

Orthodoxy, heterodoxy, and reform:

Constructing an Islamic universe in the British official mind, 1860-1914



DPhil Thesis

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University of Oxford, by:

Conor Meleady

of

St Antony's College

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Abstract

This dissertation concerns conceptualizations of Islam produced by the world of the nineteenth century British colonial official. It argues that, contrary to much of the standard scholarship concerning Western engagement with Islam and Muslims in the age of empire, the British officials who staffed the empire perceived Islam as a religion riven by sectarian division. In order to come to terms with the diversity encountered across their Islamic empire, the 'official mind', a reflexive acknowledgement of the importance of the Muslim world in Britain's imperial project, attempted to bring order to this conceptual chaos by anchoring its understanding of Islam in terms of orthodoxy, heterodoxy, and reform. In the process, the official mind became subject to several contexts, the most important of which were the religious, cultural, and educational background of the officials themselves; the significance of India as the location where the most intimate relationships with Muslims were built; and the influence of Muslim voices, who in some cases won the ear of their British masters and helped shape colonial policy.

The reality of colonial governance drove a process whereby, from the rural hinterlands of the Punjab to the urban sophistication of Cairo, British officials became arbiters of Islam. In some places this involved imposing orthodoxy, in others encouraging reform. Everywhere, it involved engaging in doctrinal controversies, evaluating authenticity within Islam, and speculating on the nature of the dozens of consciously sectarian and reformist movements which were emerging from the world of Islam in the period under review. As the official mind attempted to make sense of the Islamic universe it was constructing, a burgeoning identification with Islam developed, culminating in the project to affect reformative change in the Muslim world in partnership with the sect or movement with the most potential to unleash Islam's essentially progressive spirit.

Long form abstract

This dissertation concerns conceptualizations of Islam produced by the world of the nineteenth century British colonial official. It argues that, contrary to much of the standard scholarship concerning Western engagement with Islam and Muslims in the age of empire, the British officials who staffed the empire perceived Islam as a religion riven by sectarian division, and struggled to find ways by which to come to terms with the diversity they encountered across their Islamic empire. Drawing on terminology and concepts central to their reformed Christian background, these men anchored their understanding of Islam in terms of the familiar religious categories of orthodoxy, heterodoxy, and reform, in the process constructing what I refer to as an Islamic universe overseen by British authority. Collectively, this set of shared assumptions regarding the most suitable way to approach the question of sectarian diversity among Muslims produced a particular way of thinking about Islam which I refer to as the ‘official mind’, a reflexive acknowledgement of the importance of the Muslim world in Britain’s imperial project, and the necessity to understand as much about that world as possible.

The official mind, however, did not speak with one voice. It was subject to several alternative contexts which produced a variety of responses to the basic dilemma of Muslim diversity. The officials were steeped in the cultural and educational world of the Victorian Oxbridge elite, familiar with a core body of scholarship relating to the regions they were governing. From these texts, they derived what they believed to be a level of understanding which would help explain the Muslim world they encountered throughout the empire. However, in the uniquely intimate space of India, they encountered the Islamic sects and movements they had read about in their formative years, and found that the reality of

incorporating Muslims into the British imperial system, as Muslims, demanded alternative approaches. Encountering the debased popular religion of rural Punjab, British officials turned to the 'ulama', the guardians of the Islamic legal tradition, in order to elaborate the system of Anglo-Muhammadan Law, which they hoped would bring order and orthodoxy to the masses. And rather than emphasizing the supposedly heterodox tendencies of movements such as the Shi'a, or the allegedly fanatical nature of the *Ahl-i-Hadis*, they found themselves engaging with a range of Islamic 'sects' on their own terms. The result was their legitimization as authentic expressions of the Islamic tradition in British eyes.

In this endeavor, the voices of Muslims themselves proved crucial. The growing realization that one of the competing sectarian or reformist movements might have the capacity to reshape the concept of orthodoxy, and so hope to affect a reformative change within Islam, drew British officials into a dialogue with a collection of Muslim thinkers espousing the cause of Islamic reform. The most important of these new relationships was with the founder of the Aligarh College, Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan, and his followers. Sir Sayyid acted as an intermediary between the British and their Muslim subjects, offering his interpretation of the various questions that British rule in India posed for them. The prestige associated with his status as a reliable British ally sparked an enthusiasm for the school of thought which eventually took the name of Aligarh. Yet this enthusiasm was largely contained among British Indian officials. Indian Muslims, for the most part, rejected Sir Sayyid's ideas for religious form, and his name and reputation carried less weight in Cairo, home to a nascent reformist trend of its own.

The reality of colonial governance drove a process whereby, from the rural hinterlands of the Punjab to the urban sophistication of Cairo, British officials became arbiters of Islam.

Through classic experiences of colonial governance such as the mediation of sectarian disputes and the enumeration of the competing sects, they engaged in doctrinal controversies, evaluated authenticity within Islam, defined the boundaries of sectarian identity, and speculated on the potential for the dozens of consciously sectarian and reformist movements which were emerging from the world of Islam in the period under review to embody the promise of an Islamic reformation. In some contexts, they were forced to impose orthodoxy, while at the same time they encouraged reform. As the official mind attempted to make sense of the Islamic universe it was constructing, a burgeoning identification with Islam developed, culminating in the project to affect reformatory change in the Muslim world in partnership with the sect or movement with the most potential to unleash Islam's essentially progressive spirit.

The search for such a movement had the effect of obscuring orthodoxy in the official mind. As the imperial project of classification and categorization got underway in the late nineteenth century, an emphasis on identifying the progressive spirit among the multitude of sects and movements coming to light in this period led to an overemphasis on novelty and heterodoxy. This produced different results in contrasting contexts. In India, the Aligarh model continued to reign supreme in the official mind, although the vast number of alternative trends drew attention to a range of enigmatic and controversial candidates for the role of revivalist of Islam. The Persian Gulf, however, produced quite different candidates. In this sacred landscape from where the formative sectarian disputes of Islam originated, British officials concerned with the geopolitical ramifications of the decline of Ottoman and Iranian authority looked within two mutually antagonistic traditions to find a suitable partner with which to bring a higher measure of civilization to what was regarded as the most backward region of West Asia. From the Shi'ī tradition emerged Babism, fueled by Iranian

mystical speculation and esoterism. It appeared that the Babis, however, were only superficially connected with the authentic Islamic impulse; whatever impact they may have on the future of religious revival in Iran and the adjacent regions would lie outside Islam. Conversely, the Wahhabis of Arabia represented the most self-consciously fanatic authentic expression of what the British believed to be the original Islamic mission. In the deserts of Najd, a collection of travelers and diplomats encountered a fiercely monotheistic reforming movement with which they believed they could do business.

Ultimately though, it was from Cairo that the most active bid for a reformatory change within Islam was launched. Along the Nile Valley, and in the western deserts, the rise of two challengers to Ottoman authority in Islam tempted the British with prospect of a new order. While in India the Aligarh project failed, due in large part to the lack of reformatory religious content in the college's teachings, the British in Cairo focused on politics, believing that if they could find a worthy spiritual successor to the caliph in Istanbul, then British power could support and secure his candidacy. Ultimately, however, the search proved fruitless, producing an Islamic world at the end of the First World War that was more fragmented – both spiritually and politically – than ever before.

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A note on transliteration and names

I have transliterated all Islamic terms and Arabic and Arabic-derived Urdu, Persian, and Turkish names from the original Arabic spelling according to the guidelines and word list provided by the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, e.g. *madhhab* instead of *mazhab* and Sayyid Ahmad Khan instead of Syed Ahmed Khan. In the few cases where a name was not recognizably derived from an obviously Arabic origin, I have generally used the spelling as revealed in the source. The one major, noticeable exception to this rule is my use of *Ahl-i-Hadis* rather than *Ahl al-Hadith*. I have chosen this exception due to the enormous number to references to the movement which have had the effect of consolidating this spelling in the popular consciousness.

For place names, I have generally kept the most commonly used and accepted English name and spelling except when referencing or quoting the British archives directly, e.g. Istanbul instead of Constantinople. What exceptions occur (e.g. Jidda rather than Jeddah) are not particularly significant and should be obvious to the reader.

I have chosen to leave the spelling of terms, names and place-names unedited when they appear within quotes. Although this means the reader is exposed to a vast array of alternative spellings for such basic names as *Muhammad* (alternatively Mahomet, Mohammed, etc.), it has the benefit of giving a sense of the style in which our sources wrote.

Abbreviations

BL	British Library
BOD	Bodleian Library
CAM	Cambridge University Library
FO	Foreign Office
GAD	General Administration
IOR	India Office Records
NA	National Archives of the United Kingdom
NAI	National Archives of India
UPNNR	United Provinces Native Newspaper Reports
UPSA	Uttar Pradesh State Archives

There has yet been no Religion (that I know of) upon Earth, though never so pure, which hath not been subjected to alterations, Division, Sects and Heresies.

Daniel Defoe, *Dictionarium sacrum seu religiosum.*
A dictionary of all religions (1704)

Introduction: Conceptualizing Britain's Islamic universe

In July 1917, the British intelligence officer T. E. Lawrence, then deployed in the Hijaz on behalf of the British war-time administration of Cairo, paid a visit to the recently crowned King of the Hijaz, the Sharif Husayn of Mecca. The primary topic of conversation concerned the state of sectarian relations within the Islamic world, and the possibility that Husayn may make a claim to the Islamic caliphate. As Lawrence expressed curiosity regarding the probable response of the world's Shi'i and Wahhabi Muslims to such an announcement, Husayn informed him that, while the two 'sects' were locked in hostility towards each other, he had managed to maintain relatively good relations only with the Shi'a. For the previous four months, he revealed, forces under the command of his son, 'Abd Allah, had been involved in a series of minor military skirmishes while combatting the incursions into Hijazi territory of the Sa'udi Amir 'Abd al-'Aziz, known in British official circles as Ibn Sa'ud. The Wahhabis, as Husayn referred to the Sa'udis, had declared him, along with all Muslims who refused to submit to Ibn Sa'ud's authority, to be infidels. Further on, Husayn denied any plans to proclaim himself caliph, the lawful successor to the Prophet Muhammad as head of the of the *umma*, the global Muslim community. The caliphate, according to Husayn, had ended with the murder of 'Ali, the fourth successor of the Prophet, and the ideal it represented had subsequently been degraded by its association with a series of dynastic empires, most recently that of the Ottomans. What Husayn was really interested in, according to Lawrence, was "a spiritual city, not a theocracy."

As Lawrence related the details of this conversation back to his superiors in Cairo, he added a curious footnote detailing his thoughts on the religious inclinations of Husayn and three of his sons. "The Sherif," wrote Lawrence,

is ostensibly a Shafei: in this connection he took up a middle position between moderate Shia and Sunni: it is generally believed that his real beliefs are Zaidi. Sidi Abdulla is nearly as definitely a Shia of the Jaafari wing; Sidi Ali is a Sunni, and a fairly definite one; Sidi Feisul is not a formalist; and tends to an undefined undogmatic position, more Shia perhaps than Sunni, but vague. They are all nervous of betraying their real attitude even to their friends, and maintain a non-committal Shafei profession in public.¹

The episode sheds light on several aspects of imperial Britain's identification with Islam in the period from the Indian uprisings of 1857 through to the First World War, the subject of this dissertation. Since 1914, British officials based in Cairo had been involved in a scheme by which they hoped to liberate the pan-Islamic solidarity which united the *umma* from its emphasis on political unity, which inevitably concentrated attention on the figure of the Ottoman sultan in Istanbul. In its place, they intended to re-orient global Islamic sentiment in a spiritual direction, with the belief that doing so may provide the space for Britain's Muslim allies to affect a reform of the Islamic world in line with the highest ideals of Western civilization. The focus of this reformed Islam would be Mecca, considered the spiritual heartland of Islam, and home to Britain's newest Muslim ally, Husayn, whose rebellion against Ottoman authority Cairo had encouraged since 1914, and supported since 1916. Yet Husayn was just one of a number of potential candidates considered for the role of head of this spiritual empire. Scanning the world for a figurehead who might fulfil the requirements for the position of caliph demanded by the Islamic tradition, British officials found themselves engaging with questions of authority, legitimacy, and orthodoxy in Islam. That they felt confident enough to do so without expressing the type of self-doubt which may typically afflict the more humble interpreter of an alien faith was a reflection of the feeling that, in 1917, the ability to actively shape the destiny of the Islamic world was in their hands. This feeling was in turn a product of what I will term the construction of a

¹ "Lawrence and the Sherif on the Caliphate", 31st July 1917. FO 686/8/10/3, NA.

conceptual Islamic universe, which had formed the basis for the British official approach to the question of Islam for at least the previous half century.

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At the heart of this endeavour was an acknowledgement of the diversity that existed within the world of Islam. As Lawrence's footnote shows, a reflexive understanding of the sectarian terminology used to distinguish the various Islamic schools of thought and movements, and their implications, was taken for granted in British official circles – Lawrence felt no need to elaborate on or clarify the language he was using. This dissertation is, first and foremost, an examination of how those responsible for conducting the policies of British India and the Foreign Office came to terms with the diversity in perceived sectarian affiliations among the Muslim subjects of the British Empire over the course of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Whether by design or otherwise, general studies concerning modern Europe's engagement with or (mis)representation of Islam and its adherents have tended to emphasize that aspect of the encounter in which Islam was conceived of as a monolithic whole, and the Muslim peoples as a distinct, coherent community, at least in terms of their faith, if not their ethnicity.² Most such works proceed on the assumption that it is enough to explore the European relationship with 'Islam' or the 'Muslim world' in order to understand the factors which may have played a role in distorting their image in the European mind.

² The classic case is Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 2003). For a more recent treatment in the same vein, see Joseph Massad, *Islam in Liberalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015). See also Maxime Rodinson, *Europe and the mystique of Islam* (London: Tauris, 1988), Albert Hourani, *Islam in European Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), Henry Laurens, John Tolan and Gilles Veinstein, *Europe and the Islamic World: A History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), Francis Robinson, "The British Empire and the Muslim World," in *The Oxford History of the British Empire: Volume IV: The Twentieth Century*, eds. Judith M. Brown and Wm Roger Louis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 398-420, and Faisal Devji, "Islam and British Imperial Thought," in *Islam and the European Empires*, ed. David Motadel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 254-268.

The question of European engagement with the reality of sectarian division within Islam is left largely unexplored, or in some cases noted in passing or as a minor diversion from the broader picture. The same critique applies to those more specific works which address the European-Muslim encounter within a certain context or through a specific theme.³ This may be understandable in those cases with a focus on the medieval or early-modern eras – admittedly, knowledge of Islam was so limited among Europeans of these times that an understanding of the various Islamic trends and sects would have been beyond any potential subject-matter.⁴ However, no understanding of how Europeans responded to Islam in the modern era is complete without a consideration of how they came to terms with the sectarian diversity they encountered among Muslims across the empires they established in Africa and Asia. It is the aim of this dissertation to address this scholarly void.

The most sophisticated and, in my case, useful recent publication on modern Western conceptualizations of Islam has been Cemil Aydin's *The Idea of the Muslim World*, which argues that the idea that the collective global Muslim community constitutes a legitimate and comprehensible subject of political analysis was largely an invention of the European imperial powers of the nineteenth century, born in defiance of the realities of the history and contemporary condition of the Muslim peoples of the world, but transmitted to them to emerge in the form of Islamist activism.⁵ Aydin shows little interest in accounting for how

³ Humberto Garcia, *Islam and the English Enlightenment, 1670-1840* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), Clinton Bennett, *Victorian Images of Islam* (London: Grey Seal, 1992), Shahin Kuli Khan Khuttak, *Islam and the Victorians: Nineteenth Century Perceptions of Muslim Practices and Beliefs* (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 2008), Norman Daniel, *Islam, Europe and Empire* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1966), and Sophia Rose Arjana, *Muslims in the Western Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), the last of which explores the theme of the "Muslim monster" in the Western imagination.

⁴ John V. Tolan, *Saracens: Islam in the Medieval European Imagination* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), Norman Daniel, *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1960), and David R. Blanks and Michael Frassetto, eds., *Western Views of Islam in Medieval and Early Modern Europe: Perception of Other* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999).

⁵ Cemil Aydin, *The idea of the Muslim world: a global intellectual history* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017).

the colonialists incorporated Muslim diversity into this framework, and the argument that nineteenth-century British official approaches to Islam were defined in large part by their acknowledgement of Islam's sectarian diversity may appear to run counter to his case. However, this dissertation is not an attempt to refute Aydin. Rather, it accepts his basic framework for enquiry, while aiming to supplement it by showing the ways in which Islamic unity and diversity coexisted, and indeed were co-dependent, in the British official mind.

Several works have provided valuable but limited answers to the question of how British officials of the nineteenth century understood Islamic diversity, sectarianism, and reform, within the framework of this unity. Among them are studies which have assessed the impact the perceived threat of Muslim sedition and pan-Islam had on colonial discourse. Such works have inevitably been drawn to focus on expressions of the Islamic reformist thrust dating back to the eighteenth century; and most often, the Wahhabis of Arabia or India have provided the subject-matter. Some of these have provided valuable accounts of the ambiguousness of the European intellectual and cultural response to the phenomenon of a reformist impulse in the rival monotheistic faith.⁶ Others, however, have emphasized the hostility, fear, distrust, and dehumanization they present as the defining elements of the European approach to Islam and Muslims in the age of empire, often with an eye on contemporary global politics. Such is the case with Ilyse R. Morgenstein Fuerst's mistitled *Indian Muslim Minorities and the 1857 Rebellion*, which posits, based on a reading of a single text, that the Wahhabi panic of 1860s India evolved into a hegemonic, reflexive British response to Muslim activism in all the decades of empire that followed, subsequently

⁶ Giovanni Bonacina, *The Wahhabis Seen through European Eyes (1772–1830): Deists and Puritans of Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), and Alex Padamsee, *Representations of Indian Muslims in British Colonial Discourse* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), although the latter perhaps focuses too heavily on the idea of 'conspiracy' as the central theory shaping British attitudes towards the Wahhabis.

shaping Western-Muslim relations in the age of the War on Terror.⁷ Chapter three of this dissertation is targeted, in part, at such an erroneous and limited interpretation of British India's engagement with the Wahhabi movement. The major problem with this distorted approach is that we lose sight of the broader and dominant British response to Islam and Muslim activism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – the search for an authentic reformist impulse within Islam with the potential to achieve unity from all the diversity encountered throughout Britain's Muslim empire. I am not arguing that British official attitudes towards Islam and Muslims were actually benign. As we shall see, many British officials did exhibit a certain level of hostility to and fear of the Muslim fanatic in his various guises, and essentialized Islam as a religion with no potential to contribute to the progress of humanity. Indeed, as chapter six will show, this search was in part a product of the fear that such unity may be turned against the British presence in Muslim lands, and so must be manipulated and made to serve British interests. However, by no means were these perspectives shared across the board – within the basic framework of British imperial dominance and belief in the inherent unity of the essential Islamic impulse, diversity of opinion was the order of the day, much as diversity of doctrine reigned among the empire's Muslim subjects.

While the empire's conceptual and material relationships with the various sufi orders active throughout its domain have received only cursory attention, and no general study of imperial Britain's engagement with the Shi'a yet exists,⁸ recent scholarship treating the British relationship with its Muslim subjects has explored the topic through a series of studies

⁷ Ilse R. Morgenstern Fuerst, *Indian Muslim Minorities and the 1857 Rebellion* (London, New York: IB Tauris, 2017).

⁸ See chapters one and two.

focusing on specific institutions, such as the *hajj* and the Indian army.⁹ While such works have hinted at the impact the variety of beliefs and customs held sacred by their Muslim subjects had on often exasperated colonial officials, they have primarily highlighted the relationship of British officialdom with the generally undesignated adherents of so-called ‘popular’ forms of Islam. Discussions of the British response to that most salient development in Islamic intellectual life in the period under review, the growth of a self-consciously reformist impulse in Muslim lands from North Africa to Southeast Asia, have largely been conducted within the broader context of what has come to be known as Pan-Islam.¹⁰ This focus has, unfortunately, tended to obscure the growing British awareness of the significance, vitality, and extraordinary diversity of the new movements rising across the empire’s pan-Islamic sphere which claimed, in one form or another, the mantle of Islamic reform. In fact, the conceptual dissection of Islam into a multitude of competing sects and reformist movements formed a central theme in the British Empire’s burgeoning identification with Islam in the late nineteenth century.

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This was a process driven in part by imperial consolidation and expansion from Cyprus and Egypt to Malaya, strategic considerations fuelled by the so-called ‘Eastern Question’ and ‘Great Game’, and moving in tandem with the development of ever more complex expressions of self-consciously Muslim identities which were, in turn, dependent on the

⁹ John Slight, *The British Empire and the Hajj 1865-1956*. (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2015) and Nile Green, *Islam and the Army in Colonial India: Sepoy Religion in the Service of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

¹⁰ See chapter six.

imperial infrastructure and networks facilitated by British expansion.¹¹ As the growth and spread of a common Muslim consciousness across the seas and frontiers governed and guarded by the imperial powers had the effect of deepening the involvement of those empires in the surveillance and management of their Muslim subjects, the most common ideological or symbolic means of countering such threats lay in identifying the ruling power with Islam and the interests of the Muslim community as a whole. Such was the case in Tsarist Russia no less than in the famous episode of Napoleon's Egyptian expedition when Bonaparte issued a proclamation declaring the French invaders to be Muslims.¹² For the British, dominant as they were throughout the Indian Ocean, Red Sea, and eastern Mediterranean, ensuring the successful execution of the *hajj* from those territories under their sway from which Muslims would annually travel to the Hijaz proved an obvious means of securing general Muslim approval. Indeed, as the most recent and comprehensive study of the pilgrimage under the British shows, the *hajj* formed perhaps the centre-piece of imperial

¹¹ See M. A. Yapp, "British Perceptions of the Russian Threat to India," *Modern Asian Studies* 21, no. 4 (1987): 647-665 for an example of how the perceived need to counter Russian expansion in Asia drove an ever greater British engagement in the span of Muslim territories running from Anatolia to northern India. On the nineteenth and twentieth century Mediterranean and Indian Ocean as spheres of British hegemony, see Robert Holland, *Blue-Water Empire: The British in the Mediterranean Since 1800* (London: Allen Lane, 2012) and Robert J. Blyth, *The Empire of the Raj: Indian, Eastern Africa and the Middle East, 1858-1947* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003). On the communities and networks of the Indian Ocean which operated under the maritime *pax Britannica*, see Thomas R. Metcalf, *Imperial Connections: India in the Indian Ocean Arena, 1860-1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), Sugata Bose, *A Hundred Horizons: The Indian Ocean in the Age of Global Empire* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), and Slight, *The British Empire and the Hajj*. On the development of a variety of expressions of self-consciously Muslim identities within this imperial framework, see Nile Green, *Bombay Islam: The Religious Economy of the West Indian Ocean, 1840-1915* (Leiden: Cambridge University Press, 2011) and Seema Alavi, *Muslim Cosmopolitanism in the Age of Empire* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2015) for two contrasting approaches. While Green charts the growth of "an ever-increasing diversity of religious producers and consumers" and variety of what he terms "customary islams" in the industrializing city of Bombay and its "inter-continental" religious economy stretching from Iran to East Africa and the Indian interior, Alavi instead examines the formation of an increasingly self-conscious and pan-Islamic reformist identity through a study of several Indian Muslim activists operating in the imperial web stretching from Istanbul to the Andaman Islands.

¹² Robert Crews, *For Prophet and Tsar: Islam and Empire in Russia and Central Asia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 2 – 3, and Juan Cole, *Napoleon's Egypt: Invading the Middle East* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), 30 – 32. Dariusz Kolodziejczyk, "Khan, caliph, tsar and imperator: the multiple identities of the Ottoman sultan," in *Universal Empire: A Comparative Approach to Imperial Culture and Representation in Eurasian History*, eds. Peter Fibiger Bang and Dariusz Kolodziejczyk (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 175 – 193, shows a similar dynamic at play as the Ottoman Empire expanded at the expense of the Byzantines.

Britain's explicit identification with Islam.¹³ By the latter half of the nineteenth century, the idea that the British Empire, the polity with more Muslim subjects than any other, and with a territorial stretch unmatched in Islamic terms since the early caliphate, constituted an Islamic empire of some sort was prevalent throughout official imperial discourse, and indeed echoed in certain circles of Muslim thought at the same time.¹⁴ Although fed by an underlying fear that in justifying itself with reference to traditional Islamic concepts of legitimate authority, the empire's pan-Islamic stretch could in turn be undermined by the same means, such identification fostered a sense of responsibility and deference to perceived Muslim sentiment, which in turn helped produce an ambiguous range of sentiments expressed with regards to Muslims and Islam across the imperial terrain.¹⁵ In such a context, knowledge of Islam and its complexities became a decidedly valued quality in the eyes of those charged with formulating policy.

As Thomas R. Metcalf has shown, “[a] relentless need to count and classify everything they encountered defined much Victorian intellectual activity”.¹⁶ This project was inextricably tied to the furtherance of imperial rule¹⁷ and was applied to all manner of elements which

¹³ Slight, *The British Empire and the Hajj*. Other recent work on the British *hajj* includes Saurabh Mishra, *Pilgrimage, Politics, and Pestilence: The Haj from the Indian Subcontinent, 1860-1920* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011) and Michael Christopher Low, “Empire and the Hajj: Pilgrims, Plagues, and Pan-Islam under British Surveillance, 1865-1908,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 40 (2008): 269-290.

¹⁴ Slight, *The British Empire and the Hajj*, 1, f.n. 1, provides a lengthy list of examples of British officials referring to the empire's Islamic character. For a greater exploration of the implications of this British identification with Islam in terms of the British approach to Islam in general and the 'Orientalism' debate, see Devji, “Islam and British Imperial Thought”.

¹⁵ Devji, “Islam and British Imperial Thought,” and Francis Robinson, “The British Empire and the Muslim World”.

¹⁶ Thomas R. Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 113.

¹⁷ A point noted, in the context of John Gordon Lorimer's *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf*, by Nelida Fuccaro, “Knowledge at the Service of the British Empire: the Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf, Oman and Central Arabia,” in *Borders and the Changing Boundaries of Knowledge*, eds. Inga Brandell, Marie Carlson and Önver A. Çetrez (Istanbul: Swedish Research Institute, 2015), 26.

were perceived to form the basic constitutive units of Asian societies. As Bernard Cohn notes,

[the] documentation that was involved created and normalized a vast amount of information that formed the basis of their capacity to govern. The reports and investigations of commissions, the compilation, storage, and publication of statistical data on finance, trade, health, demography, crime, education, transportation, agriculture, and industry – these created data requiring as much exegetical and hermeneutical skill to interpret as an arcane Sanskrit text.¹⁸

In terms of the ethnographical composition of the peoples of India, knowledge of the various castes was, perhaps even more than religion, a subject accorded the highest priority, an emphasis reflected in the subsequent scholarly literature on the role of the census and the construction of British colonial knowledge in general.¹⁹ Yet information on the religious inclinations of the empire's subjects was regarded as of paramount importance generally, with the census report for Bengal of 1891 noting that "The statistics of religious belief present a subject of interest second to none in the long category of sources of information, which the census of India opens up."²⁰ Metcalf notes

the prominence given to religious affiliation as a 'fundamental category' in the Indian census... The centrality of religious community, along with that of caste, for the British marked out India's distinctive status as a fundamentally different land.²¹

¹⁸ Bernard Cohn, *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996), 3.

¹⁹ Bernard Cohn, *An Anthropologist among the Historians and Other Essays* (Delhi; New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 242. On the colonial imagining or 'construction' of caste, see Ronald B. Inden, *Imagining India* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2000) and Nicholas B. Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

²⁰ C. J. O'Donnell, *Census of India, 1891. Vol. III, The Lower Provinces of Bengal and their feudatories: the report* (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1893), 144, para 190. See also N. Gerald Barrier, "Introduction," in *The Census in British India: New Perspectives*, ed. N. Gerald Barrier (New Delhi: Manohar, 1981), viii, which argues that "Ethnography and religion were thought to be essential elements in the earliest [census] reports."

²¹ Metcalf, *Ideologies*, 133-134.

Scholarship treating the question of British engagement with religion in India, however, has tended to limit itself to explorations of the impact of imperial policy and discourse on Hindu-Muslim relations and the ‘construction of communalism’.²² Questions surrounding the intra-communal sectarian and reformist movements which have received much scholarly consideration in their own right²³ have yet to be approached through the obsessive lens of their colonial overseers, an especially peculiar omission considering the extensive range of studies relating to the nature and impact of Western discourses as they applied to the subject peoples of empire. That discussion was initially driven by the argument that the most pertinent framework in which to examine the European encounter with and ‘construction’ of the ‘Orient’ is the fact of European military, economic, and cultural dominance, a reality believed to drive the misrepresentation of the nature of subject societies for the purpose of rationalizing imperial rule,²⁴ and to render all other contexts subordinate. While this dissertation accepts this approach as a solid foundation on which to build, it aims to explore the various sub-contexts shaping variance within the British conceptualization of Islam.²⁵ The task is to identify the nature of how the myriad factors driving and shaping historical change played upon the development of the relationship between European empire-builders and their variety of ‘Others’. This dissertation, then, is a study of the subjectivity of the ‘white man’ as he conceptualized Islam in his ‘official’ guise during the age of high imperialism. It proceeds with several alternative contextual frameworks in mind.

²² See Gyanendra Pandey, *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) and Peter Gottschalk, *Religion, Science, and Empire: Classifying Hinduism and Islam in British India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

²³ General regional studies include Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798 – 1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983) for the Arab Middle East, and Barbara Daly Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860 – 1900* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002) for South Asia.

²⁴ Said, *Orientalism*.

²⁵ This is the approach called for by David Trotter, “Colonial Subjects,” *Critical Quarterly* 32, no. 3 (1990): 3, David Ludden, “Orientalist Empiricism: Transformations of Colonial Knowledge,” in *Genealogies of Orientalism: History, Theory, Politics*, eds. Edmund Burke III and David Prochaska (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 75, and John M. MacKenzie, *Orientalism: History, Theory and the Arts* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), 37-38.

One of the primary consequences of the general historical exercise in contextualization has been the debate over the significance to be granted the agency of the subjected in shaping the coloniser/colonised encounter, however asymmetrical, and the subsequent implications in terms of those elements of the relationship one chooses to emphasize. Scholars whose research has rested upon the theory of a decisively hegemonic imperial project have tended to minimize the agency of subject peoples in achieving autonomous space in which to define themselves and to significantly impact upon colonial policy; rather, they have argued that the impact of European forms of administrative and cultural authority had the effect of hardening, politicizing, and ultimately transforming pre-existing forms of collective identity along the same lines in which the Europeans had originally theorized them to exist.²⁶ One response to this emphasis on the overbearing quality of the imperial project has been to draw attention to the continuing vitality of pre-colonial forms of identity, organization, and administrative practices as they entered the colonial age.²⁷ Of more relevance to this study, scholars have advanced the theory of a mutually-transformative relationship between colonized and colonizer,²⁸ with a growing recognition of the various ways by which

²⁶ Such is the approach taken to caste by Dirks, *Castes of Mind*, to Hindu-Muslim violence in British India by Pandey, *The Construction of Communalism*, and, to the census, by R. B. Bhagat, "Census Enumeration, Religious Identity and Communal Polarization in India," *Asian Ethnicity* 14, no. 4 (2013), 434-448.

²⁷ See Peter Gottschalk, *Beyond Hindu and Muslim : Multiple Identity in Narratives from Village India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 19, generally; Peter van der Veer, *Imperial Encounters: Religion and Modernity in India and Britain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 43, in relation to the idea of religious "reform" as an invented tradition; C. A. Bayly, "The Pre-History of 'Communalism'? Religious Conflict in India, 1700–1860," *Modern Asian Studies* 19, no. 2 (1985): 177-203, in relation to Hindu-Muslim communalism; and Norbert Peabody, "Cents, Sense, Census: Human Inventories in Late Precolonial and Early Colonial India," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 43, no. 4 (Oct., 2001): 819-850, in relation to the census.

²⁸ Jamal Malik, "Introduction," in *Perspectives of Mutual Encounters in South Asian History 1760 - 1860*, ed. Jamal Malik (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 2-3, argues that "colonialising and colonised people were mutually complicit and interpenetrated, rather than reducible to one-sided appropriations by Europeans versus resistance and self-assertion of colonised people...all parties, European as well as Indians, irrespective of their social, ethnic, religious, or political backgrounds, translated and re-translated, negotiated and re-negotiated their respective world-views and social embeddedness in new environments...The precondition for

subjected peoples could absorb the impact of the European colonial project, and even hope to shape or inadvertently complicate the ideas and policies of their European masters. Not only could subject people “determine to varying extents what they absorb into their own, how they use it, and what they make it mean”,²⁹ as Christopher Bayly has shown in relation to information gathering in nineteenth century India, “colonial knowledge was derived to a considerable extent from indigenous knowledge, albeit torn out of context and distorted by fear and prejudice”.³⁰ The scope granted local Muslims actors in shaping their own destinies under the imperial thumb must not be overstated – the challenge is to identify when and the context in which their contribution to the British information-gathering exercise not only provided the rulers with intelligence deemed valuable, but also became embedded in the official mind as an authoritative and essentialist component of the peoples, societies, and political problems concerned. It is a central claim of this dissertation that in seeking to understand Islam, British officials regularly engaged with and were influenced by Muslim sources, both textual and personal. In particular, in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, a line of intellectual engagement with Islam pursued in certain British circles came under the influence of the reformist tendency within Islam associated with the Aligarh College in northern India and with the critics of the traditional ‘ulama’ of al-Azhar in Cairo, a movement scholars have subsequently come to broadly label Islamic ‘modernism’. The broader theory of a *mutually* transformative encounter – one in which, potentially, Muslim

this was...a certain degree of correspondence between European and South Asian discourses and cognition that kept changing in the process of encounter.”

²⁹ Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London; New York: Routledge, 2008), 7.

³⁰ C. A. Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780-1870* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 7. On the impact of Indian peoples on the census project, see Barrier, “Introduction,” viii – “Whether concerned with language, script, education, employment, or the number of people grouped into categories, Indians made suggestions and later demands about how censuses should be conducted. These in turn influenced official decision-making...” On role of local agents in assisting the empire project in the Persian Gulf, see James Onley, *The Arabian Frontier of the British Raj: Merchants, Rulers, and the British in the Nineteenth-Century Gulf* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

influence on British thinking was mirrored by a concomitant British impact on the shape that, say, Muslim sectarianism took over the course of our period – is one which, though lying beyond the scope of this dissertation, promises to reward any further scholarly enquiry in that direction.

Implied throughout our discussion to this point has been the dominating role of the Indian framework. As Faisal Devji has argued,

invocations of Islam in the English language inevitably possessed an Indian reference, even when it was the Middle East that was being described as that religion's true home...we might...argue that Islam was imagined in the name of India, which provided its analytical categories, objects of study, and sense of importance.³¹

While British imperial action from 1860 to 1914 stretched in space and time across a number of lands and periods with their own unique characteristics, each of which must be considered in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the forces at play, it was above all the desire to placate the sentiments of Indian Muslims that drove British engagement and identification with Islam. And while the Indian arena was perhaps *the* crucial regional context in the formation of imperial Britain's outlook on Islam in the post-1857 period, its impact was not merely philosophical – the processes of classifying colonial knowledge were pioneered in India before being exported elsewhere,³² the flow of ideas and practices from imperial India westwards being a function of the transfer of manpower either serving in an official capacity in Cairo, Jeddah, Aden and the Gulf, or active in the 'exploration' of the

³¹ Devji, "Islam and British Imperial Thought", 257

³² Cohn, *Colonialism and its Form of Knowledge*, 3-4. Perhaps nothing demonstrates this flow of epistemological methodologies than the exportation of the District Gazetteer to the Persian Gulf under John Gordon Lorimer.

Arabian interior.³³ India was the context in which the doctrinal intricacies defining the *madhahib* came to be required knowledge as the British sought to understand the laws they believed could be derived from the medieval works of jurisprudence; it was the place where they encountered and were forced to engage with Sunni-Shi'i sectarianism for the first time; and it was the arena in which they were first forced to come to terms with the new wave of Islamic revivalism which would come to inspire a broad variety of movements across the British-Islamic world.

Yet the Indian hold over the 'official mind' was not hegemonic. The Arab Middle East, for example, held a unique place in the British imagination as the formative and pristine heart of Islam.³⁴ A degree of reflexive sympathy for the Ottoman Empire and Turkish causes in general has also been shown to have captured the minds of the men appointed to the British consulates which dotted the Ottoman landscape from the Balkans to Transcaucasia.³⁵ Practical considerations related to information-gathering in the Middle East combined pre-existing conceptions of these regions to fuel an alternative set of expectations held by British officials with relation to their sectarian and reformist movements in comparison with those of India. The idea of an authentic or 'true' Islam, held to survive among the pure-blooded Arabs of the Arabian Peninsula, was in turn a product of the evolution of more general ideas

³³ See Onley, *Arabian Frontiers*, P. J. Rich, *The Invasions of the Gulf: Radicalism, Ritualism and the Shaikhs* (Cambridge: Allborough, 1991), Roger Owen, "The Influence of Lord Cromer's Indian Experience on British Policy in Egypt," in *Middle Eastern Affairs*, ed. Albert Hourani, Vol. 4, 1965): 109-139, and Robert Tignor, "The 'Indianization' of the Egyptian Administration Under British Rule," *The American Historical Review* 68, no. 3 (1963): 636-661. On the depth of the Indian influence on British officials serving in the Gulf, Rich, *The Invasions*, 54, observes that "Of the sixty-six Gulf Residents and Agents between 1858 and 1947, at least twenty-four had fathers who spent part of their careers in India... At least twenty more had close relatives who served there, such as a brother or uncle.."

³⁴ See Rich, *The Invasions*, 60 and Priya Satia, *Spies in Arabia: The Great War and the Cultural Foundations of Britain's Covert Empire in the Middle East* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 7, who argues that "there is... a historical specificity to British ideas about the Middle East and the style of imperial rule they underpinned."

³⁵ Gordon L. Iseminger, "The Old Turkish Hands: The British Levantine Consuls, 1856-1876," *Middle East Journal* 22, no. 3 (1968): 297-316.

concerning religion which had been taking shape in Britain since the Reformation. For, as Bayly has put it, “colonial ideologies were varied, unstable and contradictory...they owed as much to debates in European intellectual history as they did to particular Indian circumstances.”³⁶

The impact of the metropole on the intellectual formation of those charged with conducting the policies of imperial Britain has been another path of scholarly enquiry through which historians have sought to historicize the construction of colonial discourses. Such studies have considered the educational background of such men, with P. J. Rich asserting that “a marked characteristic of the British Empire was the way it was ruled by public school-inspired ritual. *Ipsa facto the English public school taught the Imperial rulers how to be superlative ritualists*”³⁷ and Thomas Richards noting that “[the] administrative core of the Empire was built around knowledge-producing institutions like the British Museum, the Royal Geographical Society, the India Survey, and the universities.”³⁸ The experiences of the typical Oxbridge graduate, destined for a career in the Indian Civil Service or Foreign Office, must surely have played a role in emphasizing the importance and continuing relevance of the classicist legacy in terms of the British approach to empire noted by Rama Sundari Mantena,³⁹ and in the perception of the class differences which David Cannadine has shown to be of instrumental significance in shaping the British approach to local elites throughout the empire.⁴⁰ Furthermore, as Cannadine persuasively shows, “the British

³⁶ Bayly, *Empire and Information*, 142.

³⁷ Rich, *The Invasions*, 4.

³⁸ Thomas Richards, *The Imperial Archive: Knowledge and the Fantasy of Empire* (London; New York: Verso, 1993), 4.

³⁹ Rama Sundari Mantena, “Imperial Ideology and the Uses of Rome in Discourses on Britain's Indian Empire,” in *Classics and Imperialism in the British Empire*, ed. Mark Bradley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 54-73.

⁴⁰ David Cannadine, *Ornamentalism: How the British Saw their Empire* (London: Penguin, 2001).

Empire was...in large part about the domestication of the exotic - the comprehending and the reordering of the foreign in parallel, analogous, equivalent, resemblant terms.”⁴¹ It should come as little surprise, then, to find that the default response of many British officials to the question of Islamic sectarian groups was to reflexively draw analogies with the Christian movements and trends which had played such a decisive role in shaping British and European history since the sixteenth century. Indeed, both Nile Green and Thomas R. Metcalf have emphasized the role of the religious zeitgeist of early nineteenth century Britain in driving imperial conceptualizations of the empire’s mission and its approach to other religions in general - an element of the formation of the ‘official mind’ which Green explicitly contrasts with the more commonly assumed ‘secular’ nature of the ‘orientalist enterprise’.⁴²

* * * * *

How or against what yardstick did British officials measure the authenticity of any given doctrinal interpretation or ritualistic expression of Islam? The question remains one of contemporary concern for scholars of Islamic history and Muslim societies. A fear of giving credence to essentialist categorizations drawn from colonial times has led some anthropologists to argue the nominalist view for the existence of many islams, but no Islam, an idea which has been perceived to drive a reluctance to say anything objectively about Islam at all. This theory would not have impressed the subjects of our enquiry. At the core of this dissertation lies the argument that British officials anchored their conception of Islam in a set of assumptions and terminology based on their largely Reformed Christian heritage,

⁴¹ Cannadine, *Ornamentalism*, xix.

⁴² Nile Green, “Parnassus of the Evangelical Empire: Orientalism and the English Universities, 1800–50,” *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 40, no. 3 (2012): 337-338. See also Metcalf, *Imperial Ideologies*, 133-135.

searching first for an essence, spirit, or orthodoxy within Islam by which to measure the authenticity of the various sects and movements they encountered. They would assuredly not have questioned, like the anthropologist Abdul Hamid el-Zein, whether “a single true Islam exists at all”,⁴³ nor accept his proposition that Islam does not exist as “a fixed and autonomous form referring to positive content which can be reduced to universal and unchanging characteristics.”⁴⁴ While the British encountered many ‘islams’ across their imperial domain, they did not consider each expression of the Islamic tradition to be equally legitimate when tested against the standards of orthodoxy that they identified. The conceptual Islamic universe they constructed was centred around an orthodox core, the distance from which defined the extent of heterodoxy.

As such, while this dissertation has been much enriched by the vibrant ongoing scholarly debate concerning alternative conceptualizations of Islam,⁴⁵ and whether such a concept as ‘orthodoxy’ has significant meaning when applied to the Islamic tradition, it is *not* a contribution to that discussion, or to the wider debates concerning the concepts of orthodoxy and heterodoxy in general.⁴⁶ I make no claim to an objective understanding of what exactly is signified by terms such as *Islamic*, *orthodoxy*, *heterodoxy*, *sectarian*, or *sect* - I employ them throughout the text only in the sense in which they were understood by the British

⁴³ Abdul el-Zein, *Beyond Ideology and Theology: The Search for the Anthropology of Islam*, 6 (1977): 227.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 252.

⁴⁵ See for example Leonard Binder, *Islamic Liberalism: A Critique of Development Ideologies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), Shahab Ahmed, *What is Islam?: The Importance of being Islamic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), Talal Asad, “The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam,” *Qui Parle* 17, no. 2 (2009): 1-30, Ovamir Anjum, “Islam as a Discursive Tradition: Talal Asad and His Interlocutors,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 27, no. 3 (2007): 656-672, Zareena Grewal, “Destabilizing Orthodoxy, De-Territorializing the Anthropology of Islam,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 84, no. 1 (March 2016): 44-59, Alexander Knysh, “‘Orthodoxy’ and ‘Heresy’ in Medieval Islam: An Essay in Reassessment,” *The Muslim World* 83, no. 1 (1993): 48-67 and M. Brett Wilson, “The Failure of Nomenclature: The Concept of ‘Orthodoxy’ in the Study of Islam,” *Comparative Islamic Studies* 3, no. 2 (2007): 169-194.

⁴⁶ See for example Jacques Berlinerblau, “Toward a Sociology of Heresy, Orthodoxy, and Doxa,” *History of Religions* 40, no. 4 (May 2001): 351, Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 161-171 and George Zito, “Toward a Sociology of Heresy,” *Sociological Analysis* 44, no. 2 (1983): 123-130.

officials who form the subject matter of my research. This dissertation will argue that for the British of the first half of the nineteenth century, Islamic ‘orthodoxy’ could be located in the monotheistic, Arabian, and textual essence of the original Islamic mission; and in nineteenth-century Muslim society in both the rulings of the lawful interpreters of that mission, the ‘ulama’ who represented the *madhahib*, the four Sunni schools of jurisprudence, and in the authority of the Ottoman sultan-caliph in Istanbul. This approach had the effect of convincing British officials to pass judgement, whether moral or legal, on those diverse groups and tendencies they encountered increasingly throughout the nineteenth century who failed to fulfil the conditions of orthodoxy. As we have already noted, by the latter decades of the nineteenth century the most conspicuous feature of these encounters was the development of a number of competing movements claiming the mantle of Islamic ‘reform’. The trend received an assortment of labels, all of which pointed towards the same binary division – popular versus scripturalist,⁴⁷ esotericism versus exotericism,⁴⁸ sufi versus ‘Wahabee’ – separating the adherents of those devotions based on saintly or prophetic mediation and apparently syncretic ritual deemed ‘traditional’⁴⁹ from those newly self-conscious Muslims prioritizing a personal approach to the divine based on a rational return to the formative texts of Islam and a rejection of innovation (*bid‘ah*) and often of blind deference (*taqlid*) to the *madhahib*. Driven by the growth of the use of print among Muslims during the nineteenth century,⁵⁰ the implications were noted early in British circles. Yet no

⁴⁷ On the continuing utility of Max Weber’s concept of ‘popular religion’, see Jacques Berlinerblau, “Max Weber’s Useful Ambiguities and the Problem of Defining ‘Popular Religion’,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 69, no. 3 (2001): 605–626. The term ‘scripturalist’ belongs, I believe, to Clifford Geertz, *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 56–88.

⁴⁸ Marc Gaborieau, “Muslim Saints, Faquirs and Pilgrims in 1831 according to Garcin de Tassy,” in *Perspectives of Mutual Encounters in South Asian History 1760-1860*, ed. Jamal Malik (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 132.

⁴⁹ For a pertinent discussion on the problematic application of the term ‘tradition’ in the context of the role of the ‘ulama’ in modern Islam, see Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam: Custodians of Change* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 3–11.

