

BRITISH MUSLIM VOICES FROM THE AGE OF MODERNITY

Empowerment and the Subjectivity of the Self

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This study explores responses to Western modernity through the lens of prominent British and British South Asian Muslim thinkers and practitioners. It examines their evolving engagement with modernity, spanning from the era of empire to contemporary times, and critiques their religious and intellectual positions using a framework informed by Farzin Vahdat's model of human subjectivity in Muslim thought. This framework highlights the tensions between human subjectivity and divine authority, as well as those between Islamic modernity and democratic ideals. The study also incorporates insights from Postcolonial literature to better understand how South Asian diasporic writers in Britain engaged with the empowerment of the self and negotiate their identity within the context of

colonial legacies and the modern world. Through the analysis of six key figures, the article investigates the ways in which their ideas and practices, whether modernist or neo-traditionalist, have contributed to broader discussions about the empowerment of the self, faith, and the reconciliation of Islamic thought with modernity.

KEYWORDS: British Muslims, modernity, self, subjectivity, Farzin Vahdat, Agency

INTRODUCTION

In his study *Islamic Ethos and the Specter of Modernity*, Farzin Vahdat has proposed a model which he applies to ideas produced by Muslim thinkers as part of their engagement with the process of western modernity. The starting point is to employ a paradigm adopted by western thinkers in which Protestant Christianity beginning in western Europe in the seventeenth century is seen as a harbinger of modernity in the way it harnessed self-agency. A restructuring of human agency and subjectivity, it is argued, was initiated in western puritanism and later developed in liberal thought. In traditional religious thinking it was supposed that humans receive agency by performing God's injunctions, passively emptying themselves in obedience to His will while lacking a sense of the need to develop human subjectivity. In puritanism however, by aligning themselves with God and acting out His commands, human subjects could gain partial agency. This is designated as "mediated subjectivity". In this stage humans are still abandoning their own right of power and decision to God. Hegel "referred to this indirect and mediated subjectivity as Unhappy Consciousness".¹ However, it was a stage on the way to achieving full subjectivity and empowerment.



According to Vahdat the same approach can be observed in the thought of modern Muslim thinkers, where Muslims generally might be seen to belong amongst those seeking “subjectivity and agency...entail[ing] empowerment of those who have been historically denied power”.³ In a religious context, acquisition of modern subjectivity begins as mediated subjectivity in the Muslim world and develops by “a long process of *experience* that a critical mass of society needs to go through first hand”⁵ in order to bring about reform and activation of rights to the fore.

MODERN RELIGION AND THE EMPOWERMENT OF THE SELF

In stressing that this process of self-empowerment is applicable to modern Muslims, Vahdat invokes the “notion of humans as God’s vicegerent (*khalifah*) on earth”.⁷ According to this reading, the term *khalifah* (Qur’an 2:30) anticipates future development of the seeds of human subjectivity. Vahdat’s conception implies that such subjectivity is a necessary part of Muslim thinkers’ response to the trajectory of modernity and engagement with the West. At the same time Muslims work out a modern path according to their own agency which functions in different ways. However, as we shall see, Vahdat’s argument needs refining particularly with regard to its endorsement of the paramount role of western thought.

So far, Vahdat and other similarly aligned scholars of modern Islamic movements have focused on studying the ideas of significant authors belonging to the broad *ummah*. The Muslim authors I shall discuss come from an intersection of contexts in which a British as well as an Islamic dimension is formative. While figures like Muhammad Iqbal and Abul Ala Maududi as subjects of Britain’s empire in India allowed their experience of British rule to mediate their Muslim subjectivity in part, in the case of the South



Asian-born British domiciled figures I will be discussing, this experience is more amplified. As might be expected, we shall find for the indigenous British converts, a British subjectivity most fully intersects with a Muslim one. One of our main contentions is that a specific, complex hybridity emerges from the experience of the British Muslims. Given that colonialism plays a formative role in the experience of British Muslims (and British-Indian ones) an area of intercultural intersection is at play of a kind discussed by specialists working in the disciplines of cultural theory and discourse, and in comparable fields such as postcolonial history and literature.

Vahdat affirms: “The rise of social and political movements in the Islamic world in the past few decades is in many ways a response to the negative forces of modernity such as colonialism and the related problems of economic and political development. At the same time these movements are, in some way or another, faced with new ideas and institutions such as individual citizenship rights, political participation by the populace, gender equality, economic development and tolerance of difference.”⁹ Vahdat’s statement accentuates the disadvantages of colonialism first of all but then brings into play those aspects of the modern world that can be identified as positive enabling features, identified with the West though they might be. These are the advantageous components of subjectivity and agency. Vahdat’s assertion highlights the ambivalence that characterizes the encounter between Islamic societies and the forces of modernity, which have often been introduced through colonial imposition but carry with them certain concepts that are core to the differentiation between what is Islamic and what is not. He suggests that while colonialism has imposed economic, social, and political challenges, it has also, paradoxically, introduced frameworks like citizenship rights, political participation, gender equality, and tolerance – concepts closely aligned with individual agency and subjectivity. These ideals, despite originating from western paradigms, offer empow-



ering avenues for agency and self-determination, prompting a nuanced, complex relationship with modernity in the Islamic world. However, agency in Islamic thought is habitually conceptualised through the relationship between human-will and divine sovereignty. According to Fazlur Rahman, “Islam sees man as a responsible being who can exercise free choice, but within the framework of divine guidance”.¹¹ This framework stresses that individuals have the capacity of moral choice, which is central to accountability before God. Farid Esack also emphasises that Islamic agency includes “empowerment within the context of service to God, where freedom is balanced by responsibility to both God and society”.¹³ Thus, agency is both a personal and communal responsibility in Islam. Charles Tripp examines how Islamic social movements have negotiated ideas of modernity, often integrating western ideals with Islamic values to develop a model that supports individual agency while rejecting what they see as morally and culturally incompatible fundamentals. Tripp writes, “[t]he encounter with modernity has resulted in a hybrid discourse that allows for political mobilization while maintaining an authentic cultural identity”.¹⁵

Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr¹⁷ focuses on how Islamic movements attempt to resist western dominance while appropriating western principles which align with objectives of autonomy and political agency that correspond to Islamic frameworks. Such movements become what they are for two reasons. Firstly, their resistance to western hegemony is non-rejectionist, facilitating open dialogue with the forces of modernity; furthermore, such movements by being non-rejectionist allow for certain modes of agency to fight authoritarianism and empower their cultural and religious frameworks. For Nasr, by embracing concepts such as citizenship rights, political participation, and individual agency, Islamic movements reshape these western ideas to fit an Islamic worldview. Therefore, the question in this case becomes: how can Islamic movements maintain their religious identity while at the same time



negotiate with these forces of modernity? The answer resides in aligning both the concept of agency and Islamic values in broader modern frameworks. This creates a complexity of subjectivity and agency in cases such as that of British Muslim Ziauddin Sardar whose thinking is informed by postcolonial contexts. *Vahdat's* commentary encapsulates this tension, where colonialism and its negative forces impose challenges but also seed the possibility for empowerment through ideas that allow individuals to reclaim agency; that is to say, fighting the Empire by methods derived from its original force of agency.

Vahdat's selection of Muslim thinkers reflects an assertion of subjectivity empowering individuals and communities to reconfigure their social and political landscapes while resisting full assimilation into western models. It includes modernists, Islamists, and neo-traditionalists whose variety underscores the inherent duality of modernity in the Muslim world, one that destabilizes and empowers, challenging societies to redefine concepts of agency, equality, and citizenship within their unique contexts. *Vahdat* presents a carefully thought through argument mainly in favour of the activation of a range of thinkers, from the towering modernist Muhammad Iqbal, to notionally “fundamentalist” twentieth-century Islamist figures like Abul Ala Maududi and Sayyid Qutb, who he suggests in engaging in political reform activated their own agency as much as God's. The main aim in this article is therefore to apply *Vahdat's* analysis of the categories of human agency and subjectivity in order to scrutinise their applicability to select British Muslim voices.

In the first instant, before discussing how western formulations of Islam may through the British converts have been introduced and impacted on the Islamic community, it is essential to appreciate how their adoption of an Islamic perspective disrupted narrowly held British notions during the high noon of late imperialism. The focus is trained on the lives of six influential modern Muslims connected to Britain stretching from 1869 to the present day. It



commences with two native Indians from the colonial period: Syed Ahmad Khan (1817-1898), a benchmark reformer in British India who also visited Britain in 1869; and Syed Ameer Ali (1849-1928), an influential exponent of modernist Islamic axioms. The survey then moves on to scrutinise two ethnic British converts active as Muslims or engaged with the Muslim world from the 1880s to the mid-1930s: Abdullah William Quilliam (1856-1932) and Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall (1875-1936). Lastly, the spotlight falls on to two living figures, Pakistan-born British intellectual and ‘critical Muslim’, Ziauddin Sardar (b.1951) and “neo-traditionalist” Imam at the Cambridge Mosque, Abdul Hakim Murad (Tim Winter) (b.1960). First of all, it is useful to sketch very briefly the British context of colonial rule over the east to understand how a tiny group of Indians appropriated the beneficial attributes of modernity and applied them in significant measure to Islam.

SOME MUSLIM ENCOUNTERS IN THE AGE OF IMPERIALISM

As it consolidated its control over India in the later nineteenth-century, Britain’s empire began to attract the epithet “the great Muhammadan Power” on the principle that it was the first amongst empires with regard to ruling over large Muslim populations. These comprised in the main Muslim subjects of the Indian subcontinent. However, starting in 1882 British power exerted behind-the-scene control over the government of Egypt, where the influence of Sunni Islam’s pivotal al-Azhar seminary was situated. It was during this period (1899-1905) that the modernising Grand Mufti, Muhammad Abduh instituted reforms at Al-Azhar.¹⁹ By the time the Great War ended, Britain was poised to extend its indirect control across the Arabian Peninsula, where the twin holy shrines of Mecca and Medina were located. During this late period of British world power, missionary efforts facilitated by the aid



of its imperial reach spread out across the length and breadth of the Orient. In particular, Christian missionaries came into contact with huge swathes of non-Christian populations from the Middle East to China. Though they stayed outside of direct imperial sway, autochthonous countries like Persia and China were weak and unable to block European missionaries. In the Indian sub-continent the two numerically most important religious systems, Brahmanism and Islam, attracted the study of British scholars both in India and at home. In the east more generally, in their attitudes towards non-Christian religions, missionaries adopted the framing notions comprehended within the category of Orientalism. They responded to the supposed impenetrability of Shi'i Islam in Iran and Buddhist-Confucianism in China by implicating both the Iranian and Chinese peoples, and their religions, in recycled Orientalist paradigms which began as medieval Christian polemic. As scholar of Christian-Muslim relations Hugh Goddard puts it: Edward Said "made... only too clear...the extent to which Western scholars have sometimes reproduced uncritically or even reinforced older stereotypes and caricatures concerning Islam".²¹

As far as Islam was concerned, however, the reaction started in Agra in northern India when in the 1850s a Muslim theologian engaged in *mubahala* (public debates) with missionaries by employing modern techniques in Biblical criticism to wrong-foot his ill-prepared evangelical adversary.²³ Such a response, conducted within an atmosphere of gloves-off religious contestation, were indicative of how on one level, imperialism stimulated and gave new life to a section of the educated Muslim elite. Nevertheless, in spite of these examples of Muslim agency vis-à-vis the conquering westerner, and in spite of sporadic armed resistance, Muslim communities and societies, like other non-Muslim indigenous cultures and religious formations elsewhere, were subject to manifold humiliations and challenges at the hands of the coloniser and the modern modes of control he brought with him.



