, correcting, mending, admonishing; the Qur'an and the Sunnah were continually there intact and unpolluted— to guide and to judge on occasions of doubt and dispute. They kept alive the spirit of defiance against the libertinism of the ruling classes and against the other un-Islamic influences. The whole course of Islamic history is lighted up with the crusading endeavours of conscious determined, brave-hearted men who, like the true successors of the Prophet (SAAS), faced the challenge of the time and restored, revived and kept on moving the Ummah by resorting to *jihād* and *ijtihad*.

From its earliest days, Islam possessed a tradition of revival (*tajdid*) and reform (*islah*). Muslims had been quick to respond to what was regarded as the compromising of faith and practice. In succeeding centuries, a rich revivalist tradition expressed itself in a variety of concepts and beliefs, in the lives

and teachings of individual reformers and in the activities of a host of movements. Medieval period of Islam produced a number of scholars and thinkers, who contributed to the development of Islamic thought considerably by using their *ijtihadi* capabilities. There were traditional scholars as well as the scholars who had philosophical bent of mind and both these groups responded to the critical situations of their times. The prominent among them were Imam al-Ghazzali (1058-1111/450-505) and Ibn Taymiah (1263-1329/661-728), both, throughout their tenure, did their utmost to rebuttal the challenges confronting Muslim society and thought. Likewise, in the subcontinent religious doctors, Shaykh Abdul-Haq Muhaddith of Delhi (b.1551), Shaykh Ahmad of Sarhind known as *Mujaddid-i-Alf-i-Thani* (971-1034/1564-1624), Shah Waliullah (1703-1763), Sayyid Ahmad Shahid and Ismail Shahid are scintillating personalities who made remarkable contributions in reforming Muslim society and reinvigorated Islam in subcontinent in their respective times. So there has been a continuity of reform and revivalism throughout Islamic history.

In the recent past, when the Muslim world found itself face to face with modern Western culture and forced to taste the bitterness of defeat at its hands. For the first time, the Ummah was confronted by a decidedly destructive enemy which threatened its entire civilization. Scholars produced a number of responses to extricate it from the crises and to institute reform to liberate itself from the challenges of the western influence. A variety of responses emerged from Muslim self-criticism and reflection on the cause of the decline. Their action spanned the spectrum, from withdrawal and rejection to adoption and cultural synthesis. During the late 20<sup>th</sup> century Mawlana Sayyid Abul Ala Mawdudi (1903-1979) and Mawlana Sayyid Abul Hasan Nadwi (1914-1999) are at the forefront among the important responses. Through their writings they provided an ideological foundation to the contemporary Islamic

revivalism. They identified and responded to many of the concerns which continue to trouble contemporary Muslims in executing Islam in day to day life. Their assiduous writings on Western culture, thought and ideologies and its incompatibility and emphasis on Islam as a comprehensible and transcendental world view, obviated to a large extent the overwhelming influence of the west.

Although there is common underlying objective and interest to resuscitate Islam in the subcontinent and rise to the challenges posed by the west, more importantly, both shared a revivalist ideology an implicit a prior methodology. Mawlana Mawdudi and Mawlana Nadwi adopted different approaches and attitudes while interpreting certain issues. However, Mawlana Mawdudi considered ideology, the engine of other developments in society. His idea of unity of Allah and of his exclusive transcendental sovereignty is meant to reinstate Islam as a political system. To him, the decisive factor in performing the act of submission is not the mere belief in God's existence; rather, it is the admission of His exclusive authority in determining the moral, political and economic aspects of all societies. The mere recognition of God's existence entails the belief in His sovereignty and rulership. There is, according to Mawlana Mawdudi, no separation between faith in Allah and adherence to His social, political and economic injunctions. The fundamentals of the doctrine of Islam and the tenets of its laws are one single whole; the latter is a practical translation of the former. It was only after centuries of 'diabolic machinations' that the legislative exclusiveness (*hakimiyyah*) of Allah became separated from the question of doctrine in the minds of Muslim and non-Muslims alike, which is synonymous with the worship of idols or man-made images. According to Mawdudi, Islam is a well-defined systematic system of life which is based on certain solid principles. Its major and minor parts are logically connected to its basic principles and a complete Islamic life

emerges from its basic principles just as from the seed of a tree emerge the roots, the trunk, the branches, the leaves and despite blossoming widely, every leaf is connected to its root.<sup>1</sup>