⁵⁰ Francis Robinson, “Technology and Religious Change: Islam and the Impact of Print,” *Modern Asian Studies* 27, no. 1 (1993): 229–251.

less than the dissection of Islam into its traditionally ‘orthodox’ and ‘heterodox’ spheres were the British interested in measuring these new movements against each other and, more importantly, against the yardstick of post-Reformation Western civilization. Rather than the potential for sedition which has occupied many scholars’ approach to the problem of British engagement with Islamic reform, then, it would perhaps then be more useful to locate a distinct division in British minds in terms of the potential they perceived for the reformist movements in question to not only inspire a broader move towards Islamic unity, but to shape that unity in the image of imperial Britain. It is the central argument of this dissertation that the project of comparative Islam discussed above led, in the three or four decades preceding the outbreak of the First World War, to a search among some British officials to find the particular burgeoning Islamic movement which would inspire reform in the Muslim world in partnership with Britain’s self-perceived imperial, civilizing mission.

* * * * *

This dissertation will utilize Bernard Cohn’s model of ‘investigative modalities’ in tandem with the theory of the ‘official mind’ in order to provide a conceptual framework through which to approach the topic. While some studies of the Western approach to Islam have liberally surveyed and selected from what they deemed to constitute the most formative cultural works of the Western imagination in order to build a broad critique,⁵¹ this methodological approach has been criticized for its ahistoricity. As David Motadel has argued,

⁵¹ For example, Said, *Orientalism*, 24, states that “[the] fabric of as thick a discourse as Orientalism has survived and functioned in Western society because of its richness: all I have done is to describe parts of that fabric at certain moments, and merely to suggest the existence of a larger whole, detailed, interesting, dotted with fascinating figures, texts, and events.” See also Massad, *Islam in Liberalism*, *passim*.

Many works on colonial representations of Islam do not define their source basis clearly, but look at a wide spectrum of writings, mixing government documents, literature, journalistic articles, travel writing, and memoirs. Scholars thereby tend to ignore the fact that authors often had very different motives and audiences. Academic texts, reports of colonial officials, and the writings of travellers addressed quite different groups of readers and varied significantly in their political influence. The actual impact of these texts on political practice often remains unclear. There is a need for further systematic exploration of official government documents – political directives, administrative reports, military manuals, and orders – which concern Islam.⁵²

While Motadel's plea is well-received, this dissertation reveals that colonial administrators drew upon a vast range of texts relating to their subject of inquiry. A brief scan of the census reports from 1869 to 1901 reveals citations of travellers such as Gifford Palgrave, missionaries such as Thomas Hughes and Edward Sells, court records and reports such as those composed by William Wilson Hunter in relation to the Wahhabi trials of the 1860s, historical scholarship such as Edward Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, anthropological works such as the *Qanoon-e-Islam*, and in the later years, the writings of Islamic modernists such as Sayyid Amir 'Ali and Muhammad Iqbal. How is the historian to approach the task of extracting some level of coherence from such a diverse field of sources? Cohn's model provides the most useful method by which to achieve this.⁵³

According to Cohn,

An investigative modality includes the definition of a body of information that is needed, the procedures by which appropriate knowledge is gathered, its ordering and classification, and then how it is transformed into usable forms such as published reports, statistical returns, histories, gazetteers, legal codes, and encyclopedias.⁵⁴

Cohn details a number of modalities, of which four are of central concern here. As we shall see, the "Historiographic Modality", described by Cohn as "the most complex, pervasive,

⁵² David Motadel, "Islam and the European Empires," *The Historical Journal* 55, no. 3 (2012): 855–856.

⁵³ Fucarro, "Knowledge at the Service of the British Empire," 21.

⁵⁴ Cohn, *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge*, 5.

and powerful” modality, underlined much official reportage on the question of Islam.⁵⁵ British officials frequently looked to orientalist historical scholarship relating to Islam and in particular its formative history in order to understand the schisms perceived to have been born in that period, a phenomenon that calls into question Christoph Bayly’s assertion that

It is an error to believe that textualised, learned orientalism ever acted widely or deeply on society, unless its intentions ran with the grain of indigenous ideas of particular bureaucratic requirements or panics. Few officials or soldiers knew or cared about orientalist ideas even in a vulgarised form.⁵⁶

Yet as Peter Gottschalk notes, “the significance of the epistemic order crafted under British rule cannot fully be appreciated by examining only the work of the major orientalists and metropolitan intellectuals...”⁵⁷ The “Observational/Travel Modality”, concerning “the creation of a repertoire of images and typifications that determined what was significant to the European eye,”⁵⁸ was utilized in order to obtain information of a contemporary nature relating to those elements of society under scrutiny. The accounts of travellers were especially valued where those elements existed in areas which the colonial state apparatus found difficult to penetrate. The “Enumerative Modality”,⁵⁹ represented most explicitly by the Census of India, needs little justification given the discussion up to this point, while the “Surveillance Modality”, the drawing-up of intelligence reports based primarily on information gleaned through informants,⁶⁰ was utilized for the purpose of monitoring those Muslims and Islamic movements regarded as potentially seditious, often with a view to using the information gleaned as evidence in court.

⁵⁵ See Ibid, 5-6.

⁵⁶ Bayly, *Empire and Information*, 168.

⁵⁷ Gottschalk, *Religion, Science, and Empire*, 8-9.

⁵⁸ Cohn, *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge*, 6-7.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 8.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 10-11.

These building-blocks of colonial knowledge relating to Islam were studied through the prism of the ‘official mind.’ Initially indicating a reflexive strategic concern on the part of British policymakers with the security of the lands dividing Great Britain from India,⁶¹ the term has come to be used more broadly, with Frank Heinlein defining it as

the sum of the ideas, perceptions and intentions of those policy-makers who had a bearing on imperial policies. The term ‘policy-maker’ designates politicians and civil servants who were responsible for or had a bearing on the development and execution of imperial policy.⁶²

The ‘official mind’ is a particularly valuable concept when it comes to the British approach and growing identification with Islam, sparked as we have seen by the security needs of British India and the growing awareness that the lands serving as a buffer between Calcutta and the European Russian plains were largely inhabited by a “great mass”⁶³ of Muslim peoples. This connection between the strategic impulses explicitly guiding imperial policy and the concern to understand as much as possible of the nature of the empire’s Muslim subjects means that a wide array of writings on the subject of Islam may fall within the spectrum of the ‘official mind’, which may even incorporate such writings as those published by the ostensibly ‘anti-imperialist’ Wilfrid Scawen Blunt. What is important here is that those men who expressed an instinctive concern for the idea of a Muslim world and its importance in terms of Britain’s imperial mission, were all engaged with each other in the task of constructing a coherent, comprehensible Islamic universe from all the diversity they encountered. While individually their opinions ranged far and wide, they shared a basic

⁶¹ Ronald Robinson, John Gallagher and Alice Denny, *Africa and the Victorians: The Official Mind of Imperialism* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015), 21 and John Darwin, “Imperialism and the Victorians: The Dynamics of Territorial Expansion,” *English Historical Review* 112, no. 447 (1997): 622-624.

⁶² Frank Heinlein, *British Government Policy and Decolonisation, 1945-1963: Scrutinising the Official Mind* (London; Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 2002), 7, f.n. 1.

⁶³ M. E. Yapp, “‘That Great Mass of Unmixed Mahomedanism’: Reflections on the Historical Links between the Middle East and Asia,” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 19, no. 1 (1992): 3-15.

set of assumptions regarding Islam as a religion, operated in a shared discursive environment in which knowledge of Islam's complexities was assumed, and all operated in the shared belief that the highest ideals of human civilization were, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, represented by the West, and in particular the British Empire.

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This dissertation will proceed in six chapters. I have chosen to order them thematically, largely in terms of the particular sect or movement under consideration, although within a broadly linear chronological logic. In doing so, I hope to give some sense of the style and order which typified the ethnographical and scholarly accounts of Islam produced across the empire in our period. If my language at times displays the influence of our Victorian subjects, then we may consider this an unintentional benefit for similar reasons. The first chapter will examine how the idea of Islamic 'orthodoxy' was shaped in the official mind of the first half of the nineteenth century. It will argue that a body of scholarly literature concerning the formative years of Islam was produced in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries which embedded the idea of Islam's essence as rigidly monotheistic. Transported to rural north India with the functionaries of empire, this idea was contrasted against the religious practices of the Muslim 'masses', whose continued adherence to apparently local Indian forms of 'popular religion' highlighted the Arabian origin of the early Islamic mission. While the Sufis were perceived as attempting to give a thin Islamic veneer to these heterodox devotional practices, their rivals, the 'ulama', with their emphasis on the texts and law as the basis for managing Islamic society, were privileged in the official mind with the category of 'orthodox', by extension projecting the label on to the Sunni community as a whole.

The second and third chapters examine how British officialdom incorporated perceived 'heterodoxy' into their nascent conceptual Islamic universe. Chapter two will begin by analysing scholarly conceptions of the Shi'a as the 'other' of the Sunnis, fulfilling the category of heterodox sect. Their commitment to monotheism was doubtful, their origins apparently Iranian rather than Arabian, and their legal traditions unsound. Yet as British officials in northern India increasingly encountered the Shi'a through the processes of colonial governance, they were re-imagined as a coherent, comprehensible religious minority, whose claims to legitimacy in Islamic terms formed the basis for the theoretically neutral approach taken to their religious traditions by the colonial state. Likewise, chapter three will examine the incorporation of the *Ahl-i-Hadis* into Britain's Islamic universe. As the wave of panic and suspicion relating to the trials of the 1860s and early 1870s rescinded, British official encounters with the so-called "Wahhabis" fuelled a shift in emphasis on the movement from a reactionary, bigoted, and seditious conspiracy to a legitimately Islamic sect with a genuinely reformist impulse, ultimately producing the *Ahl-i-Hadis*.

Chapter four will explore how the reformist or modernist trend associated with Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan of Aligarh came to be regarded in British circles as the measure by which other such movements, whether in India or elsewhere, were to be evaluated. It will argue that the project to put the principles of the reformist program into practice at the Aligarh College in the North-Western Provinces ultimately disappointed its enthusiastic adherents, as the persistence of orthodoxy - clouded in British minds by the passion they felt for the modernists - and the political pressures of late nineteenth and early twentieth century India, ensured that life at the College became subject to the various passions of the day. Chapter five will examine how this emphasis on reform was reflected in those great ethnographical projects in the service of empire, the Census of India and the Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf.

It will argue that the processes of enumeration and explanation combined with the enthusiasm for the prospect of reform to produce official analysis of the empire's Muslim population which was heavily weighted in favour of any movement expressing heterodox tendencies with the potential to reshape Islam for the advance of civilization.

The final chapter will examine the British official response to the appeal of pan-Islam. As imperial Britain struggled to find a symbolic means by which to legitimize their status as the world's predominant Muslim power, they searched for an individual or movement who could potentially fulfil the demands of orthodoxy in order to challenge the fraying status of the Ottoman caliphate, increasingly at odds with Britain from the late 1870s onward. By working in partnership with such a movement, they believed, they could assume its authority and affect reformative change within Islam in a way which would advance British interests. It will argue that, in fact, no such suitable candidate emerged, with the decline in Ottoman prestige leaving a political power vacuum in the Islamic world which Britain ultimately determined to fill herself.

1. Defining orthodoxy: The privileging of Sunnism

Writing in the Punjab Census Report for 1881, superintendent of census operations and long-time Punjab-based official Denzil Charles Jelf Ibbetson¹ attempted to distinguish the dominant Sunni tradition which seemed to prevail among the Muslims of his province from the various alternative forms of Punjabi Islam which the census enumeration process had unearthed. Turning to categories familiar to any British layperson, Ibbetson wrote:

It is probably not strictly correct to apply the term sect to the Sunni belief, as it represents the orthodox church of Islam, and apparently bears a somewhat similar relation to the Shiah and other schismatics as exists, among English Protestant Christians, between the Church of England and the Dissenting bodies.²

The association of “Sunni belief” with ‘orthodoxy’ was, by the 1880s, an almost unspoken assumption among British observers, and when expressed in official correspondence, usually accompanied by a reference to the four great Sunni legal schools, or *madhahib*, which together elaborated the system of Islamic law known as the shari‘a.³ Along with a discussion of the various doctrinal intricacies distinguishing these legal schools, such communications might also include acknowledgement of the Sunnis’ recognition of the authority of the first three successors of the Prophet Muhammad, the *Rashidun* or ‘rightly-guided’ caliphs,⁴ and perhaps mention their continued reverence for the Umayyad, Abbasid,

¹ By 1881 Ibbetson had been a settlement officer in the Punjab for ten years, a role in which he was responsible for assessing agricultural product in order to determine revenue demands. See Oxford Database of National Biography entry for Ibbetson, Sir Denzil Charles Jelf.

² Denzil Ibbetson, *Report on the Census of the Panjab taken on the 17th February 1881, Volume 1: Text and Appendices C and D* (Calcutta: Government Printing, 1883), 146, para 283. On the ‘church-sect’ dichotomy embodied in British official discourse, see Benton Johnson, “Church and Sect Revisited,” in *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 10, no. 2 (Summer, 1971): 124–137 and Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge, “Of Churches, Sects, and Cults: Preliminary Concepts for a Theory of Religious Movements,” in *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 18, no. 2 (Jun., 1979): 117–131.

³ See for example E. D. Maclagan, *Census of India, 1891. Volume XIX, The Punjab and its feudatories. Part I, The report on the census* (Calcutta, Government Printing, 1891), 189, para 133.

⁴ See for example A. Sankariah, *Report on the Census of Native Cochin* (Madras: Graves, Cookson and Co., 1877), 27.

and Ottoman caliphs who followed.⁵ This chapter will trace the privileging of these markers of Sunni doctrine in the official mind as the normative measure by which all the various expressions of the Islamic tradition encountered across the British Empire were evaluated. The identification of the Sunni tradition with orthodoxy had its origins in a set of assumptions regarding the nature of ‘true religion’ which had been produced during the Reformation era. As British scholars and officials attempted to come to terms with the diversity of doctrines, rituals, and characteristics they found among the increasingly large number of Muslim peoples they exercised authority over in the nineteenth century, they applied concepts and categories familiar to them from the reformed Christian tradition. Peter Harrison has traced the origins of British intellectual approaches to ‘the religions’ and the practice of comparative religion back to the immediate post-Reformation era:

The great revolutions in science and religion which took place in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries...paved the way for the development of a secular study of the religions, and equally importantly, of a concept ‘religion’ which could link together and relate the apparently disparate religious beliefs and practices found in the empirical ‘religions’.⁶

As Harrison shows, the very practice of comparing and contrasting, of measuring “the religions...against each other, or against some intellectualists criterion of truth”⁷ engendered the formation of concepts of what constituted true ‘religion’, worthy of investigation along the same lines as those pursued in order to come to terms with the dizzying array of minority Christian sects born in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.⁸ The results of these

⁵ *Census of the Bombay Presidency, 1872. Part II: General Report and Tables* (Bombay: Government Central Press, 1875), 77.

⁶ Peter Harrison, *'Religion' and the Religions in the English Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 2.

⁷ *Ibid*

⁸ *Ibid*, 3. Harrison argues that “The whole comparative approach to religion was directly related to confessional disputes within Christianity.”

engagements in comparison were not uniform, and could in certain interpretations reach broadly enough to incorporate even the most primordial forms of divinely-inspired devotion and ritual under the general rubric of 'the religions'.⁹ However, as Tomoko Masuzawa has shown, by the early nineteenth century four categories of religious truth had been established: "only one religion - the true one - was recognized; alongside it were two forms of deviance; and, as for the rest, they were nations bereft of religion altogether."¹⁰

Christianity and its deviant cousins Judaism and Islam were deemed

unique and proper to themselves because, presumably, they have developed as culturally and historically particular delineations, and because they were predicated on specific defining events or acts, usually associated with certain historical personages - founders, teachers, prophets, reformers.¹¹

Not only linear historical development, prophecy, and scripture, but monotheism in itself was considered a marker of a 'religion' legitimately open to scholarly inquiry through the same processes by which scholars had come to understand Christianity in the post-Reformation era, separating the three Abrahamic faiths from the remaining elements of humanity which remained mired in parochial superstition:

the most significant chasm among nations was between those who had knowledge of the one supreme deity and those who did not. The latter, whether they were those who had lamentably fled to the hills and to the "heath," clinging to their old bucolic ways at the advent of Christianity, or those who simply had the misfortune of having lived before the time of Christ, or those now inhabiting hinterlands still remote from the saving grace of the church, were all spiritual rustics, as yet untouched by the civilizing knowledge of Christianity. They did not have religion in the proper sense of the term, but in its place they had something that resembled it, a compensatory or consolatory substitute in the form of idolatry.¹²

⁹ Ibid, 163-169.

¹⁰ Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions*, 60.

¹¹ Ibid, 17-18.

¹² Ibid, 48-49.

This basic schism of mankind's religious heritage into the revealed and heathen traditions was reflected in a division of labour between the nascent academic discipline of anthropology and the more time-honoured field of orientalism:

If the society in question was small and "tribal" in its scale and lacked the technology of writing, it would be an object of study for anthropology. If on the other hand, the society happened to be a large-scale, regionally dominant kingdom or empire and had a long and illustrious written tradition, it would fall under the aegis of Orientalism.¹³

The revealed or Abrahamic religions, then, were the subject of orientalist inquiry, concerned as it was with the decipherment of texts relating to scripture and law, while the study of religious practice *as the British encountered it in reality*, was in theory to be left to the anthropologists. These basic measurements of religious 'truth' came to be applied to Islam and the schisms perceived to afflict it by nineteenth century British officials seeking to understand the religious heritage of their Indian subjects. They encouraged the association of such elements of religious enlightenment as monotheism and law with the forward march of human civilization, exemplified in history by the birth of Islam and its impact on the society of seventh-century Arabia, and today by Britain's imperial mission. In turn, these characteristics came to be regarded as 'orthodox'. They also produced orthodoxy's 'others', which were apparent everywhere the official mind cast its eye, serving to highlight the limits of orthodox Islam's civilizing impulse. In the rural regions of northern India and the Nile Valley, a vulgar, polytheistic backwardness was judged to have survived the conversion of the masses to Islam, casting doubt on the utility of Islam as a reformative force in the modern world.

¹³ Ibid, 15.

This chapter will examine those aspects of the nineteenth-century British official engagement with Islam which produced the association of Sunnism with Islamic orthodoxy. The first part will examine the approach to the historiography concerning the birth of Islam and the character of the Prophet Muhammad taken by several scholars who together laid the foundations for British official understandings of the nature of early Islam. It will argue that their writings, reflecting the assumption that the gift of monotheism represented an advancement in the religious, and by extension civilizational, life of pagan societies, produced a characterization of Muhammad's mission as an essentially reformist drive which facilitated the emergence of the Arabs as historical agents of civilization. The second part will examine the response of the British scholars and officials who carried this idea with them to the countryside of northern India to the general condition of religious life they encountered there. It will argue that the apparent prevalence in these rural areas of what they considered to be vulgar or primitive expressions of religious devotion and piety derived from local sources, most explicitly represented by Sufism, had the effect of linking Islamic orthodoxy with the particularly Arab environment which had produced the early Islamic mission. Furthermore, the anarchic, parochial nature of 'popular religion' in northern India brought a sharpened focus on Islamic law as an additional marker of orthodoxy. British engagement with Islamic law, as a means by which to bring order and some measure of civilization to the Indian Muslim masses, inevitably consolidated in the official mind the idea that these predominantly urban Sunni legal traditions constituted the most visible manifestation of Islamic orthodoxy on the Indian street.

* * * * *

The foundations of nineteenth-century British official understanding of Islamic history and doctrine were provided by a new wave of historical scholarship which had, since the

eighteenth century, attempted to make sense of Islam's place in human history. By that time, the prejudice and ignorance which had afflicted medieval European Christians attempting to come to terms with the existence of a rival monotheistic faith with similarly universalistic claims began to dissipate. Writers such as George Sale, who provided the first translation of the Qur'an into English,¹⁴ and the historian Edward Gibbon, whose *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*¹⁵ was required reading for any Oxbridge graduate whose career trajectory placed him in a position of authority over the subject peoples of the Empire,¹⁶ provided early examples of a new approach which conceptualized the rise of Islam not as the product of a devious imposter working on behalf of God's enemies, but as a human response to the specific historical conditions of seventh-century Arabia.¹⁷ Both works remained standard references for the study of early Islam in British official networks throughout the nineteenth century, as evidenced by the numerous citations scattered throughout official Government of India correspondence and publications such as the census reports and district gazetteers.¹⁸ Their status in these circles even attracted the attention of a

¹⁴ George Sale, *The Koran, Commonly called The Alcoran of Mohammed* (London: C. Ackers, 1734).

¹⁵ Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 8 Vols (London: 1821).

¹⁶ Ronald Hyam, *Understanding the British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 2. In reference to those sent to staff the diplomatic outposts of early twentieth-century Britain's Middle Eastern empire, Satia, *Spies in Arabia*, 80 argues that "Consuls' training in the classics did not merely build character; for those sent to the Middle East, it was seen as practical knowledge...Kipling's stories, Edward Gibbon's *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, and the works of Xenophon, Herodotus, and Thucydides were all regularly consulted for parallels with their own situation."

¹⁷ According to Bernard Lewis, "Gibbon's influence on the western perception of the prophet, Islam, and their place in history was enormous. From recondite and learned books, most of them in Latin and little known outside the narrow world of clerics and scholars, he was able to present a picture of the Prophet and the rise of Islam that was clear, elegant, and above all convincing. Most important of all was that unlike previous writers, including the Arabists, he saw the rise of Islam not as something separate and isolated, nor as a regrettable aberration from the onward march of the church, but as a part of human history, to be understood against the background of Rome and Persia, in the light of Judaism and Christianity, and in complex interplay with Byzantium, Asia, and Europe." See Bernard Lewis, "Gibbon on Muhammad," *Daedalus* 105, no. 3 (Summer, 1976): 100.

¹⁸ Among too many examples to list, see "Reports on Wahhabi Trials, 1872", Reily to Inspector-General of Police, 15th November 1870, no. 202ct. IOR/L/PJ/3/1281, British Library (BL), in which a police officer investigating the so-called 'Wahhabi' conspiracy in Bengal cited Gibbon in order to affirm the fealty of the Wahhabis to the orthodox Islamic tradition. For more on the Wahhabi investigations of this period, see chapter three. See also Maclagan, *Census of India 1891*, 187, para 131, which cites Sale and claims that "most subsequent writers seem to have drawn their information" from his translation of the Qur'an.

Muslim audience, with several notable reformist figures of late nineteenth century India expressing their approval of Gibbon's depiction of Muhammad and the early Islamic society.¹⁹ A collection of imitators emerged in the nineteenth century, to provide information regarding more specific details of the ebb and flow of Islamic history, and in some cases to provide accounts that came to be regarded as every bit as definitive as Gibbon's own. The best and most influential of these works were produced by the scholar-administrators Sir John Malcolm and Sir William Muir, who combined their role as functionary of empire with that of the supposedly disinterested orientalist. Malcolm's *History of Persia* and Muir's various historical accounts of the early Muslim community and dynasties retained an air of authority into the twentieth century.²⁰ They were supplemented by lesser works, some of them tired accounts of the rise and fall of the various Arab and Turkish dynasties which had dominated political life in the heartlands of Islam since the end of the seventh-century,²¹ others apologist biographies of the Prophet himself.²² While the impact of this last genre on the official discourse under examination here is rather less clear, the chapter on Muhammad by Thomas Carlyle in his *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* proved most

¹⁹ See for example Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, *A Series of Essays on the Life of Mohammed and Subjects Subsidiary Thereto* (London: Trubner & Co., 1870), xx–xxi and Syed Ameer Ali, *The Spirit of Islam, or The Life and Teachings of Mohammed* (Calcutta: S. K. Lahiri & Co., 1902), 274. For more on these men and their response to Western writings on Islam, see chapter four.

²⁰ Sir John Malcolm, *The History of Persia, from the most Early Period to the Present Time: Containing an Account of the Religion, Government, Usages, and Character of the Inhabitants of that Kingdom*, 2 Vols (London: John Murray, 1829), Sir William Muir, *The Life of Mahomet. With introductory chapters on the original sources for the biography of Mahomet, and on the pre-Islamite history of Arabia*, 4 Vols (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1861), and Sir William Muir, *The Caliphate: Its rise, decline, and fall. From original sources* (London: The Religious Tract Society, 1892). See Eric Stokes, *The English Utilitarians and India* (Delhi ; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 11, who notes that Malcolm's influence extended to the middle of the twentieth century, while as we shall see in chapter four, Muir's writings exercised a heavy influence on the late nineteenth/early twentieth-century consul-general in Cairo, Lord Cromer.

²¹ For example, Andrew Crichton, *The History of Arabia, Ancient and Modern*, 2 Vols (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1834) and Sir Edward S. Creasy, *History of the Ottoman Turks: From the Beginning of their Empire to the Present Time* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1878).

²² See Godfrey Higgins, *An Apology for the Life and Character of the Celebrated Prophet of Arabia, called Mohamed, or The Illustrious* (London: Bowland Hunter, 1829), Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (London: James Fraser, 1841), 67-124, and John Davenport, *An Apology for Mohammed and the Koran* (London: J. Davy & Sons, 1869). Inevitably, Carlyle, 77, depended on Sale for his study of the Qur'an, while Davenport, 11-13, cited Gibbon to support his characterization of the Prophet.

influential, helping to establish a favourable portrait of the Prophet that endures to the present-day.²³ Together, all these works, and many more produced by an assortment of orientalists, travellers, diplomats, and others,²⁴ constituted an authoritative body of knowledge on Islamic doctrine and history that could be referred to with a casual indifference which suggested that their attested status in the official mind was firmly established and taken for granted.

Such scholarly works, many of them sweeping accounts of a thousand years or more of various topics integral to the composition of a general history of Islam, tended to reflect the *whig* approach to history, exhibiting a concern with identifying a series of dramatized watershed moments held to explain sudden historical change rather than being understood as products of more complex, long-term developments; and with those individuals, trends or movements to be found throughout Islamic history which could be deemed to some degree ‘progressive’ or ‘enlightened’ - as the nineteenth century British historian would understand the idea - in contrast to those which could be classed as ‘reactionary’ or ‘bigoted’. Through the detection of such trends, the general course of Islamic history and the present-day conditions which the adherents of Islam found themselves in could be accounted for in terms instantly recognisable to the interested European observer.²⁵

²³ Devji, “Islam and British Imperial Thought,” 258.

²⁴ ‘Others’ would include two influential early-nineteenth century accounts of popular religious life in India. See Mrs. Meer Hasan Ali, *Observations on the Mussulmauns of India: Descriptive of their Manners, Customs, Habits, and Religious Opinions made during a Twelve Years Residence in their Immediate Society*, 2 vols (London: Parbury, Allen, and Co., 1832), and Jaffur Shurreef, *Qanoon-e-Islam, or the Customs of the Moosulmans of India; Comprising a Full and Exact Account of Their Various Rites and Ceremonies from the Moment of Birth till the Hour of Death. Translated by G. A. Herklots* (London: Parbury, Allen, and Co., 1832).

²⁵ For the classic critique of this approach, see Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1931).

A tendency to approve of the moral consequences of the triumph of Islam over the pre-Islamic Arabs of the *jahiliyya*²⁶ era coloured the general approach to the formative years of Muhammad's mission, constituting an acceptance of the standard narrative of the period presented in the Islamic historiography. The depiction of pre-Islamic Arabian society is uniformly negative and contemptuous across the sources. Sale described the Arabs of the early seventh-century Hijaz as engaging in "gross idolatry" consisting of "worshipping the fixed stars and planets, and the angels and their images, which they honoured as inferior deities, and whose intercession they begged, as their mediators with God."²⁷ Muhammad had "reclaimed his countrymen" by establishing a strictly monotheistic faith among them.²⁸ Citing Sale among others, Gibbon likewise described the faith and rituals of the pre-Islamic Arabs as constituting a form of "ancient idolatry" awash in superstition, and drew a comparison with the religions of India.²⁹ Conversely, the defining feature of the religion preached by Muhammad was freedom from "suspicion of ambiguity...the Koran is a glorious testimony to the unity of God."³⁰ The historian Andrew Crichton's *The History of Arabia* provides perhaps the most explicit example. Surveying the spiritual landscape of the Hijaz, Crichton found the pre-Islamic Arabs "addicted to superstition"³¹ and "grossly idolatrous"³², awash in a sea of paganism and Christian heresy, yet not wholly "ignorant of the unity and perfections of the Deity."³³ He believed the remoteness of Arabia had drawn the adherents of heretical Christian sects escaping persecution, and that these were readily embraced by local Arabs already languishing in a sea of absurd paganism.³⁴ The subsequent moral degradation, according to Crichton, provided conditions favourable to the emergence

²⁶ The Arab term for the "age of ignorance" which preceded Muhammad's mission.

²⁷ Sale, *The Koran*, 14-15.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 16.

²⁹ Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall*, vol 6, 266.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 279.

³¹ Crichton, *The History of Arabia*, vol. 1, 186.

³² *Ibid*, 190.

³³ *Ibid*, 191.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 196.

of the prophetic purifier of the original monotheistic creed, Muhammad, who specifically targeted the idolatrous practices of his fellow Arabs and worked to “restore the only true and primitive faith, such as it had been in the days of the patriarchs and prophets.” The essential element of this reform was its stress on the unity of God,

[a] principle thus simple and obvious, which no sect had ever denied, and which presented to reason nothing that it could not easily conceive, was a broad foundation for a popular and universal religion - an advantage which Mohammed fully appreciated.³⁵

That Muhammad was an opportunistic imposter of some sort, Crichton took for granted. Ultimately his appraisal did not grant any degree of divine inspiration or indeed progressive tendencies to the preaching of Islam beyond its role in diminishing what he clearly took for the lowest spiritual principles around which human life could organize. Indeed, his criticism of Muhammad extended to the prophet’s cunning embrace of some of the primitive pre-Islamic rituals cherished by the Arabs of Mecca.³⁶ Yet the civilizing, monotheistic element of Muhammad’s message proved crucial in shaping an evaluation which ultimately firmly embedded in the mind the image of Muhammad as a harbinger of dramatic change:

That, to a certain extent, Mohammed was a benefactor to his nation cannot be disputed. Gross and absurd as is the whole system of Islam, it possessed many principles in common with the true religion; and is, doubtless in every respect, far preferable to the degrading and monstrous idolatry which formed the ancient and prevailing creed of Arabia. It was a wise and humane jurisprudence that forbade the infant slave to be separated from the mother; that abolished the immolation of children to idols; and the barbarous system of burying females alive.³⁷

Others proved more willing to grant Muhammad and early Islam a rather more extensive endorsement. In his *History of Persia*, Sir John Malcolm argued that, in his combined role

³⁵ Ibid, 208 – 209.

³⁶ Ibid, 209.

³⁷ Ibid, 270 271.

of prophet and statesman, Muhammad had brought both spiritual and political unity to the Arabs, providing them with the means through which they could make their mark on history:

Mahomed was possessed of a graceful person, of ready eloquence, and of wisdom. In the state he found his country in, the means taken by this extraordinary man to propagate his doctrine and establish his power could hardly fail; and even his enemies must admit, that he entitled himself to the gratitude of his countrymen. The great majority of the Arabians, when he first proclaimed his mission, were ignorant idolaters, whose superstition was disgraced by the grossest and most inhuman usages. They were divided at home and despised abroad. By adopting his religion, they learnt to pay exclusive adoration to one true and only God; and they obtained a strength from that political union, which was the consequence of their common creed, that enabled them to become masters of the fairest portion of the globe.³⁸

Carlyle too viewed the embrace of Islam by the Arabs as a moment of “change and progress”,³⁹ describing their conversion as “a birth from darkness into light.”⁴⁰ Islam, according to him, embodied certain principles which could likewise be identified wholly with Christianity,⁴¹ representing a stage of human advancement which even the heretical Christian sects seventh-century Syria could not hope to emulate:⁴²

Out of all that rubbish of Arab idolatries, argumentative theologies, traditions, subtleties, rumours and hypotheses of Greeks and Jews, with their idle wire-drawings, this wild man of the Desert, with his wild sincere heart, earnest as death and life, with his flashing natural eyesight, had seen into the kernel of the matter.⁴³

Along with John Davenport, Carlyle mounted a fierce defence of Muhammad’s character, refuting the commonly made charges of cynicism, insincerity, intolerance, sensuality, violence, and blasphemy.⁴⁴ This apologist approach to the biography of Muhammad would

³⁸ Malcolm, *The History of Persia*, vol. 2, 234.

³⁹ Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic*, 67.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 123.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 91.

⁴² *Ibid*, 101.

⁴³ *Ibid*.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 70, 98-99. See also Davenport, *An Apology for Mohammed and the Koran*, 133-161.

find renewed life in the latter half of the nineteenth century. It is in the identification of early, pristine Islam with the reformist and civilizing tendencies associated with the triumph of monotheism over polytheism that we find the seeds of a discourse which developed in those decades, and which proposed that these tendencies represented the essence or spirit of Islam. Though a combination of Turkish militarism and legal conservatism may have suppressed this spirit through many centuries, the specific conditions of the late nineteenth century, it was argued, held the promise that it would once again be unleashed on the world, to humanity's benefit. We shall examine this discourse and its impact on the official mind in greater depth in chapter four. For now we may note that although none of the authors under consideration here went so far in their appraisal, they generally believed that the effect of Islam on the manners and behaviour of its sincere followers was beneficial, and that the Islamic system of governance represented a higher level of human advancement than the polytheistic societies the Arabs had conquered beyond Arabia. Three examples may suffice. The historian of the Ottoman Empire Sir Edward Creasy believed that the Turks' generally upstanding moral character was due, for the most part, to "the moral precepts of their creed, which ensures sobriety and cleanliness, as well as benevolence, integrity, and charity, among its true disciples."⁴⁵ The orientalist Edward Lane, author of perhaps the most comprehensive and influential nineteenth-century account of everyday life in a major Muslim city, Cairo, deeply admired the civilizing effect communal prayer appeared to exercise on Islam's adherents:

The utmost solemnity and decorum are observed in the public worship of the Muslims. Their looks and behaviour in the mosque are not those of enthusiastic devotion, but of calm and modest piety. Never are they guilty of a designedly irregular word or action during their prayers. The pride and fanaticism which they exhibit in common life, in intercourse with persons of their own, or of a different

⁴⁵ Creasy, *History of the Ottoman Turks*, 109.

faith, seem to be dropped on their entering the mosque, and they appear wholly absorbed in the adoration of their Creator; humble and downcast, yet without affected humility, or a forced expression of countenance.⁴⁶

Finally, the historian of early British India, James Mill, contrasted the impact of Islam in India with its pre-Islamic, Hindu society, concluding that the arrival of Islam in the subcontinent represented a moment of major progress, both in terms of manners and governance. Regarding the former, he found the Muslims of India remarkably advanced:

The principal portion of the manners of the Hindus was founded upon the cruel and pernicious distinction of castes: A system of manners proceeding, like that of the Mohammedans, upon the supposition of the natural equality of mankind, constituted such a difference in behalf of all that is good for human nature, as it is hardly possible to value too high.⁴⁷

In their religious rituals too, Muslim practices had the effect of highlighting the backwardness of their Hindu neighbours, whose ceremonies Mill described as “tormenting and detestable.”⁴⁸ In fact, Islam as a monotheistic faith was vastly preferable to that of the Hindus – its scripture was more rational, its heritage more recognizably biblical.⁴⁹ Government and society in medieval Hindu India, which Mill believed had been dominated by an abusive and parasitic priestly caste, had benefited from the arrival of Islam, by which this caste was relegated to a largely peripheral role, stripped of political power and influence.⁵⁰ “[Human] nature in India gained,” according to Mill, “and gained very considerably, by passing from a Hindu to a Mohammedan government.”⁵¹

⁴⁶ Edward William Lane, *An Account of The Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* (London: John Murray, 1860), 83-84.

⁴⁷ James Mill, *The History of British India, 6 vols* (London: James Madden and Co., 1840), vol. 2, 516.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 516-517.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 515-516.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 488-490.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 485.

Not every author, however, was willing to accept such a characterization of the impact of Islam on the world. The scholar-administrator Sir William Muir believed that while Islam may have had some utility, particularly in its early years, in helping to spread the monotheistic message and with it the benefits of a very limited form of civilization, somewhere along the line it had stagnated and stopped being a progressive force in this world. Essentially, Islam's role in the steady advancement of humanity had ended, at the latest, at some point in the thirteenth century, the point at which Muir concluded his *History of the Caliphate*. Muir's history of Muhammad and the early Muslim community also provides a counterweight to many of the assumptions embodied in the collection of works addressed above. While acknowledging the debased state of religious life in Arabia on the eve of Muhammad's mission,⁵² he argued that Islam had in fact incorporated rather than reformed much of the pre-Islamic paganistic tradition, over-laying it with elements of the monotheistic message so as to leave it less vulnerable to the call of Christianity:

the idolatry of Mecca had formed a compromise with Judaism, and had admitted enough of its semi-scriptural legends, and perhaps of its tenets also, to steel the national mind against the appeal of Christianity. Idolatry, simple and naked, is comparatively powerless against the attacks of reason and the Gospel; but, joined and aided in some measure of truth, it can maintain its ground against the most urgent efforts of human persuasion.⁵³

There was some progress affected by this change, Muir grudgingly admitted; but beyond Arabia, Islam could not hope to equal the achievements birthed by the doctrines and morality

⁵² "The people were sunk in superstition, cruelty, and vice. It was a common practice for the eldest son to marry his father's widows inherited as property with the rest of the estate. Pride and poverty had introduced among them, as it has among the Hindus, the crime of female infanticide. Their religion consisted in gross idolatry, and their faith was rather the dark superstitious dread of unseen beings, whose goodwill they sought to propitiate, and to avert their displeasure, than the belief in an over-ruling Providence. The Life to come and Retribution of good and evil were, as motives of action, practically unknown." Muir, *The Life of Mahomet*, vol. 2, 270.

⁵³ *Ibid*, vol. 1, ccxxxvi.

of Christianity, or even Judaism.⁵⁴ At its best, Islam had succeeded in establishing a disciplined, law-and-order run political regime – Muir was an admirer of the Umayyad dynasty, seen as austere, strict, and ethnically pure.⁵⁵ In particular, he lauded the Caliph ‘Umar II, known as a just and pious governor, who he described with a warmth he did not extend to the Prophet himself:

It is a relief, amidst bloodshed, intrigue, and treachery, to find a Caliph devoted to what he believed the highest good both for himself and for his people. The saint might be morbid, over-scrupulous, and bigoted; but there are few, if any, throughout this history, whose life leaves a more pleasing impression on the reader's mind than that of Omar.⁵⁶

In a final evaluation of Islam’s impact on the world, however, Muir concluded that whatever benefits it had brought were “outweighed by its evils”, which included polygamy, divorce, slavery, and conformism in religion. Perhaps most importantly for the evangelical, missionary-minded Muir, Islam had prevented the spread of Christianity throughout much of Asia and Africa.⁵⁷

By the middle of the nineteenth century, the men who staffed the British Empire in those lands which had previously being governed under Muslim rule increasingly sought means by which to understand the religion of their Muslim subjects. In this endeavour, they typically fell back on a body of scholarship concerning Islam which had enshrined a set of basic assumptions regarding the essentially monotheistic nature of the early Islamic religion and its generally reformatory impact on the polytheistic societies in which it was introduced.

⁵⁴ Ibid, vol, 2, 272.

⁵⁵ See Avril A. Powell, “Modernist Muslim Responses to Christian Critiques of Islamic Culture, Civilization, and History in Northern India,” in *Christians, Cultural Interactions, and India's Religious Traditions*, ed. Judith M. Brown and Robert Eric Frykenberg (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002), 82-83.

⁵⁶ Muir, *The Caliphate*,

⁵⁷ Ibid, vol. 4, 321.

Monotheism, then, was considered one of the defining essences of Islam. By bringing a moralistic, monotheistic creed with a distinctly legalistic program to pagan societies across Africa and Asia, Islam, it was believed, had offered millions at least a partial path out of idolatry and barbarism. Yet as we shall in the following section, British officials on the ground in these regions noted that it was a path that, for the most part, the rural masses had chosen not to take. As they scanned the rural districts of northern India and elsewhere, these officials struggled to identify a coherent faith which resembled the monotheistic, puritanical, and unitarian religion described in the histories of early Islam and associated with the character of the Prophet Muhammad and his birthplace, Arabia.

* * * * *

A distaste for the religious practices of the countryside had characterized British attitudes towards so-called ‘popular religion’ since at least the seventeenth century. According to Keith Thomas, “[it] was as common in Elizabethan England for the social elites to profess contempt for vulgar ‘superstitions’ as it had been in Augustan Rome.”⁵⁸ Magic and superstition were associated with rural areas as yet untouched by the industrializing, forward march of modernity, where men and women found themselves at the mercy of the forces of nature.⁵⁹ As one report from Lincolnshire noted in 1856, “Those who are not in daily intercourse with the peasantry can hardly be made to believe or comprehend the hold that charms, witchcraft, wise men and other like relics of heathendom have upon the people.”⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in popular beliefs in sixteenth and seventeenth century England* (York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 646.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 663-664. “In fact,” notes Thomas, “it is not obvious that magic was essentially agrarian. On the contrary, the evidence of other societies suggests that crafts and simple manufacturing techniques can acquire a good deal of mystery for the uninitiated.” As Nile Green, *Bombay Islam: The Religious Economy of the West Indian Ocean, 1840–1915* (Leiden: Cambridge University Press, 2011) argues, the devotional practices typically associated with rural life not only survived but thrived in industrializing, late nineteenth and early twentieth century Bombay.

⁶⁰ Quoted in *ibid*, 666.

Devotional rituals involving such mediums evoked the paganism that had dominated spiritual life in pre-Christian Europe and was believed to have lingered on in the peripheral areas of civilized life. Thomas Carlyle provided a memorable critique of the appeal of paganism from the vantage-point of the cultured Victorian gentleman:

Surely it seems a very strange-looking thing this Paganism; almost inconceivable to us in these days. A bewildering, inextricable jungle of delusions, confusions, falsehoods, and absurdities, covering the whole field of life there. A thing that fills us with astonishment, almost, if it were possible, with incredulity, - for truly it is not easy to understand that sane men could ever calmly, with their eyes open, believe and live by such a set of doctrines. That men should have worshipped their poor fellow-man as a God, and not him only, but stocks and stones, and all manner of animate and inanimate objects; and fashioned for themselves such a distracted chaos of hallucinations by way of Theory of the Universe: all this looks like an incredible fable. Nevertheless it is a clear fact that they did it.⁶¹

Such prejudice migrated to the plains of northern India with the British officials whose job it was in the second half of the nineteenth century to account for the religious allegiances of imperial Britain's Indian subjects. There, they developed a critique of Indian religious life which contrasted sharply with the image of the puritanical, fiercely monotheistic Islam of seventh-century Arabia. In its most simple form, this critique expressed the idea that the devotional practices of rural India did not constitute a form of religion at all. As one survey of the Meerut district of the North-Western Provinces in the 1870s put it, "the great mass of the people is without any religion of any kind."⁶² The General Report on the Census of India for 1891 offered a relatively sophisticated account of the essential nature of religious belief in India, identifying elements of what it described as the "very earliest stages of organized Animism"⁶³ in all the religious traditions present in the country. The primary purpose of

⁶¹ Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic*, 5.

⁶² Edwin T. Atkinson, *Statistical, descriptive and historical account of the North-Western Provinces of India. Vol. 2: Meerut Division, Part 1* (Allahabad, 1875), 191.

⁶³ Quoting the Dutch scholar Cornelius Tiele, the report defined animism as "the belief in the existence of souls or spirits, of which only the powerful - those on which man feels himself dependent, and before which

devotion and ceremony in this context was, according to this argument, “to get power over the spirits by magic, and, in a higher stage of belief, to propitiate them by gifts or homage.”⁶⁴ The Punjab Census Report of 1901 provided a lengthier explanation of popular religion, beginning by offering a definition of religion as “a propitiation or conciliation of *powers superior to man* which are believed to direct and control the course of nature and human life.”⁶⁵ True religion was held to embody some sort of universal ethical or moral code, a feature of popular religious life in India that was, regretfully, sorely absent.⁶⁶ The actual nature of popular religion in India was difficult to define with one word:

We have no word to express the mass of beliefs and customs which adherence to a religious system involved in India, because we have nothing precisely corresponding to it in modern Europe, and so we must be content to use the word religion as defined above and bear in mind all it implies...It is difficult to express in every-day language the vague mass of ideas which go to make up the religious beliefs of the people. In a system of religion where innumerable superstitions, magic, and various quasi-physiological ideas all find a place, there is little room for a scheme of ethics, and it may be said that in India popular religion has rather less to do with morality than with anything else.⁶⁷

In this conception of spiritual life, human fortunes were inextricably tied to a collection of material phenomena, emptying lives of their moral content, and creating a void to be inevitably filled by the caste of cynical, manipulative holy men and bigoted priests.⁶⁸ In every tradition, the report argued, there existed a tension between the dependence on such men to act as mediators - and by extension for their priestly status to be passed on to a

he stands in awe – acquire the rank of divine beings, and become objects of worship. These spirits are conceived as moving freely through earth and air, and, either of their own accord, or because conjured by some spell, and thus under compulsion, appearing to men (*Spiritism*)." J. A. Baines, *Census of India 1891: General Report* (London: 1893), 157.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ H. A. Rose, *The Punjab, its feudatories, and the North-West Frontier Province. Part 1: Report on the Census* (Simla, 1902), 159, para 62.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 160.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

designated successor - and a more “rationalistic spirit”, to be found in India, it was argued, “among the Sunnis...and among the Sikhs.”⁶⁹ In the effort to identify the exemplar of this vulgar popular religion in India, the hammer fell heavily on Hinduism. The Census Report for Bengal of 1881 claimed that while the Sikhs, Muslims, Jews, Parsis, Christians, Buddhists, and Jains all embodied a certain individuality which marked them as recognizable religious traditions,

the remaining religions [i.e. the various Hindu traditions] shade into each other by such imperceptible gradations, and are separated by such impalpable partitions, that it is impossible to say where one ends and the other commences: so that the border land between each one and the next is a misty valley, now widening and now narrowing, but always thick with the exaltation of ignorance and the fogs of doubt.⁷⁰

Thirty years later, the Census Report for the United Provinces claimed that, in contrast to the Muslims, Christians and ‘Aryas’ (by which was meant the reformed Hinduism of the Arya Samaj),⁷¹ Hindus had no creed, and would remain on the lowest rung of India’s hierarchical religious ladder until Hinduism’s inevitable extinction at the hands of the more vibrant, reformative faiths.⁷²

The Indian masses, British officials believed, were steeped in superstition, idolatry, and ignorance, a state which left them at the mercy of fraudulent *fakirs* and *sadhus*, professional holy men utilizing their particular criminal talents or deified heritage to take advantage of the peasantry. This was even believed to be the case among those sections of the population which had converted to Islam over the centuries, but who, it appeared, had never truly

⁶⁹ Ibid, 164-165.

