

Introduction

What is religion? In the contemporary perspective, religion appears to be a universal category. It is assumed that some kind of religious belief and/or practice can be located in any culture and region of the world in contemporary times as well as in the past. Yet, from the perspective of religious studies, this universality has been contested and questioned. Is religion really a universal concept, or rather, a global if not a globalised concept? The assumption implies that religion is a human constant, perhaps related to human nature. If described as global, religion is detached of a naturalised claim; however, it still denotes a general distribution. The designation of religion as “global” or “globalised” therefore introduces the concept of processual dissemination. Religion then comes to be perceived not as a concept which can be translated without semantic change from one language and culture to another, as a short glance into perhaps any contemporary dictionary of any language seems to indicate, with a supposedly synonymous equivalent in the target language. Instead, further investigation into older dictionaries dismantles this unequivocalness to show a wider range of possible translations. Religion is a concept that experienced a long process of negotiation. This study aims at tracing this process through the history of South Asian Islam.

Language and Society

Religion not only proves to be the product of a process of negotiation, it equally resists a uniform definition. Different approaches have been brought forward, among the most recent being various polythetic definitions of religion. In contrast to former, normative definitions, polythetic ones aim to describe religion as a set of possible elements, which need not appear in a particular religion all at once. Scholars have criticised this view, however, because it presumes a prototype of religion is presumed which comprises all the elements of religion. The difficulty of this type of definition has already become apparent since it is not aimed at a general concept of religion, but rather takes a particular element as its point of departure. This definition of religion is not based on a top-down approach, but

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rather views a particular religion as a prototypical representative of its abstract category.¹ Simply put, the unknown and foreign is always categorised with relation to the known and familiar. The unknown is viewed through the lens of familiar categories.

This difficulty is inextricably related to the linguistic conceptualisation of the world:

According to a well-known saying of Epictetus, it is not deeds that shock humanity, but the words describing them. [...] It draws our attention to the autonomous power of words, without whose use human actions and passions could hardly be experienced, and certainly not made intelligible to others. This epigram stands in a long tradition concerned with the relation of word and thing, of the spiritual and the lived, of consciousness and being, of language and the world.²

In these introductory lines on the relation between history and concepts, Reinhart Koselleck describes a complex relation between the latter and society. Not only is the expression of an individual's thoughts or experience inextricably related to common concepts in society, but the sensation and experience itself is equally and recursively related to these concepts. Language is perceived, on the one hand, as a mirror of social circumstances, while those are, on the other hand, to a certain extent also formed and sustained by linguistically structuring and conceptualising the world. This structuring of the world through concepts is an inevitable condition for society, for "without common concepts there is no society."³ Yet, those conceptualisations are always contingent, lacking any natural reference as justification.

As a consequence of their inextricable relation to society, concepts are subject to historical change and require adaption in order to keep pace with societal change. This is accomplished either by reshaping the semantic field of a given concept or by abandoning a term for the sake of another that may better cover a changed context. Moreover, the relationship of language and society must not be misunderstood as unidirectional, but rather as reciprocal. Alteration of concepts may equally affect societal change. Altered concepts affect the structuring of the world and, thus and at the same time, society. Therefore, concepts have a history and do not relate to any objective point of reference.⁴

1 Michael Bergunder, "What is Religion? The Unexplained Subject Matter of Religious Studies." *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 26 (2014), 249f.

2 Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 75.

3 *Ibid.*

4 *Ibid.*

Religion – A Western Import?

These statements apply also to the concept of religion itself. Several studies have engaged with the conceptual history of religion, of which the four-volume German *Religio: Die Geschichte eines neuzeitlichen Grundbegriffs* by Ernst Feil is perhaps the most extensive. Tracing the term “religion” from antiquity, as a derivative of the Latin *religio*, Feil acknowledges the 18th century as „a significant break.”⁵ “‘Religion’ now received a completely new understanding, becoming the name of a ‘modern basic concept’ (neuzeitlicher Grundbegriff) that has held sway since the 19th century. Feil identified this with a Protestant theological variant of a religion of inwardness, attributed to Schleiermacher.”⁶ This assertion of a turning point in the 18th century, moving towards inwardness in the conceptualisation of religion, is widely shared.⁷

In his *A New Science: The Discovery of Religion in the Age of Reason*, Guy Stroumsa describes the discoveries of the 15th and 16th century as a crucial trigger: “The intellectual and religious shock caused by the observation of formerly all-but-unknown religious rituals and beliefs in the Americas and Asia provided the trigger without which the new discipline [i.e. religious studies] could not have been born.”⁸ Consequently, religion came to be perceived as a universal concept being transferred to formerly unknown cults. Religion was extended from its former meaning of belief to a plural category encompassing varying rituals. It obtained the position of an overarching category subsuming different entities.⁹

As a consequence of this development, religion has been criticised as a Western concept. Wilfred Cantwell Smith’s *The Meaning and End of Religion* is frequently described as the first instance of this critique and criticises a dissemination of this concept through colonialism:

In modern times, among most peoples of the earth the spread of Western ideas and attitudes and social patterns and the response to these seem to have led or to be leading among many other consequences to a development, at least at sophisticated levels, of a counterpart term and concept for ‘religion’. This is the case not only in

5 Ernst Feil as quoted in Bergunder: “What is Religion,” 258.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Guy Stroumsa: *A New Science: The Discovery of Religion in the Age of Reason* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 2.

