

Conclusion

This study has been introduced with the question of “What is religion?” I do not, however, provide a definition of religion, nor did I intend to do so. It was not the aim of this book to present an unequivocal definition. It was rather to depict the varying and shifting applications of this concept in the context of 19th and early 20th century South Asia. This time period has been chosen deliberately for its intensifying contact between the British coloniser and the Indian colonised. Due to the power imbalance in this relationship, it has oftentimes assumed a dominant European, and particularly Protestant, concept of religion which “travelled” from Europe not only to South Asia but also spread on a global level:

An abstract and universal concept of religion is a product of European, in particular, Protestant intellectuals of the 19th century. [...] This concept of religion immigrated to other cultural worlds [...].¹

Thus, one central concern of this study was to question and further qualify this assertion. For, can there really be assumed a dissemination of a “Western” concept of religion?

Uniformisation

In his *Die Verwandlung der Welt*, Jürgen Osterhammel argues that the Protestant, European concept of religion has frequently been applied as a prototype for presenting one’s own tradition in a similar vein. Since Islam already applied to many of the criteria outlined within this concept of religion, Muslims rather had to face another accompanying development: the emphasis on macro-categories which implied a process of uniformization. European orientalist put forward large categories of standardised religions like Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam. Those categories were adopted by representatives of the particular tradition, implying a unified

¹ Jürgen Osterhammel: *Die Verwandlung der Welt: Eine Geschichte des 19. Jahrhunderts* (München: C.H. Beck, 2010), 1241f.

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representation of traditions which were formerly not or only loosely perceived as a unity.

In South Asia, several factors – including the Christian mission, orientalism, historiography, and science – compelled Muslims to take a stand in these contexts. The 19th century in South Asia is thus characterised by the formation of various reform movements with varying responses to these challenges, oscillating from mere refusal to engage in these debates to an intensive engagement and attempt to make those new developments comply with an Islamic framework. In this study, I have focussed on the Aligarh movement – not as a rejection of the importance of rather traditionalist movements but for its explicit and active participation in this discourse and effort of creating a mutual commensurability. Other movements, like the Deobandis, Barelwis, or Ahl-i Hadith, rather aimed at preserving different tendencies of South Asian Islam as far as possible, without however being entirely able to ignore these developments. Yet, the question of how far other movements with a rather rejective stance and concept of religion have been affected by the confrontation with the aforementioned challenges but also and much more with the Aligarh movement deserves a study of its own.

The work of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan, founder of the Aligarh movement, mirrors a long process of negotiating the relationship of his conception of Islam to other belief systems under an overarching concept of religion. His contact with the Christian mission, orientalist critique, and eventually science triggered significant changes in this regard. In this study, the aim has been to trace these developments back to their particular triggering moment in order to scrutinise to what extent this confrontation, with its different understandings of religion, informed the authors' presentation of Islam and to what extent these responses can be described as unique contributions or mere adoptions. Khan's works is outstanding, insofar as it allows him to depict the different threads of debate compelling him to change his stance.

Constructing Orthodox Islam

The present study was introduced with a focus on Khan's early writings of the 1840s and 1850s in their context of early reformist approaches. Three significant influences have been determined albeit with parallel intentions and simultaneously mutual entanglements. On the one hand, Khan's family background provided him

a strong tie with Sufism, in particular the Naqshbandi order and its reformist efforts to counter superstitious practices and an excessive saint and *pīr* veneration, violating the unity of God. But his family was also related to the family of Shah Waliullah, whose work proved to be influential for Khan. Yet, the most significant influence on Khan's early texts was perhaps the *Tariqah-i Muhammadiyah* with its restorative approach to history arguing for a verbatim maintenance of the *sunnat* of Muhammad. These influences crucially shaped Khan's early religious writings, which were limited to a merely inner-Islamic discourse.²