⁷⁰ J. A. Bourdillon, *Report on the Census of Bengal, 1881* (Calcutta, 1883), 71, para 177.

⁷¹ On the Arya Samaj, see Kenneth W. Jones, *Arya dharm: Hindu consciousness in 19th-century Punjab* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1976).

⁷² E. A. H. Blunt, *Census of India, 1911. Volume XV: United Provinces of Agra and Oudh, Part 1 – Report* (Allahabad, 1912), 143-144, para 172.

surrendered their commitment to the rituals and absurdities of their ancestral creed. This was acknowledged already in the authoritative 1832 publication the *Qanoon-e-Islam, or the Customs of the Moosulmans of India*, an early anthropological account of Muslim religious life in southern India compiled by a Muslim informant named Ja‘far Sharif, and translated by his associate, an army surgeon named Dr. Gerhard Andreas Herklots.⁷³ Many of the customs described in the book, according to Herklots, “will be discovered to have been borrowed from the Hindoos.”⁷⁴

This insight came to dominate British thinking on the subject of Muslim religious life in northern India, eventually becoming embedded in official discourse through the census reports. In his account of the spiritual life of Sindh, along the Indus Valley south of the Punjab, the explorer Richard Burton found much evidence to vindicate his theory that a newly imposed religion could never quite overcome the legacy of that which it had ostensibly replaced:

In most countries, civilized or uncivilized, the traveller and ethnologist may remark that when a new religion has raised itself upon the ruins of an old and cultivated form of worship, the intruder is compelled to borrow much from its predecessor. Indeed it may be doubted, to judge from general experience, if the spirit of the latter ever departs...So it is with Islam. Conceived and born in the deserts of the Arab, it went forth conquering and to conquer. But when the excitement of battling and plundering had passed away, and the converts had the time and opportunity to insert a few of their old tenets and traditions into the system of Monotheism, violently thrust upon them, Islam began to feel and show the effects.⁷⁵

⁷³ As Sylvia Vatuk has noted, by the 1860s the *Qanoon* was regarded as a “standard work” on Indian Muslim customs. See Sylvia Vatuk, “Shurreef, Herklots, Crooke, and Qanoon-e-Islam: Constructing an Ethnography of ‘The Moosulmans of India’”, *South Asia Research* 19, no. 1 (1999): 5. In fact, in his introduction Herklots explicitly stated that the work was intended primarily for the use of “gentlemen in the service of the Honourable East-India Company generally; and in particular, all military officers serving in India.” Shurreef, *Qanoon-e-Islam*, ix.

⁷⁴ Shurreef, *Qanoon-e-Islam*, xi.

⁷⁵ Richard F. Burton, *Sindh, and the race that inhabit the valley of the Indus; with notices of the topography and history of the province* (London: W. H. Allen & Co., 1851), 172-173.

Meanwhile the army officer Aubrey O'Brien, author of an influential article on the saints of the Punjab, argued that the Muslims of the Indus Valley region were

singularly lax and-unobservant of the ordinances of their faith...[the] tribes are still very much linked with the Hinduism they once professed, but all alike are sunk in the most degrading superstition, and are in the most abject submission to their spiritual pastors or Pirs.⁷⁶

Former Lieutenant-Governor of the North-Western Provinces John Strachey wrote in 1894 that the religious life of the majority of the Muslims of India hardly differed from the Hindus they lived alongside, remarking that this was likely due to the fact that most of them were the descendants of Hindu converts. Conversely, those Muslims descended from the original Muslim invaders of India expressed “more or less orthodoxy [in] the tenets of their faith.”⁷⁷ Since arriving in India, then, the pristine, puritanical, monotheistic, and egalitarian Islam of the Arabian peninsula had been diluted and transformed beyond recognition by the encounter with Hinduism and the base forms of popular religion to be found throughout the Indian countryside.⁷⁸ This characterization of Islam in rural India became embedded in those products of the watchful colonial state, the provincial census reports of India and the district gazetteers.⁷⁹ The census report for the North-Western Provinces in 1872 remarked that “[in] these Provinces the impress of the Hindoo religion has left its mark on the invader as well as the aboriginal tribes and castes; and we find instances of the descendants of Mahomedan

⁷⁶ Aubrey O'Brien, “The Mohammedan Saints of the Western Punjab”, *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 41 (Jul. - Dec., 1911): 509. Nile Green, *Islam and the Army in Colonial India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), xv, defines a *pir* as an “‘old man’; a spiritual elder or patriarch; a holy man.”

⁷⁷ Sir John Strachey, *India* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co., 1894), 237-238.

⁷⁸ It seems not to have occurred to our Indian officials that, perhaps, much which appeared superstitious and idolatrous in Indian Muslim practice could, in fact, be found in the Islamic world beyond India, in some cases embedded within the normative Islamic tradition. For example, Lane, *An Account of The Manners and Customs*, 222-236, gives an lengthy account of the superstitions of Muslim Egypt, commenting, 222, that “The Arabs are a very superstitious people; and none of them are more so than those of Egypt. Many of their superstitions form a part of their religion, being sanctioned by the Kur-an.”

⁷⁹ For more on which, see chapter five.

converts, who embraced the Mahomedan faith often at the edge of the sword, retaining Hindoo customs and adhering to observances and ceremonies which are purely Hindoo.”⁸⁰ Thirty-five years later, we find a remarkably similar statement in the Imperial Gazetteer of India of 1907, which claimed that “[in] the rural districts Islam has been largely affected by its Hindu environment. If it has gained some converts from Hinduism, it has borrowed from it many of those practices which distinguish it from the original faith of Arabia.”⁸¹ This emphasis on Arabia as the origin of the original, uncontaminated Islamic creed, can be found throughout such reports, with the Bombay census report of 1881 arguing that

[though] an exotic, and not indigenou, Muhammadanism has since its original introduction, suffered so many variations...that it has acquired, at least in this Presidency, a specially local character, differing considerably from that promulgated from Arabia.⁸²

Meanwhile, the General Report of 1891 concluded that “[it] is thus plain that in India the religion of the Prophet is in practice by no means the uncompromising Puritanism it is found to be in, say, Arabia, whatever may be the theoretical identity of the two forms.”⁸³ Muslims were generally ignorant of their own religion,⁸⁴ the exception being those elements of the population whose ancestry was claimed to be foreign. These the British categorized along caste lines, dividing them into Sayids, Pathans, Shaikhs, and Mughals, the first of whom could trace their heritage back to the Prophet’s family.⁸⁵ The rest were Muslims “in little but name” while “the villager...is still a very bad Musalman.”⁸⁶ The hold of Islam on the masses

⁸⁰ W. C. Plowden, *Census of the N. W. Provinces, 1872. Vol. 1: General Report* (Allahabad, 1873), xx.

⁸¹ James Sutherland Cotton, *The Imperial Gazetteer of India: The Indian Empire, Vol I – Descriptive* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907), 435.

⁸² J. A. Baines, *Imperial Census of 1881: Operations and Results in the Presidency of Bombay, including Sind* (Bombay, 1882), 48.

⁸³ Baines, *Census of India 1891*, 169.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ See Peter Hardy, *The Muslims of British India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1872), 6-7.

⁸⁶ Ibbetson, *Report on the Census of the Panjab*, 142.

was not entirely superficial, however. British officials discerned two contrasting, competing responses to the problem. One response took the form of Sufism, the mystical approach to Islam's engagement with God⁸⁷ which was perceived to incorporate and adapt the Indian element of religious devotion within a broad Islamic fold, stamping them with the prestige associated with each particular order's founder. The other response was perceived to emerge from the 'ulama' (sing. *'ālim*), the guardians of Islam's legal tradition, who rejected and worked to erase those practices they believed to be prohibited by Islamic law. In this division, the 'ulama' were believed to reflect the orthodox tendencies associated with the early age of Islam, while their Sufi counterparts were perceived as promoting a form of devotion with little basis in the Islamic tradition, but inspired by a range of esoteric influences, both India and foreign.

In nineteenth century British India, several major Sufi orders (*turuq*, sing. *tariqa*)⁸⁸ with a heritage stretching back to various figures associated with the arrival of Islam in the subcontinent, were believed to dominate rural devotional life among northern Indian Muslims. At the shrines dedicated to the exalted holy men of the fabled past which dotted the rural landscape along the Indus and its tributaries, the men of the fraternities organized public ceremonial expressions of piety, collected donations for the maintenance of the property, and provided a sense of parochial belonging for an illiterate population who regarded them with awe. While this awe was primarily due to the holy men's spiritual and

⁸⁷ As Moin Ahmad Nizami has noted, Sufism, or *tasawwuf*, "encompasses such a diversity of spiritual aspirations and experiences that it is difficult to assign one definition to it...[it] is generally understood as that aspect of Islam which explores its spiritual dimensions... Sufism is a spiritual quest for the inner truth and reality of the teachings of Islam, which, as the Sūfīs hold, can be best understood when experienced. It is insight into the manifestations of nature, religious rites, and beliefs, and finally into one's own soul, that is termed as *tasawwuf*." See Moin Ahmad Nizami, *Reform and Renewal in South Asian Islam: The Chishti-Sabris in 18th—19th Century North India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 31.

⁸⁸ For a list of those active in the late nineteenth century Punjab, see Rose, *The Punjab, its feudatories, and the North-West Frontier Province*, 146, para 46.

intellectual link to the order's founder, stretching back through the centuries via the master-student relationship by which mystical knowledge was transmitted through the generations,⁸⁹ by the eighteenth century these men had also established themselves as the major land-owning class of these rural regions.⁹⁰ Thus, while disapproving of the boisterous nature of the rituals associated with the shrine culture, British authorities in these regions soon found these functionaries useful as local intermediaries for the maintenance of order and the air of legitimacy which could be derived from patronage of a particular shrine.⁹¹ However, although the major Sufi orders underwent a relatively sobering reformist program during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries,⁹² British authorities never seriously considered them in terms of Islam; rather, a search for the foreign, non-Islamic origins of Sufism dominated British scholarly discussion on the matter, fuelling the belief in its basic heterodoxy.

An early assessment was made by the famed scholar of Sanskrit William Jones, who believed that the Sufi mode of religious devotions appeared to have been derived from “the Indian philosophers of the Vedanta school.”⁹³ A more extensive treatment from an author named James William Graham, who was guided in his work by Sir John Malcolm and described as “Linguist to the 1st Battalion of the 6th Regiment of Bombay Native Infantry”,

⁸⁹ See Nizami, *Reform and Renewal in South Asian Islam*, 39-40.

⁹⁰ Barbara Daly Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860-1900* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), 25-26

⁹¹ See David Gilmartin, *Empire and Islam: Punjab and the Making of Pakistan* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co, 1988), 46-49 and Nile Green, *Sufism: A Global History* (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 194-195. In Egypt too, British authorities derived legitimacy through the maintenance of good relations with the major Sufi figures of the country. For example, following the occupation of the country in the summer of 1882, ‘Abd al-Baqi al-Bakri, the supreme head of Egypt’s sufi orders, threw a banquet for Sir Garnet Wolseley, commander of British forces. See F. De Jong, “The Şūfi Orders in Egypt During the ‘Urābī Insurrection and the British Occupation (1882-1914): Some Societal Factors Generating Aloofness, Support, and Opposition”, *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt* 21 (1984), 131.

⁹² See Nizami, *Reform and Renewal in South Asian Islam*, *passim*, and Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India*, 27-28.

⁹³ Sir William Jones, *The Works of Sir William Jones*, 6 vols (London: G.G and J. Robinson, 1799), vol. 1, 445.

expressed some agreement,⁹⁴ while also noting apparent Greek and Christian influences on Sufi doctrine.⁹⁵ Burton, while travelling through Sindh mid-century, also noted “a wonderful resemblance between Tasawwuf [Sufism] and the Vedantic system”, but warned that similar modes of devotion may be found “among similar races, in similar climates, and under similar circumstances.”⁹⁶ Later in the century, works by scholars such as the Iranologist Edward Granville Browne detailed several alternative theories. The first, which Browne acknowledged carried little weight with European scholars, was that Sufism represented the genuine “esoteric doctrine” of Muhammad himself. The second located Sufism’s impulse in an Aryan protest against Semitic religion, derived either from Iran or India. The third theory, the brainchild of the Arabist Reynold A. Nicholson and approved of by Browne, identified “neo-Platonist influence”, while the final theory held that Sufism developed independently and spontaneously.⁹⁷

Whatever the origins of Sufism, its impact on the lives of its more humble practitioners was regarded as degrading. Burton offered a scathing critique of life at the shrines, describing the corruption of the *pirs* who “openly transgress the orders of their faith...celibacy, continence, penance, and religious disciplines are dispensed with after they arrive at a certain pitch of holiness.”⁹⁸ These men manipulated their ignorant, fanatical devotees for monetary gain, with the result that the “disciples sink capital in a speculation that can never pay in this world; and besides their monetary loss, they throw away all chance of moral

⁹⁴ James William Graham, “A Treatise on Sufiism, or Mahomedan Mysticism,” *Transactions of the Literary Society of Bombay* (1819), 92.

⁹⁵ *Ibid*, 92-93.

⁹⁶ Burton, *Sindh*, 199-200.

⁹⁷ Edward Granville Browne, *A Literary History of Persia: From the Earliest Times until Firdawsi* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1909), 418-421. For Nicholson’s theories, see Reynold A. Nicholson, “A Historical Enquiry concerning the Origin and Development of Sufiism, with a List of Definitions of the Terms ‘Šúfi’ and ‘Tašawwuf,’ Arranged Chronologically,” *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* (Apr., 1906): 303-348.

⁹⁸ Burton, *Sindh*, 206-207.

improvement.”⁹⁹ For Sir John Malcolm, however, the most pressing problem with Sufism was its lax approach to the central tenets of Islam, a product of its shallow content:

There can be no doubt that [the Sufis’] free opinions on [Islam’s] dogmas, their contempt for its forms, and their claim to an immediate communion with the Deity, are all calculated to subvert that belief for which they outwardly profess their respect; their progress has consequently been deemed synonymous with that of infidelity...Every where it professes to be adverse to error and superstition, but exists by the active propagation of both.¹⁰⁰

A final point must be made on the response of British observers to Sufism. From as early as Graham’s article in 1819, it was noted that adherents of Sufism appeared to be locked in a battle for the soul of Islam with their scholarly counterparts, the ‘ulama’. This sharp dichotomy¹⁰¹ left little space in the official mind for consideration of the overlap that might exist between the two apparently opposing approaches to the question of Muslim devotional life in India.¹⁰² According to Graham, the Sufis disengaged from “all temporal concerns and worldly pursuits”, an approach to spirituality which put them at odds with the daily obedience to a variety of regulations laid down in Islamic law, the shari‘a.¹⁰³ “The Sufi,” according to a quote provided by Graham,

⁹⁹ Ibid, 207.

¹⁰⁰ Malcolm, *History of Persia*, vol. 2, 266-267.

¹⁰¹ As M. Reza Pirbhai, notes, this basic binary division has long existed in scholarly discourse relating to the nature of Islamic devotion, although expressed through a number of different terms – orthodox vs heterodox, scripturalist vs pietistic, ‘high’ vs ‘folk’, shari‘a-minded vs sufi. Pirbhai’s own contribution to the debate is the introduction of the “sober” vs the “intoxicated” paths. See M. Reza Pirbhai, *Reconsidering Islam in a South Asian Context* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 4-5 and *passim*.

¹⁰² In fact, as Barbara Metcalf has shown, the ‘ulama’ of British India were deeply embedded in the institutional world of Indian Sufism. See Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India*, 31-32, 157-197. Likewise, in Cairo, where “every man...was a member of at least one Sufi brotherhood”, the ‘ulama’ often held official positions in the Sufi hierarchy. See Afaf Lutfi Al-Sayyid Marsot, “The Ulama of Cairo in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries,” in *Scholars, Saints, and Sufis: Muslim Religious Institutions in the Middle East since 1500*, ed. Nikki R. Keddie (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 150-151.

¹⁰³ Graham, “A Treatise on Sufiism, or Mahomedan Mysticism”, 90-91. While I am aware that it is no longer considered accurate to describe the shari‘a in these terms, I do so here to reflect how British officialdom of the nineteenth century understood the term.

has no religion, on account of his non-observance of the rites, forms, or ceremonies of any religion – so says the Mahomedan lawgiver, who...enacted laws, rites, and forms, and followed them himself as an example to others.¹⁰⁴

For the Reverend Edward Sell, an Anglican missionary who wrote widely on Islam in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the ‘ulama’ were the “great enemies” of the Sufi *turuq*. Though both factions were deeply opposed to any currents of progressive change that might infiltrate Muslim societies, the Sufi orders looked to their charismatic spiritual guides for leadership, while the ‘ulama’ referred back to the law and scripture,¹⁰⁵ which they saw as the sources of the orthodox faith.¹⁰⁶

This British identification of law with orthodoxy was not merely a product of the ‘ulama’'s face-off with the Sufi orders. As Shahab Ahmed has argued, the modern state has been conceptualized as a “law state”, with a textually-derived legal tradition conceived as one of the markers of modernity, and by extension, civilization.¹⁰⁷ This helped produce in British minds what he refers to as the “legal-supremacist” conceptualization of Islam, whereby the law defined Islam’s essence, and hence its orthodoxy.¹⁰⁸ As M. Reza Pirbhai has noted, this “essentialization of doctrinal Islam” has pervaded orientalist discourse regarding Islam right up to the modern day.¹⁰⁹ In nineteenth-century British circles, it went largely unquestioned. The ‘ulama’ were those whose essential function in Islamic society was to develop understanding of the functional demands of God’s word, as revealed in the Qur’an, through

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 101.

¹⁰⁵ Rev. Canon Edward Sell, *The Religious Orders of Islam* (London: Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, Kent & Co., 1908), 1.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 9.

¹⁰⁷ Ahmed, *What is Islam?*, 530-531.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 120.

¹⁰⁹ Pirbhai, *Reconsidering Islam in a South Asian Context*, 337.

interpretation of the four sources of the shari‘a.¹¹⁰ In India, they had traditionally associated themselves with central state authority in order to exert a measure of influence; the waning of that authority during the eighteenth century left them searching for an independent means by which to retain their status as the guardians of the faith.¹¹¹ This eventually led to the establishment of major madrasas, or schools of learning, across northern India, first at the Firangi Mahal in Lucknow in the eighteenth century, and later at Deoband in the North-Western Provinces in the nineteenth century. British administrators of this era, determined to maintain the image of a disinterested, neutral colonial state when it came to matters of religion, pursued a policy based on offering each religious community arbitration in civil affairs according to their own legal traditions. In this endeavour, the ‘ulama’ initially proved useful, providing the expertise required to elaborate the system which eventually evolved into Anglo-Muhammadan Law. This process, however, involved the codification of what British authorities believed to be the most authentic, ‘orthodox’, interpretations of the law; in effect, the British colonial state took responsibility for imposing its conception of orthodoxy on its Muslim subjects.¹¹² Yet the shari‘a had, in fact, been an altogether more fluid concept, designed to be adapted to any number of circumstances unforeseen and unaccounted for in a codified, unchanging text.¹¹³ As the process got seriously underway, such texts were inevitably produced. Several of them became standard works to be referred

¹¹⁰ The Qur’an, hadith (traditions of the Prophet and his companions), *qiyas* (use of analogy), and *‘ijma’* (consensus).

¹¹¹ Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India*, 28-29.

¹¹² “[The] courts’ premise was that Muslims ought to follow their own scripture to the letter. If the Quran demanded a partition of estates, Muslims must not evade the rigours of the own legal system. Thus, as judges wrote their opinions, they included within them a series of judgements about who Muslims were and how they ought to behave. They assumed that Muslims were a single community, formally bound by a common faith and ‘religious law’.” See Gregory C. Kowlowski, *Muslim Endowments and Society in British India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 5.

¹¹³ On Anglo-Muhammadan Law, see Michael R. Anderson, “Islamic law and the colonial encounter in British India,” in *Institutions and Ideologies: A SOAS South Asia Reader*, eds. David Arnold and Peter Robb (Richmond: Curzon Press, 1993), 165-185, Kowlowski, *Muslim Endowments and Society*, Scott Alan Kugle, “Framed, Blamed and Renamed: The Recasting of Islamic Jurisprudence in Colonial South Asia,” *Modern Asian Studies* 35, no. 2 (May 2001): 257-313, and Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam*, 18-28.

to by judges mediating civil disputes between Muslims. The most influential early example was Charles Hamilton's translation of the medieval work of jurisprudence compiled by the Central Asian 'ālim Burhan al-din al-Marghinani, known as *The Hedaya*,¹¹⁴ which remained the standard reference work until the publication of Neil B. E. Baillie's *Digest of Moohummudan Law* in the 1869,¹¹⁵ which consisted primarily of "paraphrases" of sections of the great Mughal-era compilation of Islamic law, the *Fatawa al-'Alamgiriyya*.¹¹⁶ Important as these sources were, clearly outlined easily referable legal textbooks based on the rulings detailed in the translated source material ultimately proved of greater value to the colonial operatives who dominated legal processes in British India. The first such example was William MacNaghtan's *Principles and Precedents of Moohummudan Law*,¹¹⁷ first published in 1825.¹¹⁸ By the time of the second edition of 1860, it was regarded as "the safest guide in the administration of Mahomedan Law", whose authority had been affirmed by the issuing of legal rulings (*fatawa*, sing. *fatwa*) on its accuracy by several muftis and qadis – indeed, it was claimed that "not a single principle has ever been questioned, nor a single conclusion over-ruled."¹¹⁹ The publication and use of these works placed the continuing utility of the 'ulama' in doubt,¹²⁰ and more followed, including Standish Grove

¹¹⁴ Charles Hamilton, trans., *The Hedaya, or Guide: A Commentary on the Mussulman Laws* (London: Wm H Allen & Co: 1870). First edition published 1791. On al-Marghinani, see Y. Meron, "Marghīnānī, His Method and His Legacy", *Islamic Law and Society* 9, no. 3 (2002): 410-416.

¹¹⁵ Neil B. E. Baillie, *A digest of Moohummudan Law on the subjects to which it is usually applied by British courts of justice in India, 2 vols* (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1869). See also Kowlowski, *Muslim Endowments and Society*, 130.

¹¹⁶ Syed Ameer Ali, *The Personal Law of the Mahommedans, according to all the schools: Together with a comparative sketch of the law of inheritance among the Sunnis and the Shiahs* (London: W. H. Allen & Co., 1880).

¹¹⁷ W. H. MacNaghten, *Principles and Precedents of Moohummudan Law, 2nd edition* (Madras : J. Higginbotham, 1860). First published in 1825.

¹¹⁸ Kowlowski, *Muslim Endowments and Society*, 130.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, vii. A mufti is an 'ālim with the recognized qualifications to give his opinion on legal matters, while a qadi (*kazi*) is the highest functionary, or judge, on a shari'a court. In British India, "The English judicial officers functioned as *kazis*; but as they were not qualified jurists the *futwas* of the *Maulvis*, who functioned as *muftis*, were binding upon them." See A. C. Banerjee, *English Law in India* (New Delhi: Abhinav, 1984), 31.

¹²⁰ As one report put it: "With [MacNaghten's] work, with the "Hedaya," and Mr. Neill Baillie's excellent treatises and other English works, and with the reported decisions of the various High Courts and of the

Grady's *Manual of the Mahomedan law of inheritance and contract* (1869),¹²¹ and later Roland Knyvet Wilson's *Digest of Anglo-Muhammadan Law* (1895).¹²² Muslim scholars also contributed, with the modernist Sayyid Amir 'Ali of Calcutta offering a particularly well-received contribution to the genre.¹²³ While some believed that space remained for a more comprehensive guide to the workings of Anglo-Muhammadan Law,¹²⁴ taken together these works had the effect of consolidating the status of the law as one of the primary markers of Islamic orthodoxy in British minds. And given the source material on which they were largely based, it was inevitably a status which privileged Sunni law as orthodox.

British writers on Islam had long acknowledged the existence of the four schools of Sunni Muslim jurisprudence (*madhahib*, sing. *madhhab*) – the Hanafi, which dominated the subcontinent, Central Asia, Anatolia and the Balkans, and parts of the Levant and Iraq; the Shafi'i, which prevailed in Egypt, parts of the Levant and Iraq, Yemen, India's Malabar Coast, and the islands of south-east Asia; the Maliki, with its base in the Maghrib and Upper Nile Valley; and the Hanbali, centred on the Arabian peninsula with a following in some Levantine and Iraqi urban centres such as Damascus and Baghdad. Already in the *Preliminary Discourse* to his translation of the Qur'an, George Sale remarked on the subdivision of the Sunnis "into four chief sects, which, notwithstanding some differences as

Judicial Committee of the Privy Council, a European judge in India has, as a rule, little or no difficulty in deciding any question of Mahomedan law that may come before him for decision." See "Muhammadan Education in British India and their employment in the Public service generally", no. 41, 116-120. Home/Education/51-98/A, July 1885, NAI. In fact, the muftis' role was abolished by Act XI of 1864. See Banerjee, *English Law in India*, 31.

¹²¹ Standish Grove Grady, *A manual of the Mahomedan law of inheritance and contract, comprising the doctrines of the Soonee and sheea schools, and based upon the text of Sir W. H. MacNaghten's Principles and Precedents, together with the decisions of the Privy Council, and High Courts of the Presidencies in India* (London: W. H. Allen and Co., 1869).

¹²² Sir Roland Knyvet, *A Digest of Anglo-Muhammadan Law* (London: W. Thacker & Co., 1895).

¹²³ Ameer Ali, *The Personal Law of the Mahomedans*.

¹²⁴ See Sayyid Mahmud's concerns that the abolition of the office of *mufti* in 1864 had deprived the courts of a level of expertise that the text books could not replace, and that as a result, a more comprehensive set of guidelines were necessary. See "Memorandum on the necessity of preparing a codified digest of Muhammadan Law." Legislative/Unofficial/No. 131-1/2, 1883, NAI.

to legal conclusions in their interpretation of the Koran, and matters of practice, are generally acknowledged to be orthodox.”¹²⁵ Gibbon too made reference to the four “orthodox” Sunni schools,¹²⁶ while later accounts elaborated on the distinctions between them,¹²⁷ with Grady, for example, expressing the commonly-held opinion that while the Maliki and Hanbali schools were the more uncompromising of the four, the Shafi‘i was the closest to the original spirit of Islam, and the Hanafi the most flexible and “philosophical”.¹²⁸ Some provided biographies of their founders, the four imams.¹²⁹ The schools’ adherents in India were often duly accounted for in the census returns,¹³⁰ and described in detail in the reports.¹³¹

While the vast majority of adherents of the Sufi orders in India would also fall under the broad label of ‘Sunni’, their basic heterodoxy - and in particular their apparent worship of saints, their petty, parochial base, and their seeming disregard for the textual foundations upon which the shari‘a was built - inevitably had the effect of projecting the privileged category of orthodox on to those who consciously adhered to the proscriptions of the *madhahib*. Unlike the wandering sages who gave their names to the Sufi orders they founded, whose hagiographies were clouded in myth and mystery, the four imams had an identifiable heritage and connection with the very earliest centuries of Islam, and could properly be regarded as the legitimate interpreters of the will of the earliest Muslim community. In their acknowledgement of the imams’ authority, the Sunnis marked themselves in British minds as orthodox. And in contrast to the parochial nature of the saint-centred shrine culture of the Sufi-dominated rural hinterlands, their reverence for the figure

¹²⁵ Sale, *The Koran*, 154.

¹²⁶ Gibbon, *The History of the Rise and Fall*, vol. 6, 285.

¹²⁷ For example see Hamilton, *The Hedaya*, xxv and Lane, *An Account of The Manners and Customs*, 64-65.

¹²⁸ Grady, *A manual of the Mahommedan law*, xxxix.

¹²⁹ Malcolm, *The History of Persia*, vol. 2, 243-245.

¹³⁰ See for example the Census Report for Travancore of 1901, which noted that the Shafi‘is counted as much the largest sub-set of Sunni Muslims on the south-west coast of India. N. Subramhanya Aiyar, *Census of India 1901, Volume XXVI: Travancore, Part I* (Trivandrum: Malabar Mail, 1903), 107, para 87.

¹³¹ For example, the *East India (census): General Report of the Census of India, 1901* (London: 1904), 372.

of the Ottoman caliph, the ‘successor’ to Muhammad as the political head of the *umma* (the totality of the world’s Muslims), implied a universal vision of Islam which, it was believed, in some way reflected the essence or spirit of Islam as originally founded in seventh-century Arabia.

This chapter has argued that, by the mid-nineteenth century, a British conception of Islam had developed which identified the essence or spirit of Islam with a rigid monotheism and Arabian origin, and came to privilege Sunni law as the orthodox expression of this spirit in daily life. The following two chapters concern how British officials came to terms with two movements or ‘sects’ which they believed defied these basic characteristics of orthodoxy. The subject of chapter three, the *Ahl-i-Hadis*, raised questions for the British on how best to categorize a movement which, while rejecting the authority of the ‘ulama’, remained committed to the textual sources of the shari‘a and explicitly aimed to embody the monotheistic, Arabian spirit. On the other hand, the subject of our next chapter, the Shi‘a, emerged as the Sunnis’ prototypical *other*, posing no such difficulties.

2. Incorporating heterodoxy: The Shi‘a from sect to minority

In the previous chapter we have examined how, through the attempt to locate and define an identifiable essence of Islam in line with common Victorian evaluations of what constituted ‘true’ religion, ‘orthodoxy’ came to be associated in British minds with a rigidly monotheistic, legalistic form of Sunnism believed to have its roots in the Arabian Peninsula. This chapter and the following will analyse the incorporation of two ostensibly ‘heterodox’ Islamic movements into the British-administered system of Islamic sectarian relations which had come to prevail in India by the first decade of the twentieth century. While the next chapter will focus on a movement – the Wahhabis or *Ahl-i-Hadis* – which represented in British eyes a somewhat novel development in Islamic intellectual thought and activism, this chapter will examine British engagement with one of the products of the formative Islamic controversies, the Shi‘a, with a focus on that strand of Shi‘ism which had come to prevail among British Shi‘i subjects in India, the Twelvers.

British knowledge of the divisions which plagued the early Islamic community appears to have been negligible until the early seventeenth century, when travellers and officials working on behalf of the East India Company in Safavid Iran began to develop a vague and confused understanding of ‘The Religion of the Persians’, recognizing the general hostility with which the population regarded the first three caliphs and noting the veneration attached to the figure of ‘Ali. Still, English visitors to Iran lacked access to authentic and reliable Shi‘i sources, and for the most part seemed unaware of the *Sunni* and *Shi‘i* labels by which to distinguish the Persians from the Muslim peoples they encountered in the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean. The understanding of such categories existed almost exclusively in early

orientalist academic spheres,¹ only beginning to penetrate popular consciousness with the publication of such eighteenth century works as Sale's translation of the Qur'an and Gibbon's history of the Roman Empire. The latter would provide the model for numerous nineteenth century dramatic readings of early Islamic history to which the central events defining the growth of Shi'ism lent themselves so well. Yet well into the nineteenth century, European travellers to Iran constituted the most common source of information on Shi'ism. In British circles, early-century accounts of Iran such as James Morier's *Journey Through Persia* were cited and supplemented by books published in later decades by George Curzon and Edward Granville Browne.² Due to a lack of source material and a more general attitude of indifference, Shi'ism failed to draw the more widespread academic interest which scholars investigating the world religions gave to Islam generally.³ For them, it was the Muslim religion of Arabia, the Ottoman Empire and, for British writers in particular, India which defined normative Islam.

By the time of the uprisings of 1857, however, a number of works belonging to several genres – historical scholarship, amateur anthropology, legal treatises – had been published for British audiences, and perhaps due to the obscurity of their focus, tended to exercise a somewhat inflated influence on the field. Of these, Sir John Malcolm's *History of Persia* represented perhaps the nineteenth century's most detailed explanation of Shi'i doctrine, and

¹ Gerald M. MacLean and Nabil I. Matar, *Britain and the Islamic World, 1558-1713* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 188 - 191.

² See James Morier, *A second journey through Persia, Armenia, and Asia Minor, to Constantinople between the years 1810 and 1816* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1818), George N. Curzon, *Persia and the Persian Question, 2 Vols.* (London; New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1892) and Edward Granville Browne, *A Year Amongst the Persians. Impressions as to the Life, Character, & Thought of the People of Persia, Received during Twelve Months' Residence in that Country in the Years 1887-1888* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1893).

³ Etan Kohlberg, "Western Studies of Shi'a Islam," in *Shi'ism, Resistance, and Revolution*, ed. Martin Kramer (Boulder: Westview Press, 1987), 34.

was admired by such observers of Iran as James Fraser, Curzon, and Browne.⁴ Meanwhile, the writings of Mrs. Mir Hasan ‘Ali provided a rich account of life and Muslim ritual in the elitist Shi‘i milieu of early nineteenth century Lucknow, based on information gleaned from “the religious men who are of that faith, and live in strict accordance with the tenets they profess.”⁵ As Herklots noted in the introduction and with regard to the *Qanoon-e-Islam*,

The two works thus develop the conflicting opinions of the two great sects, who entertain the most inveterate hatred towards each other; and combined, afford as complete an insight into the national character of that race as can be reasonably desired or expected. Barring the difference of the religious notions, the general descriptions given of their manners, customs, &c. accord so entirely, that so far from one at all detracting from the merits of the others, the statements of the English Lady and the Indian Moosulman will be found to afford each other mutual support and illustration.⁶

The development of Anglo-Muhammadan Law produced another genre, which introduced British readers to the Shi‘a and their distinct legal code. In the Preliminary Discourse to his translation of the *Hedaya*, Hamilton located the origin of the Sunni-Shi‘i doctrinal divergence in the “dissension” between the sixth Shi‘i Imam Ja‘far as-Şadiq and his pupil Abu Hanifa (founder of the Sunni *madhhab* which takes his name),⁷ and attempted, with dubious results, to provide some idea of the prevalence of Shi‘ism across India.⁸ Some later works on Anglo-Muhammadan Law, such as Neil B. E. Baillie’s *Digest of Moohummudan Law*, would devote entire sections to the “Imameea Code of Jurisprudence.”⁹ Sources such as these were complemented by the ever-expanding body of works treating Islamic history in general, such as those of Sir William Muir which we encountered in the previous chapter.

⁴ Malcolm, *The History of Persia*. See James B. Fraser, *Historical and Descriptive Account of Persia* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1834), 6, Curzon, *Persia and the Persian Question vol. 1*, 20 and Browne, *A Literary History of Persia*, vii.

⁵ Hasan Ali, *Observations on the Mussulmans of India, vol. 1*, 117.

⁶ Shurreef, *Qanoon-e-Islam*, xiv – xv.

⁷ Hamilton, *The Hedaya, Or Guide*, xxii.

⁸ *Ibid*, xx claims that “the great body of Mohammedans...adhere rigidly to the principles of the Shiyas.”

⁹ Baillie, *A Digest of Moohummudan Law, vol. 1*, xi.

The first part of this chapter will draw upon this diverse collection of works to show how, by the final decades of the nineteenth century, the Shi‘a had been conceptualized in British minds as a heterodox or heretical ‘sect’ – through their dubious commitment to the basic Islamic message of monotheism; through their rejection of the Sunni caliphate; through their unconvincing legal code; and through the Persian influence perceived to determine the Shi‘i impulse. All these factors contributed to the portrayal of Shi‘ism as inherently heterodox and perhaps illegitimate in Islamic terms, and by extension cast doubt on the place of Shi‘ism among the world religions. Yet while some of the authors concerned may have personally encountered Shi‘i peoples on various travels or in the course of their diplomatic or academic careers, few were ever responsible for accounting for the Shi‘a and Shi‘ism in the execution of imperial policy. That task was left to those who came to engage the Shi‘a directly, nowhere more so than in India.¹⁰ As Justin Jones has noted, the Shi‘i population of India exercised an influence over Indian Muslim society and British minds out of all proportion to their actual numbers – in the United Provinces, for example, “most colonial Census records and District Gazetteers estimated the Shi‘a of most districts of even this region to comprise only around 3 per cent of the Muslim population.”¹¹ For reasons which will become apparent in the second part of this chapter, such figures need to be treated with a great degree of caution; yet the numerically marginal status of the Shi‘a in British India is not in doubt. At the same time, Shi‘ism in India had long been associated with ruling dynasties in various regions of the subcontinent, whose culture had filtered down through Muslim society to shape popular expressions of Islamic devotion and solidarity. The evolution of Shi‘ism’s public status from an essentially elitist and pietistic expression of

¹⁰ The standard works on the Shi‘a of British India are John Norman Hollister, *The Shi‘a of India* (London: Luzac & Company Ltd., 1953), Juan Cole, *Roots of North Indian Shi‘ism in Iran and Iraq: Religion and State in Awadh, 1722-1859* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988) and Justin Jones, *Shi‘a Islam in Colonial India: Religion, Community and Sectarianism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

¹¹ Jones, *Shi‘a Islam in Colonial India*, 11.

Islam to a legitimate Islamic interest group was a product of the post-1857 period. As Jones observes,

The very different concept of the Shi‘a as a separate, clearly defined religious minority community makes sense only against the background of colonial knowledge and the ‘politics of enumeration’, by which the colonial administration attempted from the 1870s–1880s to definitively classify India’s population on the basis of homogeneous religious categories.¹²

Whether by attempting to uncover the particular Shi‘i approach to the question of jihad, by the process of census enumeration, or through the arbitration of Sunni-Shi‘i disputes, British officials in the post-1857 era were increasingly forced to engage with their Shi‘i subjects on matters of immediate consequence for imperial policy. The effect of this engagement was to relegate the question of Shi‘i ‘heterodoxy’, whereby the Shi‘a were primarily employed as the enigmatic ‘other’ of the dominant Sunnis, to the periphery of British official discourse on Shi‘ism. Instead, the British were forced to accept the legitimacy of a variety of Shi‘i positions in their own terms. The second part of this chapter, then, will examine the evolution of the status of the Shi‘a in British minds from a vaguely identifiable heterodox offshoot or ‘sect’ of the normative Islamic tradition to a legitimized, distinct, and comprehensible religious tradition deserving of all the rights and protection implied by the term ‘minority’ that was to be expected in British India’s Islamic sphere.

* * * * *

As we have seen in the previous chapter, ‘orthodoxy’ in Islamic terms indicated for the British a rigid adherence to the principle of monotheism; a comprehensible and rational legal

¹² Ibid.

code; and a heritage, in some sense racial or ethnic, or perhaps intellectual, reaching back to the Arabian Peninsula, the birthplace of Islam. While in practice this meant that only certain members of the urban class of Sunni adherents of the Hanafi or, on the Malabar Coast, Shafi'i *madhahib* fulfilled the demands of 'orthodoxy', in theory any Muslim self-identifying as 'Sunni' in the census enumeration process could stake a claim of belonging to the 'orthodox' code. Such an avenue of legitimization was closed to those identifying as 'Shi'i', or indeed any other branch of Islam. For the British, Shi'ism was marked as a 'sect', a 'schism' which had distinguished itself from orthodoxy in the early decades of Islamic history and whose defining characteristic was its 'heterodoxy'. Its very legitimacy in British eyes, therefore, was suspect when considered in Islamic terms.

Among the most common British complaints in relation to the Shi'a was the charge that their veneration for Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law 'Ali went so far as to dilute the essential monotheistic message of Islam. The basic devotion to 'Ali was regarded as a distinguishing marker of Shi'ism; according to Sir Roland Knyvet Wilson's *Introduction to the Study of Anglo-Muhammadan Law*, the term *Shi'a* meant

literally a follower, or partisan, and thus designates not inaptly the characteristic of devotion to a person, in contradistinction to the Sunni, or orthodox Moslem, whose piety consists in conformity to the routine sanctified by the precept and example of the Prophet.¹³

Sale argued that "Many of the Shiites carried their veneration for Ali and his descendants so far, that they transgressed all bounds of reason and decency", although he acknowledged that the more extravagant of these tendencies could be found mainly among the so-called

¹³ Wilson, Sir Roland Knyvet, *An Introduction to the Study of Anglo-Muhammadan Law* (London: W. Thacker and Co., 1894), 54 – 55.

‘extreme’ Shi‘a, or *Ghulat*.¹⁴ Gibbon went further, noting that in certain Shi‘i circles ‘Ali was deemed to possess divine attributes - “but their superstition is universally condemned by the Sonnites; and their impiety has afford a seasonable warning against the worship of saints and martyrs.”¹⁵ Yet it was not solely their semi-blasphemous fealty for ‘Ali which stained the Shi‘i commitment to monotheism in British eyes. James Fraser discerned in the Shi‘i tradition a more general reverence for deceased figures of the past:

Among the Persians, who are zealous Sheahs, as well as among the Mohammedans in general, their religion has lost nearly all that may originally have been valuable, and has been perverted by fanaticism, venality, and designing hypocrisy, into a despicable superstition, fit only to enthrall and brutalize the nation. The reverence which the founder of Islam claimed as the last of a long line of prophets, has grown into a species of devotion that confounds the Deity and his apostle, and has even been extended to many of his learned or pious successors...The Sheahs have of all others probably shared deepest in these absurdities.¹⁶

No event reflected this ‘fanatical’ tendency more than the annual Muharram commemorations, which reached their climax on the tenth day (‘Ashura’), a period that for William Muir brought feelings of “horror and indignation to the utmost pitch.”¹⁷ A more sober tone was struck by Mrs. Hasan Ali, who astutely observed that the more devout among the Shi‘a of Lucknow refrained from participating in the extravagant spectacle, preferring to express their grief for the slain grandson of the Prophet, Husayn, in contemplative silence¹⁸ - as we shall see in the discussion of the Muharram in Lucknow later in this chapter, this Shi‘i reformist tendency, which began to exercise authority over the proceedings in the final decades of the century, often mirrored the British critique of the rituals. Yet the basic fact remained – during the Muharram festivities, the Shi‘a appeared to be worshipping their

¹⁴ Sale, *The Koran*, 176. He refers to them as *Gholaïtes*. On the *Ghulat*, see Matti Moosa, *Extremist Shiites: The Ghulat Sects* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1988).

¹⁵ Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall*, vol. 6, 344.

¹⁶ Fraser, *Historical and Descriptive Account of Persia*, 233.

¹⁷ Muir, *The Caliphate*, 321.

¹⁸ Hasan Ali, *Observations on the Mussulmauns of India*, vol. 1, 53.

deceased saints. Surveying the pilgrim crowds of Najaf and Karbala in the 1880s, Colonel William Tweedie, political resident at Baghdad, remarked that “what was in its conception the most unequivocally monotheistic faith perhaps the world ever saw is here loaded with superstition and given up to the deification of dead men.”¹⁹

Thus the Shi‘i commitment to the basic monotheistic message of Islam was considered dubious, and the scepticism with which British observers considered the Shi‘i veneration for ‘Ali and his son Husayn was extended to Shi‘i historiographical assertions regarding their claim to the early caliphate. It was not the moral worth of ‘Ali’s own character that was in doubt. Accounts of the fourth caliph in early British sources are almost unanimously admiring. According to Gibbon, “[He] united the qualities of a poet, a soldier, and a saint: his wisdom still breathes in a collection of moral and religious sayings; and every antagonist, in the combats of the tongue or of the sword, was subdued by his eloquence and valour”.²⁰ While such acclaim could be interpreted to reflect both standard Sunni and Shi‘i interpretations of ‘Ali, there were some who were willing to consider the Shi‘i narratives in their own right. John Malcolm argued that in the Shi‘i biography of ‘Ali,

was something peculiarly calculated to interest the vest feelings of human nature. His followers contemplated with an admiration bordering on devotion, a youth of fourteen becoming the first convert of the prophet; displaying throughout his life an unshaken constancy in the opinions he had so early adopted; inferior to none in zeal, and superior to all in courage; cherished by his uncle, who bestowed on him his favourite daughter, and destined him for his successor: yet after all deprived for a period of inheritance, which seemed on every ground his right; and submitting patiently to the wrongs he sustained from the elevation of the three first successors to the prophet, Aboubeker, Omar, and Osma, rather than draw that sword, which was the terror of infidels, against true believers, who, however misled, were still followers of the faith he loved.²¹

¹⁹ Col. W. Tweedie, *Turkish Arabia: Being an Account of an Official Tour in Babylonia, Assyria, and Mesopotamia, 1886-87*, 41. Mss Eur F112/384, BL.

²⁰ Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall*, vol. 6, 328–329. See also Crichton, *The History of Arabia*, vol. 1, 366-369, which echoes these themes.

²¹ Malcolm, *The History of Persia*, vol. 1, 324.

Meanwhile, some British writers seem to have adopted in whole the Shi'i image of Aisha, daughter of the first caliph Abu Bakr, wife of Muhammad, and an established villain and adversary of 'Ali in the Shi'i historiography.²² She was cunning and "ambitious",²³ "vindictive and formidable",²⁴ jealous of her husband's first wife Khadijah and a primary driver behind the antipathy which came to exist between the Hashimites and Ummayyads.²⁵ Harboursing "an implacable hatred" against 'Ali,²⁶ she was said by the writer and Indian administrator George Birdwood to have actively campaigned against his initial, rightful claim to the caliphate.²⁷

Birdwood, however, was unusual in going so far as to accept the Shi'i narrative regarding the legitimacy of 'Ali's claim.²⁸ For Gibbon, the Sunni position of granting a basically equal degree of respect to the first four caliphs was the "more impartial, or at least more decent, opinion."²⁹ The most authoritative and perhaps influential stance was taken by Sir William Muir in his *The Caliphate*. For Muir, the entire Shi'i narrative of the first decades of Islamic history following the death of Muhammad was a fabrication. While the Shi'a liked to "pretend" that 'Ali harboured caliphal ambitions, the truth was that "There is not a shadow of proof that he made any such claim himself, or that any claim was made by others for him,

²² Syed Akbar Hyder, *Reliving Karbala: Martyrdom in South Asian Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 75, writes that "The Shii discourses linked to Aisha are underpinned by scathing polemics that go so far as to blame her for feeding the Prophet something that eventually caused his death. Many Shias conceive of Aisha as a manipulative shrew more concerned with securing the caliphate for her father, Abu Bakr, than with transmitting the teachings of Islam in the Muhammadan spirit."

²³ Crichton, *The History of Arabia*, vol. 1, 371.

²⁴ Tweedie, *Turkish Arabia*, 42.

²⁵ George Birdwood in Sir Lewis Pelly, *The miracle play of Hasan and Husain*, 2 Vols (London: W. H. Allen and Co., 1879), vol. 1, vii.

²⁶ Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall*, vol. 6, 334.

²⁷ Birdwood in Pelly, *The miracle play of Hasan and Husain* vol. 1, viii.

²⁸ See also Hasan Ali, *Observations on the Mussulmans of India*, vol. 1, 124 – 125, who charged the second caliph 'Umar with plotting to "destroy not only Ali, but his whole family".