9 Ibid., 3.

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Japan and China. For example, modern Hindi *dharam* is developing a meaning of the English term ‘religion’ that its classical Sanskrit counterpart did not have.¹⁰

Smith assumes that it was only through encounters with Europe via Christian missions and colonialism that the “Western” concept of religion spread beyond Europe and was adopted in indigenous terminology. This adoption is described as a reformulation or extension of existing terms resulting in an extended meaning that was formerly non-existent.

Bergunder, however, criticises this understanding as a unidirectional perspective where religion is being perceived as a mere imposition. He argues that this assertion is an overemphasis on the “origin” based in European history. “Such an approach,” he writes, “leads to a neglect of developments since the 19th century, because it teleologically privileges the ‘origin.’”¹¹ This limitation of the development of the concept of religion merely to its European history ignores the possibility of reciprocal processes of negotiation with colonised countries in the 19th century, when the mutual encounters reached a climax.

Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan & the Aligarh Movement

The aim of this study is therefore to scrutinise this assertion via the example of 19th century South Asian Islam. As a disclaimer, it should be noted that this study cannot accomplish a comprehensive analysis of the aspect of reciprocity and its potential repercussions on Christianity or the conception of religion in a European context, as this would require a thorough scrutiny of Christianity. This study is merely aimed at questioning the aforementioned assertion of an imposition of a “Western” concept on Islam in South Asia, and to study its encounters and discursive negotiations with Europe. Europe shall not be understood as a conceptual prototype or point of departure but, rather, be decentralised. The “Western” concept of religion will therefore be integrated as an equal part of this conceptual history, Europe thus being part of a global process of negotiation.

As this is still such a vast subject, the present study focuses on the Aligarh Movement and, in particular, the religious thought of its founder Sir Sayyid Ah-

¹⁰ Wilfred Cantwell Smith: *The Meaning and End of Religion: A New Approach to the Religious Traditions of Mankind* (New York: Mentor Book, 1964), 58f.

¹¹ Bergunder: “What is Religion,” 258.

mad Khan (1817-98) and his religious thought. This source selection perhaps requires some explanation, as Khan and the Aligarh Movement can by no means be described as understudied. At least three important studies of his life and religious thought have been published in English. The first, *Religious Thought of Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, was published by Bashir Ahmad Dar in 1957. Along with Johannes Marinus Simon Baljon's *The Reforms and Religious Ideas of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan* (1964), this work provides a good overview of Khan's religious ideas, yet lacks any thorough localisation of Khan's thought. Christian W. Troll's *Sayyid Ahmad Khan: A Reinterpretation of Muslim Theology* (1978) is the most voluminous and thorough study of Khan among the three works discussed here. He divides Khan's thought into different periods and describes the different stages of his development via a careful study of Khan's extensive work, which will be referred to in this study extensively. Yet, for the most part, Troll does not transcend the limits of mere description and lacks a thorough investigation of the triggering points for Khan's development, as well as his intellectual framework. Apart from these three studies dedicated exclusively to Khan's religious ideas, an unmanageably vast amount of biographies, articles, and chapters on Khan and the Aligarh Movement have also been published that, despite their number, seem merely to reproduce what has already been said countless times and lack any innovative insight.¹² Since this study has been prepared in the department of Modern South Asian Languages and Literatures, it was a crucial concern to first of all critically review the primary sources in their original language but secondly also to take into account secondary sources from South Asia which are usually disregarded. I include and discuss this undervalued material as well, as these sometimes open up new vistas. In the following, I would like to mention a few books from which the present study benefitted a lot. In regard to Ramchandar, Şiddīq-ar-Raḥmān Qidavā'ī's *Master Ram Chandra* (1961) has to be mentioned. With reference to the Nazir Ahmad, Iftikhar Ahmad Siddiqi's exhaustive study *Maulvī Nazīr Ahmad Dihlavī* (1971) can be described as reference literature in this context. The author presents a substantiated book on Ahmad with many details on his versatile and extensive workstudy, even though the analysis seems to be restricted to a mere summary. Nasir Abbas Nayyar's comprehensive study *Urdū adab kī taškīl-i jadīd* (2016) has also been referred to in most chapters. Even though his book is primarily a literary history of Urdu, it overlaps with crucial topics of the present study in its

12 Troll mentions in his *Sayyid Ahmad Khan* (1978) that, already, "we can count about fifteen biographies and monographs, more than fifty articles in English and over a hundred in Urdu journals, dealing with Sir Sayyid's life and achievements. In addition, there are chapters dealing with or passages commenting upon him in a number of books" (Christian W. Troll: *Sayyid Ahmad Khan: A Reinterpretation of Muslim Theology* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1978), 3). One can only imagine to what extent the amount will have increased at this date.