1. BRITAIN AND INDIAN ISLAMIC MODERNISM – SYED AHMAD KHAN

The issue of how India's Muslims should respond to British politico-cultural ascendancy became a focal point of early Islamic modernism. Syed Ahmad Khan, an aristocrat who repudiated the uprising/rebellion of 1857 and who after his visit to London in 1869 in the cause of Muslim empowerment enthusiastically advocated wholesale adoption of the advances of Victorian society, made education the major plank of his platform of reform. He was scathing concerning the backwardness of Indian, especially Muslim society. In contrast, he celebrated English women of the lower-middle and working classes whom he encountered in London for their accomplishments in both literacy and *atlaq* (etiquette and politeness Arabic/Persian/Urdu).²⁵ Though he remained a traditionalist with respect to his ideas on gender roles, Syed Ahmad's observations on the pressing necessity for Muslim education did indirectly stimulate activism amongst elite Muslim women at the close of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century who took a lead from his foundation in Aligarh, Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College which was dedicated to Muslim boys and young men and formed on the Oxbridge model. In the succeeding generations, it was not unusual to find elite Muslims absorbing British cultural values *in toto*. High flying lawyers and administrators took up positions as servants of the empire and emigrated to the imperial centre embracing modernity and establishing successful careers while abolishing the priority of Christianity.

This social manifestation proved irksome to British establishment figures and goes a long way to explain the patronising approach they directed toward the 'Muslim apologetic' that key Indian Muslim figures of the higher class developed in response to Christian missionaries. Lecturing in the late 1940s, the orientalist H.A.R. Gibb registered his dissatisfaction that this apologetic should be "directed to the young [Indian] men everywhere," by



which he meant mainly students from the middle classes whom he claimed would otherwise have become “atheists” and “apostates”.²⁷ In particular, Gibb denigrated the way Islamic modernism appeared to appropriate the prerogatives of western liberalism. “It is only to be expected, in consequence, that the general tendency of modernists would be to interpret Islam in terms of liberal humanitarian ideas and values. In the first stage they contended that Islam was not opposed to these ideas; but they soon went on to claim that Islam was the embodiment of them in their highest and most perfect form”.²⁹ Gibb repeated the missionaries’ charge that Muslim reformers had read their Christian propaganda but, ironically, “simply tak[en] over Christian ideas and values” in what was in effect an entirely new “‘Christianized’ Islam’ comprising the values of nineteenth-century Europe minus the specifically Christian” part.³¹

2. BRITAIN AND INDIAN ISLAMIC MODERNISM – SYED AMEER ALI

Snobbish bias of this type toward progressive Anglicised Indian Muslims can be observed in criticism levelled against Modernist Islam’s most vocal exponent in the generation after Ahmad Khan, the Shi’i lawyer Syed Ameer Ali. Canadian expert on modern Indian Islam Wilfred Cantwell Smith did emphasise the scope of Ameer Ali’s pioneering work *Spirit of Islam*, particularly its 1922 edition. This book, he wrote, staged “a detailed and analysed apologetic for Islam on the scores of war, intolerance, women, slavery, literary and scientific spirit, rationalism, and democracy”. It constituted an advance on Syed Ahmad Khan’s apologetic by turning every defensive position taken by the former into a positive: “Sir Syed had maintained that Islam was not inimical to liberal progress. Amir Ali presented an Islam that is that progressive...The missionaries had said that Islam had degraded women;



Sir Sayyid said that it had not; Ali said that Islam raised women from their previous degradation to a lofty pinnacle”.³³

Such criticism of modernists like Ameer Ali boils down to the charge that they remoulded Islam according to modern western norms, refitting it with ideas of liberalism and progress that were not only purloined but inimical to traditional Muslims. As Martin Forward puts it in his rhetorically entitled study *The Failure of Islamic Modernism? Syed Ameer Ali's Interpretation of Islam*: “The Islam they describe is flawed because it mirrors back to Western critics of Islam the most positive and alluring image of that religion as these critics would interpret it. Instead of creating an Islam as Muslims have believed and practised it, Ameer Ali and other Modernists have been content to fashion Islam within parameters set by outsiders who are, at bottom, inveterately hostile to it. They have betrayed Islam into the hands of its enemies.”³⁵

Having delivered this attack on Ameer Ali, Forward continues to characterise him as a sycophant whose sole motive was self-promotion. For instance, he argues that Ali promoted Britain’s cultural dominance in the Muslim world in exchange for a knighthood and elevation to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council. But his “‘empire loyalism’ co-existed uneasily with his recognition that the British Empire and its white citizens did not always share his views about the Muslim world”.³⁷ Tame though his position toward Britain was, Forward misses how the reversal of its support for the Ottoman Empire became a problem not limited to Muslims like Ameer Ali. In spite of the criticism levelled against him, his *Spirit of Islam* and *History of the Saracens*, as even Gibb had to concede, “did more than any other to give a concrete, substantial, and rounded-off presentation of the new liberal conception of Islam”.³⁹ The same can be said for Ameer Ali’s compatriot and fellow modernist Abdullah Yusuf Ali, who remains well known for his English translation, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur’an* to which he appended a commentary and notes scattered with esoteric references to Ancient Greek concepts and



English literature. True, one modern critic sees the ensemble as “fired... by the need to make Muslims good citizens of the Empire and less susceptible to the siren-song of anti-British freedom movements”.⁴¹ But in spite of the bifurcating and dismissive tones of Gibb, Smith, and Forward, it is hard to deny that, through their access to British cultural power and by means of it, their assimilation of subjectivity and agency enabled these two modernists to help raise the banner of Islam in the modern world, not least in their challenge to its denigration by western orientalists.