²⁹ Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall*, vol. 6, 332.

during the Caliphates of Abu Bekr and Omar.”³⁰ Alone among British writers, Muir was willing to question the heroic and faultless image of ‘Ali depicted in earlier accounts, holding him at least in some way responsible for the assassination of the third caliph ‘Uthman³¹ and for the sectarian schism which resulted from his own murder.³² According to Muir, ‘Ali’s death occasioned no noteworthy outpouring of grief from among his ostensible supporters; the entire movement to have him and his descendants recognized as the only legitimate successors to Muhammad emerged only as a result of the events of Karbala in 680, which were subsequently used to express and foment opposition to the Ummayyads and so stoke the sectarian hatred which has plagued Islam ever since.³³ In fact, due to “Alyite fiction”³⁴ and “Shiya hate”,³⁵ very little, according to Muir, can be known for sure about what happened at Karbala. Muir’s assessment of the worthiness of Shi‘i sources would find official expression in John Gordon Lorimer’s *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf*. In a section titled “Historical events explaining the existence of Muhammadan denominations”, Lorimer derided the Shi‘i explanation for the early divisions which emerged within Islam. Recounting the nature of the events of Karbala, he wrote that

Though the fate of Husain excites commiseration, it is difficult to regard him, as Shi'ahs do, in the light of a Shahid or martyr. In the first place there appears to be no real reason for holding that descendants of Muhammad had an exclusive right to the Khalifate; in the second, it seems that any right which they might have possessed was renounced by Hasan during his headship of the family; and, in the third, it is clear that Husain lost his life, not in vindicating a moral or religious principle, but merely in an attempt to wrest the temporal power from Yazid.³⁶

³⁰ Muir, *The Caliphate*, 5.

³¹ *Ibid*, 239 – 240.

³² *Ibid*, 300.

³³ *Ibid*, 301.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 321.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 323.

³⁶ J. G. Lorimer, *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf, vol I, part II*, 2354. IOR/L/PS/20/C91/2, BL.

The basis on which the Shi‘a rejected the authority of the caliphs who, as we have seen in the previous chapter, were subsequently considered the embodiment of Islamic ‘orthodoxy’, was considered unreliable at best. The same attitude was applied to the sources and practice of Shi‘i law. Writing in his Preliminary Discourse, Hamilton argued that the Sunnis’ orthodoxy stemmed from their adherence to the “most obvious interpretation of the Koran, and the obligatory force of the traditions, in opposition to the innovations of the sectaries.” Orthodoxy was defined by a “justness of thinking in spiritual matters”, to which the four Sunni *madhahib* were all devoted.³⁷ By implication, the Shi‘i approach to law was irrational and illogical, based not on a reasoned interpretation of the recognized sources but rather on the pre-conceived belief in the infallibility of the dispossessed Imams. Referring to the canonical collections of *hadith* compiled in the eight and ninth centuries, the Austrian Orientalist Aloys Sprenger of the Delhi College described the Shi‘i records as “infinitely less faithful than those of the Sunnies,”³⁸ a verdict which Muir, reviewing Sprenger’s *The Life of Mohammad* in the *Caulcutta Review* in 1868, felt could “hardly be called unjust.”³⁹ Similar language was eventually adopted by Denzil Ibbetson in the Punjab Census Report for 1881, with the four primary collections of Shi‘i *hadith* described as “incomparably less trustworthy” than their Sunni equivalents.⁴⁰

Shi‘i law, then, was regarded as the “heterodox code”;⁴¹ nonetheless, the mainstream Twelver Shi‘a appeared to adhere to a recognizably Islamic legal system, however flawed.

³⁷ Hamilton, *The Hedaya*, xxi.

³⁸ Aloys Sprenger, *The Life of Mohammad from Original Sources* (Allahabad: Presbyterian Mission Press, 1851), 69.

³⁹ Sir William Muir, *The Mohammedan Controversy and Other Indian Articles* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1897), 118.

⁴⁰ Ibbetson, *Report on the Census of the Panjab*, 146, para 283.

⁴¹ MacNaghten, *Principles and Precedents of Moohummudan Law*, xii.

The same could not be said of their Isma‘ili counterparts.⁴² Described by Muir as a “noxious heresy”,⁴³ Isma‘ilism was represented in India primarily by the Khoja community, who were regarded as “utterly heterodox” due to their relative indifference to the authority of the Qur’an.⁴⁴ In official discourse the Isma‘ilis were described as “schismatic alike with regards to the Shiite and Sunnite forms of the Moslem faith”,⁴⁵ they disregarded “the literal meaning of the words used in the Koran, and tradition founded thereon” while admitting its “internal, hidden or allegorical sense”,⁴⁶ and they revered the semi-divine Bombay-based Aga Khan as their “spiritual head” in defiance of both Sunni and Twelver Shi‘i authority.⁴⁷ Writing of the medieval Isma‘ili Fatimid Caliphate, Roland Knyvet Wilson described

the extreme Shia theory... There must have been some merit, at least as compared with the not too high standard of contemporary orthodox Islam, in a dynasty which lasted so long and left behind it so splendid a monument as the city of Cairo; but, on the whole, the orthodox were not far wrong in regarding this beautiful capital as a hotbed of mischief, and the re-conquest of Egypt by the famous Saladin (who was a zealous Sunni of the school of As Shafi) as a service at least equally meritorious with his recovery of Jerusalem from the Crusaders.⁴⁸

Law-based conceptions of orthodoxy, then, were equally applied among the Shi‘a as they were across the Islamic spectrum as a whole. In the final evaluation, the Twelvers, due in part to their legal traditions, could be regarded as representing ‘orthodoxy’ within the Shi‘i

⁴² For a standard British official treatment of the Isma‘ilis, see the report of Justin Alvarez, 22nd October 1903, in “Précis of Turkish Arabia Affairs. 1801-1905”, IOR/L/PS/20/C236, BL.

⁴³ Muir, *The Caliphate*, 555.

⁴⁴ E. H. Aitken, *Gazetteer of the Province of Sind* (Karachi: Mercantile Press, 1907), 161.

⁴⁵ O’Conor to Lansdowne, 23rd October 1903, “Trial and conviction at Damascus of members of the sect of the Ismailians on a charge of treason and murder.” Foreign/Secret/73-75/Part E/March 1904, NAI.

⁴⁶ Mr. Shaik Mahomed Isphani, a Persian professor in the Wilson College, quoted in Commissioner of Police, Bombay to Acting Secretary to the Gov of Bombay, Special Department, 26th August 1904, “Trial of certain Ismailians at Constantinople.” Foreign/Secret/700/Part E/March 1905, NAI.

⁴⁷ Drummond Hay to O’Conor, 15th November 1905, “Persecution of the Shia Imami Ismailees in the Vilayet of Damascus.” Foreign/Secret/328 – 330/Part E/July 1907, NAI.

⁴⁸ Wilson, *An Introduction to the Study of Anglo-Muhammadan Law*, 63 – 64.

intellectual tradition. It was, however, a tradition whose very nature helped spawn numerous derivative branches. The Punjab Census Report for 1901 noted that

[The] doctrine of inherited sanctity is dependent on, or at least closely connected with, the belief in the metempsychosis, and has rendered it possible for the Shia sect to admit of many developments, so that from the cardinal tenet of the unity of God was eventually evolved a system of pantheism. This was due, probably, to the introduction of the Sufi doctrines...and had been preceded...by an earlier mysticism.⁴⁹

From where that “earlier mysticism” came is left unsaid. However, it is not unreasonable to assume that the author, H. A. Rose, had in mind the cultural and religious influence of Iran, for Iran in the nineteenth century official mind was an incubator of esoteric speculation and mysticism, a land and nation disposed to birthing all manner of spiritual eccentricities. At the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth century, its most esteemed British interpreter was the scholar Edward Granville Browne, whose account of a year spent sojourning through the country in search of encounters with the elusive Babis and subsequent *Literary History of Persia* became standard reference works for any official seeking reliable information on the various religious traditions of Iran.⁵⁰ According to Browne,

The most striking feature of the Persians as a nation is their passion for metaphysical speculation...Persia is, and always has been, a very hot-bed of systems, from the time of Manes and Mazdak in the old Sasanian days, down to the present age, which has brought into being the Babis and the Sheykhis.⁵¹

Browne expanded on this theme in an article published in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* in 1898:

⁴⁹ Rose, *The Punjab, its Feudatories, and the North-West Frontier Province*, 144, para 43.

⁵⁰ For example the *Literary History of Persia* is specifically cited in Kaul, *Census of India 1911, vol. XIV: Punjab Part I – Report* for an “elaborate account of Shias.”

⁵¹ Browne, *A year amongst the Persians*, 122.

The truth is, that there is a profound difference between the Persian idea of Religion and that which obtains in the West. Here it is the ideas of Faith and Righteousness (in different proportions, it is true) which are regarded as the essentials of Religion; there it is Knowledge and Mystery. Here Religion is regarded as a rule by which to live and a hope wherein to die; there as a Key to unlock the Secrets of the Spiritual and Material Universe. Here it is associated with Work and Charity; there with Rest and Wisdom. Here a creed is admired for its simplicity; there for its complexity.⁵²

The contrast was not drawn solely with the religious traditions and temperament of Western Europe. British observers could not help noticing an apparent dichotomy distinguishing the Arab and Iranian, or alternatively, the Semitic and Aryan, expressions of religious devotion. For Tweedie, Shi'ism represented the “the enthusiastic and supernatural” element of Islam that had existed in a state of antagonism with “the political and secular”⁵³ and which found an environment ripe for development as Islam spread to Iran in the decades following ‘Ali’s murder:

The subjective and imaginative genius of Persia had all this time been fast assimilating Ali’s tenets. Not alone had the summary methods in which Islamism had there been propagated left the masses, as usual, almost unchanged; but the essential incompatibility between the religious conceptions of Aryan and Semitic races (Jew and Gentile) had even then begun to show itself in those religious exaggerations and aberrations, from Sufiism down to “Babism,” for which Persia is so remarkable.⁵⁴

While acknowledging the sequence of events that produced the Shi‘a, Birdwood located the genesis of the movement “in the impassable ethnological gulf which separates the Aryan and Semitic races” and portrayed the persistence of Shi‘i dissidence and the Shi‘i impact on the Abbasid Revolution as basically representing Iranian protest against the domination of Arabs.⁵⁵ The effect, according to Muir, was the flowering of a range of Shi‘i influenced sects in the later Abbasid period which inspired “changes both of dogma and ritual [that] were so

⁵² Quoted in Browne, *A Literary History*, 405.

⁵³ Tweedie, *Turkish Arabia*, 41.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 42.

⁵⁵ Birdwood in Pelly, *The miracle play of Hasan and Husain*, vol. 1, xvi – xvii.

strange and sweeping...the Prophet himself would hardly have recognized the system thus evolved as in any respect his own.”⁵⁶ Indeed, for Browne the Arab conquest of Iran had imposed the religion of the Arabs only superficially:

the change was but skin-deep, and soon a host of heterodox sects born on Persian soil — Shi'ites, Sufis, Isma'ilis, philosophers — arose to vindicate the claim of Aryan thought to lie free, and to transform the religion forced on the nation by Arab steel into something which, though still wearing a semblance of Islam, had a significance widely different from that which one may fairly suppose was intended by the Arabian prophet.⁵⁷

Again, such ideas came to be reflected in the official ethnographic literature produced through the census enumeration process, as the Punjab report for 1901 described how

From the earliest times of Islam there have existed sects professing doctrines not inculcated in the Koran, or even condemned by it. These doctrines appear to have been from time to time revived in Persia, and in Khorassan, which from the very first age of Islam had been the fruitful parent of heresies...⁵⁸

As a product of the peculiarly Iranian approach to spirituality, Shi'ism thus came to be associated almost exclusively with Iran, frequently described as the “national religion of Persia” despite the relatively recent imposition of Twelver Shi'ism on the country by the sixteenth-century Safavids.⁵⁹ The Indian Shi'a could not escape the judgement; indeed some may have embraced it.⁶⁰ Already in the *Hedaya* we find Hamilton describing the Shi'a as

⁵⁶ Muir, *The Caliphate*, 553 – 554.

⁵⁷ Browne, *A year amongst the Persians*, 123.

⁵⁸ Rose, *The Punjab, its Feudatories, and the North-West Frontier Province*, 147, para 47.

⁵⁹ Malcolm, *The History of Persia*, vol. 2, 218 and Curzon, *Persia and the Persian Question*, vol. 1, 7.

⁶⁰ Jones, *Shi'a Islam in Colonial India*, 114 writes that following the British annexation of Awadh, the Shi'a of the region “began...to use the address ‘Salam-un ‘Alaikum’ rather than the more traditional ‘As-Salam ‘Alaikum’, in order to distinguish themselves from Sunnis. Equally, when the Turkish cap was popularized among many young sharif Muslims by Sayyid Ahmad Khan and other Aligarh reformists from the 1870s onwards, many Shi'a adopted the Persian kulah cap as a retort.”

being “descended from a Persian stock”,⁶¹ while subsequent official accounts came to incorporate the Arab-Iranian and Semitic-Aryan dichotomies discussed above. Describing the annual Iranian springtime celebration of Nawruz as “especially a Shia festival”,⁶² the Punjab census report for 1901 found that

from the earliest times the Shias were found chiefly among the non-Arabian races of the Mohammadan world, and that by the irony of fate the descendants of the Prophet found their most zealous supporters amongst the alien peoples. As we come down to modern times we find that Shiaism becomes more and more a question of race, or, in India of caste, its tenets finding a more congenial soil, as far as one can see, among the races of Iranian and Indian origin than among those of Arabian descent, or those which have come under Arabian influences...⁶³

Similarly, the Imperial Gazetteer of 1907 found that “The Shiah movement...is strongest where there is least Arab intermixture in the population. Hence some have defined it as an Aryan protest against Semite domination.”⁶⁴

Thus the impact of Iranian civilization on Islam had helped to generate a protest movement infused with the Iranian spiritual character, and subsequently marked Shi‘ism’s adherents, wherever they resided, with its distinctive and above all heterodox nature. Where orthodoxy was strictly monotheistic, Shi‘ism encouraged a blasphemous devotion to its founders; where orthodoxy was based on reason, reliable sources, and a rational legal foundation, Shi‘ism was founded on a dubious understanding of Islamic history and a collection of unconvincing legal texts; and where orthodoxy sprung from the Semitic heartland of Arabia, Shi‘ism was inherently associated with the contrasting civilization of Iran. Shi‘ism was - objectively as far as British observers were concerned - heterodox. Yet in the

⁶¹ Hamilton, *The Hedaya*, xx.

⁶² Rose, *The Punjab, its Feudatories, and the North-West Frontier Province*, 149, para 49.

⁶³ Rose, *The Punjab, its Feudatories, and the North-West Frontier Province*, 147 – 148, para 48.

⁶⁴ Cotton, *The Imperial Gazetteer of India*, 436.

implementation of colonial administration, the heterodoxy of the Shi‘a came to be regarded as a trivial matter. While the place of Shi‘ism among the world religions may have been doubtful, British officials faced the very real task of incorporating India’s Shi‘a into the egalitarian Islamic universe they were building.

* * * * *

In the post-1857 era in northern India, a number of developments initiated a process whereby the Shi‘a became conceptualized as a distinct religious minority and were incorporated into the system of communal and sectarian relations overseen by the ostensibly neutral colonial state. While British scholars and travellers continued to theorize and speculate on the nature of Shi‘i doctrines and rituals and their relation to ‘orthodoxy’, Indian officials directly engaged the Shi‘a as a basically homogeneous community whose position in relation to a range of questions had a real bearing on the pursuit and execution of imperial policy. In this section, we shall consider British engagement with the Shi‘a on three issues considered to be of paramount importance for the maintenance of the colonial regime – the legitimacy of British rule; knowledge of and about India’s various religious communities; and the management of communal and sectarian conflict. In attempting to discern the Shi‘i standpoint on these matters, British officials were forced to come to terms with of Shi‘i ‘heterodoxy’ as a legitimate expression of the Islamic tradition, and to incorporate the Shi‘i approach to questions of Islamic law and ritual into their thinking on an equal footing with that of their Sunni counterparts.⁶⁵ This policy of what Sandria Freitag has termed “evenhandedness” had the effect of unsettling the traditional structures of power which had

⁶⁵ Jones, *Shi‘a Islam in Colonial India*, 147, notes that in this period “Shi‘a and Sunni political identities were increasingly construed as alternative – and even adversarial – forms of political affiliation.”

previously defined sectarian relations in the region.⁶⁶ As a result, the Shi‘a emerged in the years immediately preceding the First World War as an officially recognized religious community, with all the rights and protections implied by that status.

In engaging with the Shi‘a, British officials utilized the services of a collection of often self-designated intermediaries deemed sufficiently authoritative and representative to speak for the community as a whole. These “natural leaders” were men typically drawn from the notable classes such as the *mujtahids* or *taluqdars* (landowners)⁶⁷ who fulfilled certain ideals of authority based on parochial, “client/patron” ties. Those with a claim to leadership based on transcendent ideological or charismatic appeal tended to be disregarded by the British authorities.⁶⁸ Cooperation with the state provided a means for the chosen leaders to contest claims to legitimacy and challenges from within their own community, as well as with their communal and sectarian rivals. Concurrently, it provided the foundation for the British claim to neutrality and impartiality in religious affairs, and implied recognition of the legitimacy of British rule. As Freitag notes:

The use of such intermediaries seemed to validate British conceptions of the state: the Raj would maintain face-to-face and ceremonial relationships with “natural leaders” through the institutions of the state; in turn these leaders would reinforce their connections with constituent groups of Indian society in public arenas. Since community leaders were visible in public activities, the British did not need to be.⁶⁹

Positive relations with these “natural leaders” therefore helped project British soft power among marginalized or minority communities for whom the platform of the neutral,

⁶⁶ Sandria B. Freitag, *Collective Action and Community: Public Arenas and the Emergence of Communalism in North India* (Berkeley; Oxford: University of California Press, 1989), 54 – 56.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 58 – 60.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 60. Freitag argues that this policy “expressed an imperial philosophy of rule. Only in a society ordered and controlled through networks based on personal ties - exercised face-to-face by powerful patrons - could room be found for representatives of the paramount power as well.”

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 57.

“evenhanded” state provided opportunities for communal advancement. The curious arrangement known as the Oudh Bequest provides one noteworthy example. An annual payment made by British authorities in India to a chosen few *mujtahids* in the Iraqi shrine cities of Najaf and Karbala in order to service the interest acquired on a loan received from the ruling dynasty of Lucknow, the Bequest became embroiled in the turmoil of late nineteenth century Iranian politics. British representatives in Iraq sought to advance British prestige among the leading Iranian *mujtahids* who dominated clerical politics in those centres of Shi‘i learning, hoping to undermine growing Russian influence in Iran. Yet while the British found the high-ranking Iranians generally resistant to such manipulation, they ultimately believed the Bequest useful for furthering the position of the lower-ranking Indian *mujtahids* present in Iraq. In 1911 Lorimer noted that

It is entirely due to the influence of British residents at Baghdad that three of the present twenty allowances under the Bequest are held by Indian scholars. If the matter had been left to the popular voice at Najaf and Karbala - and it is the popular voice there that makes Mujtahids, both great and small - there would not now be a single Indian among the allowance holders. An Indian mujtahid may be all very well at Lucknow; but at Najaf or Karbala it is hardly an exaggeration to say he appears like a whipped dog in the presence of the arrogant and all-powerful Persian hierarchy.⁷⁰

Use of the Bequest thus helped drive a growing perception of the colonial state as the guarantor and protector of the Indian Shi‘i community in Iraq,⁷¹ in doing so helping to engender perceptions of Shi‘i difference vis-à-vis the wider Indian Muslim population in terms of the community’s relationship with British authorities.

⁷⁰ Lorimer to McMahon, 11th August 1911. IOR/L/PS/10/77, BL.

⁷¹ Meir Litvak argues that enhancing British prestige among the Indian Shi‘a became one of the primary goals of the Bequest administration. Meir Litvak, “A Failed Manipulation: The British, the Oudh Bequest and the Shi‘i ‘Ulamā’ of Najaf and Karbalā’”, *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 27, no. 1 (May, 2000), 88 – 89.

By 1911 British Indian authorities had every reason to believe that a half-century of engagement along the lines outlined above had produced a loyal, compliant, and dependent Indian Shi'i community whose existence helped balance the questionable position assumed to be held by significant elements of the Sunni majority on the issue of the legitimacy of British authority. As we shall see in the following chapter, British anxieties in this regard were primarily the product of the immediate post-1857 zeitgeist. Yet although, according to Juan Cole, broadly ranged elements of the Shi'i community including "commoners, *ta'alluqdars*...troops of the restored Shi'i government in Lucknow, and...the Shi'i ulama"⁷² participated in the 1857 uprisings across the newly annexed province of Awadh, the established post-Mutiny narrative tended to emphasize individual acts of loyalty on the part of certain high-profile Shi'a.⁷³ The idea that the Shi'i conception of *jihad* departed from the Sunni, orthodox interpretation in ways favourable to the continuance of peaceful British-Shi'i relations⁷⁴ served both sides, as Shi'i notables sought to evade the general sense of suspicion which fell upon the Muslims of northern India in this period, while the British, according to Cole, "swallowed the lie about Shi'i quietism with alacrity", with the aim of rebuilding pre-1857 relations with local elites.⁷⁵

This belief became embedded in official discourse through the publication of William Wilson Hunter's *The Indian Musalmans* (1871), which famously posed the question of whether Muslims were bound by duty to rebel against British authority in India. While Hunter's focus rested on the Sunnis and on the reformist trend which in this period attracted the pejorative "Wahhabi", his examination of *jihad* in Shi'i doctrine served as a point of

⁷² Cole, *Roots of North Indian Shi'ism in Iran and Iraq*, 280.

⁷³ Jones, *Shi'a Islam in Colonial India*, 169.

⁷⁴ Cole, *Roots of North Indian Shi'ism*, 272.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 280.

contrast. Depending almost entirely on a pamphlet submitted to colonial authorities by a self-designated “natural leader”, one Munshi ‘Amir ‘Ali Khan Bahadur,⁷⁶ Hunter accepted almost unquestioningly the author’s argument that for the Shi‘a *jihad* was illegitimate in the absence of the Twelfth Imam,⁷⁷ arguing that the pamphlet was “stamped with the highest authority which the Shias can give to any document, and will be permanently binding on the whole sect.”⁷⁸ One seed of doubt remained; while Hunter expressed satisfaction “to learn...that at least one small sect of our Muhammadan fellow-subjects are not bound by the first principles of their religion to rebel”,⁷⁹ he speculated on the prospect that, in fact, such proclamations may reflect the Shi‘i “principle of religious compromise”, *taqiyya*.⁸⁰ Yet under British rule, Hunter noted, the conditions of persecution and Sunni intolerance which provided the rationale for such a doctrine were happily absent, proving the sincerity of the now public Shi‘i commitment to loyalty – “Even without a formal pledge of this sort, they are naturally loyal; for they know that if either the Hindus or the Sunni Muhammadans ever get the upper hand in India, the days of tribulation for the Shias will begin.”⁸¹

As the Wahhabi panic of the 1860s evolved into a more restrained yet widespread concern with the seditious nature of Ottoman-sponsored pan-Islamic intrigue in the decades immediately preceding the First World War, assertions of loyalty on the part of the Indian Shi‘a became ever more regular. Occasionally a “natural leader” would directly petition the government. In June 1906 one Sayid Muhammad Riza appealed to the Viceroy, the Earl of

⁷⁶ See “Views of the Sheeah sect of Mahomedans as to the term "Jehad"”. Foreign/Secret (India)/4-5/1871, National Archives of India (NAI).

⁷⁷ William Wilson Hunter, *The Indian Musalmans* (London: Trübner, 1876), 118 – 119.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 121. Jones, *Shi‘a Islam in Colonial India*, 167 – 172 argues that “the alleged ‘authorities’ responsible for this tract...were not representative of the opinion of all Indian Shi‘a” and that “there was never a single Shi‘a response to British rule.”

⁷⁹ Ibid, 120.

⁸⁰ Ibid, 120 -121.

⁸¹ Ibid, 121.

Minto, stressing that recent reports of discontent in Lahore and Aligarh were due to Sunni resentment at Britain's Ottoman policy:

the Shias have got nothing to do with it, as their religion does not recognise any worldly king as their religious leader. The Shias are loyal subjects of the British Government and are highly thankful to Government for the manifold blessings which British rule has conferred on the people of India. They hold that according to the Kuran and their religious books jihad is not admissible. The petitioner, therefore, prays that Government may be pleased to regard these messages as solely from the Sunni Muhammadans.⁸²

However, the publication of proclamations or articles in the vernacular newspapers upon which colonial authorities kept a close eye was perhaps the most common means of attracting British attention in this regard, with numerous declarations of loyalty to the British empire and support for its wars and campaigns appearing from the 1890s onward. For example, in February 1900 the *Oudh Akhbar* of Lucknow published an article reporting that a "Shi'i congregation" had prayed for the success of British arms in the Boer War,⁸³ while the *Gauhar-i-Shahwar* of June 1907 argued that due to their religious beliefs, the Shi'a could not support the Congress or the Ottomans, and consequently "it is only the British Government whose help and support they can look for in this world."⁸⁴ The volume of such statements intensified as the prospect of war with the Ottomans approached. In October 1913 the *Ittihad* of Amroha published an article titled "Among Muhammadans the Shias alone are truly loyal subjects of the British Government", which described British rule in India as an "unmixed blessing" in contrast with the sufferings the Shi'a had endured throughout their history.⁸⁵ An intelligence report which circulated on the eve of the First World War, detailing the activities of members of the pan-Islamic *Anjuman-i-Khuddam-i-Kaaba*, lent further

⁸² Saiyid Muhammad Riza to Private Secretary to the Viceroy, no. 770, 12th June 1906. Foreign/Secret-E/May 1907/764-796, NAI.

⁸³ *Oudh Akhbar*, 19th February 1900, UPNNR. IOR/L/R/5/77, BL.

⁸⁴ *Gauhar-i-Shahwar*, June 1907, UPNNR. IOR/L/R/5/82, BL.

⁸⁵ *Ittihad*, 24th October 1913, UPNNR. IOR/L/R/5/88, BL

support to the image of the loyalist Shi‘a, noting that “A Shiah paper warned the followers of its particular sect not to be taken in by the political tricks of the Sunnis, and remarked that the *Anjuman* was bound in course of time to disturb the public tranquillity.”⁸⁶ By the summer of 1914, the government of India had assessed that, in the event of a British-sponsored Arab revolt against Ottoman rule in Arabia, the great majority of Shi‘a in India would remain indifferent,⁸⁷ a prediction that was ultimately vindicated during the war years as various Shi‘i organizations continued to offer public support for the war effort, leading Lieutenant-Governor of the United Provinces James Meston to declare in 1917 that the Shi‘a “have no feeling against the Khilafat passing away from the Sultan of Turkey.”⁸⁸ In such a context, it behoved official opinion to accept Shi‘i opinion as every bit as legitimate as its Sunni counterpart.

* * * * *

Yet in terms of raw numbers, the Shi‘a could only hope to punch above their relative weight. The census enumeration process, conducted every decade since 1871, had increasingly revealed their numerically minority status within the Indian Muslim community. In fact, this status had in some cases provided yet another basis for the application of ‘orthodox’ to the Sunnis, “as they are...the majority.”⁸⁹ In earlier years, however, the demographic balance had been less clear, with a range of authoritative voices in some cases estimating an Indian Shi‘i population which rivalled or even outstripped that of its Sunni co-religionists.⁹⁰ Even

⁸⁶ “Anjuman-i-Khuddam-i-Kaaba, 1913-14.” IOR/L/PS/20/242, BL.

⁸⁷ Government of Bombay to Government of India, 21st August 1914. FO 371/2143, National Archives of the United Kingdom (NA).

⁸⁸ Quoted in Jones, *Shi‘a Islam in Colonial India*, 176.

⁸⁹ Baines, *Imperial Census of 1881*, 49. See also Malcolm, *History of Persia*, vol. 2, 236.

⁹⁰ See for example Hasan Ali, *Observations on the Mussulmauns of India vol. 1*, 128 and Hamilton, *The Hedaya*, xx.

with the advent of the census counts, the collection of reliable numbers was still challenging, as provincial enumerators often encountered a general ignorance as to the significance of the Sunni and Shi'a categories. Ibbetson reported in 1881 that

the great mass of the peasantry have, except on the frontier and perhaps in the western districts, never even heard of the distinction between the two great divisions of the Moslem faith, and though they are undoubtedly Sunni, are only so because they know of nothing else, and not by deliberate choice or conviction.⁹¹

Furthermore, Ibbetson opined that many Shi'a resorted to the practice of *taqiyya* to conceal their real allegiances.⁹² Attempting to circumvent such difficulties, officials compiling data for the census report for the North-Western Provinces and Oudh in 1891 attempted to uncover the dominant form of prayer practiced by each individual:

For the less instructed of Muhammadans and especially amongst the Sunnis, the difference between the two sects is little understood, and the enumerator had in general to ascertain the sect by a question as to how the hands were placed in prayer. Sunnis pray with one hand placed over the other on the front of the body, Shias with both hands depressed by the sides.⁹³

As Freitag has noted, many if not most Muslims would have been oblivious to the distinction.⁹⁴ Indeed, Ibbetson noted that consciousness of such issues tended to be confined to the urban, educated class of Muslims, as “they alone are possessed of the knowledge necessary to develop sectarian differences.”⁹⁵ Yet ultimately British authorities themselves reserved the right to define sectarian differences, ostensibly based on their understanding of the origins of the various Islamic sectarian movements and the distinctive doctrines and

⁹¹ Ibbetson, *Report on the Census of the Panjab*, 145, para 282.

⁹² Ibid, 146, para 282. According to Hollister, *The Shi'a of India*, 181, “many Shias refused to record themselves as such” well into the twentieth century.

⁹³ D. C. Baillie, *Census of India, Vol. XVI: The North-Western Provinces and Oudh* (Allahabad: North-Western Provinces and Oudh Government Press, 1894), 177.

⁹⁴ Freitag, *Collective Action and Community*, 252 – 253.

⁹⁵ Ibbetson, *Report on the Census of the Panjab*, 146, para 282.

rituals adhered to by them. Two cases will be discussed here to illustrate how British officialdom became implicated in the formation of distinctive, recognizable, and legally-binding sectarian boundaries within India's Muslim community. Most famously, in 1866 British courts in Bombay arbitrated a dispute within the Khoja community concerning its relationship with the Iranian exile the Aga Khan, spiritual figurehead of the global Isma'ili Shi'i movement now resident in British India. According to Teena Purohit, prior to the Aga Khan's arrival in Bombay the Khojas had resisted conventional religious categorization, selectively drawing on Hindu and Muslim traditions and texts, yet belonging exclusively to neither, their communal solidarity ultimately revolving around their particular caste identity. Significant sections of the community, however, revered the Aga Khan, whose claim that the Khojas were Isma'ilis and by extension came under his authority included demands for payments and influence over the management of civil affairs.⁹⁶ Conflict soon arose between those Khojas who resented the growing influence of the Aga Khan and those who remained devoted to him. In 1847 an inheritance dispute in which the followers of the Aga Khan argued that Islamic rather than customary law should apply was brought to the courts, where Justice Erskine Perry ruled that, due to their lack of knowledge of the Qur'an, the Prophet Muhammad, and the Arabic and Persian languages, the Khojas could not be regarded as Muslims, and consequently there was no imperative for recourse to Islamic law in the case.⁹⁷ The 1866 case concerned the Aga Khan's broad authority over Khoja affairs, as his opponents in the community brought a claim denying his right to arbitrate over property ownership and other issues, based on the proposition that the Khojas were actually Sunni Muslims.⁹⁸ Before delivering his ruling, Justice Arnould found it necessary to definitively

⁹⁶ Teena Purohit, *The Aga Khan Case: Religion and Identity in Colonial India* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 4–5.

⁹⁷ *Ibid*, 24 – 26.

⁹⁸ *Ibid*, 35.

define the Khojas' religious identity. Delving into the early history of Islam and citing texts such as Richard Burton's *Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina*⁹⁹ and Robert Grant Watson's *History of Persia*¹⁰⁰ as well as the semi-mythical traditional narratives of the Khojas' conversion to Islam and the community's own religious texts, he decided that the Khojas could not be Sunnis. Instead, he accepted the Aga Khan's claims, ultimately ruling that Isma'ili Shi'ism constituted a legitimate 'sect' of Islam to which the Khojas had converted in medieval times. The Aga Khan's claim to authority over them was therefore legitimate and must be recognized.¹⁰¹ As Purohit has argued, in the decades following the ruling, the Khoja community adapted itself to its now officially designated categorization as an Isma'ili Shi'i people.¹⁰²

A second case brought before the courts in the North-Western Provinces in 1890 required a ruling determining whether a widow, one Wazir-un-Nissa, had been a Sunni or Shi'i at her death, with implications for the inheritance rights of her extended family.¹⁰³ The appellants, relations of the deceased widow through a female relative, claimed that Wazir-un-Nissa had been born into a Shi'i family and married a Shi'i husband, one Sayyid Hadji. The fate of her estate, they argued, must therefore be decided in accordance with Shi'i inheritance laws, which would make them her legal heirs. The defendant, a "paternal ascendant" of the deceased, argued that in fact Wazir-un-Nissa had been a Sunni at birth, but upon her marriage to a Shi'i husband had "conformed outwardly to his religion."¹⁰⁴ At the death of

⁹⁹ Richard F. Burton, *Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage Mecca and Medina*, 3 Vols, 3rd ed. (Leipzig: Bernhard Tauchnitz, 1874).

¹⁰⁰ Robert Grant Watson, *A history of Persia from the beginning of the nineteenth century to the year 1858, with a review of the principal events that led to the establishment of the Kajar dynasty* (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1866).

¹⁰¹ Purohit, *The Agha Khan Case*, 35–53.

¹⁰² *Ibid*, 4 – 6.

¹⁰³ *The Indian Law Reports: Allahabad Series Vol. XII* (Allahabad: Government Press, 1890), 290 – 301.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid*, 290 – 291.

Sayyid Hadji, Wazir-un-Nissa had reverted to the religious traditions of her childhood, and so according to Sunni laws of inheritance the defendant was entitled to exclusive rights to her estate.¹⁰⁵ The case was first brought before the Subordinate Judge of Moradabad, who ruled in favour of the appellants' claim that Wazir-un-Nissa had died a Shi'ī. On appeal at the High Court, however, Justice Mahmud over-ruled the decision, determining that the available evidence indicated that the widow had died a Sunni. With both courts dismissing the bulk of the oral evidence as unreliable hearsay, the defendant's case rested on the claim that Wazir-un-Nissa's pilgrimage to the shrine of the Sufi saint Mu'īn al-Din Chishti at Ajmer,¹⁰⁶ conducted following her husband's death, indicated a conscious adherence to rites and practices associated exclusively with Sunnis. While the Subordinate Judge ruled that "thousands of Hindus and Muhammadans, both Shias and Sunnis, especially women who are not acquainted with the religion, visit the shrine without changing their creed",¹⁰⁷ Justice Mahmud noted that Wazir-un-Nissa had conducted her pilgrimage in the company of a Sufi *pir*, arguing that if she had been a Shi'ī "she would have never gone to Ajmere as she did."¹⁰⁸ Furthermore, the High Court found that upon the death of the deceased's father, one Ghulam 'Ali, the estate had been divided in accordance with Sunni laws of inheritance, indicating and he, and by extension his daughter Wazir-un-Nissa, had been Sunnis.¹⁰⁹

Through the census enumeration process and the proceedings of cases such as these, certain recognized markers of sectarian identity were outlined, demonstrated, legitimized, and effectively politicized, as Muslims in northern India were forced to tie their flag to one or

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, 294.

¹⁰⁶ Mu'īn al-Din Chishti was the medieval founder of the Chishti Sufi order. On the semi-mythical origins and historical functions of the shrine, see P. M. Currie, *The Shrine and Cult of Mu'īn Al-Din Chishti of Ajmer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

¹⁰⁷ *The Indian Law Reports: Allahabad Series Vol. XII*, 296.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, 298 – 300.

the other sectarian pole. It was a process in which the communities' "natural leaders" eagerly engaged. A resolution passed by the All India Shia Conference in Lucknow in December 1909 urged the government to impose a separate column for the enumeration of Shi'a in the 1911 census – the inclusion of such a column had, until then, been left to the discretion of the provincial governments.¹¹⁰ Such claims to official recognition via the census were not unique to the Shi'i community – as we shall see in following chapters, both the *Ahl-i-Hadis* and *Ahmadiyya* communities of northern India made similar bids for official recognition by means of the census from the 1880s onward. The appeal for such official recognition was, in effect, an attempt to defy the apparent logic of numerical inferiority by appealing for the concerns and interests of the minority community to be granted equal weight to those of their sectarian rivals.

* * * * *

The question of how exactly these concerns and interests were to be understood and defined *within* the Shi'i community became a source of tension. As Freitag and Jones have argued, intra-Shi'i competition fuelled by the combination of internal reformist impulses and external expectations projected on to the community by British authorities had the effect of legitimizing particular practices, considered in some way authentically or traditionally Shi'i or Islamic, at the expense of others considered innovatory and corrupt.¹¹¹ In the battle for

¹¹⁰ "Memorial of the All India Shia Conference regarding the provision of a separate column for the Shias in the schedule for the census of 1911", no. 6070, 14th March 1910. Home/Census /72-73/Part A/April 1910, NAI. The *Jain Gazette* of Muttra, 16th May 1900 had, in advance of the 1901 census, published an editorial expressing regret that the decision to enumerate by sect had been left to the local government: "The distinction of sect plays an important part in the fabric of native society... Under these circumstances, it is necessary that the sect to which every person belongs be also ascertained at the coming census." UPNNR. IOR/L/R/5/77, BL.

¹¹¹ Freitag, *Collective Action and Community*, 261 and Jones, *Shi'a Islam in Colonial India*, 28 - 29.

leadership within the community, “natural leaders” employed the language of sectarianism, defined by Jones as “an enhanced discourse of religious and communal difference between the members of Islamic groups or schools”,¹¹² in order to define and regulate what it meant to be Shi‘i or Sunni.¹¹³ The resultant hardening of identities produced more clearly defined, homogenous sectarian communities, the most explicit manifestation of which was the growth of Sunni-Shi‘i disputes and disturbances in northern India from the 1880s onward. The final section of this chapter will consider the nature of British arbitration in these disputes and its impact on British conceptualizations of the Shi‘a in terms of their place in British India’s Islamic universe.

What is of interest here is how British official interference in Sunni-Shi‘i issues, which involved engagement with and regulation of certain rituals and practices identified as “sectarian”, helped facilitate the emergence of a reformed, consciously sectarian identity politics among Muslims in early twentieth century northern India. Pre-colonial and early nineteenth century northern India was no stranger to outbreaks of Sunni-Shi‘i violence, particularly during the annual Muharram commemorations,¹¹⁴ and as Christopher Bayly has noted, such episodes tended to coincide with “shifts in political and economic power”.¹¹⁵ One such shift occurred in early nineteenth century Awadh, where the nawabs, ruling over an overwhelmingly Hindu and Sunni Muslim population, increasingly shaped the state’s identity and high culture in terms of their Shi‘i faith. Concurrently, however, the nawabs left the door open to partial communal integration through the conceptualization of the

¹¹² Jones, *Shi‘a Islam in Colonial India*, 4.

¹¹³ *Ibid*, 28.

¹¹⁴ Mrs Hasan Ali, *Observations on the Mussulmauns of India vol. 1*, 25 notes that “we very often find the two sects hoard up their private animosities and dislikes until the return of Mahurram, which scarcely ever passes over, in any extensively populated city of Hindoostan, without a serious quarrel, often terminating in bloodshed.”

¹¹⁵ Bayly, “The Pre-History of ‘Communalism’?,” 203.

Muharram rituals as an inclusive annual reflection of the state's diversity, in which Hindus and Sunnis were welcome to contribute.¹¹⁶ Absent the reformist impulse of the later nineteenth century and the rigid categorization of sectarian difference imposed by the British, many chose to participate under the authority of the explicitly Shi'ī nawabi state. Another shift occurred following the events of 1857-59, during which the British annexation of Awadh was consolidated, stripping the Shi'ī elite of their political authority and leaving them as a cultural nobility, striving to retain their former privileges as a numerically insignificant minority whose legitimacy in Islamic terms was increasingly the target of reformist Sunni polemic.¹¹⁷ As Freitag notes, "Virtually all of the Muslim reformist groups...agreed in excluding Shi'as from their Islamic universe".¹¹⁸ In this context, the sectarianism of the late nineteenth century must be understood in terms of the ostensibly neutral, non-Muslim status of the British authorities, whose lack of interest in shaping public life and communal relations in northern India along exclusivist religious lines created an even platform on which sectarian competition could play out.¹¹⁹ On such foundations was imperial Britain's own, inclusive Islamic universe constructed.

As Freitag has argued, the colonial state "interfered...though it would not participate" in the variety of public rituals, ceremonies, and other activities during which the adherents of rival religious communities would come into direct contact in an atmosphere of heightened

¹¹⁶ Cole, *Roots of North Indian Shī'ism in Iran and Iraq*, 92 – 93.

¹¹⁷ Hyder, *Reliving Karbala*, 39 – 40.

¹¹⁸ Freitag, *Collective Action and Community*, 249. Jones, *Shi'a Islam in Colonial India*, 54 – 56, shows how the initially non-sectarian character of the *Nadwat-ul-Ulama* association was cast aside as Sunni reformist figures associated with the Deobandi and Bareilvi movements competed for legitimacy by attacking its inclusive nature.

¹¹⁹ Similarly, Ussama Makdisi, *The Culture of Sectarianism: Community, History, and Violence in Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Lebanon* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 6 – 7, argues that the Maronite-Druze disturbances of mid-nineteenth century Lebanon should be understood as "an expression of a new form of local politics and knowledge that arose in a climate of transition and reform...The collapse of the old regime opened up the space for a new form of politics and representation based on a language of religious equality."

religious consciousness.¹²⁰ This active interference involved the regulation of “virtually every facet of corporate religious life - from the shape, height, and use of a building to the format of a religious procession”,¹²¹ and was ultimately designed to prevent outbreaks of communal or sectarian violence which would threaten to undermine the basis of British authority.¹²² Yet it was often the case that British authorities were drawn into involvement in such disputes at the request of one or both of the conflicting parties. The Indian Penal Code of 1860, introduced in the aftermath of the 1857 uprisings, explicitly provided for the protection of religious sensibilities, and was regularly invoked by the competing sectarian communities in the pursuit of their sectarian agendas. An article published by a disgruntled Sunni writer in the *Naiyar-i-Azam* of Moradabad in October 1890 gives an idea of how the Penal Code was regarded as the measure of British ‘evenhandedness’ in religious affairs at the time. The author bemoaned a recent British ruling to permit the publication of a book explicitly abusing the first three *Rashidun* caliphs Abu Bakr, ‘Umar and ‘Uthman along with Aisha. Although the book was clearly offensive to Sunni sensibilities, authorities noted that its cover carried a warning that Sunnis should avoid reading it. The decision, he claimed, was prompted by the intervention of the “influential” Shi‘a of Lucknow, and effectively indicated that Sunnis were no longer “protected” by the Penal Code.¹²³

In the case of the Sunni-Shi‘i disputes of the North-Western/United Provinces of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, both factions found in articles 296 to 298 tools with which they could hope to protect their traditionally recognized privileges against the provocative ‘innovations’ of their rivals, and concurrently pursue official recognition of

¹²⁰ Freitag, *Collective Action and Community*, 53.

¹²¹ *Ibid*, 54.

¹²² Mark Doyle, *Communal Violence in the British Empire: Disturbing the Pax* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 3 – 4.

¹²³ *Naiyar-i-Azam*, 6th October 1890, UPNNR. IOR/L/R/5/67, BL.

their own novel rituals and public practices in the name of the religious freedom ostensibly guaranteed by the state. In particular, they came to invoke article 298, which mandated punishment for anyone who “with the deliberate intention of wounding the religious feelings of any person, utters any word or makes any sound in the hearing of that person, or makes any gesture in the sight of that person, or places any object in the sight of that person.”¹²⁴ From the 1870s onward, certain Shi‘i mosques began reciting the phrase ‘*Ali wali-Allah va khalifa bila fasil*’ (“‘Ali, the beloved of God and Caliph without interruption”) in the call to prayer (‘*adhan*’), a practice common in Iran but considered unusual if not unheard of in India.¹²⁵ Implying the illegitimacy of the first three caliphs, the phrase inevitably provoked Sunni protests on the basis that its recent introduction constituted an innovation and was designed to offend.¹²⁶ British responses were typically mixed, seemingly dependent on the individual authorities responsible for maintaining the peace. In Lucknow in 1889, for example, the magistrate ruled in favour of the Shi‘a,¹²⁷ while in Amroha in 1894, authorities initially banned use of the phrase in deference to Sunni sensibilities, before reversing their decision on receipt of a petition from leaders of the Shi‘i community.¹²⁸ The petition argued that use of the phrase in their call to prayer constituted a “religious duty” which could not plausibly be interpreted as offensive to anyone:

this phrase can only be as hurtful to the Sunnis as the sentence “Allah is the greatest” to an atheist, the sentence “I give evidence that there is no God but Allah” to a polytheist and the sentence “I give evidence that Mohommed is an apostle of God”

¹²⁴ W. Morgan and A. G. MacPherson, *The Indian Penal Code (Act XLV of 1860) with Notes* (Calcutta: G. C. Hay & Co., 1863), 220 – 221.

¹²⁵ Jones, *Shi‘a Islam in Colonial India*, 78 – 80. Jones notes that the phrase was initially introduced in “unestablished or peripheral” mosques seeking to challenge “establishment Shi‘ism in their towns”, before eventually developing “into a common custom across South Asia.”

¹²⁶ See for example the article in the *Meerut Gazette*, 24th July 1875, UPNNR, in which the author criticizes the decision of a magistrate in Jaunpur not to intervene to prevent use of the phrase, and warns of disturbances to come. IOR/L/R/5/52, BL.

¹²⁷ *Oudh Punch*, 2nd May 1889, UPNNR. . IOR/L/R/5/66, BL.

¹²⁸ *Rohilkhand Gazette*, 16th March 1896, UPNNR. . IOR/L/R/5/73, BL.

to a Hindoo, a Parsee, a Jew, and a Christian. And all these sentences are called out in the Azan of both the Shias and the Sunnis.