In his later reviews of these texts, Khan himself termed this phase his period of "Wahhabi" thought. As has been argued repeatedly in this study, the term "Wahhabism" is highly problematic: it has been applied by British officials as an umbrella term for reformist tendencies criticising the *taqlīd* of the juridical schools of Islam as well as emphasising a reliance upon the *ḥadīṣ*-tradition as a crucial source for the life and personality of Muhammad. The latter came to be stressed as the ultimate role model to be imitated. Yet, the denomination of South Asian tendencies like Shah Waliullah or the *Tariqah-i Muhammadiyah* as "Wahhabis" implies an equation with the Wahhabi tendencies of the Arabian Peninsula, which writes Sufism out of this discourse. It cannot, however, be denied that the reliance on Sufi thought was a significant characteristic in Shah Waliullah's approach, as he particularly aimed for a conciliation of Sufism and the legal tradition of Islam – an effort to be referred to equally in the *Tariqah-i Muhammadiyah*, Khan's early writings, and to some extent even by early Ahl-i Hadis members. Thus, Khan argues in his *Kalimat al-ḥaqq* that Muhammad is the sole *pīr*, with *shariat* and his *sunnat* being the only elements of guidance on one's path to God. Khan does not negate Sufi thought here, nor the aim of reaching God in this world, but rather aims to reintegrate Sufism into the exoteric sphere of Islam by fusing *shariat* with *ṭarīqat*, legal Islam with Sufism as mutually synonymous.³ These aspects seem to have been ignored in the British designation of "Wahhabi."

Jamal Malik notices an entanglement between representatives of this early reformist thought and the European perception of Islam: those representatives, among them Shah Abdul Aziz, significantly shaped the European view of Islam. Social grievances bemoaned and criticised by Muslim reformists were adopted and resulted in a "traditionalization" ("Tradionalisierung") of South Asia.⁴ Two

2 Falāḥī: *Sar Sayyid kā dīnī šu 'ūr*, 25.

3 Hermansen, "Wahhabis, Fakirs and Others," 32.

4 Jamal Malik: *Islamische Gelehrtenkultur in Nordindien: Entwicklungsgeschichte und Tendenzen am Beispiel von Lucknow* (Leiden, Köln: Brill, 1997), 196f. "Die 'Tradionalisierung' Indiens war Ergebnis sowohl der wissenschaftlichen Beschäftigung mit der neu-

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examples of this shift have also been discussed in the present study with Ernest Renan and William Muir, both personally favouring “Wahhabi” tendencies, as well as a point of reference to define “orthodox” Islam.⁵ Yet, as indicated through the equation with the Wahhabi thought of the Arabian Peninsula, Sufi aspects of those alleged South Asian equivalents were overlooked in their construction of an orthodox Islam.⁶

In her article, “Wahhabis, Fakirs and Others,” Marcia Hermansen notes the construction of a bifurcation between Sufism and *shariat*-based Islam within British characterisations of South Asian Islam in the 18th and early 19th centuries. Sufis came to be perceived as “freethinkers who had little to do with the stern faith of the Arabian Prophet.”⁷ Sufism was thus generally viewed as standing outside of the system of *shariat* (*be-šar*’).⁸ Hermansen argues that this development was also gradually mirrored in Muslim discourse:

[I]t is clear that *tariqa* and *shari*’a categories are simultaneously operational within terms of the Indian Muwahhidun movement, whereas in subsequent movements which incorporate the Wahhabi category into British and Indian Muslim discourse, the *tariqa* element increasingly drops out. [...] The reformists increasingly identify Sufism with “popular” religion and “superstition.”⁹

Hermansen thus argues that, initially, Sufism and *shariat* were not perceived as conflicting, but as separate systems which were not mixed up in argumentation. Nevertheless, later reformists gradually came to view Sufism more critically as being exclusive of “orthodox” Islam – which was to some extent a result of adopting the British preference of “Wahhabism” in its Arabian notion, according to Hermansen. Sufism loses its legitimacy as authoritative knowledge, while, on the

entdeckten Region als auch der Rezeption, ja *bis zu einem gewissen Grade sogar der Übernahme des Gedankengutes indischer Pietisten*” (Malik: *Islamische Gelehrtenkultur in Nordindien*, 197; Italics added).