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discussion of Hali, Shibli, Khan and Ahmad. All of them were crucial with regard to their view on Islam as well as for their impact on the emergence of a new literature in Urdu.

Moreover, this study shall avoid redundantly repeating biographical details which have been exhaustively examined in the literature discussed above. It shall instead reference necessary background only wherever relevant. Furthermore, this study also does not aim to give an all-encompassing representation of Khan's ideas, let alone the whole of the Aligarh Movement. Thus, for a general overview of Khan's biography or a comprehensive description of his ideas, the reader is referred to one of the aforementioned studies.

Overarching Questions

After having mentioned the extant literature on Khan and the Aligarh Movement, and having described what this study cannot accomplish, I will now summarise the innovations this study aims to present regarding this over-studied area. First and foremost, I will transcend the limits of mere description by closely examining Khan's intellectual framework. The study's central concern is the question of the commonplace charge of "Westernisation" as it appears in various analyses. Khan's thought has been frequently oversimplified as a mere adoption of "Western" ideas. Since this study is first of all structured as an analysis of the different trajectories of Khan's ideas, this issue runs through the entire study as an overarching question. It will be discussed with some detail in chapters 1 and 3, but will be addressed at least briefly in virtually every chapter. This question relates most clearly to the initial concern described at the beginning of this introduction: whether the concept of religion can be perceived as a mere imposition or whether it has passed through a process of reciprocal negotiation.

Thus, this study will ask how Islam came to be conceived, and how the concept of religion as an umbrella category came to be represented, in the context of South Asian Islam. With this in mind, my selection of Khan for the lead role of this study becomes clear, as Khan witnessed almost the entire 19th century during his extraordinarily long life and, what is more, left a vast number of books, pamphlets, and articles ranging from the 1840s onwards until his death. This extensive period of writing, combined with the consistent adaptation of his thought, allows us to trace back the development and alteration of the concept of religion – first, on the side of different critiques of Islam triggering a response from Khan, which, secondly,

allows us to present the latter's adaptations and reformulations of Islam as well as his counter-concept of religion. While Khan's early religious writings are concerned solely with inner-Islamic debates, his perspective gradually widens towards a response to the Christian mission, historiography, and eventually science. In the latter case, particular religions do not engage in a debate with one another. Rather, science appears as the antagonist against which religion – as a plural, comparative notion – has to delimit itself. Khan's thought passed through all of these different stages as it developed, which were then mirrored in his significant reformulations. Having said this, the second reason to focus on Khan has already been suggested implicitly: that is, his intense encounter with European thought and in particular with science. While, during the 19th century, British educational institutions as well as science were frowned upon by most Muslim scholars because of the danger of their inducing doubts in Islam, Khan faced this threat and aimed his thought at harmonising Islam and science in presenting their mutual conformity.

Originating from Khan, this study furthermore presents other authors or associates of the Aligarh circle and their views on related issues. The work is structured around four blocks with at least one chapter spent in discussion of a developmental stage in Khan's philosophy, with the exception of the final block. – From this, I will examine other authors' engagements with related issues where applicable. The complete structure of this study is fully described below.

Historical Setting

The Aligarh Movement denomination can be traced back to the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College, which was Khan founded in 1875 in Aligarh. The core circle of this loose school of thought was located in Aligarh because of the college, yet its wider circle extended beyond the city. The college was characterised by its dependence on the British educational system, thus utilising English as the medium of instruction and emphasising the importance of science in its curriculum. These efforts have to be read in the context of 19th century South Asia, when the mere acquisition of English was deemed taboo or even blasphemous in Muslim society.¹³ Thus, even most of the authors discussed here had never (or had only recently) acquired some competency in English. Most prominent among these was

13 Mushirul Hasan: "Sharif Culture and Colonial Rule: A 'Maulvi'-Missionary Encounter," in Zaka Ullah of Delhi (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), x.