It went on to claim that as a result of the recent ruling, the Shi'a of Amroha had been "clearly deprived of our religious freedom and forbidden from performing an important part of our prayers", and that, in fact, it was the Sunni grievance which was "new and unique", not the recitation of *bila fast*.¹²⁹

The most volatile disputes, however, tended to concern the Muharram commemorations.¹³⁰ Held annually to mark the events of the Battle of Karbala, the spectacle of Shi'i grief had, as we have seen previously, been the focus of British attention, exercising a fascination on all who chanced to witness the processions and so-called "passion-plays", whether in India, Iran, or elsewhere. Assessing the impact of the Muharram, the one-time Political Resident in the Persian Gulf, Sir Lewis Pelly, opined that

If the success of a drama is to be measured by the effects which it produces upon the people for whom it is composed, or upon the audiences before whom it is represented, no play has ever surpassed the tragedy known in the Mussulman world as that of Hasan and Husain...In common with all my countrymen who have long resided in India, I was annually impressed by the scenes which had place in the native theatres while the recital of the woes of Hasan and Husain went on from night to night during the month of Muharram. On joining H. M.'s Legation in Persia in 1859 I was yet more struck by the effect produced upon all classes of society at the capital as they listened, day after day, to this unprecedentedly long tragedy. From the palace to the bazaar there was wailing and beating of breasts, and bursts of impassioned grief from scores of houses wheresoever a noble, or the merchants, or others were giving a tazia.¹³¹

¹²⁹ Petition of the Shi'a of Amroha to MacDonnell, 19th December 1895. GAD/106C-64/1896, UPSA.

¹³⁰ On which see Hyder, *Reliving Karbala*, Hollister, *The Shi'a of India*, 164 – 180, Keith Hjortshoj, "Shi'i Identity and the Significance of Muharram in Lucknow, India" in *Shi'ism, Resistance, and Revolution*, ed. Martin Kramer (Boulder: Westview Press, 1987), 289 – 309 and Jim Masselos, "Change and custom in the format of the Bombay Mohurrum during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries", *Journal of South Asian Studies* 5, no. 2 (1982): 47 – 67.

¹³¹ Pelly, *The miracle play of Hasan and Husain vol. 1*, iii.

Editor of the *Bombay Gazette* Grattan Geary witnessed public scenes of Shi‘i lamentations in Bombay in January 1877, and left behind an account which shows how the Muharram events had by that time been transformed into a more exclusively Shi‘i occasion:¹³²

the Shias are so wrought upon on the recurrence of this anniversary every Mohurram, that, by a police order, the celebration is restricted to the limits of certain extensive grounds, and “the procession of the horses,” carrying the blood-stained body of the martyr and his little children, is not permitted to pass through the streets, where a conflict with the Sunnis would be inevitable... Two or three Persians stood amongst the police, and at times interfered to prevent the ingress of men of the Sunni or orthodox sect, of whose self-control on such an occasion they might not unnaturally entertain a doubt. But Hindus were allowed to pass without difficulty, and so were Christians.¹³³

For a British observer such as Geary, it was above all else the sight of Shi‘i devotees beating and whipping themselves in a frenzy which made the most lasting impression:

The fierce intensity of the passions at work makes a deep impression on you as you look down at the scene, and you begin to see how terrible a thing religious fanaticism when thoroughly roused really is, and how tremendous is the force which it is capable of exerting in shaping the destinies of the world. These hundreds of muscular healthy men in the prime of life – many of them as fair as Europeans – work themselves into a perfect fury of devotion and beat their breasts till they become as raw beef... There is something contagious in so much fervour. It is certain that I began to feel an interest in Hussein that I never dreamed of taking when I set out for the Imaum Barra an hour before. Judge what the effect of such a commemoration must be upon the Shias themselves! The most sensational of American Revival meetings are but child’s play to it.¹³⁴

Geary’s thoughts eventually turned to the means by which such scenes could be moderated in some way – “It is to be hoped that as time goes on, and the influence of education makes

¹³² In fact, such a process had been underway in Bombay since the 1820s. See Masselos, “Change and custom in the format of the Bombay Mohurram”, 50 – 51.

¹³³ Grattan Geary, *Through Asiatic Turkey. Narrative of a journey from Bombay to the Bosphorus*, 2 vols. (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle, & Rivington, 1878), vol. 1, 322–323.

¹³⁴ Ibid, 324. The horror expressed here by Geary reflects standard anti-Shi‘i polemics directed at the Muharram events by critical Sunnis. For example the *Hadiyat-ul-Akhbar*, 8th May 1890, UPNNR, published an article calling for legislation to prevent the “appalling sight” of self-flagellation. IOR/L/R/5/67, BL.

itself felt amongst the Shia as amongst the orthodox Mussulmans, the mourning for the death of one of ‘the foremost among the youth of Paradise,’ will find other modes of expression.”¹³⁵ In the final decades of the nineteenth century, a variety of practices long associated with the events became the target of a reforming critique from within the Shi‘i community in northern India. At the same time, other changes introduced helped stoke Sunni animosity,¹³⁶ with the result that British authorities were eventually forced to intervene and impose formal regulations on the Muharram proceedings.

In fact, in one such case which played out in the town of Zaidpur, just east of Lucknow, in the early 1880s, it was the unasked-for intervention of a British official which provoked a controversy that would eventually lead to formal regulation of the Muharram. The town had a population of just over 9,000 in 1885, of whom roughly 5,000 were Sunni, over 3,000 Hindu, and around 950 Shi‘i. According to British reports, the Sunnis were “nearly all poor people of the lower classes”, while the town’s Shi‘a were wealthy landowners with a reputation for intolerance.¹³⁷ The *tabarra’*, or ritual cursing of the three caliphs, had apparently been a regular feature of the Muharram *ta’ziya* processions¹³⁸ in the town until 1880, when Extra Assistant Commissioner for the Lucknow Division Pandit Kali Shahi took it on himself to ban the practice in public, as had become the practice in Lucknow and

¹³⁵ Ibid, 332. Yitzhak Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 150 writes that “the observance of harsh breast-beating and chain-flagellation only came to Iraq in the nineteenth century may be gathered from several pieces of information...Najafi oral history relates that the practice of chain-flagellation was introduced into the city in 1919 by the British governor of Najaf, who had served beforehand in Kermanshah and observed the practice there...If this assertion is true, the British act was probably intended to modify the Muharram rituals and to reduce violence in substituting the practice of head-cutting with chain-flagellation.”

¹³⁶ Jones, *Shi'a Islam in Colonial India*, 103 – 105.

¹³⁷ Document of 5th December 1881. GAD Block/507/1885, UPSA.

¹³⁸ “In Muharram processions in the Indian subcontinent, *ta'ziya* signifies the bier on which al-Husayn's headless body was carried from the battlefield to its final resting place; it also stands for his tomb. The sizes and shapes of these portable *ta'ziyas* vary greatly, from small, coffin-like structures to immense floats which are either carried by a crowd of men on their shoulders or moved along on wheels...Large and small *ta'ziyas* in their thousands are carried in the Muharram processions.” *The Encyclopaedia of Islam, Vol. 10* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 408.

elsewhere.¹³⁹ In 1884, in the face of repeated Shi‘i appeals, Pandit Kali Shahi’s decision was reversed at the orders of the new Deputy Commissioner Colonel Noble. Previous authorities had considered reversing the order, but noted that following its issue, “the Sunnis having thus been taught their rights for which they cared but little previously, any cancellation of the previous order would be productive of a disturbance.” Instead, they approached the “leading men of the Shias” to reassure them that the order “was not intended in any way to interfere with their legitimate privileges, but simply to prevent a breach of the peace.”¹⁴⁰ Noble himself implemented the order in 1882 and 1883, but noting the intransigence of the Sunnis in contrast to the more flexible suggestions presented by the Shi‘i representatives, who ultimately boycotted the ceremonies in these years in protest, he subsequently decided to try to “restore to old and peaceable order of things without giving reasonable ground of offence to the Sunnis”.¹⁴¹ Explaining that while the *tabarra*’ certainly differed from comparable religious rituals in its contentious nature, and consequently required extreme oversight, Noble argued that absolute prohibition was a step too far,¹⁴² and attempted to implement a middle path. For, according to Noble,

A man has no right to complain because, by means of a public religious procession or other ceremony, he is reminded that all the world does not share his religious views; but he has ground for complaint where the religious ceremony consists in openly insulting the objects of his worship or of his highest religious veneration.¹⁴³

¹³⁹ E.g. a court ruling in Allahabad in 1878 had declared that “If a Shia deems himself bound deliberately to wound the religious feelings of others by word or gesture, he may hereafter have his reward in heaven, but he must take the consequences under section 298, Indian Penal Code, in this world.” Honorable F. B. Pearson, Judge, 20th December 1878, Allahabad. GAD Block/507/1885, UPSA.

¹⁴⁰ Document of 5th December 1881. GAD Block/507/1885, UPSA.

¹⁴¹ Noble to the Commissioner, Lucknow Division, 3rd November 1884. GAD Block/507/1885, UPSA.

¹⁴² Quinnes to the Chief Secretary to the Government of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh, 18th May 1885. GAD Block/507/1885, UPSA.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

In 1884 the *tabarra* ' was permitted along certain procession routes "where no Sunnis are known to live", but could only be uttered "once and by one person only, in his ordinary speaking voice." Warnings to the town's Sunnis to avoid these routes were issued.¹⁴⁴ In response, the Sunnis boycotted in protest, at which Noble responded that the *ta'ziya* processions were in any case "forbidden to the Sunnis by their religious teachers and books, and...the *tazia* manufacture and processions of Sunnis and Zaidpur and elsewhere in Oudh is unorthodox and have been copied from the Shias."¹⁴⁵

Noble personally oversaw the following 'Ashura'¹⁴⁶ of 1885, after which the representatives of the Sunni community complained that

the Indian Penal Code was practically a dead letter, and the Sunnis could not raise the voice of protest, though subjected to the uncivil treatment at the hands of their Shia opponents, not to speak of the Sunni servants of the Shias and the Sunni coolies carrying their *tazias*, who could not help recalling the days of the Shia kings of Oudh.¹⁴⁷

The Sunnis went on to appeal against Noble's reversal of the 1880 order on the basis of article 298 of the Penal Code, and concluded by invoking Islamic authority, arguing that the *tabarra* ' is not mandated by any Islamic texts and that, in any case, the Sunnis are forbidden to hear it by their own religious authorities.¹⁴⁸ Noble's decision split opinion in British circles, with some deploring the move and reaffirming the suitability of the example set in Lucknow, where the *tabarra* ' could only be uttered "in-doors and with bated breath".¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁴ Noble to the Commissioner, Lucknow Division, 3rd November 1884. GAD Block/507/1885, UPSA.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ The tenth day of the Muharram and anniversary of the death of Husayn at Karbala, which represents the climax of the Muharram commemorations.

¹⁴⁷ Memorial of the Sunni Residents of Zaidpur. GAD Block/507/1885, UPSA.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Reid to the Commissioner, Lucknow Division, 6th June 1885. GAD Block/507/1885, UPSA.

Others found Noble's order "in accordance with Government orders."¹⁵⁰ One bewildered official lamented the absence of a coherent British response to the problem:

The most deplorable thing in the whole occurrence is the want of continuity in the administration. A fussy Extra Assistant Commissioner first stops an old established custom to which no one had objected. Then the Shias sulk and growl for four years and are kept in order by force. Then all of a sudden they are allowed to resume the objectionable ceremony and are patted on the back, and the Sunnis are turned into enemies of order and coerced by a large police force.¹⁵¹

The Zaidpur dispute illustrates the competitive nature of the system of communal and sectarian relations which was emerging in the post-1857 era in British India. As we have seen, the system was overseen in a rather ad hoc fashion, as a series of British officials struggled to achieve a balance between the protection of religious sensibilities and the guarantee of religious freedom which would satisfy the rival parties. Appeals to British authority rested first and foremost on the Indian Penal Code – as Judge Pearson of Allahabad ruled in a *bila fasl* case in that city in 1878, "the only question for the courts to determine in dealing with a case like the present is whether the execrations were uttered with the deliberate intentions of wounding the religious feelings of others."¹⁵² Yet other considerations came into play, and they centred around the authenticity or legitimacy of the act or ritual in question. Curiously, this was approached from two directions. On the one hand, the competing parties were keen to stress the time-honoured longevity of their favoured 'status quo', arguing that any move to alter practices which stretched back beyond living memory constituted 'innovation', or *bid'ah*. British authorities were, on the face of it, keen to avoid the introduction of novel forms of religious practice which threatened to disrupt the delicate balance of power arrangements which they now supervised. Official

¹⁵⁰ T. S., 23rd May 1885. GAD Block/507/1885, UPSA.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Honorable F. B. Pearson, Judge, 20th December 1878, Allahabad. GAD Block/507/1885, UPSA.

recognition of such novelties could be perceived to undermine the claim to neutrality in religious affairs on which their entire approach to the problem of communal and sectarian relations ostensibly rested. Paradoxically, however, it was at times argued by those elements of the competing parties guided by a reformist impulse that some of these time-honoured practices had little or no basis in the legitimate Islamic tradition, and were derived from a non-Islamic, typically Hindu or Iranian source; in other words, they were 'unorthodox'. Appeals along these lines also stressed opposition to 'innovation', but it was innovation as measured by strictly Islamic, reformist terms, i.e. 'orthodoxy'. British officials were instinctively moved by the reformist drive, and generally sought to account for what they determined to be 'orthodox' practice as they attempted to weigh the various factors at hand in the resolution of disputes.

What appeared 'orthodox' differed, however, in Sunni and Shi'i eyes. As we have seen, British officialdom generally associated 'orthodoxy' with Sunni doctrine and practice, viewing Shi'ism as an Iranian-derived heterodox offshoot or sect with a questionable basis in the Islamic tradition. The principle of even-handed neutrality, however, demanded a reconceptualization of Shi'ism as a distinct but legitimately Islamic tradition in its own right, as Shi'i petitioners made claims on the basis of their legitimacy according to Shi'i tradition. The process of achieving an even-handed balance of sectarian interests thus required British officials to engage with the idea that a hierarchy of 'orthodoxy' existed within the Shi'i tradition as it did within the Islamic tradition as a whole, and ensured that they granted the 'orthodox' Shi'i tradition a status equal to that of their 'orthodox' Sunni rivals. As discussed previously in the chapter, this had already played out as British authorities attempted to define the Isma'ilis in relation to their conception of Islamic 'orthodoxy'; now it was applied within the Twelver Shi'i community. Not only did the process produce the Shi'a as a distinct

minority yet legitimate religious group in early twentieth century India, it also brought British regulation into line with the reformist elements within the Twelver Shi‘i community, thus consolidating the community’s self-consciously sectarian status. This development was finally formalized by the British response to events centred around the Lucknow Muharram commemorations of 1906 to 1908.

Lucknow’s Sunnis had traditionally participated in the ceremonies under Shi‘i authority, carrying their own *ta‘ziyas* in the central parades to the local *karbalas*.¹⁵³ These were sites at which replicas of the holy shrine of Husayn at Karbala, Iraq, had been constructed, and one in particular, the Tal Katora *karbala* in the southwest of the city, was the focus of the Muharram period’s climax, ‘Ashura’. Prior to 1905 the area surrounding the *karbala* had become the scene of a festive gathering marked by practices “likely to prove offensive to the religious feelings of pious-minded persons, particularly of the Shia sect”¹⁵⁴ – in April 1905, a deputation of Shi‘i notables requested help from British authorities to ‘restore’ the festival’s status as a period of mourning rather than exuberance. Among the practices subsequently targeted were prostitution, the playing of games, opening of shops, chewing of betel, and smoking of tobacco along the procession route leading to the *karbala*. It was afterwards noted that the leading Sunnis of the city had not been consulted regarding proposed changes in advance of the ‘Ashura’ of 1906, and that “the persons mainly affected by the new regulations would be Sunnis of the lower orders, whose discontent would be slow to find organised expression.”¹⁵⁵ According to Indian Civil Service officer T. C. Piggott, who would be appointed President of the committee convened to resolve the dispute which followed,

¹⁵³ Hjortshoj, “Shi‘i Identity”, 298.

¹⁵⁴ Report of the Piggott Committee, 7th December 1908, no. 12. IOR/P/8098, BL.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

The Shias felt that the...festivals were becoming too much of a vulgar holiday...Honest desire for reform, a puritan distaste for vulgar festivities on Muharram days and a desire to score off the Sunnis were all competing motives.¹⁵⁶

The reformist drive and change of atmosphere surrounding the events may have been sparked in part by the arrival of the reformist Shi'i preacher Maqbul Ahmad in the city in 1904. Amongst other offences Maqbul was accused by local Sunnis of encouraging the recitation of the *tabarra*; he was later prosecuted for incitement in the summer of 1908, with one authority involved in the case commenting that, in terms of the growing Sunni-Shi'i unrest, "The preachings of that Shia firebrand, Makbul Ahmad, seem to have been largely responsible for the dissensions."¹⁵⁷ In response, the Sunnis constructed their own *karbala* at the opposite end of the city and introduced the recitation of the so-called *char yari* verses extolling the virtues of the three caliphs Abu Bakr, 'Umar and 'Uthman into their *ta'ziya* procession, which at points crossed that of the traditional mainstream procession. Violence consequently marked the 'Ashura' of 1906 and 1908, at which point British authorities convened to resolve the matter.

The "Piggott Committee on Sunni-Shia Differences" met at the end of 1908 with a view to imposing regulations on future Muharram proceedings in order to restore and maintain the peace. The committee

would be required to examine thoroughly what was the existing state of facts in previous years as regards the action allowed to Shias and to Sunnis, to find definitely whether there had been any alteration in the privileges of each sect and also to find definitely whether if any alteration had been allowed it was calculated to annoy any other sect; also to ascertain whether any custom which was not an innovation was nevertheless calculated to annoy any other sect.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁶ Piggott, 19th December 1908. GAD/591/1908, UPSA.

¹⁵⁷ "The humble petition of the Sunni community of Lucknow", no. 5. IOR/P/8098, BL.

¹⁵⁸ Note of proceedings on the occasion of the reception of a Shia deputation by His Honour the Lieutenant-Governor on the 8th April 1908. GAD/591/1908, UPSA.

Essentially, the Committee had to decide if the *Char Yari* verses constituted an innovation designed to offend Shi'ī sensibilities. To this end, the committee invited testimony from leading members of both communities. A preliminary analysis by a prominent Sunni, Maulvi Ghulam Mujtaba, attempted to distinguish those elements of the Muharram commemorations he termed “purely religious” on the one hand and “customary” on the other:

This division itself should not be taken to underrate the importance attached to customary ceremonies, as I will show that persons, who observe the customary ceremonies, whether Shias or Sunnis, exhibit more enthusiasm in their performances than perhaps the Shias do in the performance of purely religious ceremonies. By religious ceremonies, I mean ceremonies sanctioned by authentic traditions of the Shia sect.¹⁵⁹

In fact, argued Ghulam Mujtaba, almost none of the rituals and activities associated with the Muharram in India could be reasonably termed “purely religious”. The proof of this lay in the common observation that the nature of the ceremonies differed dramatically from place to place:¹⁶⁰

out of the various public ceremonies observed or public processions formed during the 10 days of Muharram, the only thing to be found in common at every place is the 10th ceremony of funeral, if I may call it so. Here again the practice is not quite uniform...From what has been submitted above, it will appear that there is no hard-and-fast rule for general application either in connection with the nature of ceremonies performed or as to the date of their performance, and this is one of the reasons why I have dealt with these ceremonies under the category of customary ceremonies...it is exceedingly doubtful whether the ceremonies under this category are permissible under the strict Shia Law.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁹ Note by Maulvi Ghulam Mujtaba, 7th September 1908. GAD/591/1908, UPSA.

¹⁶⁰ Here Ghulam Mujtaba cited Pelly's *The miracle play of Hasan and Husain* along with *A Dictionary of Islam* by the missionary Thomas Patrick Hughes, on which see Chapter 5.

¹⁶¹ Note by Maulvi Ghulam Mujtaba, 7th September 1908. GAD/591/1908, UPSA. Ghulam Mujtaba here cites Matthew Arnold's “A Persian Passion Play” in Matthew Arnold, *Essays in Criticism* (New York: A. L. Burt, 1889), 164–194.

In this way, an appeal to Shi'i law was made by a concerned Sunni citing largely Western sources in order to cast doubt on the assumption that the various practices associated with the Muharram could be legitimately protected under the Penal Code. Modes of argument such as this dominated the Committee's proceedings, as investigations were launched into the authenticity of any given belief or practice. For their part, the Shi'a insisted that the *char yari* verses were "unknown to the annals of the city and the entire Islamic world" and were "opposed to the Sunni religion and...thus a pure innovation."¹⁶² For that reason, they could only have been introduced in order to cause offense to the Shi'i community, for

it is the essence of the Shia religion...that the three Caliphas, namely Abu Bakr, Omar and Usman, were not the rightful successors of the Prophet, and that they were not only the usurpers but also the chief assassins of the Prophet's own daughter and other members of his family and above all the primary cause of the martyrdom of Imam Husain himself.¹⁶³

In response, the Sunni leaders attempted to expand the Committee's agenda beyond the issues directly linked to the Muharram, arguing that the problems related

to the conduct of the Shias and practices observed by them on occasions besides the Muharram, nominally in the name of religion but in reality for the solitary purpose of grievously wounding the religious susceptibilities of the Sunnis.¹⁶⁴

According to the Sunnis, the dispute had its origins in the regional tour of Maqbul Ahmad in 1904 and the growing practice of *tabarra* among the Shi'a:

bigoted priests began to pour vituperation and abuses on the three *Khalifs* held in reverence by the Sunnis, who naturally commenced to resent this innovation. The Shia priests told their Shia audiences that to abuse those three *Khalifs* publicly was a part of the religious duties of the Shias, and consequently *tabarra* was said openly

¹⁶² "The humble memorial of the Shia community of Lucknow", 8th April 1908, no. 2. IOR/P/8098, BL.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ "The humble petition of the Sunni community of Lucknow", no. 5. IOR/P/8098, BL.

with a view to deliberately annoy and wound the religious sentiments of the Sunnis...the utterance of the *tabarra* in various ways is the main cause of the present discord between the two sects.¹⁶⁵

In the aftermath of Maqbul Ahmad's conviction, the Shi'a, according to the Sunnis, had found more subtle means of expressing their hatred for the three caliphs, reciting *bila fasl* openly and increasingly including it in their *'adhan*. Going beyond an appeal to Shi'i clerical or jurisprudential authority, the Sunnis contended that the Qajar Shah of Iran had issued a royal *firman* forbidding *bila fasl* "in order to restrain the Shias from wounding the religious sentiments of the Sunnis";¹⁶⁶ to this appeal to Shi'i political authority the Shi'a responded that the Sunnis had established a series of meetings "for the sole and exclusive purpose of disparaging the Shia religion", something unheard of "even in Turkey".¹⁶⁷

As series of witnesses were called to determine the authenticity of the *char yari* verses and associated flags which had been flown at the Sunni *ta'ziya* procession. A Sunni member of the committee, Mr. Abdul Shakur, claimed that "there is no expression used in any of these which cannot be justified from books the authority of which is admitted by the Shias themselves". Furthermore, he had heard that the practice of reciting the verses was "a very old one", sometimes performed in the Tal Katora *karbala* itself.¹⁶⁸ Another Sunni witness considered it "a matter of religion to sing the praises of the four *Caliphs*";¹⁶⁹ while another claimed that

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ "The humble memorial of the Shias of Lucknow" to Piggott, 24th November 1908. No. 7, IOR/P/8098, BL.

¹⁶⁸ "Memorandum of opinions expressed by members in reply to questions put by the President", Mr. Abdul Shakur, 30th November 1908. No. 10, IOR/P/8098, BL.

¹⁶⁹ Witness Statement of Sarfaraz Ahmad, 30th November 1908. No. 11, IOR/P/8098, BL.

Sunnis do not commence any undertaking or ceremony without first praising God, then his Prophet, and then the *Sahaba* including the four *Caliphs*...I think if the praising of the four *Caliphs* is forbidden the Sunnis will be offended and will consider that their religion has been interfered with: I say this of a general prohibition...Sunnis will consider that the English Government has for the first time prevented a sect from singing the praises of its leaders.¹⁷⁰

Yet the weight of evidence seemed to contradict such testimony – not a single non-Sunni witness could be found to confirm the supposedly ancient nature of the *char yari* recitations.

The Committee ultimately ruled in favour of the Shi‘a – first, by confining the issues to be discussed to those directly concerning the Muharram problems; second, by rejecting Sunni complaints that the Shi‘i ‘reform’ of the ‘Ashura’ festivities at the Tal Katora *karbala* was directed at them; and thirdly, by banning the recitation of the *char yari* verses and display of associated flags during the Muharram events. In relation to the Tal Katora reform, the Committee acknowledged that “a certain revival of religious feeling” had taken hold of the Shi‘i community, and that in such a context a reform targeting offensive practices was understandable, while in relation to the *char yari* verses, the Committee concluded that

The point in dispute is really a somewhat narrow one. It is quite certain that the organized and systematic recitation of these verses, in such a manner as to turn the Muharram processions into "*charyari*" demonstrations, is an innovation since 1906. The general finding of the majority of the committee is that, while we are not prepared entirely to disbelieve the witnesses who speak to the occasional recitation of verses in honour of the four Caliphs in connection with the Muharram celebrations before 1906, we are satisfied that such recitations were at most occasional and infrequent, and not calculated to attract general notice.¹⁷¹

Responding to the Sunni contention that the growth in the use of the *bila fasl* phrase among the Shi‘i community in relation to ‘Ali was designed to offend, the Committee judged that

¹⁷⁰ Witness Statement of Muhammad Sakhawat ‘Ali, *ibid*.

¹⁷¹ Report of the Piggott Committee, 7th December 1908, no. 12. IOR/P/8098, BL.

The words in themselves are a mere assertion of the Shia faith that Ali was the rightful and immediate successor of Muhammad; but they contain no such imprecation on those holding an opposite belief as has justified the suppression of the public utterance of the Shia "*tabarra*"... We are not prepared to lay it down that the utterance of the words "*bila fasl*," even in public, is in itself necessarily and presumably an offence, any more than the public assertion by a Christian preacher of the doctrine of the Trinity.¹⁷²

While the function of the *char yari* verses may well be interpreted to be analogous to that of the *bila fasl* phrase, their use in the context of the Muharram was considered "so inevitably offensive to the feelings of the Shias that some rule should be framed against them"; at other times, "the question of the public utterance of such praises may well be left to the operation of the ordinary law."¹⁷³

Sunni reactions to the recommendations of the Piggott Committee were uniformly critical, their collective attitude characterized as one of "sullen discontent" by British authorities.¹⁷⁴ Mr. Abdul Shakur accused the Shi'i Committee members and witnesses of engaging in *taqiyya* in order to deceive the non-Muslim members,¹⁷⁵ while the Sunni centre of scholarship in Lucknow, the Farangi Mahall, launched a campaign of issuing *fatawa* declaring the requirement to praise the three caliphs:

Let it be known...that the narration of the sufferings and glories of Husain...is not permissible without the narration of the glories of the three [caliphs], and...that the narration of the glories of the great four companions is a pious and customary act of the Sunnis...¹⁷⁶

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ "History of the Shia-Sunni controversy at Lucknow subsequent to the 7th January 1909." GAD/366/1912, UPSA.

¹⁷⁵ "Dissentient memorandum by Mr. M. Abdul Shakur", no. 12b. IOR/P/8098, BL.

¹⁷⁶ Late 1910/early 1911. GAD/366/1912, UPSA.

The Government, however, rejected the authority of this venerable institution of Sunni learning, arguing that

the better known authorities...held that according to the Sunni religion reverence and recognition were not, as of faith, due to any person but one, the Prophet himself, and that the attempt to assert such claim on behalf of any other Khalif was heterodox, if not heretical.¹⁷⁷

The *Al Najm* of Lucknow, a reliable source for anti-Shi'i polemics, expressed dismay at the Committee's findings, claiming they violated the government's commitment to neutrality in religious affairs.¹⁷⁸

The recommendations of the Committee, subsequently implemented, ultimately helped maintain the Muharram peace for most of the following three decades.¹⁷⁹ Yet their significance reached far beyond the simple practicalities concerning law and order during the Muharram. The parity of interests ostensibly established between the Sunni and Shi'i communities in British Lucknow confirmed the ascension of the latter to a fully recognized religious minority. Whereas the Shi'a had previously been located on the Persianized, heretical periphery of an Arab Sunni 'orthodox' core, the demands of colonial governance and consequent requirement to maintain peace on the Indian Muslim 'street' drove a re-imagining of the Shi'a as one of a number of Islamic sects whose status would no longer need to be defined in relation to a perceived normative or orthodox 'other', but would be accepted and incorporated into the colonial system of communal relations in its own terms. Concurrently, a similar process drove a re-imagining of the reformist movement which had popularly been labelled as "Wahhabi".

¹⁷⁷ Commissioner, Lucknow to Chief Secretary to the Government of the United Provinces, 15th December 1910. GAD/366/1912, UPSA.

¹⁷⁸ *Al Najm*, 14th January 1909. UPNNR. IOR/L/R/5/84, BL.

¹⁷⁹ Freitag, *Collective Action*, 270.

3. Incorporating heterodoxy: Producing the *Ahl-i-Hadis*

This chapter will analyse the formalization in the official mind of the sectarian status of what became known as the *Ahl-i-Hadis* movement, tracing the evolution in British conceptualizations of what they came to regard as a distinct ‘sect’. From the hysteria of the so-called ‘Wahabee trials’ of the 1860s to the series of rulings handed down by the Privy Council in the North-Western Provinces in the late 1880s, the movement’s place as a ‘heterodox but equal’ group with a recognizably legitimate Islamic basis for taking its place in British India’s Islamic mosaic was consolidated. The true significance of the seemingly defining anti-Wahhabi frenzy of the trial period lay not in the supposed ‘othering’ of India’s Muslims into a suspect, seditious colonial category,¹ but rather in the way in which the investigations drew British officialdom into an engagement with questions of Islamic authority, authenticity and practices which went far beyond the basic issue of loyalty vis-à-vis the Crown and which ultimately regularized the status of the *Ahl-i-Hadis* on the ostensibly neutral platform of the colonial state. As Benjamin D. Hopkins has argued, the British were, in effect, “attempting to locate [the Wahhabis] within an Islamic intellectual universe.”² In the process, British officials came to identify with elements of the movement’s adherents’ religious tenets and manners, and to understand that the *Ahl-i-Hadis* maintained a critique of the general state of religious life in Muslim India much like their own, which we have explored in chapter one. Furthermore, engagement with the movement in Islamic terms was driven in large part by the contrasting contributions of the movement’s Islamic rivals. As the protests and complaints of the ‘orthodox’ Hanafi majority tended to produce an effect on British thinking opposite to that desired, Aligarh-associated thinkers such as Sir

¹ Fuerst, *Indian Muslim Minorities and the 1857 Rebellion*..

² Magnus Marsden and Benjamin D. Hopkins, *Fragments of the Afghan Frontier* (London: Hurst, 2011), 82.

Sayyid Ahmad Khan both offered themselves and were turned to as intermediaries in the British attempt to incorporate the *Ahl-i-Hadis* into their broader conceptualization of Islam. At the same time, the movement's leading figures attempted to intervene amidst the controversies the *Ahl-i-Hadis* came to be associated with during the period in question, furthering a growing dependence on the impartial authority of the state to regulate relations with their sectarian competitors. Concurrently, the contribution of these voices in shaping the process of this formalization exposed the fragmented nature of the 'official mind' in attempting to come to terms with the most salient development in nineteenth century Islamic intellectual life, the growth of a self-consciously reformist impulse; any efforts aimed at projecting an air of seamless imperial authority were undermined by the incoherent and amateur deferral to Muslim opinion.

The story of the Indian Wahhabi or *Tariqah-i-Muhammadiyah* movement has been related in depth elsewhere,³ and need not detain us at length here. Emerging from the reformist milieu of early nineteenth-century Delhi, the *jihad* campaigns of Sayyid Ahmad Bareilvi drew on an intellectual foundation provided by Shah Waliullah and his descendants in which the prestige traditionally associated with the practice of *taqlid* (referral to the authority of the four Sunni *madhahib*, or schools of jurisprudence) was rejected in favour of direct engagement with the original sources of Islamic law - the Qur'an and hadith - and the use of individual reasoning (*ijtihad*) to derive rulings therefrom. At the same time,

³ The movement has received comprehensive treatment from Qeyamuddin Ahmad, *The Wahhabi Movement in India* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1994) and Harlan Otto Pearson, *Islamic Reform and Revival in Nineteenth-Century India: The Tariqah-i-Muhammadiyah* (New Delhi: Yoda Press, 2008). See also Ayesha Jalal, *Partisans of Allah: Jihad in South Asia* (Cambridge, MA, USA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 58 – 113, Alavi, *Muslim Cosmopolitanism*, 32 – 92, and Hardy, *The Muslims of British India*, 51 – 60. For an interesting comparison of the Indian and Arabian Wahhabi movements, see Muhammad Abdul Bari, "A Comparative Study of the Early Wahhabi Doctrines and Contemporary Reform Movements in Indian Islam" (Unpublished DPhil, University of Oxford, 1954). For an account of the related Faraizi movement of Bengal, see Muin-ud-din Ahmad Khan, *History of the Fara'idi Movement in Bengal, 1818-1906*. (Karachi: Pakistan Historical Society, 1965).

organizationally the movement drew loosely upon the basic structure associated with the Sufi orders, in which a spiritual lineage is maintained through acceptance of the authority of a *murshid* (spiritual guide) who in time passes on his knowledge and prestige to his *murid* (student or disciple). It is this aspect of the movement, along with its reluctance to declare its Muslim opponents to be polytheists and infidels, which has typically been cited in order to distinguish it from the better-known movement of Muhammad ibn ‘abd al-Wahhab of eighteenth century Najd,⁴ and which may explain the mystical attachment Sayyid Ahmad’s followers held for him, a devotion which for many manifested itself in the belief that Sayyid Ahmad had in fact escaped death and was the Mahdi arrived to usher in the last days.

In practice, the combination of scriptural reformist zeal and sufi-inspired discipline ensured the movement “emerged not as a withdrawn inner-directed Sufi order but rather as an activist movement for social and religious reform and revival of the Indian community.”⁵ An emphasis was placed on opposition to customs such as shrine visitations, which were held to elevate the status of historical figures widely regarded as saints to a divine ranking, and thus constitute a form of *shirk* (the association of worldly figures with God), and to associated practices such as the boisterous *dhikr* celebrations associated with certain Sufi orders, held to constitute *bid’ah* (innovation in religion). Politically, opposition to Sikh rule in the Punjab in Sayyid Ahmad’s lifetime was followed by a more clandestine program of organization and resistance to British rule conducted by some of Sayyid Ahmad’s followers following his death; sporadic anti-British campaigns conducted from the movement’s base on the North-West Frontier were supported by a regular flow of funds and manpower collected by agents spread across northern India, from the Punjab to Bengal. Yet it was only

⁴ See for example Hardy, *The Muslims of British India*, 53 and Abdul Bari, “A Comparative Study”, 245.

⁵ Pearson, *Islamic Reform and Revival in Nineteenth-Century India*, 39.

when one such campaign coincided with the particular post-1857 zeitgeist that British officials began to examine the nature of the movement with intent.

This chapter will take up the story at the point at which the British became seriously concerned with defining the characteristics of the movement which distinguished it from the Islamic ‘mainstream’ or ‘orthodox’ in post-1857 India. The first part will consider analyses of the movement produced during and in the aftermath of the high-profile trials of the 1860s and early 1870s. It will argue that, beneath the apparent panic centred around the question of the religious impulse guiding Muslim opposition to British rule, the trial-era accounts, culminating in William Wilson Hunter’s *The Indian Musalmans*, contained within them the seeds of a greater understanding of the movement’s place in terms of intra-Muslim relations in the subcontinent, and by extension heralded the beginnings of an extensive British engagement with the variety of beliefs, practices, and structures of authority which were perceived to define Islam in nineteenth century India and which, together with the influence of a number of Indian Muslim mediators, pushed the question of loyalty to the Crown to the periphery of the discussion.

The second part will discuss the evolving place of the movement in the Census of India and the associated campaign to have the movement’s name officially recognized as *Ahl-i-Hadis*. It will show how the process of enumerating and accounting for the distinguishing characteristics of the movement had the effect of de-mystifying and normalizing it, with the rejection of the ‘Wahhabi’ label symbolizing this process by stripping the movement of its seditious connotations and bringing it conceptually into the legitimate Islamic fold with the suggestion of replacement titles such as *Ahl-i-Hadis* or *Ghair Mukallid*.

The final part will focus on three disputes between the *Ahl-i-Hadis* and their Hanafi counterparts which arose over the shared use of mosques in the late 1880s in the North-Western Provinces. It will argue that, in the attempt to mediate neutrally between two opposing sects, the British consolidated the place of the *Ahl-i-Hadis* movement as one among equals in Islamic India, a process which ensured the group's dependence on and loyalty to the colonial state, and which contributed to the broader British conceptualization of a fragmented, sectarianized Islam in need of colonial mediation.

* * * * *

The formation of a consciously reformist Muslim identity over the course of the nineteenth century reflected, in part, the consequences of British policies such as the facilitation of the activities of Christian missionaries, the growth in use of the printing press, and the promotion of the use of the vernacular languages.⁶ Yet explicit British acknowledgement of and engagement with the phenomenon which came to be widely labelled 'Wahhabi' during the 1860s was limited in the pre-1857 era, usually confined to discussions of specific episodes such as Sayyid Ahmad's *jihad* against the Sikh kingdom, the intrigues at the court of Hyderabad in the 1830s,⁷ or the nature of specific acts of rebellion during the Mutiny itself.⁸ Exceptions, while rare, reveal both a genuine interest in the broader significance of the movement in terms of the adjustments Muslim thought was undergoing under colonial rule, and the intricate doctrinal divergences which this process was driving among various Muslim groups. As such, they shed light on the level of distortion driven by the emphasis

⁶ See Pearson, *Islamic Reform and Revival in Nineteenth-Century India*, 95 – 98 and 144 – 151, and Robinson, "Technology and Religious Change."

⁷ On which see Ahmad, *The Wahhabi Movement in India*, 145 – 148.

⁸ See William Taylor, *The Patna Crisis: or, Three Months at Patna during the insurrection of 1857* (London: James Nisbet and Co., 1858), 44–55.

on the question of Muslim loyalty in analyses of the movement published during the 1860s and 70s. For the Orientalist Aloys Sprenger of the Delhi College,⁹ the prevalent understanding of the Christian Reformation provided the most suitable analogy at hand:

we already observe symptoms that the press is enlarging the narrow cycle of learning, and, what is more important, that it extends education to all classes and even to ladies. Twenty years ago verses of the Qoran were repeated as prayers and charms, and even the whole book was learned by heart, but without being understood, and the Sunnah was almost unknown; in our days people are gradually beginning to study the book... The study of the traditions or Sunnah is making even more rapid progress than that of the Qoran... After the Musalmans had, several centuries ago, entirely lost sight of the original idea of their religion, they are now beginning to make their sacred books intelligible to all. This must lead to results, analogous to those which the translation and study of the Bible produced in Europe.¹⁰

More specifically, a most impressive study of the literature produced by the movement was published in 1832 by John Russel Colvin, at that time assistant secretary to the judicial and revenue departments in Calcutta and, according to M. Mohar Ali, Joint Magistrate of Barasat, epicentre of the disturbances associated with Titu Mir in west Bengal.¹¹ Three features of Colvin's analysis distinguish it from the series of reports produced during the trial era. First, while Colvin briefly drew attention to the analogous animating 'spirit' of the Wahhabi movement of Najd, he did not dwell on it, relegating the story of Sayyid Ahmad's *Hajj*, a common feature of the later reports, to a single sentence, and nowhere using the term 'Wahhabi' in reference to the followers of Sayyid Ahmad.¹² Second, Colvin was perhaps the only British analyst of the movement in the nineteenth century to recognize its Sufi-

⁹ Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India*, 72 – 73, notes that the Delhi College "had an institutional influence on the Muslim reformists of the city."

¹⁰ A. Sprenger, *Catalogue of the Arabic, Persian and Hindu'sta'ny Manuscripts, of the Libraries of the King of Oudh: Vol. I, Containing Persian and Hindu'sta'ny Poetry* (Calcutta: J. Thomas, 1854), vi – vii.

¹¹ See M. Mohar Ali, Hunter's "Indian Musalman": A Re-Examination of its Background," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain & Ireland* 112, no. 1 (1980): 31. On Titu Mir see Ahmad Khan, *History of the Fara'idi Movement in Bengal*, lxi – lxxviii, and Hardy, *The Muslims of British India*, 57 – 58.

¹² John Russel Colvin, "Notice of the Peculiar Tenets Held by the Followers of Syed Ahmed, Taken Chiefly from the 'Sirat-UI-Mustaqim,' a Principal Treatise of that Sect, Written by Moulavi Mahommed Ismail," *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* 1, no. 11 (November 1832): 481 – 482.

inspired basis and rhetoric, coining the phrase “Orthodox Sufiism” to describe the movement’s rather ambiguous location in relation to the commonly accepted dichotomy of ‘sober’ and ‘popular’ forms of Islam.¹³ Finally, Colvin betrayed a level of sympathy for the potential impact the movement’s doctrines might make on the “moral character” of its adherents which would not be displayed again publicly until Hunter’s famous publication;¹⁴ as we shall see, such sentiments were in fact quite common among the rank and file official class who encountered the ‘Wahhabis’ in person, and tended to undermine the wilder charges made against them by their sectarian counterparts, including, ultimately, the validity of the term ‘Wahhabi’ itself.

Such sophisticated analysis as Colvin’s, and the far-reaching implications of Sprenger’s observation, were relegated to the periphery of the discourse produced on the movement in the aftermath of the uprisings of 1857 and the subsequent Ambela campaign of 1863. While reliable reports detailing the links between the rebel base on the North-West Frontier and the activist adherents of various strands of the reform movement had reached British ears before the Mutiny, they were generally dismissed as unimportant and unworthy of any extended or serious attention.¹⁵ As Julia Stephens has noted, “The idea of an anti-government Wahhabi conspiracy stretching from eastern Bengal to the frontier regions of the Punjab emerged out of phobias peculiar to the post-1857 period.”¹⁶ Trials held in Patna in 1864-65 and Bengal in 1869-71, during which a number of individuals were charged with organizing material support for the rebel camp, fuelled the idea of a wide-ranging, inherently Islamic (“Muhammadan” in British parlance) anti-British program with its roots in both the

¹³ Ibid, 480.

¹⁴ Ibid, 488.

¹⁵ See “Copy of Minute by Lord Dalhousie, in 1852, relative to the Precautionary Measures to be adopted against the Wahabees at Patna.” *India Office*, 15th April 1872. House of Commons Parliamentary Papers.

¹⁶ Julia Stephens, “The Phantom Wahhabi: Liberalism and the Muslim Fanatic in Mid-Victorian India,” *Modern Asian Studies* 47, no. 1 (2013): 28.

scriptural and geographic heart of Islam. Such concerns were reflected in three major reports on the so-called ‘Wahhabi’ movement in India which emphasized the legalistic impulse driving Muslim opposition to British rule in India and the origins of the movement in eighteenth century Arabia.

The first of these reports was authored by T. E. Ravenshaw, who oversaw the trial of 1864-65 during which proceedings were permeated with concerns regarding the religious nature of the rebels’ defiance.¹⁷ Ravenshaw exhibited greater concern with the movement’s supposed Arabian origins;¹⁸ much of the narrative contained a standard account of the origins, doctrines, and history of the Arabian Wahhabi movement based on the writings of the Swiss traveller-scholar Johann Ludwig Burckhardt and was saturated with assumptions regarding the place of the movement vis-à-vis its sectarian rivals drawn straight from Christian analogies. Ravenshaw described the Wahhabi sack of Medina and subsequent Muslim outcry in the following terms:

If during the course of the thirty years’ war Protestant Army had taken possession of Rome and put a married priest on the seat of St. Peter, the scandal and confusion produced by such an events among the Roman Catholics could not have been greater than the horror and general consternation which spread throughout the East when the people heard that the tomb of the prophet had been despoiled, and that the first temple in the Mahomedan world was in the hands of the heretics.¹⁹

Yet underlying the dramatic impact of such passages was a genuine inquiry as to the nature of the apparent schism represented by the emergence of the Wahhabis; Ravenshaw noted

¹⁷ Judicial Proceedings, June 1865, nos. 9 – 10, 95. MS Add 7490/39/4, *Mayo Papers*, CAM.

¹⁸ Another example of this tendency can be found in Edward Rehatsek, “The History of the Wahhabys in Arabia and in India”, *The Journal of the Bombay Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 14, no. 38 (1880): 274 - 401.

¹⁹ *Papers connected with the trial of Moulvie Ahmedoollah of Patna, and others, for conspiracy and treason [1864-65]* (Calcutta: Alipore Jail Press, 1866), 123. No. 42, IOR/V/23/102, BL.

how Muhammad ibn ‘abd al-Wahhab rejected the practice of *taqlid*, prohibiting “following any of the four Imams”, and described the reform as the purification of Islam from corrupting Turkish influences.²⁰ Proceeding to the story of Sayyid Ahmad and his followers, he argued that they were basically Sunnis who rejected the moniker ‘Wahhabis” and, in defiance of Hanafi protocol, chose to pronounce ‘Amin’ aloud during prayer.²¹ As we shall see, it was such themes that came to dominate the discourse on the movement in the decades after the excitement of the trial-period had faded.

In the meantime, however, the frenzy over the Wahhabi conspiracy surged during the trials of 1869-71, culminating in the speculation surrounding the motives of the Muslim assassin of the Viceroy Lord Mayo in 1872, with discussion on the implication of the doctrine of *jihad* dominating public discourse on the alleged Islamic nature of the troubles. At the trials themselves, topics such as the supposed requirement of the rebel volunteers to make *hijrah* and emigrate beyond the frontiers of British-controlled territory in order to legitimately wage war upon British authority were discussed²² along with the reality of growing Muslim opposition to the rebel campaign.²³ While over-seeing the trials, James O’Kinealy, former magistrate of Malda in Bengal, published an extensive series of articles on the “Wahhabis in India” in the *Calcutta Review*, of which the third and final dealt with the question of whether or not British India constituted *Dar al-Harb* - the abode of war and thus a legitimate target of the *jihad* - or *Dar al-Islam* - the abode of Islam against which *jihad* is unlawful.²⁴ Indeed, the articles had been prompted, in part, by questions raised in an article published in the *Hindoo Patriot* in which the suggestion had been made that Wahhabi teachings

²⁰ Ibid, 117.

²¹ Ibid, 127.

²² Reily to Insp-Gen of Police, Lower Provinces, no. 51, 26th Feb. 1869, 18. *Judicial Proceedings*, June 1869, nos. 60 – 62. MS Add 7490-39-4, *Mayo Papers*, CAM.

²³ Ibid, *Judicial Proceedings*, March 1869, nos. 30 – 33, p. 3.