ABDULLAH QUILLIAM: BRITAIN’S SHAYKH AL-ISLAM

Following his relatively recent entry into the field of British Muslim studies, a legacy has accrued around the late Victorian/Edwardian Liverpool solicitor Abdullah Quilliam. Historically, he is considered the first leader of Muslims within the modern British context, as well as a champion of the Ottoman Empire as a domain of Islamic agency. Quilliam promoted a positive model of what a self-empowered indigenous British Muslim might be. He vaunted himself as Shaykh al-Islam of the United Kingdom a title granted him by Ottoman Sultan Abdul Hamid. By adopting an avatar which conjoined the then apparently disjointed lexical items, “British,” and “Islam,” Quilliam was, for the England of the time, engaging in a distinctive form of cultural defamiliarisation. It was also one which announced a very different understanding of Turkey’s position to “the sick man of Europe” tag advanced by Russia. For some years Quilliam was the organiser and spiritual mainstay of the Islamic centre in Liverpool which attracted Muslim visitors of different British walks of life and from all around the world. At the same time, he also gained recognition as a debater defending Turkey, particularly her presence in the Balkans, as well as arguing for the superiority of modern Islam over



Victorian Bible-based Christianity. These accomplishments feed Quilliam's reception amongst Muslims today as a Briton who, to quote Ron Geaves and Jamie Gilham, demonstrated the courage "to be a Muslim in a non-Muslim and generally hostile environment".⁴³ Quilliam made clear interventions on behalf of the poor as well as promoting the contemporary relevance of an Islamic codification of women's role in society.⁴⁴ While Shaykh al-Islam, he adopted an international role for British Islam that stretched to proselytising Islam in West Africa through to dissemination of his Liverpool magazine *The Crescent*.

However, in 1908 Quilliam suddenly vanished from the nascent Muslim scene he had created on Merseyside. He had in fact left for Istanbul where he stayed for a while in the Sultan's palace, to resurface later in London just before the start of the Great War, with a changed identity and using an assumed name. Where he had previously challenged Britain's foreign policy toward the Ottomans, he now proclaimed himself an empire-loyalist (it should be noted that the fall of Sultan Hamid and the rise of a Young Turk-led regime in Istanbul had supervened). Nonetheless, Quilliam's activism had agitated to overturn centuries of religious prejudice in Britain, and he had effectively courted indigenous Britons to convert to a form of Islam that was tolerant and tailored to aspects of British. Quilliam made in these respects a positive statement with regard to an Islamic posture that although grounded in axioms of Islamic modernism was at least in his early period as a Muslim leader less wedded to acquiescence to British imperialism of the type espoused by the Indian modernists. To translate his performance of varied modes of Islamic faith into the terms employed by Vahdat, we can say Abdullah Quilliam performed a divine obligation which he interpreted by his personal agency and volition.



MUHAMMAD MARMADUKE PICKTHALL – “LOYAL ENEMY”

Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall and Abdullah Quilliam were contemporaries; both attended the Woking Mosque which had opened as a Muslim place of worship in 1912. As a translator of the Qur'an into English (like Abdullah Yusuf Ali who was also a contemporary), Pickthall's reputation did not suffer the magnitude of Quilliam's descent into post-mortem obscurity and eclipse. He was in addition a recognised novelist whose stories of the Middle East drew admiring remarks from H.G. Wells, E.M. Forster, and D.H. Lawrence. Like Quilliam, Pickthall was a fervent admirer of Turkey, though the horse he backed, that of the Young Turks, was a different one. (In the event, however, it proved no more successful than the Sultan.) Like Quilliam, too, Pickthall was openly modernist in his promulgation of Islam. Both played more or less the same cards as Ameer Ali. Forward considers Pickthall read the *Spirit of Islam* and reproduced its author's convictions without "acknowledg[ing] his debt to Ameer Ali's religious ideas".⁴⁶ Each projected a realistic but principled stance on self-defence, which was clearly derived from standard Islamic concepts and often reiterated that whereas Christianity was implanted in antiquity, Islam was a religion able to negotiate the modern world. Quilliam, in particular, dismissed the incarnation myth, Christianity's troubling Trinitarianism, the Church's priestcraft, and its irrational deficit when it came to advances in science. In civilisational terms, both Pickthall and Quilliam trumped the puffed-up notion of Victorian progress by arguing that Islam was superior to Christianity. Each accepted that in its present state the Muslim world was backward and in decline, but as God's last message to mankind Islam was eternally true, its truths only had to be renewed. In the last analysis, the west itself was in direst need of Islam owing to the breakdown in civility and civilisation it had caused in the Great War.⁴⁸



Pickthall arrived at a very different position on empire-loyalism to British-Indian Ameer Ali. His involvement with politics was deep-seated. It had surfaced during his journalistic activism on behalf of Turkey before the Great War when he was not yet a Muslim. Soon after that war ended, Pickthall went abroad to take up the post of editor of the campaigning *Bombay Chronicle* and together with his fellow Muslims and in tandem with Gandhi played a part in the Khilafatist movement, engaging in political activity that can be construed as anti-colonial. Although he signed a pledge to the British Political Agent not to involve himself in politics in his later years in India during which he worked for the Nizam of Hyderabad, Pickthall moved to a theoretical orientation that was closer to an Islamist than a quietist modernist one. Amongst contemporary interpreters of his life who have discussed his contribution as a Muslim, Abdul Hakim Murad sees Pickthall first and foremost as an outstanding believer, a leading Muslim who made his faith the pattern of his life. Pickthall steps out of the highly conformist mode of his upbringing (his father and grandfather had both been Anglican clergymen) giving up a Christian faith that failed him and reverting to a religious persuasion which was a better fit for the kind of Englishman he was.