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Khan himself, who had only passing proficiency in English. What caused the representatives of the Aligarh Movement to take this step to utilise English as the medium of instruction and, what is more, engage with contemporary European debates? What made these authors engage with a foreign system of categorisation and how did it prove to have such a long-lasting impact on South Asia and Islam? To put it simply, how did it happen that, in contemporary times, a more or less global concept of religion can be found in virtually any region and culture – even though this apparent universality will prove to be something of a misapprehension? In order to grasp this development, one has to bear in mind the tremendous power asymmetry created through colonialism. Only this context can explain the necessity felt by Khan and his Aligarh circle to come to terms with the dominant discourse of the coloniser. It explains their efforts to make sense of those foreign categorisations through translation into their own framework. In order to understand this situation, we will have to consider his background and the broader context of 19th century South Asia in general.

Khan was born and grew up in his grandfather Khwajah Farid-ud-Din Ahmad Khan's (1747-1828) house, in a family with strong bonds to the Mughal court. His grandfather was a *wazir* at the court, but also held the position of ambassador in Iran and Burma for the East India Company. Furthermore, he was a renowned mathematician and astronomer, and taught at the Calcutta Madrasa, which had been founded in 1780 by Warren Hastings as the country's earliest educational institution under British administration. With the aim of qualifying graduates for lower posts in government offices, students were trained in Persian, Arabic, and Muslim law (*fiqh*).¹⁴

Furthermore, Khan's family had a strong affiliation with Sufism. Troll writes:

Two of the seven brothers of Farīd al-dīn were outspoken dervishes. The famous Khwājah Najīb al-dīn (d. 1843), then popularly known as Shāh Fidā Ḥusain, was an adept of the Rasūlshāhīs, a recent branch of the Suhrawardī *silsilah* (Sufi order). Najīb al-dīn strongly adhered to the doctrine of *waḥdat al-wujūd* (unity of being) [...]. Khwājah 'Alā al-dīn (d. 1855), on the other hand, was *murid* (disciple), and *khalīfah* (successor) of the famous Naqshbandi Shaikh, Shāh Muḥammad Āfāq (d. 1835) [...].¹⁵

Hence, the two prominent positions in Sufism were present in Khan's family at the same time. Yet, the latter tendency of the Naqshbandi order made a particular

14 Troll: Sayyid Ahmad Khan, 28; Khan, B. R.: "Calcutta Madrasa, The," http://en.banglapedia.org/index.php?title=Calcutta_Madrasa_The

15 Troll: Sayyid Ahmad Khan, 28f.

impact on his worldview, as his mother Aziz an-Nisa Begum – to whom Khan paid great respect – had given allegiance to the order.

The doctrine of *vaḥdat al-vujūd* was the most prominent position during the Mughal reign and assumes a unity of God and His creation. This doctrine was put forward by the famous Sufi Ibn al-Arabi (1165-1240), who is recognised as the first to give early Sufi tendencies a structured framework. God is deemed to be the only existence, while any manifestation in creation is perceived solely as a manifestation of this single being. This doctrine was countered by Ahmad Sirhindi (1556-1605) and his *vaḥdat aš-šuhūd*, emphasising a clear distinction between God and His creation, as anything else would deny the unity of God. Sirhindi was the leader of the Naqshbandi order, which urged a strong reaction to the doctrine of *vaḥdat al-vujūd*. They “feared the potential for permissiveness which it offered and detested the free-thinking habits of the Mughal emperors.”¹⁶ Although Robinson notes that the Naqshbandi reaction did not have an immediate impact on Mughal society, it gained particular influence during Aurangzeb’s reign, as he made significant concessions to religious scholars. These concessions aimed “at centralising and neutralising mystical orders, which tended towards autonomy and heterodoxy. Orders such as the Qadiriyya became the target of Aurangzeb’s iconoclastic policies and were gradually co-opted within orthodoxy.”¹⁷

Along with the Sufi tendencies of the *vaḥdat al-vujūd*, Robinson describes rational learning (*ma’qūlāt*) as one important pillar of the Perso-Islamic culture of Mughal India: the *ma’qūlāt* were based on ancient Greek philosophy, which came to be applied to theological questions evolving in a distinct discipline, *kalām*, resting largely on logic. On the other hand, the rational sciences were also closely associated with the Mughal administration and formed a compulsory branch of training.¹⁸ In the early 18th century, however, these pillars began to shake with the struggling Mughal empire. After the death of Aurangzeb in 1707, succession wars were predominant, tremendously weakening the empire. Accelerated through various invasions by the Marathas, Sikhs, and Afghans, the fragmentation of the Mughal empire in independent regional states further increased. Robinson writes:

Not much more than half a century after the death of Awrangzeb in 1707 the Mughal empire was reduced to a few pathetic square miles around Delhi. By the beginning of the nineteenth century Muslim power itself was reduced to Awadh, Hyderabad and the north-western borderlands. Instead, there now ruled confident non-Muslim powers: the Sikhs in Punjab, the Marathas across a great swathe of territory from

16 Francis Robinson: *The ‘Ulama of Farangi Mahall and Islamic Culture in South Asia* (London: Hurst, 2001), 15.

17 Jamal Malik: *Islam in South Asia: A Short History* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 196f.

18 *Ibid.*, 199.