²⁴ James O’Kinealy, “Wahhabis in India,” *Calcutta Review* 51, no. 102 (Oct. 1870): 385 - 392.

concerning the lawfulness of *jihad* were more representative of general Muslim opinion than had previously been recognized. O’Kinealy’s explicit purpose was to explore this question “without entering into all the minute points which separate the Wahhabis from the orthodox Sunnis.”²⁵ Yet this effort inevitably led to a deeper engagement with basic questions of Islamic doctrine and structures of authority, with O’Kinealy describing the “foundations of Muhammadan faith” as the Qur’an, the *Sunna*, *Qiyas*, and *Ijma* as developed by the founder of the four schools of jurisprudence.²⁶ “From this,” O’Kinealy argued,

it will be seen that Muhammadans as a body are not allowed the right of private judgement in matters of religion. They are not forbidden to read the Quran or books containing traditions of Muhammad, but beyond this they cannot advance, nor interpret them in any way inconsistent with the opinion of the sect to which the reader belongs.²⁷

It was unclear to O’Kinealy where exactly Sayyid Ahmad stood on this question; while he noted the probable influence of the Arabian Wahhabi movement on the thought of Shah ‘Abd al-Aziz of Delhi, son of Shah Waliullah and the *murshid* of Sayyid Ahmad, he opined that “The term 'Wahhabi' is only properly applicable to a body of Arabian Muhammadans, and is derived from the name of the founder of the sect.”²⁸ While approving of the campaign against Hindu- and Shi‘i inspired customs held to constitute forms of *shirk*, Shah ‘Abd al-Aziz had, in fact, repudiated the doctrines of “Syed Ahmad’s sect”,²⁹ while “admitting the same sources of religious belief as the Sunnis,” Sayyid Ahmad had

²⁵ James O’Kinealy, “A Sketch of the Wahhabis in India Down to the Death of Sayyid Ahmad in 1831,” *Calcutta Review* 50, no. 100 (Apr. 1870): 73-75.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 76 – 78.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 78.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 79.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 80.

pointed out that of these the Quran alone was free from the possibility of error; that tradition was not inspired, but, like the opinions of Muhammad's companions and the decisions of the learned divines, was liable to error, though in a less degree.³⁰

Yet, during the brief period when Sayyid Ahmad and his followers ruled in Peshawar, they had made various concessions to Hanafi doctrines in a bid to win the loyalty of the city's notables.³¹

It was Hunter's *The Indian Musalmans* more than any other publication which focused British attention on the question of *jihad*, implicit in the subtitle *Are they Bound in Conscience to Rebel Against the Queen?:*

The duty of rebellion has been formally and publicly reduced to a nice point of Muhammadan Law. Somehow or other, every Musalman seems to have found himself called on to declare his faith; the state, in the face of his co-religionists, whether he will or will not contribute to the Traitors' Camp on our Frontier; and to elect, once and for all, whether he shall play the part of a devoted follower of Islam, or of a peaceable subject of the Queen. In order to enable the Muhammadans to decide these points, they have consulted not only the leading Doctors of their Law in India, but they have gone as far as Mecca itself. The obligation of the Indian Musalmans to rebel or not rebel, hung for some months on the deliberations of three priests in the Holy City of Arabia.³²

Researched in order to discover the means by which the lowly position of Bengali Muslims could be improved under British auspices, Hunter's mission to identify the religious obligations underlying the rebel campaign led him to explore, to a greater extent than Ravenshaw and O'Kinealy, the intricacies distinguishing the reform movement from the 'orthodox' adherents of the four *madhahib*, arguing in addition to the rejection of *taqlid* and insistence on *ijtihad* the primacy of the doctrine of *jihad* and certain eschatological

³⁰ Ibid, 88.

³¹ Ibid, 84.

³² Hunter, *The Indian Musalmans*, 10 – 11.

expectations harboured by Sayyid Ahmad's followers.³³ Yet Hunter's admiration for their austerity and zeal was made explicit in several passages, echoing Colvin's earlier praise for the moral influence of the sect's basic precepts – "Dangerous firebrands as the local missionaries sometimes prove, I find it impossible to speak of them without respect...Certain it is that the Wahabi Missionary furnishes, so far as my experience goes, the most spiritual and least selfish type of the sect."³⁴ Furthermore, Hunter emphasized the growth of 'orthodox' opposition to the rebels, detailing a number of *fatawa* (legal opinions) published by leading 'ulama', some of whom had been associated with the movement of Sayyid Ahmad, condemning *jihad* aimed against British authority and distancing themselves from the 'Wahhabi' insurgents.³⁵

Ostensibly concerned with the doctrinal nature of the reform movement's apparent revolt against British authority, the engagement of Ravenshaw, O'Kinealy and Hunter with questions of Islamic authority and practice opened the doors for a greater British understanding of the way in which traditional forms of authority were being challenged and undergoing change in nineteenth century British India, laying the foundations for a more sober understanding of the significance of the reform movement once the question of *jihad* had been relegated to the margins of the discourse, a process already underway among the liberal public by the early 1870s.³⁶ In fact, as Benjamin Hopkins has argued, the focus on *jihad* was never hegemonic in British official circles,³⁷ as demonstrated by an investigation launched in the Madras Presidency in 1865 into the extent of Wahhabi influence in the

³³ Ibid, 57 – 58.

³⁴ Ibid, 71.

³⁵ Ibid, 106 – 108, and 122. See also the report on Karamat 'Ali's ruling published in the vernacular paper *Karamah*, 12th December 1870. UPNNR, IOR/L/R/5/47, BL. For a study of the process which led to the explicit rulings in favour of British India as *Dar al-Islam*, see Rajarshi Ghose, "Islamic Law and Imperial Space: British India as "domain of Islam" Circa 1803–1870," *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 15, no. 1 (2014).

³⁶ See Stephens, "The Phantom Wahhabi."

³⁷ Marsden and Hopkins, *Fragments of the Afghan Frontier*, 81 – 84.

region and prompted by the warnings of one Sharif al- 'Umrah, a Muslim member of the legislative council:

I beg to do myself the honour to hand you enclosed copy of a memorandum...embracing what I know of the Wahabees, a sect, I am sorry to say, of the Mahommedan religious community which requires carefully to be watched and looked after; and if what I have stated induces to action which will arrest the growth and progress of this sect, and thus to a considerable extent destroy one of the disturbing causes of the peace of India, I shall feel myself sufficiently rewarded.³⁸

A subsequent Presidency-wide request for information was issued with the following disclaimer – “The statements of the Mahommedan gentlemen referred to may be slightly tinged with that bitter hatred which distinguishes the members of all religious sects, and especially the partisans of the different schools of doctrine among the Mussulmen.”³⁹ Responses were varied; while many reflected unease with the fierce reputation of the Wahhabis, others noted the laudable tenets of their reformed faith. From Madras, the Acting Commissioner of the Police remarked that “no exception can be taken to their tenets, and they contrast favourably with their co-religionists..”⁴⁰ From Vizagapatam, the collector expressed almost total identification with the Wahhabis he had encountered, and suggested a sectarian motive lay behind Sharif al- 'Umrah's investigation:

I do not know what Shurf-ool-Omrah means by saying that the Wahabees are “*quite distinct from the orthodox Mahommedans.*” I always thought that they were the revivers of the old primitive faith of Islam. What their religion really is, he no where informs us. I know some Mussulmen who tell me they are Wahabees. I find them much better behaved outwardly (whatever demon lurks within) than the general run of the Mahommedans in the country...If I am to be a Mahommedan, write me down a Wahabee. No doubt [their] austere discipline may tend to excite in those who exercise themselves in it a certain sourness towards non-professors; but this feeling

³⁸ Shurf-ool-Oomrah Bahadoor to Lawrence, 14th August 1865, no. 30 in Muin-ud-din Ahmad Khan, ed., *Selections from Bengal Government Records on Wahhabi Trials (1863-1870)* (Dacca: , 1961), 95 – 99.

³⁹ From the Acting Collector of Kurnool, to the Secretary to the Board of Revenue, Fort Saint George, dated 26th April 1866, no. 86, no. 48, *ibid.* 134 - 139.

⁴⁰ From the Acting Commissioner of Police, to the Chief Secretary to Government, Fort Saint George, -(dated Madras, 23rd November 1865), no. 34, *ibid.*, 110-113.

is very far removed from the spirit which would kindle a *jihad*... For out-and-out bigots you must look amongst the priests...I, therefore, strongly reprobate Shurf-ool-Omrah's proposal, that Wahabees shall be excluded from public employ. I should be very glad to think that the suggestion proceeds from the depths of his "devotion towards the British rule"...but when I remember the sectarian and domestic resentments which prevail amongst the leading Mahommedans I seem to find myself approaching the real motives that have been at work with him...⁴¹

This British official identification with the Wahhabis went deeper than a simple acknowledgement of their manners and tenets. Scanning the depraved state of religion across the Indian countryside, colonial officials couldn't help but notice that their critique of so-called popular religion in India was mirrored in the Wahhabi program to purify the faith, put an end to shrine visitation and other flamboyant Sufi practices, and emphasise the worship of one God. Several surveys of the North-Western Provinces in the 1870s evaluated the progress made by the reforming religious movements of India in winning over rural converts to the cause and, by implication, improving the religious and moral lives of the region's inhabitants. These surveys paid particular attention to three proselytizing factions – the evangelical Christians, the Hindu-reformist Brahmo Samaj, and the Wahhabis. The report from Bareilly district in 1879, for example, noted the lack of success the Brahmo Samaj and Wahhabis were having in winning converts,⁴² while from Meerut and Agra the same association was made.⁴³ In this linking of the three reformist trends, the Wahhabis were considered the equals of their Christian and Hindu counterparts. Rather than a threat to the continuance of British rule in the subcontinent, they were now considered a rival for the souls of the rural masses in India's competitive religious market.

⁴¹ From the Collector of Vizagapatam, to the Acting Secretary to the Board of Revenue, Madras, -(dated 1st November 1865, No. 899), no. 37, *ibid.* 117-118.

⁴² Edwin T. Atkinson, *Statistical, descriptive and historical account of the North-Western Provinces of India. Vol. 5: Rohilkhand Division Part I* (Allahabad: 1879), 590-591.

⁴³ Edwin T. Atkinson, *Statistical, descriptive and historical account of the North-Western Provinces of India. Vol. 2: Meerut Division, Part I* (Allahabad, 1875), 403-404 and *Vol. 4: Agra Division* (Allahabad, 1876), 52.

In 1884 the Indian civil servant Sir Alfred Lyall published a lengthy rebuke of *The Indian Musalmans*, accusing Hunter of exaggeration, criticizing him for drawing wide conclusions based on a relatively small case study, the Muslims of Bengal, and remarking that, ultimately, the reality of Muslim opposition to British rule in India was natural for a class of subjects who had formerly exercised power over the country who adhered to a religion such as theirs:

the sentiment which justifies to itself violent assertion can never be entirely dormant in an exclusive monotheistic religion, which claims as aright and duty universal spiritual despotism, while it has been levelled down by a neutral government to mere denominational equality.⁴⁴

Such sentiments required no special inquiry of the sort undertaken by Hunter. According to Lyall, “These things have really very little to do with readings of the sacred books, or with the Futwas of Mecca.”⁴⁵ What British authorities needed to do was encourage the spread of Western science among the loyal Muslim subjects who typically despised the tiny number of Wahhabis active throughout the country:

If the Mahomedans really desire, as the best of them do, to maintain in our Indian empire the high place which their remarkable qualities, their strong mental character and their high physical courage, naturally assign to them, they must in these days make up their minds to accept Western science and literature, and to join the society of nations which rule and lead the whole world.⁴⁶

In this endeavour, Lyall repeatedly referred to one particular figure, Sayyid Ahmad Khan, who would play a major role in helping to develop more nuanced understandings of the reform movement in the British official mind. From the early 1870s, Muslim apologists for the reformers began responding to the complaints and actions undertaken against the

⁴⁴ Sir Alfred Lyall, *Asiatic Studies: Religious and Social* (London: John Murray, 1884), 243.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 242.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 252.

movement by its ‘orthodox’ opponents, and subsequently to influence British thinking. Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan’s rebuttal to Hunter was published in 1872 following a lengthy back-and-forth debate played out in the pages of the vernacular papers of the North-Western Provinces, including his own *Aligarh Institute Gazette*.⁴⁷ Going beyond a simple refutation of the theory that the ‘Wahhabis’ were obligated to wage war against British rule in India, Sir Sayyid attempted to make the movement comprehensible in terms the British would understand; thus, “what the Protestant is to Roman Catholic, so is the Wahabi to the other Mahomedan creeds.”⁴⁸ At the same time, he endeavoured to establish the reformers’ legitimacy in relation to Islamic history and doctrine. In what amounted to an attack on the perceived corruption imposed on the nascent religion by the codifiers of the four *madhahib*, Sir Sayyid introduced the title *Ahl-i-Hadis* to the British reader, locating the origins of the movement not in eighteenth century Arabia, but in the earliest centuries of Islam. The *Ahl-i-Hadis* of those years were those “believers in the sayings of the Prophet, who were not bound down by the doctrines of the four churches.”⁴⁹ Those who had received the misnomer ‘Wahhabi’ in the present-day, argued Sir Sayyid, represented the same tendency.

* * * * *

In October 1876 the editor of the Lahore-based paper the *Ishaat-us-Sunnah*, Moulvi Abu Said Muhammad Husain, approached the Government of the Punjab with a request he claimed represented the desires of all those in India to whom the appellation ‘Wahhabi’ had

⁴⁷ See for example the *Aligarh Institute Gazette*, 9th December 1870 and *Benares Akhbar*, 29th June 1871, UPNNR. IOR/L/R/5/47-48, BL. For an example of a harsh Muslim critique of the Wahhabi tendency, fully supportive of stern government measures taken against them, see the translation of an article published in the *Journal of the Scientific Society of Behaur at Mossufferpore*, 15th Feb 1871, in MS Add 7490-39-34, *Mayo Papers*, CAM.

⁴⁸ Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan, *Review of Dr. Hunter's Indian Musalmans: Are they Bound in Conscience to Rebel Against the Queen?* (Benares: Medical Hall Press, 1872), 8.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 10.

been attached. While full of praise for the regime of religious liberty ensured by the continuance of British rule, Muhammad Husain bemoaned the influence on government of “the prejudiced Muhammadan professors and influenced persons possessing other religious persuasions [than us]”; they, he claimed, had vindictively exploited British anxieties relating to the term ‘Wahhabi’ in order to discredit those with whom they were engaged in an ongoing religious polemic, in doing so casting a shadow over a community of Muslims whose loyalty to the Crown was continually put in doubt.⁵⁰ This community, Muhammad Husain would claim in another petition issued a decade later, requested official recognition under the name *Ahl-i-Hadis*; ‘Wahhabi’ could not apply to them, since they neither adhered to the doctrines of Muhammad ibn ‘abd al-Wahhab nor believed that the waging of *jihad* against British authority in India was demanded by their religion:

We believe that this request is so reasonable that it is in perfect accord with the neutral policy of Government in religious matters, because it simply amounts to this - that their title should be fixed as "Ahl-i-Hadis," which does not imply that they are regarded as belonging to the Najia sect or orthodox Muhammadans or would make other people adopt the views of the Ahl-i-Hadis. All that they pray for is simply that the doubt which the word "Wahabi" throws on their loyalty be removed by Government referring to them instead as Ahl-i-Hadis. This request is as legitimate as is the desire of loyal subjects generally to remove any doubt that might be thrown on their loyalty or the request of a public body or association to get itself registered under a certain name.⁵¹

Citing Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan’s response to Hunter’s *The Indian Musalmans* in order to prove both the community’s loyalty and the suitability of the term *Ahl-i-Hadis*, Muhammad Husain went on to note that

⁵⁰ “Memorial of a section of the native Muhammadan community to the Lieutenant-Governor of the Punjab, November 1876”, enclosed in Griffin to Commissioners and Inspector-General of Police, Punjab, 17th November 1876. Political 370/1888, UPSA.

⁵¹ The objections of the “Ahl-i-Hadis” community to the epithet “Wahabi,” by which they are generally known, enclosed in Maulvi Abu Said Muhammad Husain to The Secretary to the Government of the Punjab, 12th May 1886. Ibid.

no educated member of this section of the Muhammadan community, which numbers several lacs, represented himself as being a Wahabi during the late census; while those who did represent themselves as such did so because of their ignorance of the meaning of the word Wahabi.⁵²

The question of what exactly was signified by use of the term ‘Wahhabi’ was one which vexed British officials charged with the task of conducting the Census of India from 1871 onwards. While observers such as Ravenshaw, O’Kinealy and Hunter had utilized the term in the context of writings on a particular group of rebels, they had concurrently applied it in a rather vague fashion to all those Muslims who rejected the practice of *taqlid* and the authority of the four Sunni schools of jurisprudence, without establishing the exact nature of the distinction, if any existed, separating the two. In fact, the term had been used by so-called ‘orthodox’ opponents of the reform movement for decades before the British began regularly employing it in the 1860s,⁵³ and by the final years of the nineteenth century had become a term of abuse to hurl at one’s enemies whatever their doctrinal inclinations; the leading figure of the reformist Barelwi movement, Ahmad Riza Khan, primarily applied the term to his great Hanafi rivals at Deoband rather than to adherents of the *Ahl-i-Hadis* movement.⁵⁴

Thus, uncertainty coloured the initial British response to Muhammad Husain in 1876, with Sir Lepel Griffin arguing that, from the British perspective, the term was not intended as one of reproach, and was used simply due to its widespread prevalence in public and official discourse.⁵⁵ Yet the use of ‘Wahhabi’ in official correspondence was beginning to pose

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ See Marcia Hermansen, “Fakirs, Wahhabis and Others: Reciprocal Classifications and the Transformation of Intellectual Categories,” in *Perspectives of Mutual Encounters in South Asian History 1760 - 1860*, ed. Jamal Malik (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 31, and Stephens, “The Phantom Wahhabi”, 26 – 27.

⁵⁴ See Usha Sanyal, *Devotional Islam and Politics in British India: Ahmad Riza Khan Barelwi and His Movement, 1870-1920*. (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996), 235 – 248.

⁵⁵ Griffin to Muhammad Husain, 29th October 1876, Political 370/1888, UPSA.

problems for those charged with conducting the business of empire; attempts to enumerate the movement's adherents during the 1871 and 1881 Censuses were thwarted by the stigma which continued to surround the term – “The feeling with which Wahabyism is looked upon by the authorities is not in favour of its members being openly declared at any enumeration of the people.”⁵⁶ When Muhammad Husain approached the Government of the Punjab for the second time in 1886 with a request for official recognition of the title *Ahl-i-Hadis*, he found ears receptive to the idea of formalizing such a process. Yet while the British were willing to discontinue use of the term ‘Wahhabi’, adopting *Ahl-i-Hadis* itself posed problems, noted by Sir Auckland Colvin:

We have no sufficient authority for assuming that they wish as a body, to be known as Ahl-i-Hadis; or that among Indian Muhammadans that is the term recognized as appropriate and correctly used in regard to them. Nor, which is equally important, have we any authority for assuming that, if the term is not at present of current application, the rest of the Muhammadan community in India would view with indifference the special application to this particular sect of a term which if restricted to one class might be held to imply in others indifference to the "Hadis," an imputation which they would certainly resent.⁵⁷

Rather than ‘Wahhabi’, the issue now concerned the significance of *Ahl-i-Hadis* in terms of sectarian relations among Indian Muslims. Lyall, in the course of a discussion of the term *Muwahidin* (monotheists), a suggested alternative which was, according to T. P Hughes’ *Dictionary of Islam*, utilized by the Wahhabis of Arabia, noted a similar difficulty – its use “would be very offensive to Muslims not of their sect, since it necessarily implies that the latter are Mushrikin or "associators" of other persons with God.”⁵⁸ Colvin suggested approaching Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan for his view on the matter.

⁵⁶ Plowden, William, *Report on the Census of British India taken on the 17th February 1881, Vol. 1* (London: George Edward Eyre and William Spottiswoode, 1883), 26, paragraph 50.

⁵⁷ Colvin to Bayley, 26th June 1886, Home/Judicial/35 – 37. December 1886, NAI.

⁵⁸ Lyall to Bayley, 27th June 1886, Ibid.

That Sir Sayyid would be considered for such a mediating role was perhaps natural; he had presented himself as the foremost Indian Muslim interpreter of the reformist movement in 1872, and in addition to the prestige associated with the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College at Aligarh, his undeniable support for the continuance of British rule in India made him an attractive source of scholarly authority for any Indian Muslim wishing to convince British officialdom of the worthiness of any particular claim. His writings were cited frequently by, for example, the controversial chief ideologue of the *Ahl-i-Hadis* movement, the Nawab-Consort of Bhopal Muhammad Siddiq Hasan Khan, in his own attempt to distance the movement from the charge of ‘Wahhabism’ – “Syed Ahmad Khan being held in confidence and regarded a loyal subject of the British throne, his writings are therefore the more reliable.”⁵⁹ Muhammad Husain too had turned to the authority of Sir Sayyid in his defence of Siddiq Hasan, who had run afoul of British authorities in the Central Provinces due to the alleged seditious nature of a number of his publications which had turned up in Lahore and Calcutta.⁶⁰ Yet Sir Sayyid argued against the adoption of *Ahl-i-Hadis*, arguing, like Colvin, that it would be rejected by most Muslims due to its “special religious signification”. Instead, he suggested *Ghair Mukallid*, a term “quite free from any reproach, and...generally used for the Wahabis by the Muhammadans at large and even by the Wahabis themselves.” The term had historically been applied to Shah Waliullah himself with no negative connotations, according to Sir Sayyid, who went on to quote from Edward Lane’s *Arabic-English Lexicon* to demonstrate the meaning of the term in relation to *taqlid*.⁶¹ Lyall was immediately enthused, commenting that “It denotes what is certainly their most important doctrine, the denial of the principle of authority, and it has the advantage of being

⁵⁹ See Sayyad Muhammad Siddiq Hasan, *An Interpreter of Wahabiism*, trans. Sayyad Akbar 'Alam (Calcutta: 1884), 77.

⁶⁰ “The Nawab of Bhopal and his Co-Religionists and Fellow Subjects - An Appeal to Lord Dufferin and Sir Lepel Griffin,” 5. IOR/R/1/1/33, BL.

⁶¹ Sayyid Ahmad, 19th July 1886, Home/Judicial/35 – 37. December 1886, NAI.

perfectly neutral...”⁶² Significantly, however, it was suggested that, when approaching the sect’s “leaders” on the proposal for *Ghair Mukallid*, “we need not of course mention the source from which the proposed term originated.”⁶³

Such a warning anticipated the major drawback of utilizing Sir Sayyid as a source of knowledge on Muslim affairs. While his standing in British circles made him an appealing reference for Muslims attempting to win the favour of British officialdom, his well-known ‘heretical’ tendencies limited the authority he could exercise on Muslim minds to a tiny coterie of Muslim thinkers loosely associated with the term ‘Aligarh’.⁶⁴ Accordingly, there was little enthusiasm expressed for *Ghair Mukallid* when the suggestion was transmitted back to Muhammad Husain., who argued that Sir Sayyid

is not well disposed towards our sect, and has religious differences, in consequence of which he has been regularly excommunicated from our sect as he himself acknowledges...His present opinion is in contrast to what he has written on pages 12 to 15 of his [response to Hunter]...where he has said that the original name of this sect was *Ahl-i-Hadis*.⁶⁵

Unsure how to proceed, Sir Anthony MacDonnell postponed any decision on an official change in the North-Western Provinces until “objections on the part of Muhammadans to the employment of a particular term are removed by general consent of those concerned, uninfluenced by Government interference.”⁶⁶ In the meantime, ‘Wahhabi’ fell from favour in the Census returns, which from 1891 onwards displayed a remarkable variety in the range of monikers listed referring to the reform movement – the report on the Punjab for that year

⁶² Lyall, *Ibid*.

⁶³ F. C. D., *Ibid*.

⁶⁴ Though as we shall see in Chapter Four, not necessarily with the College itself; modern scholarship has come to refer to this loose collection of Muslim thinkers as ‘modernists’.

⁶⁵ Muhammad Husain to Wallace, 8th October 1886, Home/Judicial/35 – 37. December 1886, NAI.

⁶⁶ MacDonnell, 29th October 1886, *Ibid*.

noted that ‘Wahhabis’ had returned themselves as “Wahabi”, “Ahl-i-Hadis”, “Muwahidin” and “Muhammadi”, while “Rasuli”, “Haqiqi”, and “Ghair Mukallid” almost certainly applied to them also. Whatever the terms, however, it soon became clear that the spirit of consultation and rejection of ‘Wahhabi’ encouraged adherents of the reforming tendency to account for themselves, with the Census Report on the Punjab for 1911 noting that

With the growth of religious liberty and the independence of persuasions secured by the British rule, the hesitation of the old days is fast disappearing. We, therefore, find...that the Wahabis (Ahl-i-Hadis) have risen about 11 times in number.⁶⁷

While the accounts of the reform movement published by Ravenshaw, O’Kinealy and Hunter contained a number of elements which would eventually help transform its image in British eyes, it was a combination of the identification of several characteristics British officials came to believe they shared with the Wahhabis, and the intervention of interested Muslim opponents and apologists, which helped make possible the consolidation of its place as a legitimate Muslim sect worthy of official recognition in those terms. No longer would the debate over the movement revolve around the question of sedition; by the mid-1880s it was recognized that the true significance of the discussion surrounding the movement’s title lay in how it reflected sectarian relations within Islam rather than any particular issue regarding the legitimacy of British rule in India. British ‘neutrality’ in religious affairs offered a platform on which the self-appointed spokesmen for the reform movement could establish its credentials in legitimate Islamic terms. Furthermore, by distinguishing themselves so definitively from the remainder of the Indian Muslim population, they effectively helped absolve the others from association with their particular fundamentalist vision. By the 1890s, whatever fears the Wahhabi movement had provoked and projected

⁶⁷ Pandit Harikishan Kaul, *Census of India 1911, Vol. XIV: Punjab, Part 1* (Lahore, 1912), 166, paragraph 235.

on to the Indian Muslim population as a whole had subsided. Writing in 1894, John Strachey attempted once and for all to put to rest the charge, suggested by Hunter, that Indian Muslims were doctrinally obliged to rebel:

In perfection of manner and courtesy a Mohammedan gentleman of Northern India has often no superior...It is a mistake to suppose that the better classes of Mohammedans are as a rule disloyal; there are no people to whom such a term is less applicable. It is remarkable that English education, which not infrequently seems to develop and bring into prominence the least admirable qualities of the feebler races, seldom leads to such results among Mohammedans, but tends to make them more manly and self-reliant, and more loyal citizens. The fears that have sometimes been expressed that we may see in India a general outburst of Mohammedan fanaticism, and a simultaneous rising of millions of Mohammedans against our Government, are altogether groundless.⁶⁸

It was true that, from the remnants of the old rebel camp at Sitana on the North-West Frontier, a small gathering of militants with their origins across northern India continued to launch occasional attacks against British authority. No longer, however, did they attract the pejorative “Wahhabi” in official correspondence. Instead, they were most commonly referred to as the “Hindustani fanatics”.⁶⁹ The conceptual division of the reform movement into two camps - one militant, the other passive - was nearing completion, with the *Ahl-i-Hadis* acquiring a specific understanding of their place in India’s system of sectarian relations, in contrast to the wayward rebels of the frontier, whose Islamic impulse was relegated to the margins of the official discourse which concerned them. The final act in this process came with a series of disputes over shared mosques which occurred in the North-Western Provinces in the latter half of that decade, when it was British functionaries themselves who would take the further step of officially recognizing the movement’s claims

⁶⁸ Strachey, *India*, 240.

⁶⁹ See for example “Report on the Hindustani Fanatics”, 1895. IOR/L/MIL/17/13/18, BL.

as representing not just the minority doctrines and practices of a peripheral heterodox community, but a strain of Islam with a legitimate claim to the mantle of ‘orthodoxy’ itself.

* * * * *

Harlan Pearson has noted that as early as Sayyid Ahmad’s time on the North-West Frontier, sectarian divergences as miniscule as the correct execution of prayer had driven tensions between his followers and the majority Hanafi population of the region.⁷⁰ The Census Report on the Punjab for 1891 noted that “in the paper warfare which rages between the Wahabis and the orthodox in this province, the main point of contention appears to be regarding the proper intonation of the word “Amin” (Amen).”⁷¹ In the late 1880s, British authorities in the North-Western Provinces were forced to arbitrate between adherents of the reforming movement and the ‘orthodox’ Hanafi majority in a series of cases concerning incidents provoked at a number of mosques in the region where members of the *Ahl-i-Hadis* had taken to pronouncing ‘Amin’ aloud during prayers, in violation of commonly accepted Hanafi tradition which held that the word should be uttered silently, under one’s breath. Presiding over each case was Justice Sayyid Mahmud of the Allahabad High Court, son of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan, and the dominant force in each decision. While there is little to suggest that Sayyid Mahmud’s background in the reformist milieu of Aligarh played any role in shaping his conclusions, which tended to favour the claims made by the *Ahl-i-Hadis*, it is clear that, on matters relating to Islamic law, the other members of the Privy Council involved typically deferred to his authority; as Barbara Metcalf has noted, it was at lower levels of government administration where Sayyid Mahmud’s rulings tended to be defied.⁷²

⁷⁰ Pearson, *Islamic Reform and Revival in Nineteenth-Century India*, 41.

⁷¹ Maclagan, *Census of India 1891*, 190, paragraph 134.

⁷² Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India*, 287.

What, then, did it British ‘neutrality’ mean in such cases where the terms of reference were defined by Islamic history and precedent? In the 1885 case in Benares, the *Ahl-i-Hadis*, or ‘Wahhabis’ as they were referred to, stood accused of “insulting the religion of the Hanafia Musalmans”;⁷³ in violation of section 296 of the Penal Code, they had been convicted of having deliberately disturbed “an assembly engaged in religious worship”⁷⁴ before the case reached Sayyid Mahmud on appeal. While the conviction had rested on the disturbance perceived by the Hanafi accusers, Mahmud considered that the question of whether or not section 296 had been violated rested more on the correct interpretation of “Muhammadan Ecclesiastical Law”, for which he referred to Charles Hamilton’s late eighteenth century translation of *The Hedaya*, than on the perceived offence taken – in other words, given the impossibility of proving the intent behind the act of saying ‘Amin’ aloud in any given context, it was necessary for Mahmud to judge how legitimate the act was in Islamic terms.⁷⁵ In fact, he argued, even by the standards of those who deemed themselves ‘orthodox’, or followers of one of the four schools of jurisprudence, the act was legitimate – for “the followers of Imam Shafai have evolved the doctrine that *amin* should be pronounced aloud, and...the followers of the other two Imams, namely, Malik and Hanbal, also maintain that the word *amin* should be pronounced aloud.”⁷⁶ In this view, while adherents of the Hanafi *madhhab* may constitute a majority of the Muslim population of India, in Islamic terms their approach to the question of ‘Amin’ was no more valid than any of their three ‘orthodox’ counterparts:

it is clear that the doctrines of all the four Imams are regarded by Sunni Muhammadans as orthodox, and that the differences of opinion which exist between them are pure matters of detail. Indeed, in the greatest mosque in the world, namely,

⁷³ *The Indian Law Reports: Allahabad Series Vol. VII* (Allahabad: Government Press, 1885), 467.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 461.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 468.

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, 471.

the Kaaba itself, the followers of all the four Imams are at full liberty to pray according to their own tenets.⁷⁷

Acknowledging the point that the party in question adhered to none of the four schools of jurisprudence in questions, Mahmud nonetheless rejected the idea, raised by the accusers, that the defendants were “no longer Muhammadans”:

They call themselves "Muhammadi," which is the Arabic for "Muhammadan," and although the prosecutor brands them as Wahabis, there is nothing to prove that they belong to any heterodox sect. Indeed, the only tangible ground upon which the prosecutor objects to their worshipping in the mosque and calls them Wahabis is their saying the *amin* aloud - a practice which, as I said before, is commended by three out of the four orthodox Imams of the Sunnis persuasion.⁷⁸

Mahmud's argument was predicated on the basis that no evidence could be found to prove the defendants' deviation from “the orthodox rule of the Muhammadan Ecclesiastical Law” – in other words, their alleged heterodoxy could not be proven on the basis of the single issue at hand, the pronouncement of ‘Amin’. The ruling of the subordinate judge at the third case, again in Benares in 1889, went even further, taking a position on the question of the ‘orthodoxy’ of the reformers independent of any referral to the four Sunni *madhahib*:

The defendants [the Hanafis in this case] have no right to close [the mosque's] door against every other class except their own...It is immaterial whether the plaintiffs have seceded from the sect of Hanafis or they have been from the first Muhammadis, Ahl Hadis, Mohdassins, or if as the defendants prefer to call them, Wahabis. Call them by whatever name you please, they are and must be regarded as Sunni Muhammadans, and whether they are seceders from the Hanafis or not, their true orthodoxy, or the fact of their being Sunnis or those 'who maintain the most obvious interpretation of the Kuran' and the obligatory force of the traditions in opposition to the innovations of the sectaries, cannot for a moment be doubted...⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Ibid, 472.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 473.

⁷⁹ *The Indian Law Reports: Allahabad Series Vol. XII* (Allahabad: Government Press, 1890), 496 – 497.

This basic sentiment was supported at the High Court, where Chief Justice Edge opined that “they [the plaintiffs] are believers in one God and believe that Muhammad is his prophet, there is no question”⁸⁰ with Mahmud concluding that it was not even necessary to decide the standards by which an individual claiming to be a Muslim is judged:

as long as a mosque is a mosque...so long as the plaintiffs are persons who call themselves Muhammadans and entitled to worship, there is absolutely no authority to say that any sect or any creed or any portion of the community can restrain others who claim to have the right which to use the language of Muhammadan law, God and his Prophet gave them, from putting such right into exercise.⁸¹

The practical effect, then, of the application of British religious neutrality to the arbitration of sectarian disputes among the conflicting sects was to grant formal legitimacy to the place of the *Ahl-i-Hadis* in the Islamic “intellectual universe.” The question of the movement’s heterodoxy was officially set aside and deemed irrelevant from the British perspective, although, if judged in terms of its relation to the basic sources on which Islamic authority was built, it could perhaps be judged *more* ‘orthodox’ than the ‘orthodox’. The phenomenon of sectarian discord in the era of Islamic reform had enabled British authorities to conceptually pacify a movement representing a strand of thought which, by the processes described above, became incorporated into the Muslim mosaic perceived to define the nature of Islam in the subcontinent.

Furthermore, British engagement with the doctrines and tenets of the movement had presented conceptual world of possibility in the official mind. In the Wahhabis’ commitment to monotheism and disdain for the popular religion of the countryside, and in their generally acknowledged good manners, British officials saw something of themselves. Most

⁸⁰ Ibid, 501.

⁸¹ Ibid, 504 – 505.

revelatory was the Wahhabis' rejection of *taqlid* and the authority of the 'ulama'. On the face of it, this placed them beyond the ring of orthodoxy, with, as we have seen, the 'ulama' representing orthodoxy in the official mind, by virtue of their strict adherence to the law. Yet the reformers' fundamentalist commitment to monotheism, the Arabian 'spirit' they exemplified (suggested by the very label 'Wahhabi'), their direct engagement with the formative Islamic texts, and their call for *ijtihad*, or independent reasoning, appeared to present them as more orthodox than the orthodox. And in turn, it opened the possibility that by the same reasoning, other movements might emerge with the potential to re-shape Islam for the benefit of Muslims everywhere.

4. Measuring reform: The promises and limits of the Aligarh model

In the section detailing religious affiliation in the 1881 Census Report for the Punjab, author Denzil Ibbetson noted Government of India instructions to account for just four predominant sects – “Sunni, Shiah, Wahhabi, and Farazi” – in the enumeration of the province’s Muslim population, while acknowledging that “other sects were doubtless recorded”. Of these, Ibbetson provided an explanation of just one, “the Nechari sect”. Confined to a brief footnote which noted the origins of the movement’s moniker in the idea that it represented “natural religion”, Ibbetson firmly associated the *Necharis* with the person of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan, “a Mahomedan rationalist, rejecting miracles, and much of the supernatural in the received traditions of the Prophet’s life”.¹ Ten years on, a more detailed account of the so-called *Nechari* sect was provided in the 1891 Census Report for the Punjab by Edward Douglas MacLagen. In addition to identifying a further figure, Sayyid Amir ‘Ali of Calcutta, with the movement, MacLagen explicitly linked the *Necharis* to the Anglo-Oriental Mohammedan College founded by Sir Sayyid in Aligarh in 1875:

In its special sense it represents a Musulman school of thought, led by Sir Syad Ahmad Khan and Syad Amir Ali Khan: the object is to adapt the religion of Mahomed to the spirit of the age, to clear away the glosses of commentators, to get at the essential teaching of the Prophet, and to show how this teaching has in it nothing inconsistent with the highest non-religious philanthropy of to-day...The leaders of the school are men of great intellectual power and thoroughly conversant with the points of view adopted by European critics of their religion; and the foundation of the Aligarh College in the North-West Provinces has done a great deal to establish their authority. The Necharis advocate most social reforms, and in politics they are generally ranged on the side of the constituted authority.²

¹ Ibbetson, *Report on the Census of the Panjab*, 144, para 281.

² MacLagan, *Census of India 1891*, 192, para 135.

A decade later, the Census Report for the North-West Provinces and Oudh acknowledged that the term *Nechari* was primarily employed as a pejorative applied to this new “school of thought” by its opponents; the college and movement associated with it were best understood as representing the “progressive party in Islam which is opposed to fanaticism, and while admitting the many excellences of Arabic literature, holds that it is not sufficient for modern requirements.”³ What British authorities in India were in fact attempting to come to terms with through these reports was the emergence and significance of what modern scholarship has come to term “Islamic Modernism”,⁴ sometimes denoted in its South Asian context by the catch-all term ‘Aligarh’, referring to the location of the College.

We have encountered Sir Sayyid, his son Sayyid Mahmud, and Amir ‘Ali in previous chapters, noting the status they had acquired as suitable intermediaries and interpreters of Islam to whose authority Indian Muslims themselves could turn to in order to validate their own particular interests or cause.⁵ While Sir Sayyid’s thought and Aligarh’s role in the distinctively Muslim politics that emerged in British India in the final decades of the

³ Burn, R. *Census of India, 1901. Volume XVI: N.-W. Provinces and Oudh, Part I – Report* (Allahabad: Government Press, 1902), 97-98, para 93.

⁴ See for example Aziz Ahmad, *Islamic Modernism in India and Pakistan, 1857-1964* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967) and Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Modern Islām in India: A Social Analysis* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1946). Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 50-51 describes the basis of the modernist approach to the West as follows: “The integral constituents of their reasoning are (1) that the flowering of science and the scientific spirit from the ninth to the thirteenth century among Muslims resulted from the fulfillment of the insistent Qur’anic requirement that man study the universe - the handiwork of God, which has been created for his benefit; (2) that in the later medieval centuries the spirit of inquiry had severely declined in the Muslim world and hence Muslim society had stagnated and deteriorated; (3) that the West had cultivated scientific studies that it had borrowed largely from Muslims and hence had prospered, even colonizing the Muslim countries themselves; and (4) that therefore Muslims, in learning science afresh from the developed West, would be both recovering their past and refulfilling the neglected commandments of the Qur’an.” Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *Modern Islamic Thought in a Radical Age: Religious Authority and Internal Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 2 describes the modernist approach as “the work of those seeking to rethink or adapt Muslim institutions, norms, and discourses in light both of what they take to be “true” Islam, as opposed to how the Islamic tradition has evolved in history, and of how they see the challenges and opportunities of modernity.”

⁵ In the cases of Sayyid Mahmud and Amir ‘Ali, this status was symbolized by their appointment to the high courts of Allahabad and Calcutta respectively.

nineteenth century have been the subject of much scholarly output,⁶ the dynamics that defined the reformists' engagement with British officialdom as it pertained to the question of Islam remain largely unexplored, although valuable analysis of their responses to the works on Islamic history published by William Muir has been conducted by Avril A. Powell.⁷ In the aftermath of the events of 1857-59, Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan achieved his informal intermediary status chiefly through the publication of works designed, according to Francis Robinson, "to rehabilitate the Muslims...in the eyes of their rulers",⁸ a task in which he at least partially succeeded.⁹ Chief among these were an account of the various factors which had helped drive the uprisings,¹⁰ and as we have seen in the previous chapter, his response to Hunter. While British receptiveness to Sir Sayyid's agenda was no doubt bolstered by the reputation for loyalty he had earned during the uprisings, it was his subsequent activism for the cause of Muslim education and religious reform that prompted a serious consideration of the school of thought which came to be associated with his name and that of the institution he founded.

This chapter will explore the development of Sir Sayyid and his followers' status in the official mind, and its consequences in terms of the broader British challenge of constructing a coherent and comprehensible Islamic intellectual universe in an age of sectarian diversity

⁶ On Sir Sayyid's reformed theology and thought, see Christian W. Troll, *Sayyid Ahmad Khan: A Reinterpretation of Muslim Theology* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1978), Hardy, *The Muslims of British India*, 94–102, and Pirbhai, *Reconsidering Islam in a South Asian Context*, 223–247. On the early history of the Anglo-Oriental Mohammedan College, see David Lelyveld, *Aligarh's First Generation: Muslim Solidarity in British India* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1978). On Aligarh's contribution to the movement that eventually produced Pakistan, see Francis Robinson, *Separatism Among Indian Muslims: The Politics of the United Provinces' Muslims, 1860-1923* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 87–132 and Farzana Shaikh, *Community and Consensus in Islam: Muslim Representation in Colonial India, 1860–1947* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 76–118.

⁷ Powell, "Modernist Muslim Responses", 61–91.

⁸ Robinson, *Separatism Among Indian Muslims*, 90.

⁹ Thomas R. Metcalf, *The Aftermath of Revolt: India, 1857-1870* (Princeton, N.J.; London: Princeton University Press : Oxford University Press, 1964), 302.

¹⁰ Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, *Causes of the Indian Revolt: Three Essays* (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 1997).

and reformist activism. It will argue that British officialdom came to understand Aligarh's place in this universe through the contested prism of 'reform', a vaguely-defined concept indicating for the British a project to revive and utilize the authentic 'spirit' or essence of Islam in order to shape Muslim societies along the moral and ethical standards associated with Western civilization. As we shall see, the question of whether or not such a project had the potential to succeed was one which divided British official opinion.

The first part will analyse how engagement with Sir Sayyid and his modernist successors contributed to the emergence of a new wave of sympathetic, apologist scholarship on Islam which challenged the assumptions and conclusions of the classic orientalist paradigms established in British India by scholars such as Aloys Sprenger and Sir William Muir. The idea that a revived Islam embodied certain qualities which could, under British tutelage, contribute to the advancement of humanity, filtered into official thought to be embraced in some quarters and rejected in others. For all sides engaged in this debate, 'Aligarh' became the measure of this project, the standard by which alternative manifestations of the reformist agenda were evaluated. This was the case across the imperial realm; thus the second part will discuss how the reformist debate was imported to British-occupied Cairo, the scene of a polemical and sometimes personal rivalry which played out between the Consul-General Lord Cromer and the Arabist, traveller, and author Wilfrid Scawen Blunt. The final part will consider some of the obstacles faced by British enthusiasts for the reformist cause and the Aligarh College through which it was intended to be delivered, most notably the dependence on - yet indifference to - the guardians of 'orthodoxy' perceived to stand in their way.

* * * * *

In a review of the first English-language biography of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan published in *The Academy* in December 1885, the historian of medieval India Henry George Keene noted the broader context within which British interest in Sir Sayyid and the movement he represented was growing:

Whether or not we subscribe to the doctrine that “England is a Muhammadan power,” we must at least admit that no fair means ought to be neglected by which she can procure the confidence of the Muhammadan world. The age of the crusades has long gone by; on the other hand, Islam itself is showing an aggressive spirit. The old-fashioned Muslims are opposed to what we call civilisation and progress, though there is a party among them which takes more liberal views. That party is represented not only in Turkey, but in parts of India too. It is of the utmost importance to this country, which professes to be the mistress of the largest of Muhammadan populations, that there should be a clear understanding on this subject.¹¹

Turning to Sir Sayyid himself, Keene posed the question: “Ought we not to give a sympathetic welcome to so unexpected an ally?” Sympathy was certainly not lacking in the account of Sir Sayyid’s biographer and friend, George Farquhar Irvine Graham, who justified his “labour of love”¹² with reference to his “respect and esteem” for Sir Sayyid, and the latter’s status as “the foremost Mohammedan in India as regards force of character, influence over his fellow-men, and literary ability.”¹³ Indeed, Sir Sayyid’s nature seems to have enchanted a succession of British admirers – writers, colleagues, and administrators – who recorded their impressions. For some, Sir Sayyid embodied many of the qualities that the overseers of the British Empire tended to associate with themselves – “wise, moderate, straightforward, fearless, and firm.”¹⁴ The influential principal of the Muhammadan Anglo-

¹¹ *Reviews on Syed Ahmed Khan's Life and Works, by Lieutenant-Colonel G. F. I. Graham, being extracts from English and Anglo-Indian Newspapers* (Aligarh: Aligarh Institute Press, 1886).

¹² G. F. I. Graham, *The Life and Work of Syed Ahmed Khan* (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1885), vi.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹⁴ J. Kennedy, “Personal Reminiscences of Sir Syad Ahmad,” *The Imperial and Asiatic Quarterly Review* 6, nos. 11 & 12 (July - October 1898): 146. According to Sidney Low, *A Vision of India* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1907), 281, “Englishmen...find it easy to get on with the children of Islam. They have no difficulty in

Oriental College, Theodore Beck, counted himself as a “humble disciple”,¹⁵ while his successor Theodore Morison claimed to have “never met another man so great as he.”¹⁶ As Morison noted, Sir Sayyid was regularly consulted by regional authorities in the North-Western Provinces on matters of public policy.¹⁷ Recounting his first meeting with Sir Sayyid and Sayyid Mahmud in front of an Aligarh audience in 1896, the Lieutenant-Governor Antony MacDonnell remarked on the “vast sources of...information regarding their co-religionists” which his predecessors had drawn upon,¹⁸ while in later years the Lieutenant-Governor of the Punjab, Michael O’Dwyer, argued that “no Government had a sounder or more trusted advisor”.¹⁹

The basis of this arrangement, which we have explored in the previous chapter, may well have been Sir Sayyid’s famous loyalty. One of MacDonnell’s predecessors as Lieutenant-Governor, Sir John Strachey, argued in a speech in Aligarh in December 1880 that “No man ever gave nobler proofs of conspicuous courage and loyalty to the British Government than were given by him in 1857.”²⁰ Yet demonstrative loyalty alone could not suffice to have Sir Sayyid accepted as a privileged confidant of the ruling class; rather, it was his novel ideas for the reform of Islamic theology and law, and for Muslim education in India, which secured such access, for in each case they upheld the British perception of the imperial mission and flattered British civilizational sensibilities. Sir Alfred Lyall noted Sir Sayyid’s stature among those Indian Muslims who perceived “the enormous advantage of European

liking men who have good manners without servility, and who possess some of the open-air qualities and tastes we ascribe to ourselves.”