5 Schäbler, Birgit: *Moderne Muslime*: 31f.; Powell: *Scottish Orientalists*, 166.

6 The neglect of Sufi aspects seems to have been indicated also for Indians with the term “Wahhabi,” as Hermansen argues: “The *bad nāmī* or defamatory connotation of the term ‘Wahhabi’ however, works both in British and Indian Muslim systems. For the British, because Wahhabis are fanatic and *bad khwah* (disloyal and seditious), for the Indian Hanafi Muslims Wahhabis follow only the legal school of Ibn Hanbal and reject the mediation of the saints and the Prophet [...]” (Hermansen, “Wahhabis, Fakirs and Others,” 33). This, however, seems to be a development only in the second half of the 19th century.

7 Hermansen, “Wahhabis, Fakirs and Others,” 36f.

8 Ibid., 38f.

9 Ibid., 45.

other hand, text-based Islam recurring to the Quran and *hadīṣ* acquires the position of “orthodox” Islam in the British perspective.¹⁰

This also seems to correspond with a general tendency of a “victory of more orthodox forms of belief,” as Bayly argues in his *The Birth of a Modern World*. We can observe this tendency in the work of all the authors discussed in this study, and can describe it as a general implication of the effort to uniform one’s religion. But in contrast to Bayly who argues that former sectarian conflicts were not resolved but rather reinforced as a result of the “print revolution,” outright pamphlet and newspaper wars occurred between different sects.¹¹ In this respect, however, the authors of the Aligarh-circle apparently took a rather inclusivist position. Khan shifted from his early writings of a merely inner-Islamic perspective towards the representation of a unified Islam with sectarian discrepancies being omitted. What is more, Amir Ali stands out by leaving behind his Shia background and presenting a history of Islam which attempts to be neutral particularly with regard to those discrepancies whereupon sectarian conflicts were based. In a similar vein, Nazir Ahmad, too, vehemently argued against any kind of religious debate and, furthermore, declared sectarian conflicts as irrelevant to contemporary times. In this regard, one can observe a process of abstraction which tries to conceal minor sectarian discrepancies in ritual practices and historical events for the benefit of presenting a unified Islam. This approach results, however, in an interpretation of Islam that largely ignores the discussion of practical and ritual issues.¹²

Sufism Behind the Veil

This construction of an “orthodox” Islam and an exclusion of Sufism from this realm seems to have had its effect also on Khan. While his early writings show a strong recurrence to Sufi thought, this is apparently not followed up in his later texts, as Troll argues.¹³ In fact, Khan’s explicit references to Sufi thought are very rare, if non-existent. Yet, an analysis of his sources – among them first of all Shah

10 Ibid., 45, 47.

11 Christopher Alan Bayly: *The Birth of a Modern World: 1780-1914, Global Connections and Comparisons* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 335-339; cf. also Osterhammel: *Die Verwandlung der Welt*, 1260.

12 Nazir Ahmad is a great exception in this regard, as he also penned the voluminous *Al-Huqūq va al-farāʿ*, a manual of Muslim jurisprudence. This, however, appeared as an obvious contradiction to his refusal to take a position in debates on sectarian discrepancies.

13 Troll: *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 220f.

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Waliullah and al-Ghazali – shows that this assertion requires closer examination. We have seen that Khan describes his understanding of *dīn* as an abstract and eternal type of religion which found its expressions in the various prophetic revelations, Muhammad's being the last and universal one. This conception of *dīn* shows crucial parallels with the Sufi idea of Muhammad's light (*nūr-i Muḥammadī*): Muhammad's pre-existence in the form of light is assumed while all prophets preceding him are perceived as a particular, time-bound expression of this light. In Khan's *dīn*, this eternal message is detached from the person of Muhammad and extrapolated as universal religion – this being an interpretation, however, which is not explicitly uttered by Khan.