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Gujarat almost to the eastern seaboard, and the British in most of the Gangetic basin, Bengal, and Madras.¹⁹

Yet, Robinson hastens to add that the 18th century must not be precipitately viewed as a decline of this culture. On the contrary, rational learning gained even wider dissemination in the 18th century, originating from the Farangi Mahall in Lucknow and its syllabus, the *dars-i nizāmī*. The administration system remained largely based on Mughal structures. Thus, the

emphasis on the rational sciences [in the Farangi Mahall] was widely accepted because of the training it gave those who hoped for posts in government, a tendency which was reinforced when Warren Hastings adopted the Dars-i Nizami as the curriculum for the Calcutta Madrasa, thereby setting the standard expected for service under the East India Company.²⁰

The same applies also for the Sufi orders: those orders propagating the doctrine of *vaḥdat al-vujūd* experienced a recovery throughout the 18th century. Still, this time period was simultaneously the point of departure for challenges to emerge in countering this Perso-Islamic culture.²¹

Rational learning as conveyed through the *dars-i nizāmī* began to be countered by an emphasis on “traditional” learning, that is, based on the study of the Quran and the tradition of Muhammad’s sayings (*ḥadīṣ*).²² The most prominent representative of this development is Shah Waliullah (1730-62), who significantly reformed the curriculum of the Madrasa-i Rahimiyya in Delhi, which he had taken over from his father. During a stay in the Hijaz, he studied under the auspices of scholars of the *ḥadīṣ*. After his return to Delhi, he excluded several books on logic and *kalām* from the curriculum and instead placed the focus on “tradition.” Shah Waliullah criticised the rational sciences as having limited benefit in religious issues. Apart from this shift towards “tradition” (*manqūlāt*), Shah Waliullah also aimed to harmonise esoteric and exoteric knowledge of Sufi mysticism with “traditional” scholarship. He recognised the fragmentation of Muslim society as the central reason for the decay of Muslim power. Morals and behaviour acquired

19 Robinson: The ‘Ulama of Farangi Mahall, 20.

20 Ibid., 23.

21 Ibid., 27.

22 Similar to developments in Sufism, this trend towards ḥadīṣ scholarship had already had its predecessors during the Mughal reign, first with Shah Abd al-Haqq (1551-1642), who criticised the rational sciences and its effects, as would be seen in Akbar. Cf. Ibid., 14.

much more emphasis: the individual's responsibility to acquire Islamic knowledge and its moral implications were stressed as needing implementation in daily life.²³ Parallel efforts are to be seen in the mystical sphere, these largely overlapping with Shah Waliullah's ambitions. He was himself initiated in various Sufi orders. Yet, he upheld the Naqshbandi order with greater emphasis and those within it stressed the abandonment of superstitious traditions and practices, as well as any kind of mediation. The order vehemently criticized whatever could violate the unity of God.²⁴

Early Reformist Approaches

This general focus on individual responsibility and the efforts by Shah Waliullah and the Naqshbandi Sufi order to cleanse Islam of superstitious practices threatening God's unity, were two important factors impacting the early thought of Khan, whose family was tied to both tendencies. As has been discussed, one of his grandfather's brothers was himself a *ḥalīfah* of the Naqshbandi order. Both his parents were initiated in this order, while the close connection of his family with Shah Abd al-Aziz – the son of Shah Waliullah who took up the Madrasa and continued his father's legacy – is of equal importance.²⁵

Apart from this, Troll highlights a third significant influence on Khan's early religious thought: the *Tariqah-i Muhammadiyah* (*ṭarīqah-i Muḥammadiyāh*), founded in the early 19th century by Sayyid Ahmad Barelwi, emerged in the context of this "fundamentalist" approach, developing, however, in a *jihād*-movement against the Sikhs of the Punjab. Preceding this militarisation, Muhammad Ismail, grandson of Shah Waliullah, penned several influential religious pamphlets. Their importance is related to their shift in language from Persian towards Urdu in order to reach a broader audience.²⁶

Chapter 1 of this study therefore aims to locate Khan's early religious thought within this background. He had been writing several tracts on various topics, among them historical studies on scientific matters as well as a few religious pamphlets. With the exception of his study of the historical sights of Delhi, his *Āṣār*

23 Malik: *Islam in South Asia*, 201.

24 Margrit Pernau: *Ashraf into Middle Classes: Muslims in Nineteenth-Century Delhi* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2013), 39-41.

25 Troll: Sayyid Ahmad Khan, 30f.

26 *Ibid.*, 30, 35f.