One of the implications of the organic understanding of Shariah that is repeated over and over again in Mawdudi's writings, almost like a refrain, is that the Shariah does not recognize any division between religion and other aspects of life; and most specifically between religion and the state. There is, he insists, no area of man's activity and concern to which the Shari'ah does not address itself with specific divine guidance. Thus the cultivation of private piety, worship, and the ordering of the individual's relationship with God, the matters that are normally identified as 'religion' in popular parlance, do not necessarily satisfy the demands of the Shari'ah. True Islamic faith must issue into social action and attitude, must strive for the creation of an Islamic society as well as for personal righteousness.

Mawlana Mawdudi's major contribution and legacy was his systematic presentation of Islam, calling for restoration of Islam's primacy in personal as well as political lives. He attempted to provide a theoretical blueprint for the revival of Islam, or what he termed the process of Islamic revolution. In Mawdudi's words: "the thing which we wish to establish is called in Qur'anic terms '*deen-e-haq*', the meaning of which may be anything to anyone but for us it means to "accept Allah as the Real Ruler and to spend one's individual and collective life in His Servitude." The establishment of 'Deen' (Allah's Sovereignty and Islamic system) in its entirety was the goal and aim of all his efforts and works, towards which he strove. He never ignores the importance of securing 'Power', which, he believes, is *sine-qua non* for the establishment of 'Deen'. That is establishing and maintaining the sovereignty of God on earth or the way of life ordained by Him. He argues, that power and leadership in society are crucial and the decisive factors in

human affairs; because human civilization travels along in the direction determined by the people who control the centers of power, it can hardly resist. In a society, which is in the hands of those who have turned away from God, those desiring to travel towards God are in the precarious position of passengers in a train or individuals in a crowd, who desire to go in the opposite direction. Therefore, according to him, 'only when power in society is in the hands of the Believers and the righteous, can the objectives of Islam be realized. It is therefore, the primary duty of all those who aspire to please God to launch an organised struggle, sparing neither life nor property for this purpose. The importance of securing power for the righteous is so fundamental that neglecting this struggle, one has no means left to please God.<sup>2</sup> He further asserts that, it is not enough to preach sermons, nor merely the presence of large number of 'good' individuals. What is needed is organized, collective struggle to bring God's earth under God's rule. He wrote extensively, besides other things on the nature and character of an Islamic state as well as the primary requisite to establish it (*Islami Hukumat Kistarah Qaim Hoti Hai*) and through the forums of his organization, Jamma<sup>3</sup>i-Islami which he founded in 1941 and it worked to implement politically the Islamic ideal. The struggle to achieve this God ordained purpose has been named by him as *iqamat-e-deen*, *shahadat-e-haq* and *tehreek-e-islami*.

On the other hand, for Mawlana Nadwi, the things like establishment of the kingdom of God and evolution of human culture, on the basis of goodness and betterment are no more than means and occupy secondary position.<sup>3</sup> According to him, "there is no difference of opinion, in my knowledge, amongst the 'Ulama of Islam about the necessity of struggle for acquiring power and authority to enable enforcement of divine laws and authority in the society. Acquisition of this type of authority and power is the demand of the Qur'an and no negligence or