In a similar vein, this point can also be transferred to Khan's understanding of the Quran going back to his *A Series of Essays on the Life of Muhammad and Subjects Subsidiary Thereto*: here he argues for a forward-thinking view of history, allowing for a contextualisation and historicisation of the Quran which is perceived rather as a particular manifestation of its inherent universal principles. He argues for a continuous reinterpretation by adapting Quranic principles to a particular context. The Quran thus comes to be perceived as a context-related manifestation of the eternal message of *dīn*. One could perhaps, however, also recognise Khan's view as dependent on a recognition of the Quran as being a mere manifestation of the uncreated message of the original, heavenly Quran (*umm al-kitāb*). Again, any explicit reference by Khan on this matter could not be identified.

The last parallel to Sufi thought pertains to Khan's conception of *fiṭrat*. With human nature, man is bestowed with a direct link to God, enabling him to naturally acknowledge God's existence. The human aspect of Khan's *fiṭrat* resembles Sufi conceptions of the human soul (*rūḥ*) being linked directly with God, which thus enables immediate knowledge or insight. By contrast, Khan subsumes outer nature as *natura naturans* in his *fiṭrat*, too. Thus, nature comes to be perceived as a reflection of God, as it shows resemblance in the doctrine of *vaḥdat al-vujūd* as well as *vaḥdat aš-šuhūd* with varying nuances. Furthermore, nature allows for the inference of knowledge about God in Khan's conception. The merely top-down reflection of God in nature is extended to a bottom-up access to knowledge through this mirroring relation.

In addition, Sufi concepts still showed a significant impact on Khan's development of his later thought as well. Nevertheless, the above-mentioned process of excluding Sufism in European understandings of "orthodox" Islam apparently shaped Khan's representation of Islam, as well. Since his representation was partially designed as a direct response to European critique of Islam, he must have felt compelled to formulate his thought in a way that would be acceptable to this

view. The most prominent example of this would be his response to the aforementioned Muir, who strongly favoured “Wahhabi” tendencies as a reference for “orthodox” Islam. Nevertheless, Khan, whose background and early thought was so immersed in Sufi thought, did not abandon this framework, but rather concealed it by detaching unequivocally Sufi tags and integrating it into a rationalistic framework. Concepts are renamed (e.g. *fiṭrat* instead of *rūḥ*) or abstracted (e.g. *dīn* instead of *nūr-i Muḥammadī*) and explicit references are avoided.

Westernisation & a Radical Break

This discussion directly relates to the assertion of a radical break in Khan’s thought in the aftermath of the uprising of 1857. This thesis is inextricably linked with the charge of “Westernisation” made against Khan and the Aligarh circle in general. In juxtaposing Khan’s early writings with his later thought, I have argued that, contrary to the charge of “Westernisation,” Khan’s thought showed more continuities than direct adoptions from “European” thought. His veiled maintenance of Sufi concepts is only one aspect of this predominating continuity. On the particular example of his conception of history, it could be shown that Muir’s historical understanding in his biography *The Life of Mahomet* instead resembles early Muslim reformist approaches to history. Khan’s response to Muir, however, rather rearranges existing discourses in order to refute Muir’s critique in a vein consistent with the latter’s framework. To describe Khan’s engagement with Muir’s approach as a mere adoption would, thus, be unreasonable.

In his *Essays*, Khan maintains a generally restorative approach towards the origin of Islam, as can be found in his early writings as well as in Muir: both recognise the “origin” as a shelter of an irretrievable point of reference in history – namely, early Islam as lived in the days of Muhammad as the expression of unadulterated Islam. The progress of time, however, resulted inevitably in a loss and decay of this golden age. Thus, only the “origin” can reveal the essence of Islam. In his *Essays*, Khan resorts to this essential Islam, too. Yet, stimulated by Muir’s critique of Islam as an ossified entity incapable of reform, Khan rearranges Muir’s discourses in order to view this essence of Islam as a rather flexible one: the Quran comes to be historicised and contextualised, while its eternal principles must be revealed by detaching its understanding from fossilised, human interpretations. Thus, Khan’s view significantly exceeds Muir’s approach, as his work can be located more so in concurrency with early reformist thought. In fact, Muir is rather

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accorded the role of a triggering point evoking a rearrangement and reinterpretation of already existing discourses. “Western” thought, therefore, cannot be reasonably argued to inhere such a crucial position as is implied by the charge of “Westernisation.” It would be a strong exaggeration to dismiss Khan’s thought as a mere “aping of the West.”¹⁴ The contact with European critique rather triggered a process of negotiation wherein present concepts were rearranged and reinterpreted in order to fit into a new context. This context, however, is considerably predefined through the framework of the critique.