M.A. Sherif, however, builds on the concept of the “loyal enemy”—an epithet coined by Aubrey Herbert and reiterated by his first biographer, Ann Freeman—and highlights Pickthall’s ideological commitment by linking it, in part, to the Turco-Egyptian Ottoman aristocrat Said Halim Pasha, who might be considered one of the forerunners of Islamism. Sherif argues that the Englishman, in agitating for Turkey and converting to Islam had, in a manner of speaking, ended up going so far as to envisage a government functioning according to a system of natural law as sanctioned by the Shari‘ah: in short, an Islamic polity that excluded England altogether.⁵⁰ Indeed, In his Madras Lectures in 1924 Pickthall made a claim that could easily have come straight out of Abul Ala Maududi’s playbook: “Islam offers a complete political and



social system as an alternative to socialism, fascism, syndicalism, bolshevism and all other 'isms' offered as alternative to, a system which is manifestly threatened with extinction... The system of Islam has the great advantage... that it has been practised with success... Every Muslim believes that it must eventually be adopted in its essentials by all nations..."⁵² We can confidently say that Pickthall completely overturned a conformist, inherited subjectivity, and replaced it with a new one strongly informed by Islam, so startling in its audacity that it continues to shock to this day.

ZIAUDDIN SARDAR – CRITICAL MUSLIM

The period from the death of Marmaduke Pickthall in 1936 to the arrival to maturity of my next Muslim voice Ziauddin Sardar, covers the course of two generations. The British Muslim community had radically changed from the time when a tiny collection of ethnically white converts could claim pre-eminence. Excluding actors and politicians, Ziauddin Sardar is probably one of the better known contemporary British Muslims; he traces the moment he became active in his faith to his student years, the early 1970s. His spiritual autobiography *Desperately Seeking Paradise*, published nearly twenty years ago, is a good place to start. The book is staged as a journey in which the author travels the Muslim world in search of the Islamic paradise of the past (and possibly the future?), rehearsing the historical achievements of Islamic civilisation in a personal way but very much in a modernist mould. The cover carries an endorsement from the *Independent* which praises Sardar for being unlike (it is implied) the majority of Muslims in that he is both someone who “remains serious about his faith” but has “engag[ed] with the science, culture and politics of the contemporary world”. These days he is known as the founder and editor of the quarterly publication *Critical Muslim*, which as its name suggests carries articles by independent-minded mostly Muslim



contributors, ranging widely over contemporary issues usually with a Muslim tie-in but not constrained by doctrinal niceties.

Besides *Desperately Seeking Paradise* in other recent works by Sardar, such as *Postmodernism and The Other: New Imperialism of Western Culture* (1998), *Reading the Qur'an* (2011), and *Mecca: The Sacred City* (2014), the author projects himself as a communicator as well as a Muslim intellectual bearing a message that is intentionally critical and outspoken. He has within his sight certain kinds of contemporary Muslim practice as well as familiar distortions of Islam produced by the western secular world. At times the positions Sardar defends are embattled ones, particularly during the period of the *Satanic Verses* controversy, when he claims to have been “brutalized from both sides...overrun by the combined forces of the liberal inquisition and Muslim fanaticism”, during which “I felt my humanity seeping out of me”.⁵⁴ Nonetheless, in his impassioned arraignment of the west’s *Kulturkampf*⁵⁶ against Islam, and his struggle with recidivistic Muslim fundamentalism from the late 1980s to the early 2000s, Sardar’s approach is outwardly congruent with educated western norms. This is particularly the case with two texts that bookend the period *Distorted Imagination: Lessons from the Rushdie Affair*, and his criticism of America’s post 9/11 exceptionalism *Why do People Hate America?* Both books were co-written with his friend, a Welsh convert Merryl Davies.

Sardar’s fashioning of the problems confronting the Muslim world during this period strikes noticeable parallels with Vahdat’s analysis. Addressing the urge to address modern problems solely by calling for implementation of the Shari‘ah, Sardar proffers an antidote expressed in almost the same terms of self-empowerment used by Vahdat: “Muslim individuals and communities *ha[ve] to reclaim agency*; the right to reinterpret their religious texts according to their own time and context...And the duty to reinterpret...the basic sources of Islam belongs not to revered men long dead, or to obscurantist Mullahs who exercise power over



Muslim communities in the name of these classical scholars, *but on each individual Muslim. The believers cannot simply be blind imitators... [but] knowledgeable interpreters who exert themselves...to gain a fresh understanding of Islam*".⁵⁷ In one of Sardar's clearest statements positioning himself against the passive and repressed mentality that allowed the 11 September 2001 New York attacks to happen, he argued: "The answers to the problems of the Muslim societies are not hard to find – merely difficult to initiate. *Political freedom, open debate, the liberation of society to be civil, plural and humane – these are obvious remedies*. But the Islamic movements have become a barrier to them".⁵⁹ Sardar is aware that frightened populations reacting to the aggressive advance of western globalised modernity may respond by reverting to a reduced and narrowed understanding of Islam. Clinging to the past their agency is collectively stultified by their inability to generate new meanings and liberate themselves from authoritarian rulers.