lethargy in that regard is permissible. But all this only constitutes an important and unending means and is certainly not the whole of religion or the foremost objective.”<sup>4</sup> For him it is only means to an end not end in itself which is to seek the pleasure of Allah. He gave more importance to *ibadah* (worship) and the spiritual aspect of Islam as having fundamental and pivotal position in the whole structure of the religion and means of attaining the pleasure of Allah and his nearness. Mawlana Nadwi distinguished the term ‘*iqamat-e-din*’ the establishment of religion (used in the Qur’an only at one place in the chapter, ‘Shura, verse, 13) as a comprehensive and having wider connotation than only, what some people think, the efforts for establishment of the ‘kingdom of God’. It seems that Mawlana Nadwi often exhibits ambivalent and contradictory attitude towards power and politics. According to him, it is the whole of the religion and its teachings (belief, worship and daily business) and not only caliphate, government or acquisition of power and authority. He even disagreed with the use of contemporary vocabulary like ‘sovereignty of God’, Islamic ‘social order’ movement, revolution in a discourse on Islam and considered it tantamount to the politicization of true Islam and smacks of capitulation to the domination of the Western thought and method of organizing life. Therefore, alleged those who intermingle faith with power [power politics] as redefining Islam in terms of socio-political values instead of the eternal, and goals, like establishing the Islamic state, becomes centered on this—world rather than on securing Allah’s pleasure in that world.

Instead, Mawlana Nadwi emphasized the need of spiritual and esoteric training and its augmentation only through the abundance of acts of worship (*ibadah*). Following the traditional approach, he concurred with the programme of Mawlana Muhammad Alias and his Tabligi Jamat, whose Islam is of narrowly traditional type — that is, based on prayer, fasting

and so on, without much awareness of political and social issues. Mawlana Nadwi stressed the importance of reforming individuals and instead of establishing Islamic government (*Islami hukumat*) he accentuated the need of establishing Islamic society (*Islami m'ashirah*). According to him, "Prophets used to transform men from inside, they emphasised the change in attitude and perspective of men rather than the changing of 'system' (*nizam*). System is always subordinate to attitude and outlook/frame of mind and if heart does not change, outlook never changes and nothing changes".<sup>5</sup>

In contrast to Mawlana Mawdudi's version of '*aqamat-i-din*' (establishment of *deen*), Mawlana Nadwi put forward the programme of '*payam-i-insaniyat*', the message of humanity. He asserted that this 'message of humanity' is more viable and has wider appeal, especially in the Indian context which is inhabited by many nations and religions, more often in contention. Therefore, establishment of Islamic state in this situation seems improbable to him, in India, his original homeland where he decided to remain after partition, decision taken much in line with the many Deobandi ulama and like millions of Indian Muslims. Through this programme he appealed to all irrespective of cast, creed or religion for the moral reformation and humanitarianism, based on the latent strength and competence of Islam, so as to give a fresh lease of life to the dying humanity which has been brought to brink of social, moral and spiritual echoes by the materialism and individualism. Therefore, he attempted to invigorate fundamental aim and message of Islam to reform human society and bring humanity on the right path, by addressing the humanitarian issues, common to all religions and nationals living in India. Their by contemplating probable rather than impracticable.

However, it seems that the different methodology of interpretations, adopted by these scholars owe much to, taking



into account the varying circumstances and situations, changing realities, needs and possibilities of their respective locations. Most probably Mawlana Nadwi in India (after partition) perceived and related the situation and circumstances with the example of Prophets (SAAS) "Makkan period" (the initial phase during which an individual propogational style was used to spread Islam. This was a period in which the fundamentals of belief and the principles of change were suggested to society at large) while as Mawlana Mawdudi in Pakistan found himself in a situation similar to that of Prophets "Madinan Period" (when the Muslim state and society had gained absolute ascendancy over all its adversaries, was characterised by its completion of all detailed organisational and social arrangements for society ensuring its progress and protection). A comprehensive look at the progression of revelation and the prophetic mission will show the policies and the attempts used to deal with varying circumstances and situation while maintaining the same basic principles stemming from a single divine source. The Makkan period, as it represents the stage of propagation and reform based on new and higher principles, and with generalizations. It is also for this reason that the Prophet (SAAS) used to emphasize to his followers never to use confrontational methods or to return open hostility with hostility. Regardless of the price they had to pay in suffering, the early Muslims were never to turn away from the basic issues; the reform of society. While as, the "Madinian period" demanded establishment of socio-political order and active engagement.