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aṣ-ṣanadīd (1846), these texts have been almost entirely ignored in academic studies. Troll is an exception and concisely discusses a selection of the early religious texts, but lacks, however, any thorough study of their implications or connections relating them with Khan's later thought. This lack of interest in his early thought subsequently reinforces the assertion of a radical break in his philosophy. In discussing and locating these early texts, this chapter aims at laying a sound foundation on which to juxtapose these writings with later developments in his thought and evaluate the continuities and discontinuities. As it stands, the disinterest in his background and early thought combined with a focus on his later thought may have culminated in the assertion of a radical break and, accordingly, of a "Westernisation" of his philosophy, as continuities are not taken into account.

One ancillary aim of this chapter will be to excavate Khan's localisation in Sufi doctrine and its potential continuity in later developmental stages. It should be noted here that Troll remarks in a footnote on the desideratum of considering potential dependencies on Sufi theology in Khan's later thought:

Is it far-fetched to think that Sayyid Ahmad Khan's insistence on an inductive approach to prove the existence of God on the pattern of the empirical method of the sciences, was facilitated by his appreciation of the experiential side of religion, due to his early contact with Sufism (mainly in the specific form of the Naqshbandī Mujaddidī tradition)? In any case, the question of a possible link between the 'rationalism' and 'scientism' of Muslim modernists, and their contact with the Sufi heritage in practice and thought merits a close enquiry.²⁷

In the course of the following chapters, the question of to what extent Khan shows continuities from his early background shall be continuously addressed. Where applicable, dependencies on Sufi thought shall be highlighted.

Encountering Europe

While Khan's early religious tracts merely engage in an inner-Islamic debate, Chapter 2 discusses the widening of his perspective in encounters with the Christian mission. The Christian mission in South Asia focused initially on Hindus, while their attention shifted only gradually to Muslims in South Asia in the 1830s. An important role was played by the German missionary Karl Gottlieb Pfander (1803-1865). Due to his missionary training, he was proficient in Arabic and later

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 221.

acquired other Muslim languages, as well, among them being Persian and Urdu. This language proficiency allowed him to base his argument on the Quran and, what is more, present it in Urdu, thus potentially obtaining a broad readership. This meant a formerly unknown and, accordingly, threatening attack on Islam which triggered unrest among the religious scholars in the 1840s when Pfander published his *Mīzān al-Ḥaqq* in 1841 in Agra. The controversy eventually resulted in a debate between Pfander and Rahmatullah Kairanawi, who, on his side, presented an equally percussive argument. The outcome was perceived as a victory of the Muslims over the missionaries, which meant an abrupt end to this encounter.

Khan, however, revived this debate in writing a commentary (albeit an uncompleted one) on the Bible (1862-64), which has often been interpreted as an attempted rapprochement between Muslims and the British, for the British first and foremost recognised Muslims as responsible for the rebellion of 1857. The crushing of the rebellion culminated eventually in the abandonment of the Mughal reign, which had remained merely symbolic. The *Mutiny* implied a distrust felt towards Muslims. Already in 1859, Khan set out to write his famous *Asbāb-i baḡāvat-i Hind* (The Causes of the Indian Revolt), wherein he argues that the rebellion must not be misunderstood as having been initiated by Muslims as a community. Furthermore, he aims to refute that Islam inherently incites disobedience against British rule. Perhaps with this obvious attempt of rapprochement in mind, his commentary was hastily perceived as another effort in this vein. Yet, those assertions ignored that Khan had engaged already, since 1855, in countering missionary critique, although his commentary was planned only after 1857.²⁸

Chapter 2 shall discuss to what extent it is reasonable to describe Khan's commentary on the Bible as a mere attempt of rapprochement meant to familiarise Muslims with Christian doctrine. His commentary will be juxtaposed against Pfander's *Mīzān* in order to evaluate whether or not the commentary should be read as an adaptation of Pfander's approach of arguing on the basis of an opponent's sources for one's own purpose.

The second part of this block consists of two chapters on historiography which discuss the constructivist character of history. Chapter 3 follows up on Chapter 1 as a discussion of the change in Khan's conception of history due to his encounter with William Muir's *The Life of Mahomet* (1858-61). When Khan first read Muir's biography, he felt urged to write a response, as he deemed this text to be misleading young Muslims.²⁹ It will be argued that Muir, being requested by Pfander to write a biography of Muhammad based on material which is acknowledged by Muslims, took up an approach to history that was much reminiscent of Khan's

28 Ibid., 69f.

29 Ibid., 113, 127.

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early religious writings and early reformist tendencies in general. They shared the assumption that Islam as practiced in the lifetime of Muhammad served as a crucial point of reference, while the latter's life and deeds obtained the role of an embodied manifestation of Islam. Yet, Muir differs with regard to his historiographical approach, developing a catalogue of critically examined and evaluated sources. Furthermore, Muir studies Muhammad as a mere human being, denying his prophetic character. He thus disregards the Quran's status as a divine message, viewing it as merely human word. As a result of his study, Muir criticised Islam for reinforcing the evils of former times such as polygamy and the oppression of critical thinking. Hence, Muir comes to the conclusion that, due to Muslims' verbatim belief in the Quran, Islam has a monolithic character which prevents any advance or reform.