As a modernist, Sardar has travelled some distance from Ameer Ali. As Masooda Bano points out, approaches to modernity have changed in the way that Islamic modernists of the earlier twentieth century displayed a tendency to want to accommodate Islam to western modernity. Nowadays this position is out of sync even with western thinkers who blame the west's materialism and individuals' isolation in western society for creating inner emptiness.⁶¹ In addition, the times he is writing in have determined Ziauddin Sardar's is a Muslim voice conditioned by postcolonial society. During the *Satanic Verses* debate he was aware that shocking orientalist racist denunciations were being made against Muslims in Britain, though he stopped short of raising a full-blooded postcolonial critique to counteract them. The embedded colonialist mentality still pervades Europe today with respect to race and religion (plainly on view in the western media attacks on all Palestinians as potential Hamas "terrorists" after the October 7, 2023 attacks in Israel).



ABDAL HAKIM MURAD – NEO-TRADITIONAL ISLAMIC SCHOLAR

Where Sardar's status as a British Muslim writer and intellectual has required negotiating his Pakistani heritage, present-day British Muslim writer Tim Winter, aka Imam Abdal Hakim Murad, unapologetically aligns his Muslim beliefs with Britishness. Furthermore, via traditionalist understanding of Islam he steers a way through Islamic movements such as Salafism and Islamism which he considers ape aspects of western modernism. Equally he rejects the atheist Enlightenment premises that still underwrite much of current western thinking.

To begin with the issue of Britishness in his piece "British and Muslim?" in his response to the question: "Who is a British Muslim?" Abdal Hakim adopts a minimalist definition: "it is anyone who follows Islam and holds a U.K. passport".⁶³ To enlarge on the conjoining of Britishness and Islamic belief, he foregrounds the confluence of both in Quilliam and Pickthall pointing out that they each had forbears who were present at the Battle of Trafalgar.⁶⁴ (Tim Winter shares a Public School background with Pickthall – both attended Harrow although for pecuniary reasons the latter had to leave on the death of his clergyman father). In addition to being converts from Christianity to Islam all three might lay claim to being English gentlemen. And that is far from being an aberrant trajectory. Speaking through a perception that it has always been a religion that accepts converts, Abdal Hakim singles out the universal claims of Islam and its adaptability to and relative tolerance of local traditions. But he also distinguishes between those who sit happily with a "multiform Islam radiating from a single revealed paradigmatic core" and those who "come seeking an identity". Those who fit into the second category bring problems because "people with confused identities" are frequently "attracted to totalitarian solutions". However, "Islam's presence in Britain is not an Islamic problem. Islam is universal, and can



operate everywhere. It is not an Islamic problem, but it may be a British problem. Europe, alone among the continents, does not have a longstanding tradition of plurality”.⁶⁶

In contrast to the modernist orientation of his earlier British co-religionists, Abdal Hakim occupies a neo-traditionalist stance which is strongly critical of contemporary Muslim trends. Arguing that western ideas have influenced so-called “fundamentalist” Islamic movements he calls for the need to “de-ideologise” Islam. Like American convert Hamza Yusuf, Abdal Hakim has studied in Islamic institutions across the Muslim world. Both scholars place emphasis on scholarly texts. But whereas a Classical Islamic education may be intellectually beyond the scope of most Muslims, they are, or perhaps we should say *were*, able to access their faith history through its multiple forms of traditional cultural expression: “The Ottomans, the Moghuls, the Uzbek khanates, the Seljuks, the Malay states, the Hausa pryncedoms”. However, for those who approach Islam through the mode of identity, the history of these Islams, if we can term them as such, is a huge issue. “Their contention is that Islamic civilisation has been an atrocious, monumental, desperate failure”.⁶⁸ They express Islam as a compilation of negations: “Islam, we are loudly told is a list of prohibitions. Everywhere we turn there is something we must not believe and certainly must not do”.⁷⁰ For example, not associating partners with God (*shirk*) or allowing innovation (*bid‘ah*). Suffice to say, Abdal Hakim’s writings seem to be in continual dialogue with these contemporary fundamentalist modes of Islamic expression whether Saudi Arabian-style Salafism or some form of Islamism. Against their evisceration of Islamic history, civilisation, and tradition, he consistently delves into the classical Islamic corpus, referring to authorities such as sixth century thinker Al-Ghazali, the creators of the four schools of Sunni jurisprudence, and so on. It is clear Abdal Hakim is very far from conceding to the notion that the modern Islamic movements represent any advance on traditional Islam.



The other contemporary force Abdal Hakim is in discussion with a lot of the time is the modern secular dimension that tries to box in the broad compass of traditional Islam. He advances a strong rejection of the modern world grounded in traditional modes of viewing nature and divinity. He also condemns an intolerant modern European civilisation. The notion of British Islam discussed above he frequently contextualises by comparing it with European intolerance of otherness. He also dismisses the predicate that an Islamic Reformation is needed, certainly not one based on the models of the Protestant Reformation and the Enlightenment. He poses radical questions as to whether those who espouse the Enlightenment version of rationality that deletes God altogether have taken into account the proposition that a man-only centred rationality might not actually conduce to spreading the unity of humankind. The experience of the twentieth century seems to say it cannot. “The second dangerous consequence of ‘Enlightenment’, as Muslims see it, is the replacement of religious autocracy and sacred kingship with either a totalitarian political order, or with a democratic liberal arrangement that has no fail-safe resistance to moving in a totalitarian direction”.⁷¹ Abdal Hakim calls to his aid a Swedish renegade from the western Enlightenment consensus, who states: “Enlightenment leads to sensualism and to rationality. Walter Benjamin has already seen that it cannot guarantee that these principles will secure a moral consensus or protect the weak. It also... yields its own destruction”.⁷³

However, it does seem that Abdal Hakim’s articulation of this neo-traditional mode of Islam allows more scope for the exercise of choice. This is apparent in his assertion that British Islam can be inserted into the British spiritual heritage quite naturally; in fact, in a manner redolent of Quilliam and Pickthall, he advocates that Islam is better suited to British pragmatism than the pre-modern archaic set of dogmas sustaining Christianity. Instead, he holds to Islam as “a prophetic, dissenting witness *within* the reality of the modern world”.⁷⁵ Abdal Hakim Murad, in proclaiming his



allegiance to classical Muslim scholarship, Islamic civilisation and tradition is the one British Muslim thinker we have focussed on who in part troubles the modernist category. However, in his assertion of a British Muslim individuality and enthusiastic endorsement of Quilliam and Pickthall, he might be seen to be validating a version of Islam that carries within it a renewed sense of human agency.