With regard to modern western education the views of both the scholars converge. They suggest to be selective in adopting from the west, only good, useful and compatible with moral and spiritual heritage are to be taken. According Mawlana Nadwi, anything which can contribute to the strength and stability or prove helpful in the preaching and propagation of

the word of Allah must not be rejected simply because it is foreign or Western.<sup>6</sup> He suggests that the attitude of negation and rejection and strict refrain from making use of the fruits of culture and civilization offered by the West including even such branches of knowledge in which the Western people enjoy a monopoly, as for instance, the martial sciences and technology, will be potently foolish and short-sighted. Consequently such attitude results in further backwardness and total isolation from the main currents of time.<sup>7</sup> Likewise according to Mawlana Mawdudi, Western civilization along with its foundational principles, its historical development, and its achievements should be subjected to critical analysis and scrutiny. Thereafter, healthy achievements, of the Western civilization, especially its scientific and technological attainments, in so far as they are in conformity with Islamic principles and the spirit and objectives of Islam, should be appraised, abstracted and assimilated into the Islamic scheme of life.<sup>8</sup> And as far as cultural and civilization interaction between different nations is concerned, Islam not only considers it to be legitimate but even encourages it. Islam does not erect barriers of prejudice between nations that would preclude “cultural exchange” between them.<sup>9</sup> However; it is the philosophical underpinnings of modern education, rather than education itself, that has mostly perturbed these scholars. We find among the exponents of modern education in the Muslim world people with a variety of attitudes, including those wedded to a wholesale appropriation of entire baggage of modern education with its positivist underpinnings. Both are among those Muslim scholars who see modern scientific education as the continuation of the science that had flourished in Islamic civilization several centuries ago but at the same time they warn against empiricist and materialistic interpretations propagated in the name of modern scientific education.

Moreover, Mawlana Nadwi wrote extensively in Arabic language, chose to address the Arabs having key position in

Islamic world for revival and resurgence of past glory of Muslims. His emphasis on the distinctive role of the Arabs in the fortunes of Islam and in his discussions of the unique function of the Arabs in renewing God's authentic religion, he clearly highlights 'their nationalist formation' as being solely a product of Islam. Thence he did expect the Arab world, owing, among other things, to its glorious history, great achievements and strategic position, to shoulder the task of leading the entire Muslim world. Therefore, it seems that for Mawlana Nadwi, revival and reformation of the Arab world is *sine-qua-non* for resurgence of Islam. Mawlana Mawdudi was completely silent on this particular issue. However, Sayyid Qutb, who was influenced by the writings both of these scholars, assigned the leadership of mankind to 'the believers in the oneness of God', irrespective of their nationality or geographical location.

While the attitude of these scholars of Islam towards certain contemporary issues vary, especially with regard to political aspects of Islam, which otherwise is a grey area for Muslim scholars. There is also convergence of views on many issues, like, resuscitation and reinvigoration of Islam in the lives of Muslims and their approach to modern education vis-à-vis Muslims. Although, Mawlana Mawdudi and Mawlana Nadwi approached to the Qur'an and Sunnah in formulating responses to certain questions, their respective approaches yielded different results and interpretations. Common themes but a diversity of interpretations, while there is a unity in Islamic belief, there is also a variety of understanding both as to its implications and its implementations. The study of these paradigms of thought bear witness to the divergence (*ikhtilaf*) of thought and action, essentially one of thought rather than of belief, one of method and not of meaning, and that the issue involved is one of means and not of ends. However, it should be clear that no one could possibly object to the value, principles, and beliefs, which form the foundation of Islam.

**References and Notes**

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