With this critique in mind, Khan set out to write a rebutting biography of Muhammad which is characterised by its structural analogy modelled on Muir's text. While this is commonly described as the point of departure for Khan's examination and integration of European thought, this chapter aims at demonstrating crucial continuities with his earlier writings, perhaps veiled by its resemblance to Muir's equally golden-age-view of history. The chapter will examine how much this encounter with Muir affected an adaptation in Khan's approach in order to counter this critique. It asks: to what extent does this mirror the latter's view of Islam?

This question will be further discussed in Chapter 4 by means of the example of Khwaja Altaf Husain Hali's (1837-1914) famous *Musaddas* (1879), which bemoans the decay of Muslim culture, and Ameer Ali's *The Spirit of Islam* (in its first edition [1873] titled *A Critical Examination of the Life and Teachings of Mohammed*). I will present these two approaches to the history of Islam and its conception. Chapter 4 asks: how did the critique of Islam on behalf of the Christian mission and European orientalism inform Islam's response? Hali attempts to reverse this critique by projecting its negative on "original" Islam, which has been abandoned by Muslims, thus culminating in their devastating situation. All criticised aspects are rejected with reference to "original" Islam. On the other hand, Ameer Ali takes a different path and conversely turns to criticising European critique as based on an insufficient point of reference, assuming an incompleteness of Christianity. Ali views Islam not with regard to Europe or Christianity, but rather as a self-explanatory entity.

Science

The second half of the 19th century in South Asia shows a significant discursive shift, with science emerging as the most influential and legitimating point of reference. The situation changes from that of an inter-religious encounter between particular religions, elevating the dispute to a clash between science and religion in general. The latter has to prevail against the charge of superstition and far-fetched metaphysical claims on behalf of religion. From the 1870s onwards, Khan began to participate in this discussion intensively. Scholars have described the texts Khan published from this period until his death as being those of his most influential and innovative phase. The majority of prior academic studies on Khan have been restricted to these later texts, taking them to be his sole perspective. Khan utilised his newly established journal *Tahzīb al-aḥlāq* to disseminate his ideas. From 1880 onwards until his death, Khan published his albeit uncompleted commentary on the Quran, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*. These publications are part of his greater project to prove the conformity of Islam with science.

Chapter 5 will then discuss Khan's attempt to bypass the difficulty of the mutually incommensurable truth-claims of the inter-religious perspective, which also appeared implicitly in Ameer Ali's denial to accept an external point of reference for his vision of Islam. Khan, however, takes this thought a step further and aims at establishing reason – and this implicitly also indicates science – as an overarching *tertium comparationis* among the incommensurable truth-claims. The religion proving to be in conformity with reason will be recognised as the single true one. Khan here introduces a distinction between the Work and the Word of God as nature and His message – both, however, being God's creation. Khan denies their mutual contradiction as impossible. Thus, he sets out to prove that apparent contradictions in the Quran are mere misinterpretations built by human perception. While this approach grasps the thesis of a conflict between science and religion from the angle of Islam being reformulated from a new perspective, Shibli Nomani (1857-1914) takes a different path. Chapter 6 discusses his attempt to integrate science as an inherent aspect of Islam, claiming that, in fact, Islam was the crucial catalyst allowing for the development of ancient Greek philosophy into modern science.

In Chapter 7, I will examine both Khan's and Shibli's conceptions of science. I will attempt to infer their epistemological understandings from their writings – a topic only inherently touched upon by either of them. Yet, this permits us to question their inherent claim of science serving as a stable point of reference. In fact, both rather re-inscribe science into an Islamic conceptual framework. It appears to

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be the case here that universal concepts like science and religion are swept up in the maelstrom of translation.

Sedimentation

The last block, consisting only of Chapter 8, will examine an internal encounter within the sphere of the Aligarh Movement. While Khan's theses evoked several reactions, these being as fierce as *fatwas* declaring him an unbeliever (*kāfir*), this chapter focusses only on Nazir Ahmad's (1830-1912) view and his reinterpretation of Khan's thought. Ahmad, famous first of all for his novels in Urdu, is frequently and too hastily described either as a mere simulacrum of Khan in the literary sphere or as his antagonist. Both perspectives favour a black and white view of Ahmad. Furthermore, his explicitly religious tracts have been greatly ignored so far, reducing him to his creative phase as a novelist.