FURTHER COROLLARIES OF VAHDAT'S METHOD

Traditionalism or neo-traditionalism is a position Vahdat strongly condemns in his critique of the Iranian philosopher Seyyed Hossein Nasr. He argues that in his writings the sovereignty of God is carried to authoritarian extremes, religion is conceived of as static, and stress on man's sinfulness nullifies any attempt to acquire human agency. In addition, Vahdat's notion that the Protestant Reformation inaugurated the required process of self-empowerment which leads to modernity, underwrites his axiom that a complete Muslim Reformation is necessary before full modernity can be achieved within that space. That Vahdat is wedded to humanist axioms might please some, but others might argue that his appropriation of the western forms of subjectivity is uncritical.

To assess his view of subjectivity in more detail, I wish to return to his appropriation of the "many scholars of modernity... [who] have conceptualized the foundation of modernity in terms of notions of human empowerment, agency and subjectivity [facilitating] [t]he transformation of humans from a state of passivity and subservience to a state of action and agency [which] has been responsible for [the construction of] modernity in the West."⁷⁷ In relation to the Muslim figures he discusses in his study, Vahdat recaps that in one way or another, each falls under the paradigm of indirect, "mediated" or "vicarious agency", and to varying



degrees is involved in the contradiction that arises when human agency “can easily be perceived as annulling God’s subjectivity and supremacy,” for example in calling for “human rights, citizenship, and individual rights and freedoms”.⁷⁹ Even so, ranging across modernists, revivalists, liberals, and Islamists, “in their formulations of new visions for Muslims, they frequently envisage a new Islamic person who is empowered and who possesses agency,” although in one way or another each has “often simultaneously den[ied] these building blocks of the modern world”.⁸¹ Without belabouring the point, Vahdat’s argument is one way of stating the obvious. Every key Muslim thinker and movement of modern times has introduced some alteration to traditional interpretations of the supposedly fixed, eternal religion that is Islam. From Syed Ahmad Khan onwards, Muslim thinkers have been introducing into Islamic praxis what the conservatives have called and continue to call *bid’ah* or innovation. It all depends on whether the true faith is considered to have been advantaged or rendered irredeemably corrupt by these modifications. Vahdat is calling for “the protosubjectivist elements of mainstream Islam and Qur’anic conception of being human”. This human subject, however, “in the Islamic context ... seems to be in the process of formation but is not even born yet in most areas of the Muslim world... in the Muslim world human subjectivity has not come of age yet.”⁸³

Vahdat, perhaps optimistically, envisages a future where not only in the west but also in the Muslim world human subjectivity will increase together with human empowerment. Very important in the Islamic discourses he analyses is “the question of who would be the carrier of individuality. In most ... [it] is the collectivity, rather than the individual”. He acknowledges the dangers of authoritarian interregna that hold back the onward march of subjectivity in the form of what he calls “disciplinary subjectivity, which involves the sacrifice of the individual self”, as seen for example, in the Khameneist stage of the Islamic Republic.



Vahdat concedes that societies like Iran “may produce some sort of subjectivity for the downtrodden... [while] at the same time repress[ing] the development of full subjectivity”. However, “at the end of the long road to human empowerment, the ultimate beneficiary of subjectivity is the individual”.⁸⁵

Vahdat is still inclined to leave uncontested the premise that adoption of norms that are in the main west-centric are the requirement for people belonging to primarily non-western cultures in order for them to successfully embrace the modern world. To be more specific, he tends to leave unreconstructed the view that individual subjectivity is the ultimate goal above community. He emphasises that “The notions of responsibility and accountability to God in Islamic thought create the foundations for a sense of individual autonomy”.⁸⁷ Consequently, for him, the concept of human agency and personal accountability before God fosters a rudimentary form of subjectivity, albeit within a religious context. This religiously oriented subjectivity, he posits, can evolve into a modern, secularized form under certain conditions. Vahdat’s analysis is grounded in his critical reading of Iranian intellectual history, particularly in examining how Iranian thinkers engaged with western ideas of subjectivity. Ali Shariati, a prominent Iranian intellectual, sought to merge the principles of Islam with existentialist themes of self-actualization and resistance to oppression. Vahdat writes, “Shariati’s reinterpretation of Islam introduced an alternative form of subjectivity, where the believer could act as an autonomous agent against oppression, motivated by both religious and moral imperatives.”⁸⁸ Shariati’s model thus exemplifies how Islamic concepts can align with the ideals of autonomy and agency central to modern subjectivity.

Vahdat nonetheless appears to come down firmly on the humanist side of the argument over subjectivity, leastways as it has been expressed within western critical theory. Although he is aware that consumerism is a less welcome aspect of contemporary subjectivity, he does not emphasise the danger corporate-led capi-



talist exploitation represents to deprived sections of communities and nations worldwide. It is left to Abdal Hakim Murad to point out that if the exportation to the non-western world of western consumerism and American standards of living continues unabated, it is a sure-fire way of destroying the earth. In addition to these caveats, there remains the challenge to advocates of “enlightened” western humanism over the part it has played in imposing its version of modernity on the rest of mankind, from the imperialist phase up until the present. Western liberal thought has proved unable to stem wholesale contravention of human rights through modes of authoritarianism, racism, and prosecution of unrestrained war that has led humanity to the brink of destruction.