In his *Die Verwandlung der Welt*, Osterhammel describes this phenomenon of European critique as “historicisation” (Historisierung), which confronted Indian religious traditions with serious challenges, as had been seen in Bible criticism. Religious traditions had to take a stand with regard to the assertion of history and temporality implicating a distanced stance towards sacred texts. This development did not remain confined to the Bible and Christianity, but was applied to other traditions and sacred texts, which was frequently recognised as a challenge of desecularisation.¹⁵ As we have seen in the example of Khan, this challenge was responded to on the same grounds by extrapolating one’s own tradition and examining it from an external position. This allowed for an abstraction and reformulation of the sacred texts with regard to their temporality and their interpretation for contemporary times. Reading texts as documents of their particular time, apparently deprived them of their universality in the first instance. The universality is, however, restored in a dynamic reading transferring an abstracted message into the contemporary context.

In a similar vein, Altaf Husain Hali’s, as well as Ameer Ali’s, historical reinterpretations of how “original” Islam has to be understood is crucially predefined by prior European critique, which they aim to refute. Hali, however, tried to construct his “original” Islam in complete accordance with this critique, presenting the entirety of the criticised elements as deviations from “original” Islam. On the other hand, Ameer Ali reverses the critique to a positive in disclaiming the critic’s point of view – that is, that Christianity is deficient and, hence, inappropriate. Still, he cannot evade the elevation of the critic’s perspective to the crucial point of reference, as his reversal cannot bypass its referential character and remains dependent on it as a negative projection.

14 Habib: “Reconciling Science with Islam,” 53.

15 Osterhammel: *Die Verwandlung der Welt*, 1273f.

Translating Science

In a similar vein, Muslim reformist authors have responded to the confrontation with science, which has dominated the scene of debate at least since the 1870s. The thesis of a conflict between science and religion confronted not only Islam but religion in general. Khan aimed to tackle this debate through a reinterpretation of Islam that, for one, emphasised a relation of conformity between the Work and the Word of God. Both were perceived to be encompassed under the umbrella category of *dīn*, thus inherently excluding any potential conflict. If there should appear any such apparent inconsistency, Khan argues, this has to be traced to human misinterpretation of the Word of God.

Shibli Nomani, on the other hand, emphasised the necessity of distinguishing between reason and religion in separate spheres which treat rather unrelated questions. While science pertains to questions of nature, religion engages in moral issues. Still, Shibli, too, does not leave the charge of a conflict undiscussed and aims for a historical integration of science into the sphere of Islam. He argues that Muslim philosophy was the main catalyst for the development of modern science and had always been a crucial part of Islam – or at least that no conflict had ever been perceived: their relation nonetheless remains obscure in his texts.

Khan's and Shibli's approaches seem to differ tremendously at first glance. While Khan presents Islam from the perspective of science and reinterprets the Quran and Islamic concepts accordingly, Shibli argues rather from the perspective of Islam, denying reason and science such a crucial role. Instead, the European conception of science requires revision in order to acknowledge Islam's/Muslims' central role in its development. Yet, Shibli, too, is compelled to revise his view of Islam, but through a backdoor approach. For, in acknowledging the distinction of science and religion as separate spheres, as proposed by the conflict thesis, he also acknowledges them as mutually related counter-concepts. Thus, Islam is reinterpreted in distinction to science – an assertion which Shibli finds to be a natural distinction, backed up by the Quran.