Ahmad criticises Khan's view of Islam as too mechanistic and tries to bring back the latter's engagement with the conflict of science and religion on a more human basis. While Khan tried to combine reason and religion under a shared umbrella, Ahmad emphasises their strict distinction and argues for a "re-mystification" of Khan's disenchanted Islam. Reason is vehemently denied access to the sphere of religion. Still, Ahmad bases his thought on a clearly analogous approach to Khan's even using corresponding terminology to some extent. The latter's thought, which was a response to European critique, had become incorporated as an integral part of Islamic discourse upon which Ahmad could base his argument. This chapter shall therefore scrutinise the sedimentation and concealment of formerly contested ideas which came to obtain an intrinsic character.

Ahmad, however, also developed a very individualistic approach to religion, denying *any* kind of mediation, and going so far that even consulting another person about the meaning of a Quranic verse was criticised. This not only implies difficulties regarding the identificatory aspect of Islam, but also allows us to draw conclusions about the general context of 19th century South Asia, which was characterised by a strained atmosphere of religious debate both from within Islam as well as from other religions such as the Christian mission or Hindu reformist movements like the Arya Samaj.

South Asia – A Religious Continuum

In particular, the last quarter of the 19th century in South Asia was characterised by the emergence of several reformist movements in the Islamic sphere, which shaped the religious discourse up to that point. These movements argued about the appropriate answer to the aforementioned confrontations with the Christian mission, science, and, in general, the undeniable loss of Muslim power and its implications for the maintenance of an Islamic outlook for a Muslim society no longer backed up by the administrative structure of Muslim reign. Apart from inner-Islamic debates, the Christian mission had already, early in the 19th century, evoked fierce debates with Muslims, the aforementioned dispute with Pfander being the most prominent example. Yet, one aspect has been entirely ignored thus far: Hinduism.

Since Islam's arrival, South Asia has been a place of religious contact and exchange, with strict borders coming to be emphasised no earlier than the 18th and particularly the 19th century. As Pernau writes:³⁰

Boundaries were drawn and defended more resolutely from the eighteenth century onwards, partly as a result of reformist movement within Islam, but also through its counterpart in Hinduism. It should not, and indeed cannot, be denied that colonial rule played a fateful role in bolstering these tendencies, particularly in the second half of the nineteenth century. On the other hand, the break between the eighteenth and nineteenth century should not be overemphasized. [...] The process of dissociation from other religious communities was already underway.³¹

While the preceding centuries in part saw a lively exchange between Islam and Hinduism, reformist tendencies in Islam in the early 19th century began to describe superstitious practices such as excessive saint and grave veneration as influences from Hinduism.³² But, in particular, the strained atmosphere of religious debate

30 Pernau, *Ashraf into Middle Classes*, 48-51; Barbara Daly Metcalf: "The Taqwiyat al-Iman (Support of the Faith) by Shah Isma'il Shahid," in *Islam in South Asia in Practice*, ed. Barbara Daly Metcalf (Princeton University Press), 2009, 205.

31 Pernau, *Ashraf into Middle Classes*, 46.

32 Bergunder, for example, describes flourishing relations between Sufism and Nath Yogis: their shared emphasis on monism allowed them to view one another's tradition as a commensurable doctrine. Equally worth noting, Richard Eaton attributes the reference of Sufis in the Deccan region to Hindu terminology used to introduce new converts to Islam to its basic doctrines. Tony K. Stewart, too, presents a reminiscent phenomenon in pre-colonial Bengali texts denying any unequivocal identification and ascription to the categories of Hinduism or Muslim. Cf. Michael Bergunder: "Religionsvergleich in der nordindi-

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extended also to a conflict between Hindu and Muslim reformist movements. The extensive operations of the Arya Samaj in the Punjab, focusing on the “re-conversion” of Muslims, was perceived as a serious threat.

With this in mind, the refusal to reference parallel developments in Hindu reformist thought on behalf of the writers of the Aligarh circle appears to be reasonable: in the material discussed in this study, Hinduism virtually does not exist, and there are only a very few instances referring to Hindus, while any discussion of doctrinal aspects could not be found. Although explicit references cannot be observed, still significant analogous ideas in Hindu reformist thought can be perceived in the texts discussed in this study. Another overarching aim of this study is thus to present those parallels. Such parallels should not be overstressed, however, and must remain speculative because of their lack of demonstrability.

schen Nirguna-Bhakti des 15. bis 17. Jahrhunderts? Die Sant-Tradition und ihre Vorstellung von ‘Hindus’ und ‘Hindus’,” in *Religion in Asien? Studien zur Anwendbarkeit des Religionsbegriffs*, ed. Peter Schalk (Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet, 2013), 43–80; Richard M. Eaton *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier: 1204-1760* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Tony K Stewart: “In Search of Equivalence: Conceiving Muslim-Hindu Encounter Through Translation Theory,” *History of Religions* 40, no. 3 (2001): 260–87.