CONCLUSION

Mostly the British Muslim voices which have been discussed above may be said to exemplify some aspects of a developing Muslim self which Vahdat advocates. They can at the least be said to have been in the vanguard of setting the process of Muslim subjectivity into motion. In this article, however, the focus has been upon individuals rather than communities and institutions. There has been no space here to consider the set-up of the British Muslim community which appertained during the lives of the individuals we have been discussing, or to show how its shape has varied through the last one hundred and fifty years. Across that period of Muslim history perhaps with the exception of Ziauddin Sardar, the voices we have selected from British India and Britain are, not representative of the Muslims who arrived in Britain after the Second World War. Since that time a relative explosion has occurred such that according to the 2021 census the Muslim community comprises 3.8 million people, i.e., 6.5 per cent of the overall population. The community of today has drawn



from Muslim migrants worldwide though most are the children of immigrants from South Asia. Over the last forty years, key events have brought Muslims into confrontation with the British state, notably the Rushdie Affair of 1988-9, and the after-effects of the World Trade Centre attacks of 11 September 2001 and the London bombings of 7 July 2005. These events have only been touched upon tangentially here and do not include the story of the negotiation of Prevent measures taken against the most recent generation of young Muslims. Yet even within that period the British Muslim minority have taken steps, or steps have been taken for them, to acculturate more closely to the indigenous society.⁹⁰ There is now a comparatively much richer body of research from which to assess the lives, thoughts, and beliefs of British Muslims today which should further illuminate our understanding of the issues discussed in this article.⁹²

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NOTES

1. Farzin Vahdat, *Islamic Ethos and the Specter of Modernity* (New York: Anthem, 2015), xiv.
2. *Ibid.*, xviii.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*, 265.
5. *Ibid.*, ix.
6. Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 29.
7. Farid Esack, *Qur’an, Liberation and Pluralism* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1997), 48.



8. Charles Tripp, in *Islam and the Moral Economy: The Challenge of Capitalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 84.
9. Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr, *Islamic Leviathan: Islam and The Making of State Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).
10. Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age 1978-1979* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962), 158-159.
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12. Barbara D. Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in India: Deoband, 1860-1900* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982), 220.
13. Syed Ahmad Khan, *Writings and Speeches of Syed Ahmad Khan*, ed. Muhammad Shan (Bombay: Nachketa, 1972), 228.
14. H.A.R. Gibb, *Modern Trends in Islam* (Chicago, ILL: Chicago University Press), 69.
15. *Ibid.*, 69-70.
16. *Ibid.*, 70.
17. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Modern Islam in India: A Social Analysis* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1946), 50.
18. Martin Forward, *The Failure of Islamic Modernism? Syed Ameer Ali's Interpretation of Islam* (Bern: Peter Lang), 136.
19. *Ibid.*, 95.
20. Gibb, *Modern Trends in Islam*, 71.
21. M.A. Sherif, *Searching for Solace: A Biography of Abdullah Yusuf Ali Interpreter of the Qur'an* (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 1994), 180.
22. Ron Geaves and Jamie Gilham, ed., *Victorian Muslim: Abdullah Quilliam and Islam in the West* (London: Hurst, 2017), 5. See also Yahya Birt, "Preachers, Patriots, and Islamists: Contemporary British Muslims and the Afterlife of Abdullah Quilliam," in *Victorian Muslim Abdullah Quilliam and Islam in the West* edited by Ron Geaves and Jamie Gilham 133-50.
23. Diane Robinson-Dunn, "Fairer to the Ladies and of Benefit to the Nation: Abdullah Quilliam on Reforming English Society by Islamising Gender Relationships," in *Victorian Muslim Abdullah Quilliam and Islam in the West*, edited by Ron Geaves and Jamie Gilham, (London: Hurst, 2017), 57-78.
24. Forward, *op. cit.*, 126.



25. Marmaduke Pickthall, "Islam and Progress," *Islamic Review and Modern India*, 5 (1919): 337-52.
26. M.A. Sherif, "Pickthall's Islamic Politics," in *Marmaduke Pickthall: Islam and the Modern World*, edited by Geoffrey P. Nash (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 106-136.
27. Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall, *The Cultural Side of Islam (Islamic Culture)* (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1993), 17-18.
28. Ziauddin Sardar, *Desperately Seeking Paradise: Journeys of a Sceptical Muslim* (London: Granta), 286.
29. On how this term functioned within the period, see Geoffrey Nash, *Writing Muslim Identity* (London: Continuum, 2012).
30. Sardar, *Desperately Seeking Paradise*, 247-248. Italics added.
31. Ziauddin Sardar, "Islam has become its own enemy," *The Guardian*, 20 October 2001. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/oct/21/afghanistan.religion1>. Italics added.
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39. Ibid.
40. Ibid. Italics in text.
41. Vahdat, *Islamic Ethos*, 265.
42. Ibid., 265
43. Ibid.
44. Ibid., 231.



45. Ibid., 268. Like many contemporary Iranian scholars Vahdat's thinking demonstrates filiation to western thought. In past times this was mainly centred on Marxism. For a detailed resume of the different schools of post-revolutionary Iranian Muslim thinking drawing on western liberal, neo-liberal, and conservative Islamic thought, see Mehran Kamrava, *Iran's Intellectual Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); for a recent theoretically sophisticated approach, see Eskander Sadegh-Boroujerdi, *Revolution and Its Discontents: Political Thought and Reform in Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

46. Vahdat, *Islamic Ethos*, 54.

47. Ibid., 102.

48. See Stephen H Jones, *Islam and the Liberal State: National Identity and the Future of Muslim Britain* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020).

49. See Sophie Gilliat-Ray, *Muslims in Britain: An Introduction. Appendix: Sources for Researchers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).