A scrutiny of both Khan's and Shibli's conceptions of science and reason reveals further intriguing insights about the negotiation and translation of concepts, as their responses to science and reason were rather based on previously existing discourses: the confrontation with science was rather re-translated in terms of the conflict with Greek philosophy, which resulted in the development of *'ilm al-kalām*, a Muslim theological framework based to a great extent on Greek philosophy. Their equation of these confrontations already becomes obvious from both of their demands to develop a new *'ilm al-kalām*.

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Science then comes to be identified with an experimental and empirical approach based on experience (*tajribah*) and observation (*mušāhadah*). Yet, the epistemology – allowing one to infer results from this empirical approach – is based on an Aristotelian type of reason, while their critique of the speculative Greek philosophy refers merely to the strawman argument of Plato and the assumption of pre-existing Forms. Both Shibli and Khan instead argue for an inductive approach to perception originating from matter. Yet, their induction proves to be merely pseudo-inductive, for reason is perceived as a universal faculty. Consequently, merely contingent insights can be argued as necessary ones – the most crucial being the acknowledgment of God as a rational insight. Science therefore comes to be translated in the discourse of *‘ilm al-kalām*.

Transforming Concepts

Returning to the initial question of “Westernisation” and, in more general terms, the question of whether religion is a Western concept which has been imposed on non-Western cultures, the present study rather presents a much more differentiated answer to this question. Muslim contact with the Christian mission, European orientalism, and eventually science had an undeniable impact on this process of negotiation. But the example of Khan, and the Aligarh circle in general, show that their responses were compelled to acknowledge the critique’s premises and even its conceptual framework to a certain extent. Nevertheless, the critique is translated into existent categories and responded to from within existing discourses, however rearranged and reinterpreted. These authors internalise European critique and integrate it into an existing Muslim framework which allows each to make sense of it. Hence, religion (and in the same way science) is translated and transformed, while the assertion of an imposed “Western” concept of religion becomes highly problematic, as it dismisses the innovative character of this process of negotiation.

Changes in religious contexts through colonialism and its subsequent asymmetry of power are mirrored in the Indian adaptation to the categories of the dominant discourse of the coloniser. Only this adaptation allowed for agency within this new context. One significant requirement is perhaps a tendency towards uniformization, the representation of Islam as a whole: while earlier reformist discourses engaged in intra-Islamic debates between different sects or tendencies, one significant parallel between the authors discussed in this study is that they aim to

speak for a unified Islam. Sectarian differences are negated and reduced to a deviation of the original Islam. Thus, Ameer Ali, who himself had a Shii background, reduces the spirit of Islam to a singularity in his historical presentation – the variety of sects is, in his description, framed as deviation. Likewise, Khan abandons his early approach that argues for a conformity between *shariat* and *ṭarīqat* and represents Islam as a whole in his later texts. Intra-Islamic distinctions are dropped as a result of encounters with Christian missionaries and orientalist critique, who in turn direct their critique against Islam as a whole and in its original manifestation. Thus, we can observe a shift from inner-Islamic and inter-sectarian debate towards inter-religious debate, which required Muslim reformists to argue on a macro-level with such uniform and abstracted categories as Islam, Christianity, Hinduism etc.

Participation in this new discourse necessitated the employment of commensurable categories, which, however, cannot be described as the adoption and dissemination of homogeneous concepts. Still, crucial premises, as for example a distinction of science and religion in different spheres, had to be acknowledged in order for the Muslim author to be appreciated as a participant of this discourse. As has been shown with the example of Nazir Ahmad, these contingent constellations which emerged only in a process of negotiation came to be sedimented as integral parts of the discourse of Islam. Thus, even today, these premises are mirrored in rather “orthodox” discourses of Islam: a distinction between the spheres of Islam and science is still acknowledged. Furthermore, as has been indicated in this study, even arguments of the Aligarh circle have been adopted and detached from their link to liberal Islam. Yet, such links to Aligarhian discourse and its re-integration into subsequent positions has so far not been examined in any detail and would require another full-length study.