¹⁵ Theodore Beck, *Essays on Indian Topics* (Allahabad: Pioneer Press, 1888), 111.

¹⁶ Theodore Morison, “Muhammadan Movements” in *Political India, 1832-1932*, ed. John Cumming (London: Oxford University Press, 1932), 88.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 88-89.

¹⁸ MacDonnell to the Trustees of the MAO College, Aligarh, 24th January 1896. *MacDonnell Papers*, MS. Eng. Hist. c. 363, BOD.

¹⁹ Quoted in Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, *The Truth about the Khilafat* (Lahore: Ripon Press, 1916), iii-iv.

²⁰ Quoted in Graham, *The Life and Work of Syed Ahmed Khan*, 19.

education”,²¹ while Strachey, who wrote that “there is no man for whom I feel a more true respect” described Sir Sayyid as

in every respect a thoroughly enlightened man, alive to the value of European knowledge, and to the fact that unless the Mohammedans could accept the results of western civilization there was no hope for them in the future.²²

Most significantly, Sir Sayyid was “first and foremost a religious reformer”²³ who believed that Islam “is the friend of truth and progress in every branch of human knowledge.”²⁴ The embrace of Sir Sayyid thus signified the legitimization in British eyes of the idea that Islam had the potential to shape the lives of Britain’s Muslim subjects in ways compatible with the forward thrust of European-shaped modernity. As such, it represented something of a paradigm shift in terms of how Islam was to be correctly assessed on the hierarchy of religious truth and civilization, hints of which we have seen in the sympathetic accounts of the “Wahhabis” of the Madras Presidency discussed in the previous chapter. For engagement with Sir Sayyid’s ideas indicated at the very least a willingness to reconsider the judgement of Sir William Muir who, in the final pages of his history the Caliphate, concluded that

A reformed faith that should question the divine authority on which [its institutions] rest, or attempt by rationalistic selection or abatement to effect a change, would be Islam no longer...As regards the spiritual, social, and dogmatic aspect of Islam, there has been neither progress nor material change. Such as we found it in the days of the Caliphate, such is it also at the present day. Christian nations may advance in civilization, freedom, and morality, in philosophy, science, and the arts, but Islam stands still. And thus stationary, so far as the lessons of the history avail, it will remain.²⁵

²¹ Lyall, *Asiatic Studies*, 252–253.

²² Strachey, *India*, 205–206.

²³ Morison, “Muhammadan Movements,” 88.

²⁴ Strachey, *India*, 207.

²⁵ Muir, *The Caliphate*, 599–601.

The writings of Muir and others - most notably Aloys Sprenger - helped provoke what Mary Louise Pratt has termed “autoethnographic” responses from Sir Sayyid and other like-minded Muslim thinkers, of whom the most prominent were Chiragh ‘Ali of Hyderabad and Amir ‘Ali of Calcutta.²⁶ Apologetic in nature, these responses focused on defending Islam and Muhammad against a series of charges relating to issues such as the status of women and slaves in Islam and the militaristic and intolerant drive allegedly inherent in Muhammad’s example.²⁷ At the heart of each response was an affirmation of the essentially progressive and civilizing nature of the ‘spirit’ or ‘essence’ of Islam. While Sir Sayyid and Chiragh ‘Ali were willing to concede to Muir that the practice of *taqlid* and the basic conservatism of the ‘ulama’ had hindered the development of Islamic civilization, they countered the idea that Islam was rigidly defined by its legal tradition and those who considered themselves its guardian. In doing so, they challenged the basis for the standard British understanding of ‘orthodoxy’ in Islam by shifting the emphasis of analysis to general, abstract principles derived from rational, contextual engagement with Islamic sources and history at the expense of narrowly-focused, literal examinations of specific texts and jurisprudential rulings. Sir Sayyid, who believed that “true” religious principles were derived from the perfection of nature and fulfilled through Islam,²⁸ referred to *taqlid* as a “blind belief in the opinions of others” and called on his readers to

candidly and impartially investigate the truth of Islam, and make a just and accurate distinction between its real principles and those which have been laid down for the

²⁶ Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 9 defines ‘autoethnography’ as “instances in which colonized subjects undertake to represent themselves in ways that *engage with* the colonizer’s terms...autoethnographic texts are texts the others construct in response to or in dialogue with...metropolitan representations.” On the nature of the modernist response to Muir, see Faisal Devji, “Apologetic Modernity”, *Modern Intellectual History* 4, no. 1 (April 2007): 63, who notes that “Muslim ideas of Islam’s modernity were neither independent nor systematic, but plotted according to European concerns, themselves partial in every sense of the word.” See also Troll, *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 127–143 and Powell, “Modernist Muslim Responses.”

²⁷ Powell, “Modernist Muslim Responses,” 72.

²⁸ Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, *A Series of Essays on the Life of Mohammed and Subjects Subsidiary Thereto* (London: Trubner & Co., 1870), ix–xi.

perpetual and firm maintenance and observance of the same, as well as between those that are solely the productions of those persons whom we designate as learned men, divine, doctors, and lawyers.²⁹

Chiragh 'Ali³⁰ took a more polemical approach, explicitly targeting Muir and others such as the missionary writer Edward Sell in order to prove that “Mohammadanism as taught by Mohammad, the Arabian Prophet, possesses sufficient elasticity to enable it to adapt to the social and political revolution going on around it.”³¹ For Chiragh 'Ali, the Western critics of Islam possessed only a cursory understanding of the principles of Islamic law due to their uncritical dependence on “unreliable sources”³² such as the *muqallids*³³ and 'ulama'. For while “Slavish adherence to the letter and taking not the least notice of the spirit of the Koran is the sad characteristic of the Koranic interpretations and deductions of the Mohammadan doctors”,³⁴ Chiragh 'Ali argued that, in fact, the Qur'an is best understood in terms of “general rules of morality.”³⁵

As Powell has noted, Sir Sayyid repeatedly cited prominent Western authors in order to lend weight to his apologetics.³⁶ While he generously heaped praise on the “learned and masterly manner” of Muir's *Life of Mahomet*,³⁷ he ultimately condemned it for Muir's Christian bias and hostility to the subject matter which, in his view, produced numerous factual errors and

²⁹ Ibid, xi. See also Troll, *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 128 where Sir Sayyid is quoted: “if people do not break with *taqlid* and do not seek (especially) that light which is gained from Qur'an and Hadith and if they are going to prove unable to confront religion with present-day scholarship and science, then Islam will disappear from India.”

³⁰ On whom see Ahmed, *Islamic Modernism*, 57–64.

³¹ Moulavi Cheragh Ali, *The Proposed Political, Legal, and Social Reforms in the Ottoman Empire and other Mohammadan States* (Bombay: Education Society's Press, 1883), ii.

³² Ibid, ii.

³³ Practisers of *taqlid*.

³⁴ Cheragh Ali, *Proposed Political, Legal, and Social Reforms*, xv.

³⁵ Ibid, xvii.

³⁶ Powell, “Modernist Muslim Responses,” 74–75.

³⁷ Ahmed Khan, *A Series of Essays*, xvii.

misunderstandings;³⁸ in contrast, he lauded the more sensitive writings of Godfrey Higgins, Thomas Carlyle, John Davenport, and especially Gibbon,³⁹ authors who, as we have seen in chapter one, represented a long-established tradition of balanced and even sympathetic scholarship on Islam. Seeking to counter the combative Christian indictments of Muhammad's character, accounts in this vein typically attempted to place the emergence of Islam in its rightful historical context as a civilizing force in pagan Arabia, while defending Muhammad against accusations of deception, debauchery, and intolerance. As the Wahhabi panic of the 1860s ran its course and Sir Sayyid and his colleagues began to exercise some real influence in official circles, a new wave of scholarship emerged from within this tradition which aimed to assess Islam as a civilization in the modern world, one worthy of comparison with its Christian Western counterpart. Such work inevitably produced a discourse concerning the potential for a reform which would unleash Islam's civilizational potential. As we have seen, Sprenger had already speculated that increased accessibility to the Qur'an and traditions of Muhammad was likely to impact upon Muslim societies in ways similar to the forces which gave birth to the European Reformation, while some early census and gazetteer reports had noted the deepening religiosity of the rural masses, possibly linked to the activities of the Wahhabis. The challenge presented by Sir Sayyid and the modernists subsequently demanded a serious consideration of the prospect of an Islamic reformation. A conservative contributor to this debate was Stanley Lane-Poole, nephew of Edward Lane. Writing firmly within the sympathetic, apologetic tradition, Lane-Poole argued in an introduction to his uncle's *Selections from the Kuran*⁴⁰ that cruelty was alien to Muhammad's character and that Muhammad's long and faithful marriage to his first wife

³⁸ Ibid, xviii.

³⁹ Ibid, xx–xxi.

⁴⁰ On which Lane-Poole wrote “even native Muslims of India, ignorant of Arabic, have used [it] as their Bible.” Edward William Lane, *Selections from the Kuran, with an introduction by Stanley Lane Poole* (London: Trubner & Co., 1879), vi.

Khadija belied the charge of sensuality,⁴¹ while elsewhere he sought to encapsulate Muhammad's mission by stressing its sincerity:

Let us banish from our minds any conception of the Koran as a code of law, or a systematic exposition of a creed. It is neither of these. Let us only think of a simple enthusiast confronted with many and varied difficulties, and trying to meet them as best he could by the inward light that guided him. The guidance was not perfect, we know, and there is much that is blameworthy in Mohammad; but whatever we believe of him, let it be granted that his errors were not the result of premeditated imposition, but were the mistakes of an ignorant, impressible, superstitious, but nevertheless noble and great man.⁴²

Yet Lane-Poole was careful to avoid drawing any conclusions about the implications of his defence of Muhammad for the civilizational status of Islam. As it was, he expressed doubts regarding the capacity for Muslim thinkers to successfully contextualize the specific injunctions of the Qur'an and sunna which aimed at shaping social and political life in Muhammad's Medina, and distinguish them from the more general religious principles inspired by those textual sources.⁴³ In response, Chiragh 'Ali insisted that both "spiritual and social development" lay at the heart of the Qur'anic message.⁴⁴ While Lane-Poole remained sceptical throughout his career,⁴⁵ the exchange reflected the new dynamic that was beginning to shape Western assessments of Islam at this moment, as British observers increasingly engaged with the idea that Islam could be a civilizing force.

⁴¹ Ibid, lxx–lxxvi.

⁴² Stanley Lane-Poole, *The Speeches & Table-Talk of the Prophet Mohammad* (London: MacMillan and Co., 1882), 62.

⁴³ Lane, *Selections from the Kuran*, xcv.

⁴⁴ Chiragh Ali, *Proposed Political, Legal, and Social Reforms*, xxxv.

⁴⁵ Later, writing of the "difficult question [of] whether a reform of Islam is possible", he concluded that "There are some, whose opinion is weighty, who think it is; who believe that it is possible to throw over tradition and theological refinements, and to get back to the Koran alone; and having got back to the Koran alone, to treat it eclectically, to eliminate temporary and local elements, to ignore the social regulations, and to accept only its teaching on the great truths of religion. I hope it may be possible, but I confess I feel little confidence in it. Rationalizing such a creed is a very destructive process." See Stanley Lane-Poole, *Islam: A Prelection delivered before the University of Dublin, March 10, 1903* (Dublin: Hodges, Figgis, & Co., 1903), 55–56.

A slightly earlier and more enthusiastic contributor to the new wave was the writer Reginald Bosworth Smith,⁴⁶ whose collection of lectures titled *Mohammed and Mohammedanism* was frequently cited by Lane-Poole.⁴⁷ Clinton Bennett has noted that Smith was subsequently criticized for adopting too closely the modernist perspective;⁴⁸ indeed, Smith cited both Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan and Amir ‘Ali in the preface to *Mohammed and Mohammedanism*, although he only consulted their work in advance of the second edition, in which he wrote of his admiration for the “views and the conciliatory spirit of these two learned Musalman reformers.”⁴⁹ His aim being to identify areas in which Islam and Christianity shared a common purpose, Smith bemoaned the ignorance of his English countrymen when it came to Islam, writing that even civil servants who had spent years among the Muslims of India returned home with the belief that Muslims were “idolators”.⁵⁰ To remedy this, he expounded on the civilizing impact of Islam not just on the pagan Arabian society from which it emerged, but also on the Hindu and Buddhist “Indian islanders” of south-east Asia⁵¹ and the polytheists of sub-Saharan Africa.⁵² According to Smith, Muslim missionaries in these regions exhibited

a forbearance, a sympathy, and a respect for native customs and prejudices, and even for their more harmless beliefs, which is no doubt one reason of their success, and which our own missionaries and schoolmasters would do well to imitate.⁵³

⁴⁶ On whom see Bennett, *Victorian Images of Islam*, 74–102.

⁴⁷ See for example Lane, *Selections from the Kuran*, cxi–xii and Lane-Poole, *The Speeches & Table-Talk*, 63.

⁴⁸ Bennett, *Victorian Images*, 96.

⁴⁹ R. Bosworth Smith, *Mohammed and Mohammedanism* (London: Smith, Elder, & Co., 1876), xviii.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 60.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 33.

⁵² *Ibid*, 42–43.

⁵³ *Ibid*, 35.

Muslim India, meanwhile, was displaying “symptoms at once of a Revival and of a Reform that may, at any time, change the religious destinies of the country.”⁵⁴

Smith was not an orientalist; he never visited a Muslim country, and he was entirely dependent on English-language source material.⁵⁵ Moreover, any direct impact his writings may have had on official thinking remains unclear. In contrast, the Hungarian-born scholar Gottlieb Wilhelm Leitner was steeped in the orientalist tradition, producing ethnographic studies of the Turks and the mountain peoples of the region he termed Dardistan,⁵⁶ while his position as the principal of the Government College at Lahore (later the Oriental University of the Punjab) from 1864 to 1879 gave him a unique platform from which to exert a measure of influence on the direction of official policy. As we shall see in chapter six, Leitner played the key role in the adoption by Queen Victoria of the title *Kaisar-i-Hind*. In his short work titled *Muhammadanism*, Leitner sought to engender feelings of “sympathy” and “fellow feeling” for Islam among his Christian readership,⁵⁷ defending the status of women by arguing for the benefits of polygamy in certain contexts,⁵⁸ extolling the virtues of Islamic morality in helping alleviate such vices as gambling, prostitution, and alcohol, and noting the regard for manners in Islamic society, which contrasted favourably with Europe.⁵⁹ As for the rest of the world, Islam was a gift bestowed on them by an “inspired” prophet:

The idea of Muhammad not to limit the benefits of Abraham's religion to his own people, but to extend them to the world, has thus become the means of converting to a high form of culture and of civilization millions of the human race, who would

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 59.

⁵⁵ Bennett, *Victorian Images*, 76.

⁵⁶ Roughly corresponding to the contemporary region of Gilgit-Baltistan in Pakistan, and its neighbouring areas in Afghanistan and India.

⁵⁷ G. W. Leitner, *Muhammadanism* (Woking: The Oriental Nobility Institute, 1889), 3.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 9.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 11.

either otherwise have remained sunk in barbarism, or would not have been raised to that brotherhood which “Islam” not only preaches but also practices.⁶⁰

If Englishmen had difficulty appreciating the civilizing genius of Islam, Leitner suggested, it might be due their instinctive deference for “routine and the letter, rather than the spirit, of rules.”⁶¹ This emphasis on the need to detach oneself from literal interpretation of specific texts was, of course, the hallmark of the modernist approach to Islamic law and doctrine. When applied to the field of Islamic history by the orientalist Thomas Walker Arnold, it relegated the standard accounts of central governance, dynastic change, and military expansion, with their focus on the Arab or ‘orthodox’ heartlands of the Islamic world, to the periphery of the discussion. Priority was now accorded instead to the spread of the Islamic faith among the Muslim peoples of the non-Arab lands of Africa and Asia - whose pre-Islamic traditions were typically blamed for their ‘heterodox’ tendencies - and the continuing vitality of the Islamic faith in the face of political fragmentation.⁶² Of those scholars representing the new wave, Arnold was the most embedded in the modernist milieu, someone whose

unusually receptive disposition towards Muslims’ own interpretations of Islam gave [him] closer affinities with revisionist currents among Muslim intellectuals than with contemporary European orientalist writings.⁶³

As a teacher in philosophy at the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College from 1888 to 1898, he came under the influence of Sir Sayyid and others,⁶⁴ throwing himself into the task of

⁶⁰ Ibid, 4.

⁶¹ Ibid, 8.

⁶² Katherine Watt, “Thomas Walker Arnold and the Re-Evaluation of Islam, 1864-1930,” *Modern Asian Studies* 36, no. 1 (Feb., 2002): 12–17, provides an enlightening contrast between the works of Muir and Arnold.

⁶³ Ibid, 17.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 9–10 and 17.

encouraging Muslim attendees to “work individually for the regeneration of their nation.”⁶⁵ Most notably, after moving on to the Oriental University in Lahore, Arnold helped shape the thought of a young Muhammad Iqbal, “the key figure in twentieth-century modernism.”⁶⁶ In *The Preaching of Islam*, Arnold attempted to show that, “In the hours of its political degradation, Islam has achieved some of its most brilliant spiritual conquests.”⁶⁷ For Arnold, the key to understanding the spread of the Islamic faith beyond the Arab lands lay not with the armies of the Rashidun, Umayyad, and Abbasid caliphates whose conquests led to the implementation of Islamic rule from Spain to Central Asia, but rather with the work of the missionaries who devoted their lives to the conversion of the non-Muslim subjects of the Islamic empires and the communities beyond, with whom they conducted trade.⁶⁸ As such, Islamic history did not end with the Mongol conquest of Abbasid Baghdad, as it did for Muir. In Arnold’s account, the continuing spread of Islam in such far-flung regions as sub-Saharan Africa and the islands of East Asia proved that Islam embodied a spiritual appeal which functioned quite independently of any guiding central political impulse. Islam’s appeal lay in the simplicity of the creed, easily comprehensible across such a wide-ranging collection of cultures, ethnicities, and languages;⁶⁹ in the modern world, it was bolstered by the revivalist trend first associated with the Wahhabi movement of Arabia, and now accompanied by the pan-Islamic activism which sought to establish real material bonds among “all the nations of the Muslim world.”⁷⁰

⁶⁵ “Arnold, Sir Thomas Walker” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

⁶⁶ Ahmed, *Islamic Modernism*, x. See Watt, “Thomas Walker Arnold,” 67–69. Iqbal dedicated his PHD dissertation to Arnold, writing “This little book is the first fruit of that literary and philosophical training, which I have been receiving from you for the last ten years, and as an expression of gratitude, I beg to dedicate it to your name.” See Muhammad Iqbal, *The Development of Metaphysics in Persia* (London: Luzac & Co., 1908).

⁶⁷ Thomas Arnold, *The Preaching of Islam: A History of the Propagation of the Muslim Faith, 2nd edition* (London: Constable & Company, 1913), 2.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 3–5 and 419.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 418–419.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 425–426.

Perhaps no figure epitomized the mutually invigorating impact of the modernist-orientalist dialogue more than Sayyid Amir ‘Ali. Emerging from the distinctive reformist milieu of Calcutta, Amir ‘Ali ascended to the upper echelons of the British justice system in Bengal, ultimately earning a place on the imperial legislative council of India and the judicial committee of the privy council in London.⁷¹ His influence, however, extended far beyond the circles which defined his career in officialdom. As a highly regarded legal mind, Amir ‘Ali’s works on ‘Islamic law’ were widely sought after and cited throughout the empire;⁷² when Evelyn Baring (Lord Cromer), the Consul-General to Egypt during the first twenty-four years of the British occupation, sought to clarify the Islamic position on slavery and divorce, he turned to Amir ‘Ali’s *Personal Law of the Mohammedans*.⁷³ In the mid-1890s the Cambridge-based scholar of law, Sir Roland Knyvet Wilson, published two works on Anglo-Muhammadan Law, both of which were heavily influenced by Amir ‘Ali’s *Muhammadan Law*. Wilson noted Amir ‘Ali’s association with the supposedly rationalist Mu‘tazila theological trend, and expressed interest in its “modern revival” and “numerical strength”⁷⁴ with a view to assessing its potential to effect a reform of Islamic law. Finding little information by which to judge, Wilson looked elsewhere, explicitly citing Amir ‘Ali in a section on the Shafi‘i *madhhab* which suggested that, contrary to the notion that Shafi‘ism represented a conservative check on the more progressive tendencies of the Hanafi *madhhab*, in fact it was potentially the “embodiment of those aspirations for moral regeneration and legal reform which are agitating so many minds in India.”⁷⁵

⁷¹ Ahmed, *Islamic Modernism*, 86.

⁷² See “Purchase by the Resident of the Persian Gulf of a copy of the book entitled ‘Muhammadan Law’ by Saiyad Amir Ali”, Foreign/Extl/119-120/Part B, June 1898, NAI. Kozlowski, *Muslim Endowments*, 117, argues that his books reflected his knowledge of Anglo-Muhammadan law more than of the shari‘a and were styled in the manner of English law books, while his Shi‘i background meant that his authority carried considerably less weight with traditionally-educated ‘ulama’.

⁷³ Earl of Cromer, *Modern Egypt* (London: MacMillan & Co, 1908), 136–137 and 157–158.

⁷⁴ Wilson, *A Digest of Anglo-Muhammadan Law*, 13 and 405–409. See also Wilson, *An Introduction to the Study of Anglo-Muhammadan Law*, 126. Amir ‘Ali clearly linked the revival of Mu‘tazila thought with a more general Islamic reform.

It was, however, through his account of the life and teachings of Muhammad, *The Spirit of Islam*, that Amir ‘Ali found his broadest audience and made his greatest impact. Edward Granville Browne described it as “especially deserving of study by those who desire to understand the strong hold which Islam and its Prophet still have even on those Muslims who are most imbued with European culture and learning”.⁷⁶ Writing in his memoirs, the Aga Khan expressed “unstinted” admiration for Amir ‘Ali’s “capacity to expound and interpret our Muslim religion.”⁷⁷ *The Spirit of Islam* was subsequently cited by a variety of writers seeking to account for the apparently sudden burst of intellectual activism from within the Muslim world.⁷⁸ According to Amir ‘Ali, the only reliable way to grasp the “genius” of Islam was by assessing its ethical content, or “spirit”.⁷⁹ It was his stated aim to “revive among the Moslems a knowledge of true Islamic ethics” in partnership with the “ruling classes” of the British Empire.⁸⁰ Citing both Lane-Poole and Bosworth Smith, Amir ‘Ali noted the new wave of sympathetic scholarship that had emerged since the 1870s which aimed to discuss “from a philosophical and historical point of view, the merits of Islam both as a creed and as a humanising agency”,⁸¹ and speculated that *The Spirit of Islam* may help the spread of Islam in Europe. There, he suggested, while the lower classes may benefit from the “stern discipline and...severe morality” of Islam, *The Spirit of Islam* may appeal to those at a more advanced stage of civilizational development.⁸² For according to Amir ‘Ali,

⁷⁵ Ibid, 343.

⁷⁶ Browne, *A Literary History*, 188. See also Ahmed, *Islamic Modernism*, 87, who writes that, along with the *Short History of the Saracens*, *The Spirit of Islam* had an influence which ran right through to the latter half of the twentieth century, particularly on “the western educated Muslim intelligentsia in the Indian subcontinent and in Egypt.”

⁷⁷ His Highness the Aga Khan, *The Memoirs of Aga Khan: World Enough and Time* (London: Cassell and Co., 1954), 76–77.

⁷⁸ See for example R. G. Corbet, *Mohammedanism and the British Empire* (Edinburgh & London: Ballantyne, Hanson & Co, 1901), 8–9.

⁷⁹ Ameer Ali, *The Spirit of Islam*, vii–viii.

⁸⁰ Ibid, ix–x.

⁸¹ Ibid, xii.

⁸² Ibid, xiii.

“Islam, wherever it has found its way among culturabled and progressive nations, has shown itself in complete accord with progressive tendencies, it has assisted civilisation, it has idealised religion.”⁸³ Like Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan and Chiragh ‘Ali before him, Amir ‘Ali located the cause of Islam’s apparent stagnation in the conservatism of the ‘ulama’; the cure, he argued, was the rational application of “private judgement”, or *ijtihad*, in the face of the modern circumstances challenging the Muslim world:⁸⁴

before there can be a renovation of religious life, the mind must first escape from the bondage which centuries of literal interpretation and the doctrine of 'conformity' have imposed upon it. The formalism that does not appeal to the heart of the worshipper must be abandoned ; externals must be subordinated to the inner feelings ; and the lessons of ethics must be impressed on the plastic mind ; then alone can we hope for that enthusiasm in the principles of duty taught by the Prophet of Islam.⁸⁵

The discourse concerning the reform of Islam was born and elaborated upon most clearly in the context of post-1857 British India, where the emergence of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan and his modernist followers to positions of influence made a lasting impact on how Islam came to be assessed in both scholarly and official circles. Whether or not one chose to accept or reject the notion that Islam could make a lasting contribution to the advancement of modern humanity, one could not avoid engaging with the terms of the debate. We shall now examine the migration of this discursive trend to the alternative context of post-1882 Egypt.

* * * * *

A clash of personalities and agendas which played out in post-1882 Cairo helps shed light on the complex nature of the reform debate as it was adapted to serve the discursive demands of a non-Indian environment. In the animosity that raged between the Consul-General Lord

⁸³ Ibid, 158–159.

⁸⁴ Ibid, 162.

⁸⁵ Ibid, 164.

Cromer and the Arabist, anti-imperialist activist and commenter on Islamic affairs, Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, over the legitimacy of the British occupation of Egypt, Aligarh and the figures associated with it were employed as a means by which to measure the authenticity and civilizational stature of Egyptian Muslims. The engagement produced curious results. While Lord Cromer remained sceptical regarding the prospect of an Islamic reformation, he approved of the activism of those Egyptian Muslims whose thought he viewed as analogous to the Aligarh movement, most notably the Azharite *'alim* Muhammad 'Abduh. Cromer rejected the idea that a civilizational revivalism could emerge from within Islam; rather, the best the British could hope for was the slow and gradual adoption of Western civilizational ideals and institutions by the Empire's Muslim subjects, by which process the demands of their Islamic identity would ultimately be reduced to mere cultural relics. As such, the loyalty of seemingly enlightened men like Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan and Muhammad 'Abduh was to be cherished, while the reformist activism of those explicitly opposed to the British occupation of Egypt was belittled as nothing more than the latest expression of the age-old enmity held by Muslims for those of other faiths. Blunt, however, was an enthusiastic believer in and promoter of the reformist agenda. Most famously, his widely-read tract *The Future of Islam*, published in 1882, argued that an Islam freed from the conservative grip of the Ottoman sultan and his Hanafi 'ulama' was destined to play a leading role in shaping the future course of human civilization, once the Arabs assumed their natural position of leadership. It was therefore in Britain's interest to undermine the Turkish empire by working for the transfer of the caliphate to Arab hands, and to forge a genuine, egalitarian partnership with the Muslim world for the benefit of civilization. As a consequence of this emphasis on the uniquely Arab dynamic shaping the coming Islamic reformation, Blunt held little enthusiasm for the Aligarh movement. Measured against the circle of Muslims he associated

with during his time in Egypt, including ‘Abduh, Sir Sayyid and his colleagues appeared tainted by their pro-imperial stance and a vague air of inauthenticity.

The basis for Cromer and Blunt’s dispute was the British occupation of Egypt, which commenced in the summer of 1882 with the ending of the ‘Urabi uprising against the Khedival government.⁸⁶ As a supporter of ‘Urabi and a vehement critic of the subsequent British presence, Blunt took aim at, and attempted to undermine the figure most closely associated with the prolongation of the occupation, Lord Cromer. For his part, Cromer saw Blunt as a “mischievous fellow”⁸⁷ who reflexively opposed whatever policy the British government had set itself upon:

Blunt is one of those who really deserve the term, so frequently misapplied, of Little-Englander. Whether it be from personal vanity, love of notoriety, or real conviction I cannot say; but the fact is that he always unfortunately, disagrees with the British Government and with most of his own countrymen.⁸⁸

Underlying what was on the face of it a disagreement over policy, however, were deeper questions regarding how well the British actually *knew* their Egyptian and Muslim subjects, and how they were to assess their future prospects. Blunt criticized Cromer’s annual reports on the state of affairs in Egypt as “models of insincerity”, “vain-glorious”, and “fallacious”:

Year after year his reports used to be published, making an impression on the public mind of being the simple record of great things performed by one careless of personal fame, and at the same time so superior to his readers in his knowledge of his subject as to have the right to say : “This, I and those with me did ; that we left undone; the result is what you see.” To me, who knew more of Egypt than the public knew, his reports revealed themselves as less candid, and very much less modest.⁸⁹

⁸⁶ On which, see Juan Cole, *Colonialism and Revolution in the Middle East: Social and Cultural Origins of Egypt's Urabi Movement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

⁸⁷ Baring to Northbrook, 10th October 1883, no. 5. FO 633/4, NA.

⁸⁸ Baring to Strachey, 18th May 1906. FO 633/8, NA.

⁸⁹ Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, *Gordon at Khartoum; being a Personal Narrative of Events in Continuation of “A Secret History of the English Occupation of Egypt”* (London: Stephen Swift and Co., 1911), 60–61.

Assessing Cromer's 1908 publication *Modern Egypt*, Blunt faulted the Consul-General for his lack of engagement with Egyptian society, which fostered all manner of misinterpretations of the course of events playing out under his watch:

Lord Cromer never seems to have taken the trouble to consult any native authority, or to have gone further afield than the Blue Books for his knowledge of events unconnected with his own special work. Even about these he is occasionally inaccurate, and seldom quite sincere. As a diagnosis of the land he lived in for so many years without really seeing it for his mornings were spent at his desk, and his evenings in the European society of Cairo his final judgements are fallacious through ignorance, the work of a stranger to Egypt rather than of one so long resident there. His prediction of the future of Islam is a fallacy already proved; and his adoption of Lord Milner's foolish phrase about Egypt being the "Land of Paradox," a confession of ignorance inexcusable in one with such long experience, and not a trifle absurd.⁹⁰

Cromer was no less dismissive of Blunt's grasp of Egyptian affairs, yet understood that their feud was fuelled more by their divergent world views than by disagreements over facts or specific policies:

Letting alone his personalities, which are silly enough, and his inaccuracies, to use no stronger term, which are very numerous, there is a serious difference of opinion between Blunt and myself...Blunt thinks that Islam can be regenerated on Islamic lines. The more I live in the East, the more convinced am I that he is quite wrong. The only regeneration possible is by the gradual introduction of western civilization.⁹¹

Following firmly in the footsteps of Muir, Cromer regarded the hold maintained by the 'ulama' over the interpretation of Islamic law as unbreakable; and since he considered Islamic orthodoxy to be defined primarily by its legalistic nature, he concluded that no more evolution or progress was possible. While he recognized that moderate or "enlightened" Muslims may at times attempt to reformulate certain superficial aspects of the shari'a in

⁹⁰ Ibid, 61.

⁹¹ Baring to Strachey, 18th May 1906. FO 633/8, NA.

response to immediate material concerns,⁹² Cromer judged that the conservative foundations upon which the law was built could not be challenged – doing so automatically put one outside the fold of ‘orthodoxy’ and so destroyed one’s credibility and ability to affect real change:

The rigidity of the Sacred Law has been at times slightly tempered by well-meaning and learned Moslems who have tortured their brains in devising sophisms to show that the legal principles and social system of the seventh century can, by some strained and intricate process of reasoning, be consistently and logically made to conform with the civilised practices of the twentieth century. But, as a rule, custom based on the religious law, coupled with exaggerated reverence for the original lawgiver, holds all those who cling to the faith of Islam with a grip of iron from which there is no escape.⁹³

Ultimately for Cromer, as for Muir, “reformed Islam is Islam no longer”,⁹⁴ and any Muslim displaying the suspect manifestations of an affiliation with Western culture and civilization was destined for political obscurity.⁹⁵ Rather than an opportunity for a partnership that would transcend religious difference in the cause of civilization, Cromer viewed any revivalist activism based on Islamic sentiment as suspect and probably fanatically anti-Western, commenting that “It is rather unfortunate that Moslem religious fervour almost invariably takes the form of hating all those who are not Moslems.”⁹⁶

⁹² “The more enlightened Mahommedans...recognize that, although no portion of the “Sheriat” can be formally repealed, some of its provisions, which clash with Treaty rights and with the commonplace ideas of modern civilization, must be tacitly allowed to fall into abeyance. Moreover, they recognize that very indifferent justice is to be got out of the Cadi's Courts.” Baring to Salisbury, 14th December 1887, no. 130. FO 407/71, NA.

⁹³ Cromer, *Modern Egypt*, 136.

⁹⁴ *Ibid*, 228–229.

⁹⁵ In a section of *Modern Egypt* on the official head of Egypt’s various Sufi *turuq*, the Shaykh al-Bakri, Cromer remarked on his wonder at finding him familiar with thought of Rousseau and the workings of the British Parliament, before noting that “The new Sheikh soon sank into political insignificance.” Cromer, *Modern Egypt*, 176–177.

⁹⁶ Baring to Grey, 26th May 1906. FO 800/46, NA.

In *The Future of Islam*, Blunt explicitly challenged the “received opinion” of those who, like Muir and Cromer, considered innovative and critical engagement with the sources of Islamic law to be an exercise in futility. Blunt was happy to acknowledge the conservative instinct of “a vast array of learned Mohammedan opinion”⁹⁷ while arguing that Islamic law represented, at the time it was codified by the adherents of the four Sunni *madhahib*, an “admirable” means by which to regulate social life. Problems began, he argued, when leadership of the Islamic world passed into the hands of the militaristic Turkish dynasties who lacked the sophistication and intellectual curiosity of their Arab predecessors:

The Turkish Ulema, ever since their first appearance in the Arabian schools in the eleventh century, finding themselves at a disadvantage through their ignorance of the sacred language, and being constitutionally adverse to intellectual effort, had maintained the proposition that mental repose was the true feature of orthodoxy, and in their fetwas had consistently relied on authority and rejected original argument...[The] closing of doctrinal inquiry by the Ottoman Sultans, and the removal of the seat of supreme spiritual government from the Arabian atmosphere of Cairo to the Tartar atmosphere of the Bosphorus, was the direct and immediate cause of the religious stagnation which Islam suffered from so conspicuously in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁹⁸

It was only in modern times, when Turkish dominance of certain Arab lands, including Egypt, had waned, that some Arab ‘ulama’ were finding the space and freedom to engage in *ijtihad* and rediscover the true principles of Islam.⁹⁹ Blunt conceived of these principles in much the same way as the modernist trend represented by Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan, Chiragh ‘Ali, and Amir ‘Ali. The Qur’an, according to Blunt, was best thought of as a guide to the discovery of “certain religious truths”. Yet Blunt placed a far greater emphasis on the role of the shari’a in shaping the glories of the Islamic past,¹⁰⁰ and so looked to the ‘ulama’ of

⁹⁷ Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, *The Future of Islam* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench & Co., 1882), 134.

⁹⁸ *Ibid*, 72–73.

⁹⁹ *Ibid*, 158–160.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid*, 154.

the Arab lands to re-engage with the sources of the law in order to initiate a general revival of Islamic civilization.¹⁰¹ He wrote frequently of a section of the ‘ulama’ of Cairo who were “rapidly assimilating to their own the higher principles of our European thought.”¹⁰² They were “men of sincere piety” whose aim was to “to free the intelligence of believers from scholastic trammels, and at the same time to enforce more strictly the higher moral law of the Koran.”¹⁰³ By such means, Blunt believed, Muslims could hope to fully participate in the forward progress of humanity without compromising on the authenticity of their Islamic traditions; in other words, without adopting the manners, customs, and institutional models of their European partners.

It was not from India that Blunt took his inspiration. Cromer, however, was quite clearly influenced by the legacy of his time in India as private secretary to the Viceroy Lord Northbrook during the 1870s.¹⁰⁴ Writing in his memoirs, the Aga Khan recalled a visit to Cairo where Cromer expressed to him the view that Egypt would benefit from the presence of an educated, Western-influenced Muslim leader like Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan.¹⁰⁵ Yet when responding in 1887 to the suggestion of a critical Muslim writer, Selim Faris,¹⁰⁶ that such a figure be imported to Egypt from British India, Cromer noted that the “experiment” had already been tested. In 1884 Maulvi Sami ‘Allah Khan, described by Cromer as a “great personal friend and disciple” of Sir Sayyid, had accompanied Northbrook to Egypt on a special mission to assess the state of the country’s finances. Cromer noted that the Egyptian

¹⁰¹ Ibid, 160-161.

¹⁰² Ibid, 159.

¹⁰³ Ibid, 136.

¹⁰⁴ See Owen, “The Influence of Lord Cromer’s Indian Experience on British Policy in Egypt and Robert Tignor, “The ‘Indianization’ of the Egyptian Administration Under British Rule,” for how Cromer’s time in India impacted upon his Egyptian administration.

¹⁰⁵ Aga Khan, *The Memoirs of Aga Khan*, 61.

¹⁰⁶ Faris had published a book critical of Britain’s relations with the Muslim world titled *The Decline of British Prestige in the East*. Cromer suspected that Blunt was behind it. See Baring to Salisbury, 14th December 1887, no. 130. FO 407/71, NA.

‘ulama’ were almost completely ignorant of India and its Muslim population, believing most of them to be Shi‘a; while this misunderstanding was soon corrected, they subsequently regarded Sami‘ Allah’s ideas for the reform of the Egyptian judicial system with horror:

The Ulema thought Samiullah Khan a freethinker who was tainted with heresies, the result of English association, which were quite irreconcilable with the pure faith of Islam. Samiullah, on the other hand, told me that he thought the Egyptian Mahommedans ignorant of their own creed and wholly unacquainted with the first principles of law and justice.¹⁰⁷

Cromer concluded that the importation of Aligarh-influenced Indian Muslims into Egypt was destined to fail. While Sir Sayyid and his followers represented “the most enlightened section of the Indian Mahommedans”, they shared little in common with the “ignorant and bigoted Ulema of El-Azhar.”¹⁰⁸ Yet in the final decade of Lord Cromer’s reign in Egypt, a figure did emerge who could be legitimately measured against the modernists of India. Muhammad ‘Abduh had studied and taught at al-Azhar, the most prestigious institution of learning in the Sunni Muslim world. There, he grew weary of the intellectual stagnation and conservatism of the senior ‘ulama’ who surrounded him, eventually determining to embark on a campaign to “reform al-Azhar and its pedagogical traditions, courses, and administrative techniques.”¹⁰⁹ Coming under the influence of the radical Iranian pan-Islamic activist and ideologue Jamal al-din al-Afghani during the years of the ‘Urabi revolt, ‘Abduh was forced into exile by the British in 1882, residing first in Ottoman Syria before moving to Paris. On his return to Egypt in 1888, he set about securing an administrative role in the British-designed regime from where he could implement his reformist agenda, ultimately

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Indira Falk Gesink, *Islamic Reform and Conservatism: Al-Azhar and the Evolution of Modern Sunni Islam* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2010), 1-2.

ascending to the position of Grand Mufti in 1899.¹¹⁰ While ‘Abduh rejected blind imitation of Western customs and civilizational markers,¹¹¹ his thought was very much of the modernist approach, emphasizing the need for Muslims to reject *taqlid* and embrace the civilizational principles of the West which were, in origin, those of Islam properly understood.¹¹² As such, comparisons with the Aligarh school of India have been fruitfully drawn by a number of scholars, with Fazlur Rahman claiming that “their arguments are amazingly similar.”¹¹³ Such parallels were not lost on Cromer, who came to regard ‘Abduh with a measure of respect he generally withheld from the rest of Muslim Egyptian society. Writing in the Egypt Report for 1905, Cromer described ‘Abduh as

The type of Islamic reformer...[who] is somewhat better known in India than in Egypt. In the former country, this type was at one time represented by the well-known and highly respected Seyyid Ahmed, who, some thirty years ago, founded a college at Aligarh. Broadly speaking, it may be said that the main object of those who represent this special phase of Islamic thought is to reform the ancient customs of Islam, not only without in any degree shaking the main pillars of the Moslem faith, but also without abandoning those practices which rest on a more or less religious basis.¹¹⁴

¹¹⁰ Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age*, 134.

¹¹¹ See Gesink, *Islamic Reform*, 80 – “‘Abduh criticized the type of education that the military and civil schools promoted. He was concerned that they might lead to the outright imitation of European customs. ‘Abduh was no slave to the West, however. He had a special term for parents who were willing to send their children to foreign schools, where they were taught to disdain their own traditions: *muqallidun al-gharb*, those who practiced *taqlid* of the West. *Taqlid* to him was always unreflective, always damaging; it could not lead to valuable change.”

¹¹² Hourani, *Arabic Thought*, 139–141. On ‘Abduh’s thought, see also Malcolm H. Kerr, *Islamic reform: the political and legal theories of Muḥammad ‘Abduh and Rashīd Riḍā* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966) and Mark Sedgwick, *Muhammad Abduh* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2010), xii, who writes that “He...bridged two very different worlds, and tried to show others how this might be done. One part of his modernism, then, was to prefer a marriage of civilizations to a clash of civilizations.” For a thoughtful critique of Hourani and the traditional categorization of the “‘Abduh school”, see Hussein Omar, “Arabic Thought in the Liberal Cage,” in *Islam After Liberalism*, eds. Faisal Devij and Zaheer Kazmi, 17-45 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

¹¹³ Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, 50. See also Toll, *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 223–230.

¹¹⁴ Egypt Report for 1905. FO 371/65, NA.

Just prior to his departure from Egypt in 1907, Cromer returned to the subject of ‘Abduh, explicitly identifying him with the “Aligarh school of thought”¹¹⁵ before proceeding to describe him as a “man of broad and enlightened views” in *Modern Egypt*.¹¹⁶ Yet ultimately for Cromer, ‘Abduh’s and Sir Sayyid’s approach removed them from the folds of orthodoxy and limited the potential impact they could hope to have on Muslim society in Egypt and India respectively.¹¹⁷ In fact, Cromer suspected ‘Abduh of agnosticism,¹¹⁸ citing Lane-Poole’s belief that a “Moslem must be either a fanatic or an agnostic.”¹¹⁹ For Cromer, then, a sincere and genuine reform of the Islamic world could not emerge from within the orthodox Islamic tradition; those who might attempt such an endeavour were ultimately doomed to failure. As such, the utility of the Aligarh school of thought in the pursuit of Britain’s imperial mission was questionable.

Curiously enough, Blunt came to judge Aligarh along similar lines, though he arrived there by a very different path. In his assessment of the primary reformist actors in Egypt and India, Blunt tended to focus on the differences in outward character and political positions which distinguished his Cairo-based associates from Sir Sayyid and his Indian followers. From the moment of his arrival in Cairo in the Autumn of 1880, Blunt was captivated by the “liberal” ‘ulama’ he encountered, led by ‘Abduh’s mentor Jamal al-din al-Afghani. He described Jamal al-din as the “true originator of the Liberal religious Reform movement” which aimed

¹¹⁵ “Memorandum by Lord Cromer on the present situation in Egypt, September 1906.” FO 407/169, NA.

¹¹⁶ Cromer, *Modern Egypt*, 179. Such praise drew the attention of Gertrude Bell who, after reading *Modern Egypt*, wrote to Cromer to express her interest in discussing ‘Abduh’s ideas of a “regenerated Islam” with Theodore Morison of the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College in Aligarh, remarking that “I have always clung to a possibility that was born in my mind at Aligarh.” See Bell to Cromer, undated. FO 633/12, NA.

¹¹⁷ Egypt Report for 1905. FO 371/65, NA.

¹¹⁸ Cromer, *Modern Egypt*, 180. Elie Kedourie, *Afghani and ‘Abduh: an essay on religious unbelief and political activism in modern Islam* (London: Frank Cass, 1997), 2, remarks that ‘Abduh’s agnosticism “may indeed have been a recommendation in Cromer’s eyes.”

¹¹⁹ Quoted in “Memorandum by Lord Cromer on the present situation in Egypt, September 1906.” FO 407/169, NA.

to prove that “the law of Islam was capable of the most liberal developments” and that Sunni Islam was “capable of adapting itself to all the highest cravings of the human soul and the needs of modern life.”¹²⁰ Believing Jamal al-din to be an “orthodox Sunni”,¹²¹ Blunt surveyed the impact of his thought on his Egyptian admirers, concluding that his critique of the tenets of the Sunni *madhahib* - “even those of El Hanafi” - carried all the more weight for having emerged from a credibly authoritative source, and reflected the same impulses which had guided religious reform in sixteenth century Europe.¹²² As for ‘Abduh, Blunt regarded him as a worthy successor to Jamal al-din following the Iranian’s expulsion from Egypt in 1879, describing him as “one of the best and wisest, and most interesting of men.”¹²³ It was perhaps due to his admiration for ‘Abduh and the scholarly disciples who surrounded him that Blunt identified the Shafi‘i *madhhab* as embodying the greatest hope for a moral reform of Islam from among the Sunni schools of jurisprudence.¹²⁴ For in contrast to the Hanafi creed of the Ottoman-appointed functionaries who filled the official religious positions of Egypt, the Shafi‘i school was the prevailing creed among the Egyptian population, numerically dominant at al-Azhar,¹²⁵ and apparently favoured by ‘Abduh and his followers.¹²⁶ It was doubtless under the influence of ‘Abduh that Blunt came to advocate for the removal of the caliphate from Turkish hands, to be reconstituted “on a more spiritual basis.”¹²⁷ And it was certainly the model of reform he encountered in Jamal al-din, ‘Abduh,

¹²⁰ Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, *Secret History of the English Occupation of Egypt, etc.* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1922), 76 – 77.

¹²¹ This was likely the exact affect the Iranian Jamal al-din desired in appropriating a marker of Afghan identity. In fact, Nikki Keddie has shown that Jamal al-din hailed from a Shi‘i background, and was less concerned with questions of orthodoxy and heterodoxy than with pragmatically utilizing pan-Islamic solidarity for the purposes of a reformist, anti-imperialist agenda. See for example Nikki R. Keddie, *Sayyid Jamāl Ad-Dīn “Al-Afghānī”; a Political Biography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 2 and 129 – 131.

¹²² Blunt, *Secret History*, 77.

¹²³ *Ibid*, 79 – 80.

¹²⁴ Blunt, *The Future of Islam*, 28 – 29.

¹²⁵ See Gesink, *Islamic Reform*, 199.

¹²⁶ Blunt, *Secret History*, 123 – 126.

¹²⁷ *Ibid*, 81.

and their followers at al-Azhar – extinguished with the British occupation of 1882 - that persuaded Blunt to work for the establishment of a “Central University for all Muslims” in India: “The hope, made void in Egypt, was renewed in India.”¹²⁸

By the time of his travels in India, the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College at Aligarh had already been founded by Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan in 1875, and it might have been expected that Blunt would have embraced the new institution with the same enthusiasm he extended to his Azharite associates and which his India-based fellow countrymen tended to extend to Aligarh. Yet Blunt’s diaries demonstrate little interest in the College, and his encounters with Sir Sayyid and his associates in India suggest reasons for his indifference. In Calcutta, Blunt contrasted the favourable impression made upon him by Nawab ‘Abd al-Latif, founder of the Mohammedan Literary Society and viewed by Blunt as “the head of the older-fashioned Mohammedans”,¹²⁹ with Amir ‘Ali, who was described to him as “like an Englishman.”¹³⁰ ‘Abd al-Latif informed Blunt that Amir ‘Ali had little support from within the Muslim community of Bengal, both for his Shi‘i background and his adoption of Western dress and manners,¹³¹ and subsequently criticized Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan and the Aligarh college.¹³² Blunt sympathized:

I can understand why the Aligarh men are not liked. I myself feel rather constrained with them, for one does not know whether to treat them as pious Mohammedans, or latter-day disciples of Jowett. Not that they are not extremely amiable, but there is a tone of apology in their talk to me, as much as to say ‘we are not such infidels as you suppose.’¹³³

¹²⁸ Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, *Ideas about India* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench & Co, 1885), 103–104.

¹²⁹ *Ibid*, 97.

¹³⁰ *Ibid*, 86.

¹³¹ *Ibid*, 97–98.

¹³² *Ibid*, 127.

¹³³ *Ibid*, 156.

Blunt subsequently expressed disappointment at his first impression of Sir Sayyid, considering him a possible “*faux bonhomme*”.¹³⁴ And while he warmed to Sir Sayyid at a later meeting, everywhere he travelled in India he encountered opposition to Sir Sayyid’s religious ideas and to Aligarh as an institution. It is likely such criticisms found receptive ears in Blunt, for not only did he clearly consider them to emanate from more authentically Islamic sources, his association with and admiration for Jamal al-din may have helped shape his impression of Sir Sayyid in advance of their first meeting. In 1881 Jamal al-din initiated a controversy with Sir Sayyid, accusing the Indian of undermining the social order and pan-Islamic solidarity of Indian Muslims by fomenting sectarianism and betraying their heritage. As Nikki Keddie has argued, while Jamal al-din presented himself as the guardian of orthodoxy, it was not Sir Sayyid’s ideas concerning a rational approach to the reform of Islamic thought and law which offended him, for he largely shared them. Rather, it was Sir Sayyid’s explicit support for the continuance of British rule in India which drew the Iranian’s ire.¹³⁵ Blunt too found the Aligarhists wanting when it came to the question of British imperialism and the Ottoman caliphate. He reflexively sympathized with Jamal al-din’s opposition to the extension of British rule in Muslim lands, and found ‘Abduh admirably opposed to the tyranny of Sultan ‘Abd al-Hamid II.¹³⁶ In contrast, Blunt scolded Amir ‘Ali for his initial support for the occupation of Egypt,¹³⁷ and on meeting Chiragh ‘Ali in Hyderabad judged that while he was an advocate of much the same reformist program as the Azharite school led by ‘Abduh, he placed too much faith in the figure of the Ottoman sultan to execute it.¹³⁸

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Keddie, *Sayyid Jamāl Ad-Dīn “Al-Afghānī”*, 167.

¹³⁶ Blunt, *Gordon at Khartoum*, 208.

¹³⁷ Blunt, *India Under Ripon*, 87–88.

¹³⁸ Ibid, 70.

Despite their disagreements regarding the potential for reform in Islam and the extent and nature of their expertise on the subject, both Cromer and Blunt believed that the representatives of the Aligarh reformist movement lacked the authenticity required to move the Muslim masses along a progressive path which would reflect the ideals of modern civilization while remaining true to their traditions. Cromer did not believe such a program could succeed, viewing any attempt to challenge the authority of the 'ulama' as a hopeless endeavour which would inevitably draw charges of heresy – delivered by an Indian to an Arab audience, the credibility of such a message faced even greater obstacles. Meanwhile Blunt regarded Sir Sayyid and his colleagues as compromised by their cultural and political association with their British masters, and instead placed his hopes for a genuinely Islamic reformation in the Arab world. While the Aligarh-centred discourse of Islamic reform remained the primary means of measuring the civilizational potential of Muslims after its importation into post-1882 Egypt, the specific context of the Arab Middle East exposed its limitations. If in British eyes the reformist program represented an attempt to redefine the meaning of 'orthodoxy' for an increasingly self-consciously Muslim subject population, then it appeared that Sir Sayyid and his colleagues would face enormous challenges in extending their project beyond the frontiers of British India. Yet both Cromer and Blunt seemed prepared to accept that Aligarh could have an impact in India, albeit one restricted to advancing the piecemeal adoption of Western civilizational ideals and customs by Indian Muslims at the expense of their Islamic identity.¹³⁹ By the opening years of the twentieth century, however, it was unclear if even such an unambitious vision of Aligarh's role in Indian Muslim society could be fulfilled.

¹³⁹ Blunt, for example, grudgingly conceded that the Aligarh men were likely to make a greater impact on the future of Muslim life in India than the more traditional, orthodox Muslims he favoured. See *Ibid*, 99.

* * * * *

Those Indian officials willing to consider the proposal that Islam had the capacity to affect genuine progress in the Muslim world, or at least among the Muslims of India, focused their attention on the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College at Aligarh, through which it was envisioned the reformist agenda would be delivered. Visiting Aligarh in 1882, William Wilson Hunter remarked on how the college appeared to have successfully transcended sectarian barriers, as Sunnis and Shi‘a from across India gathered “for the common purpose of education, live together, study together, play together, and pray peacefully a little apart.”¹⁴⁰ As a proposal to establish a university at Aligarh got underway in the years immediately preceding the First World War, Muslim advocates cited this apparently tranquil, broad-minded atmosphere as a suitable model to be replicated:

The establishment of the Aligarh College...has resulted in a re-adjustment of unwholesome reactionary religious ideas and a revision of antiquated beliefs which were somewhat intolerantly antagonistic to other creeds and communities. The new spirit has promoted the growth of those higher ideals...The Aligarh College, in the words of the Allahabad University authorities, “is catholic in its character and is open to students of every creed and race.”¹⁴¹

Speaking during his 1896 visit, Antony MacDonnell speculated on the college’s potential impact, contrasting the dim prospects for a reform emerging from what were perceived to be the institutional and spiritual heartlands of Islam with the more fertile environment of British-ruled India:

It is not too much to hope that this College will grow into the Muhammadan University of the future; that it will become the Cordova of the East; and that in these

¹⁴⁰ Quoted in Graham, *The Life and Work of Syed Ahmed Khan*, 329.

¹⁴¹ A. A. Baig, 13th July 1911. “Aligarh University Proposal”, IOR/L/P&J/6/1154, BL.

cloisters Muhammadan genius will discover, and under the protection of the British Crown work out, that social, religious and political regeneration, of which neither Stamboul nor Mecca affords a prospect.¹⁴²

Indeed, the journalist Sidney Low regarded Aligarh as “the finest educational institution in India”, fit to rival any of its English counterparts.¹⁴³ When in later years the Aga Khan looked back with pride on his long support for and association with the college and then university, he cited Aligarh’s stature as a centre of Muslim religious and cultural modernity, imbued with a “profound spirit of tolerance and charity and respect for other faiths.”¹⁴⁴ Yet it is noteworthy that the sole concrete achievement the Aga Khan could ascribe to the Aligarh project was political - it was in Aligarh, he claimed, that the “sovereign nation of Pakistan” was born.¹⁴⁵ It was less clear that the college had, in fact, helped engender an Islamic reformation which would abate sectarian discord; and certainly by the outbreak of the war, British officials had just cause to believe that the lofty hopes and expectations projected onto Aligarh in the preceding decades had gone unfulfilled. In April 1913, the Indian civil servant Sir Harcourt Butler expressed his dismay at the direction the college had taken. Students were graduating with extremist ideas, imbued with pan-Islamic sentiment focused on the sultan in Istanbul, while the college apparently held little prestige in the eyes of the Muslim population across the country:

¹⁴² MacDonnell to the Trustees of the MAO College, Aligarh, 24th January 1896. *MacDonnell Papers*, MS. Eng. Hist. c. 363, BOD. It is reasonable to question the sincerity of these words delivered to what was presumably a largely Muslim audience – during his time as Lieutenant-Governor of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh, MacDonnell acquired a reputation for hostility to Muslims interests, expressing unease with the number of Muslim employees in government service and regarding Muslim sympathy for the Ottoman sultan with suspicion. See Robinson, *Separatism Among Indian Muslims*, 134 and Hardy, *The Muslims of British India*, 177. MacDonnell was also involved in the campaign to accord “the Nagari script an official status equal to that of the Urdu.” See Christopher King, “The Hindu-Urdu controversy of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh and communal consciousness,” *Journal of South Asian Literature* 13, no. 1/4 (Fall-Winter-Spring-Summer 1977-1978): 113.

¹⁴³ Low, *A Vision of India*, 282.

¹⁴⁴ Aga Khan, *The Memoirs of Aga Khan*, 116.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 36.

The Nawab of Dacca looks upon Aligarh as a place for the manufacture of infidels and he has enlarged to me for several hours on the unreliability, vice and wickedness, not to mention the disloyalty, of the Aga Khan. Aligarh has become generally unpopular outside its own little orbit in the United Provinces.¹⁴⁶

From its founding in 1875, the Aligarh college was bedevilled with accusations of heresy and sacrilege, for its founder Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan was a deeply reviled figure among the conservative establishment which defined orthodoxy in British eyes. Criticism typically concentrated on a combination of Sir Sayyid's alleged English mannerisms – supposedly acquired during his infamous visit to Europe in 1869-70 - and his reformed religious thought. An article of the *Aligarh Institute Gazette* of 1878 listed the primary complaints, claiming that Sir Sayyid advocated pilgrimage to London and Paris rather than Mecca, and education under infidels rather than 'ulama'; that he denied the legality of slavery and the existence of demons; that he neglected prayers and fasting, ate non-halal food, and drank wine; and that, essentially, he desired to adopt the lifestyle of non-Muslims.¹⁴⁷ Elsewhere it was suggested that students attending the Aligarh college would change their names to suit Christian sensibilities, with "Mr. Bacon-a-pig" suggested as one option,¹⁴⁸ while in 1894 a resolution was passed at the Begum Shahi Mosque in Lahore calling for all copies of Sir Sayyid's commentary on the Qur'an to be destroyed.¹⁴⁹ Sir Sayyid's opponents even reached out to authorities in the Hijaz to lend weight to their opposition, securing a fatwa in 1876 which called for the destruction of the college.¹⁵⁰ Though initially determined to shape the religious curriculum of the college to his own preferences, Sir Sayyid was ultimately forced to give

¹⁴⁶ Butler to Lovat, 8th April 1913. *Butler Papers*, Mss Eur F116/71, BL.

¹⁴⁷ *Aligarh Institute Gazette*, 1st June 1878, UPNNR. IOR/L/R/5/55, BL.

¹⁴⁸ *Lauh-i-Mahfuz*, 20th August 1875, UPNNR. IOR/L/R/5/52, BL.

¹⁴⁹ *Rahbar*, Moradabad, 24th April 1894, UPNNR. IOR/L/R/5/71, BL.

¹⁵⁰ *Nur-ul-Anwar*, 5th November 1876, UPNNR. IOR/L/R/5/53, BL. See also Troll, *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 20–21. A sympathetic Muslim observer would later write that Sir Sayyid was "despised by the orthodox section of the Musalmans...because he tried to purge out of them the poison injected in their system by the teachings of the narrow-minded Maulvis." See "Note by Mr. S. Habibullah", 17th February 1913, *Muhammadan Feeling in India from 1912-14*. MSS Eur F 136/6, *Meston Papers*, BL.

way to the demands of the conservatives as opposition threatened to abort the project at its birth, denying him a role in all religious instruction.¹⁵¹ Despite these concessions, Aligarh struggled to attract Muslim students, even within the North-Western Provinces.¹⁵²

Sir Sayyid's British admirers were not unaware of his reputation in the very circles he hoped to penetrate. In his biography, Graham portrayed Sir Sayyid as a martyr of sorts, "quite prepared to suffer even a painful death in the execution of his set purpose",¹⁵³ while principal of the college Theodore Beck described the animosity directed at Sir Sayyid from within the Muslim community as a "disgrace on their nation."¹⁵⁴ An obvious question, then, concerned the nature of the religious education to be provided at Aligarh, for it was generally accepted in British official circles that such instruction was desirable.¹⁵⁵ "[It] is a great satisfaction to me," claimed MacDonnell, "to know that the Directors of this College accept, and act upon, the rule, that...secular education without religious training is 'comparatively futile and ineffectual work.'"¹⁵⁶ In Sir Sayyid's absence, Beck and his successor Theodore Morison, along with British scholars such as Thomas Arnold, assumed responsibility for the Islamic component of the college's educational program. For their own part, they enforced a strict

¹⁵¹ Lelyveld, *Aligarh's First Generation*, 130–133. Devji, "Apologetic Modernity," 66 notes that Sir Sayyid's *tafsir* was regarded as too radical for the college.

¹⁵² Hardy, *The Muslims of British India*, 102–104.

¹⁵³ Graham, *The Life and Work of Syed Ahmed Khan*, 201–204.

¹⁵⁴ *Reviews on Syed Ahmed Khan's Life and Works*, preface by Theodore Beck. See also Strachey, *India*, 206 and Kennedy, "Personal Reminiscences of Sir Syad Ahmad," 148. In a rare example of the Muslim critique of Sir Sayyid impacting upon a British official mind, Lelyveld, *Aligarh's First Generation*, 137 notes that Mathews Kempson, the Director of the North-Western Provinces' Department of Public Instruction in the 1870s, considered Sir Sayyid as "untrustworthy, inaccurate, unrepresentative of Muslim opinion, and harmful to the cause of education."

¹⁵⁵ See Robert Ivermee, "Islamic education and colonial secularism: the Amroha experiment of 1895-96," *South Asian History and Culture* 5, no. 1 (2014): 33, who writes of "widespread British concern over the failure of colonial public instruction to encourage moral improvement in Indian subject."

¹⁵⁶ MacDonnell to the Trustees of the MAO College, Aligarh, 24th January 1896. *MacDonnell Papers*, MS. Eng. Hist. c. 363, BOD. Elsewhere MacDonnell expressed agreement "with those who think that education should from the beginning be combined with religious teaching." See "Speech delivered at the Convocation of the Allahabad University on the 8th March 1899" in *Selections from speeches of Sir A. P. MacDonnell, G.C.S.I., Lieutenant-Governor, N.W.P and Chief Commissioner of Oudh from 1895 to 1901* (Naini Tal: N.W.P. and Oudh Government Camp Branch Press, 1901), 105.

regime of obedience to the basic demands of Islamic observance, prohibiting music and singing in the college,¹⁵⁷ instituting thirty minutes of Qur'an reading before classes started,¹⁵⁸ and imposing a series of punishments on students absent from one of the five obligatory daily prayers.¹⁵⁹ Meanwhile, to impart religious instruction to the college's Sunni students Morison and Sayyid Mahmud secured the services of an 'alim from the Islamic seminary at Deoband,¹⁶⁰ regarded by British officialdom as "the home of Muhammadan orthodoxy"¹⁶¹ and a source of some of the bitterest opposition to Sir Sayyid's religious thought.¹⁶²

While similar services were provided for Shi'i students,¹⁶³ sectarian relations at the college deteriorated under these arrangements, despite claims from the trustees that Sunni-Shi'i controversies were "completely avoided."¹⁶⁴ Seeking to forestall such tensions in government schools, British authorities in the North-Western Provinces and Oudh had previously imposed restrictions on religious instruction. It was only in 1890 that classes were permitted, and then only on school premises outside regular school hours and subject to local regulations,¹⁶⁵ although in later years an experiment in Amroha whereby Muslim students were allowed to attend religious classes in place of second-language lessons was regularized across the province.¹⁶⁶ Responding to a government query regarding conditions at the

¹⁵⁷ Beck to Tyabjee, 7th May 1888, in *Theodore Beck Papers from the Sir Syed Academy Archives*, ed. Khaliq Ahmad Nizami (Aligarh: Aligarh Muslim University, 1991), 80.

¹⁵⁸ "Rules of the M.A.O. College Boarding-House", *ibid*, 98.

¹⁵⁹ "Attendance at prayers", *ibid*, 307-311.

¹⁶⁰ "Prayers and Religious Instructions", *ibid*, 279-280.

¹⁶¹ "Anjuman-i-Khuddam-i-Kaaba, 1913-14." IOR/L/PS/20/242, BL.

¹⁶² Troll, *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 21. Despite this, Sir Sayyid encouraged support for the Deoband seminary – "it is incumbent on all to see that this madrasah continues and flourishes." Quoted in Ziya-ul-Hasan Faruqi, *The Deoband School and the Demand for Pakistan* (London: Asia publishing house, 1963), 42-43.

¹⁶³ Lelyveld, *Aligarh's First Generation*, 276.

¹⁶⁴ Trustees of the MAO College to MacDonnell, 24th January 1896. *MacDonnell Papers*, MS. Eng. Hist. c. 358, fol. 7, BOD.

¹⁶⁵ "Religious Instruction in Schools and Colleges", *Proceedings of June 1890*, Educational. IOR/P/3596, BL.

¹⁶⁶ Ivermee, "Islamic education and colonial secularism."

Middle School in Etawah, Director of Public Instruction for the province E. White opined that

disturbances would be more likely to arise between different religious orders of Muhammadans than between Muhammadans and Hindus. Sunnis and Shias, for instance, would be more likely to create a disturbance than Muhammadans and Hindus. I doubt if Sunnis and Shias could receive religious instruction in different rooms of the same building on the same day, and thus three days in the week would not suffice for the Muhammadan students, and both Sunnis and Shias would probably select Friday as one of the days for religious instruction.¹⁶⁷

Indeed, in *Causes of the Indian Revolt* Sir Sayyid himself had described Sunni-Shi'i cooperation as "impossible", drawing an analogy with the discord dividing Catholics from Protestants.¹⁶⁸ The appointment of a Deobandi 'alim at Aligarh was unlikely to help matters, for the revivalist movement represented by the seminary at Deoband was deeply conservative and imbued with hostility to Shi'ism;¹⁶⁹ in fact, Deobandi 'ulama' were initially reluctant to associate themselves with Aligarh due to the college's acceptance of Shi'i students.¹⁷⁰ Consequently, Aligarh came to be regarded in Shi'i circles as a sectarian institution¹⁷¹ and Shi'i attendees regularly complained about the lack of equality at the college.¹⁷² By 1914 proposals were floated concerning the establishment of a Shi'i college to rival Aligarh.¹⁷³

¹⁶⁷ White to Government of NWP & Oudh, 17th October 1890. Education 296/1891, UPSA.

¹⁶⁸ Ahmed Khan, *Causes of the Indian Revolt*, 3–4.

¹⁶⁹ Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India*, 152 writes that the Deobandi 'ulama' "held the Shi'ah to deny the singularity of God, the humanity of the Prophet, and the finality of revelation."

¹⁷⁰ Lelyveld, *Aligarh's First Generation*, 134.

¹⁷¹ Jones, *Shi'a Islam in Colonial India*, 165.

¹⁷² See *Akhbar-i-Imamia* of Lucknow, 5th June 1906 and *The Leader* of Allahabad, 25th September 1913, UPNNR. IOR/L/R/5/81, 88. The latter provides a list of typical grievances which includes the lack of Shi'i theological books available, no recognition of Shi'i holidays, and a rule forbidding Shi'i students from wearing Persian-style headdress. In contrast, wearing of the Turkish *fez* had been encouraged and increased at Aligarh since its inception - see *Al Bashir* of Etawah, 26th November 1900, UPNNR. IOR/L/R/5/77.

¹⁷³ See *Ittihad* of Amroha, 24th April 1914 and *Oudh Akhbar* of Lucknow, 6th June 1914, UPNNR. IOR/L/R/5/89.

With religious instruction for the majority Sunnis in the hands of Sir Sayyid's most authoritative opponents, and the prospect of sectarian rapprochement increasingly distant, the question remained as to what type of reform, if any, Aligarh could hope to generate. In early 1904 a plan proposed by Morison to introduce Arabic studies at Aligarh served to fuel a debate which proceeded along by now familiar lines.¹⁷⁴ Citing Edward Granville Browne's efforts to promote Arabic at Cambridge, Morison argued that a school of Arabic would help place Aligarh at the centre of the coming Islamic "renaissance." For

Aligarh is not only the name of a college, but stands for a certain set of ideas; it connotes a religious and intellectual movement which was behind the college at its foundation, and to which the college owes its success and importance, and it is from this movement, started by Sir Syed Ahmed, that all enlightened and modern Musalmans draw their inspiration.¹⁷⁵

According to Morison, alternative locations such as Calcutta or Deoband lacked the pan-Indian draw that Aligarh had already managed to achieve among Indian Muslims in the first quarter century of its existence. But more importantly, it was only at Aligarh that the scheme had the opportunity to come under the guidance of the progressive section of the Muslim community. In a peculiar verdict delivered by the Englishman who had placed religious instruction at Aligarh in the hands of a Deobandi, Morison contrasted the "modern, enlightened" Muslims of Aligarh with those of Deoband, who he described as "the dwindling adherents of a lost cause...whose advice in worldly matters commands little or no respect nowadays." At the same time, he recommended the hiring of an Egyptian Arab, an Iranian, and two Indian 'ulama' to staff the school, urging that the Egyptian be an alumnus

¹⁷⁴ According to Gail Minault and David Lelyveld, "The Campaign for a Muslim University, 1898–1920," *Modern Asian Studies* 8, no. 2 (1974), 155, Morison's aim was to win orthodox Muslim support for the more ambitious plan to establish a Muslim university at Aligarh.

¹⁷⁵ Morison to Miller, enclosed in Miller to Risley, 3rd February 1904, no. 31. "Establishment of a School of Arabic at Aligarh", Home/Examinations/31-35/Deposit/July 1904, NAI.

of al-Azhar.¹⁷⁶ Morison envisioned that, ultimately, graduates of the new Arabic school would go on to staff British diplomatic missions across the Islamic world, where “a knowledge of the different currents of Muhammadan thought” would be most valuable.¹⁷⁷ Following a meeting with Morison at Aligarh, the orientalist Edward Denison Ross of the Calcutta madrasa embraced the scheme, arguing that it would help to bridge the gap dividing the “strictly orthodox” from Aligarh and inspire young Indian Muslim students unfamiliar with the heroic and intellectual endeavours of the early Muslim empires. For Ross, as for Morison, it was vital for the British to embrace the impending reformation and shape it in its own image:

It must be apparent to all that a literary and intellectual revival among the followers of the Prophet would ultimately exercise untold influence for good on Muhammadans generally, and on those of India especially, who live under a peaceful and well-ordered Government, and who are so intimately in touch with those countries which today take the lead in science and thought. For these reasons, and many others, including the familiar fact that Great Britain is the largest Muhammadan power, it seems both fitting and important that the proposed renaissance should take its origin in India.¹⁷⁸

James La Touche, Lieutenant-Governor of the revamped province¹⁷⁹ since 1901, stood in opposition to Morison and Ross. While La Touche was open to the prospect of offering classical Arabic as one component of the college’s MA degree, he believed instruction should remain strictly under English supervision with the aim of imbuing attendees with broad-minded, liberal ideas at the expense of religious superstitions related to the Qur’an. Morison’s plan for Muslim employees from beyond India, La Touche argued, would have the opposite effect:

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Ross to Miller, January 1904, *ibid.*

¹⁷⁹ Renamed the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh in 1902.

He [Morison] wants an Arabic renaissance and a revival of Arabic learning. There is no Arabic learning save what is derived from the Greeks. If there is a revival, it must be reactionary and retrograde and in hostility to the West.

Moreover, the proposed school will not be under the control of the University. The control will fall under fanatics from Egypt, or Persia, or possibly Constantinople; and the school will become a focus of disaffection and of Pan-Islamic aspirations.¹⁸⁰

La Touche was supported by an Aligarh student, Sayyid Riza 'Ali, who claimed that, as appealing as they may find the subject, Indian Muslims faced far more pressing concerns than access to traditional Arabic scholarship. Riza 'Ali went on to quote Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan to the effect that "Eastern learning" represented a "stumbling block" in the way of "moral as well as intellectual progress", which depended entirely on acquiring knowledge of the literature, philosophy and science of the West.¹⁸¹

While Morison claimed the backing of Amir 'Ali and the Aga Khan who, he argued, represented Muslim opinion "with more authority than we can,"¹⁸² La Touche was supported by Denzil Ibbetson, the Viceroy Lord Curzon,¹⁸³ and the census commissioner and ethnographer of India Herbert Hope Risley, who cautioned that "traditional scholarship is as a rule inseparable from religious fanaticism and political propaganda" and warned against the danger of ideals imported from al-Azhar.¹⁸⁴ On the other hand, Risley saw little danger in an Arabic school at Aligarh presided over by English professors who would apply European methodological practices to traditional sources, although he acknowledged that such a program may be seen by the "orthodox" as British encouragement of "innovation" in

¹⁸⁰ La Touche to Miller, 6th February 1904, "Establishment of a School of Arabic at Aligarh", Home/Examinations/31-35/Deposit/July 1904, NAI.

¹⁸¹ Mr. S. Riza 'Ali, "The Revival of Arabic Learning", *Indian Daily Telegraph*, 30th January 1904. Enclosed in *ibid*.

¹⁸² Morison to Miller, 9th March 1904, *ibid*.

¹⁸³ Ibbetson, 2nd April 1904 and Curzon, 15th April 1904, *ibid*.

¹⁸⁴ H. H. Risley, 27th March 1904, *ibid*.

religion.¹⁸⁵ La Touche and his allies won the day, and it was decided to hire a European scholar alongside an Indian, with the costs to be borne by the government in combination with sympathetic wealthy Indian benefactors.¹⁸⁶ Yet the modified plan could not conceal the decline in European influence at the college, with Sir Harcourt Butler noting as early as 1905 that “the strength of the European influence in the college is diminishing and...the enthusiasm and influence of Messrs Beck, Arnold and Morison are not likely to be equalled in [the] future.”¹⁸⁷ By 1913, a Muslim observer sympathetic to the Aligarh project was lamenting a shift in focus at the college:

the ideal of Sir Syed to regenerate the youths of Islam by purifying their minds of the poison against Europeans was losing its strength. A set-back had been started in the shape of religious reform by teaching the students more religion and less love of truth, straightforwardness and manliness. Sir Syed's ideal was to Anglicise the Muhammadans so far as the formation of character went, the reaction was in the direction of Muhammadanising them with an addition of English education.¹⁸⁸

Meanwhile, the new Lieutenant-Governor James Meston, widely regarded as sympathetic to Muslim interests in northern India, noted that the “young party would be glad to see the European element entirely ejected and the whole place handed over to their own theories of education, which at present would be nothing short of a calamity.”¹⁸⁹ Much of the pessimism surrounding Aligarh at this time concerned the political activities of a younger generation of alumni, led by the infamous brothers, Muhammad and Shawkat ‘Ali.¹⁹⁰ While Aligarh’s

¹⁸⁵ H. H. Risley, 1st March 1094, *ibid*.

¹⁸⁶ Minault and Lelyveld, “The Campaign for a Muslim University,” 156.

¹⁸⁷ Butler, 2nd August 1905, “Higher Study of Arabic at Aligarh”, *Education* 275/5/1904, UPSA.

¹⁸⁸ “Note by Mr. S. Habibullah”, 17th February 1913, *Muhammadan Feeling in India from 1912-14*. MSS Eur F 136/6, *Meston Papers*, BL.

¹⁸⁹ Meston to MacDonald, 11th September 1913. MSS Eur F 136/6, *Meston Papers*, BL.

¹⁹⁰ On the ‘Ali brothers’ involvement in the war-time and post-war agitation which evolved into the Khilafat Movement, see Gail Minault, *The Khilafat movement: religious symbolism and political mobilization in India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982), *passim*, Robinson, *Muslim Separatism*, 175-179, Jacob Landau, *The Politics of Pan-Islam: Ideology and Organization* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 198-203, Azmi Özcan, *Pan-Islamism: Indian Muslims, the Ottomans and Britain (1877-1924)* (Leiden, Brill, 1997), 178-181, and Lelyveld, *Aligarh’s First Generation*, 340.

founders had rejected the trappings of orthodoxy in favour of an English education with no explicit political content, the teaching of Islam was left in traditionally 'orthodox' hands. It was perhaps inevitable, then, that the idea of the Ottoman Sultan as the legitimate caliph of Islam, and the political consequences inherent in such a position, began to dominate student minds at Aligarh,¹⁹¹ confirming the fears of MacDonnell that Sunni Muslims owed their allegiance to Istanbul.¹⁹² In a political context in which young, Western-educated Muslims were increasingly disillusioned by the failure of the Government of India to fulfil the expectations its alliance with the traditional Aligarh leadership had raised,¹⁹³ Aligarh gained a reputation in British official circles as a hot-bed of pro-Ottoman sentiment and resentment. This was perceived to be fuelled not just by specific grievances such as the Nagari resolution of 1900, the cancellation of the partition of Bengal in 1911,¹⁹⁴ or the Cawnpore Mosque incident of 1913,¹⁹⁵ but more generally by the extent of British power in the Islamic world. Reports received before the war described failed efforts to discourage political activism at the College. The trustees, it was said, were now dominated by "disseminators of extreme political ideas" under the influence of those "rogues", the 'Ali brothers,¹⁹⁶ while a certain number of students were reported to have embraced "agitation and terrorism" as the only means by which to pressure the Government of India on behalf of their agenda.¹⁹⁷

By the outbreak of the First World War, Aligarh had failed to fulfil the expectations of even its most enthusiastic British supporters. The problem lay, in part, in the struggle of British observers to reliably assess Sir Sayyid's and Aligarh's place in the Islamic intellectual

¹⁹¹ Lelyveld, *Aligarh First Generation*, 341.

¹⁹² Robinson, *Muslim Separatism*, 134.

¹⁹³ *Ibid*, 133.

¹⁹⁴ Hardy, *The Muslims of British India*, 148-153.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid*, 184-185.

¹⁹⁶ Fateh Ali Khan to Meston, 19th May 1914. MSS Eur F 136/6, *Meston Papers*, BL.

¹⁹⁷ Roos-Keppel to Wheeler, 6th September 1912. In "Turkey and the Powers feeling among Indian Muhammadans", P-522, 1913. IOR/L/PS/11/45, BL.

universe they were constructing. On the one hand, the so-called *Necharis* were regarded as a distinct minority ‘sect’, distinguished from normative or ‘orthodox’ Islam by an approach to basic questions of Islamic authority and theology that was recognized as heretical in terms of the same standards that British authorities applied when assessing other movements. Yet concurrently, *Aligarh* was seen as a potentially universalizing force in the Islamic world which could perhaps redefine the meaning of ‘orthodoxy’ in partnership with the British Empire. At the heart of this conflict was a superficial approach to Sir Sayyid’s actual religious thought. Rather than engaging in the serious question of how to incorporate his reformist agenda into Muslim learning and reconcile it with the political and legal ideals of the Islamic past, British observers tended to emphasize Sir Sayyid’s loyalty and general receptiveness to Western ideals. Those resolutely sceptical of the idea of a civilizing Islamic Reformation regarded it as pleasing, but little more, to have at least one or two vaguely influential Muslims engaged in activism on behalf of the West; their loftiest hope was for Aligarh to make Englishmen of its Muslim students, an endeavour in which Islam had little or no practical value. On the other hand, those mesmerized by the perceived universalism of British civilizational ideals complacently regarded Sir Sayyid’s practical ventures as a harbinger of an inevitable revitalisation of the Islamic world under British auspices; indeed the march forward was so irresistible that the disciplinary value of orthodox Islamic ritual and doctrine could be utilized without any necessary implications for the broader reformist agenda. In both cases, careful consideration of Sir Sayyid’s reformed thought, or the potential consequences of its absence at the college, was lacking; shorn of any political or legal content in a world which continued to be heavily defined by the glories of temporal

governance, both past and present, and the strictures of law, the British reformist agenda conceded space to be filled by so-called orthodoxy.¹⁹⁸

It is apparent, however, that British observers had even less interest in investigating the prospect that important activism and perhaps even change might emerge from among the traditional 'ulama' of northern India. Whether they embraced the reformist agenda or not, by the late nineteenth century British official thinking concerning Islam was so overwhelmed by the discourse of reform that those suspected of standing in its way were deemed unworthy of consideration beyond the potential threat they posed to the continuance of British rule. In Cairo, the figure of 'Abduh had obscured in British eyes the reality that the reforms eventually undertaken at al-Azhar were largely the product of 'Abduh's conservative opponents.¹⁹⁹ Meanwhile the significance of the rival movements which came to be associated with the seminary at Deoband and the figure of Ahmad Riza Khan Bareilvi largely flew under the British radar in the years preceding the First World War.²⁰⁰ It was only with the heightened anxieties relating to the prospect of Muslim sedition in the context

¹⁹⁸ Faridah Zaman, "The Future of Islam, 1672-1924," *Modern Intellectual History* (October 2018): 21-24 notes the political impulse behind Chiragh 'Ali's writings and his concept of the Islamic law as "republican", in contrast to Sir Sayyid, who refused to be drawn into an idealization of any particular political system, and Amir 'Ali, who showed little interest in the caliphate in the pre-war editions of *The Spirit of Islam*. In this regard, it is noteworthy that Chiragh 'Ali was by far the least influential of these three modernist writers in British circles.

¹⁹⁹ Gesink, *Islamic Reform*, 7 argues that at al-Azhar in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, "Conservatives did not eschew reform or play a purely preservative role; they took an active role in modifying modernist ideas to make them culturally acceptable and eventually came...to craft the vision of modern Islam that animated the reform process."

²⁰⁰ The continuing relevance of the 'ulama' in adapting and shaping Islamic societies in South Asia is the central theme of Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam*. On Deoband, see Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India* and SherAli Tareen, "Normativity, Heresy, and the Politics of Authenticity in South Asian Islam," *The Muslim World* 99 (July, 2009), 521-552. See also Brannon Ingram, "Crises of the Public in Muslim India: Critiquing 'Custom' at Aligarh and Deoband," *South Asia* 38, no. 3 (2015), 403-418 for an insightful comparative study of reform at Deoband and Aligarh. For the Barlevi movement, see Sanyal, *Devotional Islam and Politics in British India*. It may also be the case that, as suggested by Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India*, 356, Deoband tended to consciously avoid contact and engagement with the colonial state, in contrast to the minority sects which actively sought British recognition.

of the war that the British started taking a real interest in Deoband,²⁰¹ while the Bareilvi movement seems to have elicited no explicit scrutiny whatsoever. In relegating orthodoxy to the periphery of the discourse concerning the future of Islam, the official mind opened a conceptual space in which authority in Islam was “up for grabs.”²⁰² As we have seen, it was a space that Sir Sayyid and the Aligarh movement were unable to fill. As the practices of surveillance and classification of India’s population intensified at the turn of the twentieth century, the official mind thus became increasingly enthralled by the perceived heterodoxy and reformist potential of the numerous minority movements coming to official attention, the subject of the following chapter.

²⁰¹ See for example “Attention of Govt. drawn by the Begum of Bhopal to the “Faringhi Mahal” at Lucknow and the Islamia College at Deoband on account of the pan-Islamic feeling in connection with the War with Turkey.” IOR/R/1/1/1125, BL. On a wartime conspiracy in which Deoband was implicated, see “Summary of the ‘Silk Letters Case’, V. Vivian, 7th December 1916. FO 882/12, NA, Saul Kelly, ““Crazy in the Extreme’? the Silk Letters Conspiracy,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 49, no. 2 (2013), 162-178, and Faridah Zaman, “Revolutionary History and the Post-Colonial Muslim: Re-Writing the ‘Silk Letters Conspiracy’ of 1916,” *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 39, no. 3 (2016), 626-643. Yet as Robinson, *Separatism Among Indian Muslims*, 282 and Hardy, *The Muslims of British India*, 185 – 186 have shown, Deoband officially remained loyal throughout the war.

²⁰² Devji, “Apologetic Modernity,” 75.

5. Surveying reform: The Census of India and the Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf

In 1882, Wilfrid Scawen Blunt published *The Future of Islam*, a manifesto for a radical restructuring of authority in the Muslim world which he hoped would unleash the progressive forces inherent in the essence of Islam. Before deciding upon the origin of this prospective reform, however, Blunt warned his readers that “it must be remembered that Islam, which in its institution was intended to be one community, political and religious, is now divided not only into many nations, but into many sects.”¹ Surveying the sectarian landscape of the “Mohammedan World”, he identified a variety of ancient and contemporary Islamic movements and trends, with the aim of identifying Islam’s underlying spirit. While Blunt noted that the multitude of interpretations of Islam he uncovered in this examination all adhered to a limited set of common denominators based on the five pillars of Islam, he argued that “[on] other points...both of belief and practice, they differ widely; so widely that the sects must be considered as not only distinct from, but hostile to, each other.”² Blunt quickly identified four primary sects dominating Muslim life across the globe. The global Sunni (or “orthodox”) population he estimated at 145 million; the Shi‘a at 15 million. Two other “sects” caught his eye – the Ibadhis amounted to 7 million in Blunt’s calculations, while the Wahhabis numbered 8 million.³ Blunt proceeded to note that while the Sunnis had “good right” to treat the other sects as “heretics”, they were, in fact, divided among themselves, into the four jurisprudential schools of Hanafi, Shaf‘i, Maliki, and Hanbali.⁴ Moving on, he accounted for the Shi‘a, noting their “tendency to superstitious beliefs unauthorized by the Koran or by the written testimony of the Prophet’s companions” and

¹ Blunt, *The Future of Islam*, 11.

² Ibid, 12-13.

³ Ibid, 13.

⁴ Ibid, 14-29.

identifying them with the intellectual world of Iran.⁵ “The future of the Shi‘a,” according to Blunt, “only indirectly involves that of Islam proper.”⁶ Going further, he provided details regarding the two sects of southern Arabia, the Ibadhis of Oman and the Zaidis of Yemen,⁷ before finally reaching the Wahhabis, noting their apparent decline, while arguing that “the spirit of reform has remained.”⁸

In mapping this Islamic universe, Blunt was engaging in an endeavour characteristic of the imperial zeitgeist, the enumeration and classification of the peoples of empire. Indeed, the chapter title chosen for this investigation, “Census of the Mohammedan World”,⁹ is indicative of the period. The first all-encompassing Census of India had been conducted in 1871, with the heavyweight editions of 1891, 1901 and 1911, rich not just in statistical analysis but also descriptive ethnographic detail, due in the near future. Meanwhile, that parochial cousin of the Census, the District Gazetteer, would soon be exported to the “Arabian Frontier”¹⁰ of the Raj in the years preceding the First World War, in the form of John Gordon Lorimer’s monumental *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf*, which offered British officials in the area an unparalleled source of information on a region of growing strategic importance. These great ethnographic surveys, classic examples of knowledge in the service of empire, revealed a mosaic of Muslim peoples inhabiting imperial Britain’s territories, identifiable not only by their distinguishing tribe, caste, or nationality, but also by their sectarian affiliation. As such, the task involved engagement with the historiographical narratives and doctrinal particularities from which the various Islamic sects were believed

⁵ Ibid, 35036.

⁶ Ibid, 39.

⁷ Ibid, 40-42.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid, 1–47.

¹⁰ See Onley, *The Arabian Frontier of the British Raj*.

to have developed. Several works analogous to Blunt's appeared in these years, taking similar forms. Already in Bosworth-Smith's *Mohammed and Mohammedanism* (1876) we find a discussion of the Babis of Iran alongside the Wahhabis,¹¹ while the missionary Thomas Patrick Hughes's *Dictionary of Islam* provided colonial officials with a user-friendly reference guide to all manner of Islamic movements and trends.¹² A pamphlet produced in 1901 by the obscure writer R. G. Corbet repeatedly cited Amir 'Ali' and Sayyid Ahmad Khan as suitable interpreters of the current state of affairs in Islam for a British audience, and emphasized the need for Britain to work in partnership with the reforming "spirit" of Islam in order to ensure that Muslim sentiment was not turned against the British by a rival power such as the Russians.¹³ Writing for the Rationalist Press Association, a similarly little-known author, Henry Crossfield, argued in the same vein, ultimately concluding that the Babis represented the greatest hope for reform in Islam:

this manifestation of the working in little-expected quarters of the same undying spirit which inspires the prophets, so to speak, and humanity of the West - the spirit of Ruskin, or of Emerson, or a John Stuart Mill...Have we not here the presage of an advance in civilization surpassing, perhaps, all previous human efforts, by the effective union of the seekers of truth and humanity alike of East and West in their warfare against the self-same foes to rationality and happiness the world over? Here, then, would seem the opportunity of the real liberal element in the English nation for an undertaking which shall indeed become "imperial" in its scope, in that it implies the availing of the most splendid traditions and material resources of the West, blended with the profounder Eastern insight into the mysteries of the Infinite, for a greater measure of practical and intellectual illumination than has ever yet been vouchsafed to man.¹⁴

Most typical of this "survey of Islam" genre was Amir 'Ali's *Spirit of Islam* (1890). In a chapter titled "The Political Divisions and Schisms of Islam", Amir 'Ali used the example

¹¹ Bosworth-Smith, *Mohammed and Mohammedanism*, 315-319.

¹² Thomas Patrick Hughes, *A Dictionary of Islam: Being a Cyclopaedia of the Doctrines, Rites, Ceremonies, and Customs, Together with the Technical and Theological Terms, of the Muhammadan Religion* (London: W. H. Allen & Co., 1885).

¹³ Corbet, *Mohammedanism and the British Empire*.

¹⁴ Henry Crossfield, *England and Islam* (London: Watts & Co., 1900), 47.

of Christian sectarian strife to highlight what he believed to be a corresponding divisive trend within Islam:

The Church of Mohammed, like the Church of Christ, has been rent by intestine divisions and strifes. Difference of opinion on abstract subjects, about which there cannot be any certitude in a finite existence, has always given rise to greater bitterness and a fiercer hostility, than ordinary differences on matters within the range of human cognition. The disputes respecting the nature of Christ deluged the earth with the blood of millions; the question of Freewill in man caused, if not the same amount of bloodshed, equal trouble in Islam. The claim to infallibility on the part of the Pontiffs of Rome convulsed Christendom to its core; the infallibility of the people and of the Fathers became in Islam the instrument for the destruction of precious lives.¹⁵

He proceeded to offer a complete breakdown of the multitude of theological, sectarian, and reformist trends he identified throughout the Islamic world, including a dissection of the many “extremist” Shi‘i tendencies, who contrasted with the “Shiahs proper”, the Twelvers,¹⁶ and a discussion of the competing theological approaches represented by the Usuli and Akhbari traditions, and the rational Mu‘tazila school, which he clearly identified most closely with:

Mutazalaim, is unquestionably the most rationalistic and liberal phase of Islam. In its liberalism, in its sympathy with all phases of human thought, its grand hopefulness and expansiveness, it represents the ideas of the philosophers of the House of Mohammed who reflected the thoughts of the Master.¹⁷

Making his through the Sunnis and Wahhabis, he arrived at the “Calvinists of Islam”, the Khawarij of the early decades of Islam,¹⁸ before finishing with Babism, which he described

¹⁵ Ameer Ali, *The Spirit of Islam*, 265.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 314-315.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 321.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 326.

as “the latest expression of an eclectic evolution growing out of the innate pantheism of the Iranian mind.”¹⁹

What characterized all these works was the dismissal of ‘orthodoxy’ as a potential agent for change within Islam. Rather, they were all united by an obsession with identifying the particular school of thought, sect, or movement which would spark the expected revival. As the first part of this chapter will show, this tendency to emphasize the novel heterodox tendencies encountered throughout the British Empire was reflected in the Census of India reports for northern India from 1891 onward, ultimately reflecting the privileged status accorded to the reformist tendency which was identified with Aligarh and Islamic modernism. The second, longer section will discuss John Gordon Lorimer’s *Gazetteer*. First, it will analyse how the genre of travel literature concerning Arabia, by far the most common category of sources used by Lorimer to construct a vision of religion in the Gulf region, painted a portrait of a uniquely sectarian landscape. It will finish with a brief discussion of British views of the Babi movement, before a lengthier examination of how British officialdom came to terms with the original Wahhabi movement of Arabia. By the 1880s, British surveys of Islam had become subject to the growing belief in reform as the ‘Future of Islam’. As such, they represented not simply a disinterested, statistical account of the empire’s Muslim population, but an expectation that the sectarian reality of Islam would produce a movement worthy of the West.

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¹⁹ Ibid, 328.

In 1900, the Office of the Census Commissioner for India posed the question of how to go about recording non-Christian sects in the upcoming census for all the superintendents of Census Operations across the country, providing three possible options. The first was to omit sect from the census count altogether; the second was to record only particular sects “by special inquiry through Supervisors”; while the final option proposed the recording of *all* sects, “but to abstract only those which are thought to be of special interest or importance.”²⁰ It was, as we might expect, the third option which won the day, a decision which helps us to understand the train of thought which produced the selections we will be discussing here. Scholarship concerning the Census of India, which was officially launched in 1871 and repeated every ten years until 1931, has tended to emphasize how the process of enumeration and official recognition had the effect of hardening identities based on caste and religion. As Bernard Cohn has noted, the census reached into all aspects of Indian social and family life, presenting illiterate villagers with a set of choices to make regarding the multitude of elements that made up their identity.²¹ Kenneth Jones has argued that this process acted as

a catalyst for change as it both described and altered its environment. The act of describing meant providing order to that which was described, and at the same time stimulating forces which would alter that order.²²

We have seen already how this impacted upon the construction of the Shi‘a and *Ahl-i-Hadis* as recognized, legitimately Islamic sects. What has been left largely unexplored has been the impact of these processes on British officialdom, and how they impacted upon, and came to reflect, the religious mosaic over which the British Empire exercised authority. What did

²⁰ Office of Census Commissioner for India, Simla, 26th May, no. 58. Home/Census /41/Part B. June 1900, NAI.

²¹ Cohn, *An anthropologist among the historians*, 227-228.

²² Kenneth W. Jones, “Religious Identity and the Indian Census,” in *The Census in British India: New Perspectives*, ed. N. Gerald Barrier (New Delhi: Manohar, 1981), 73-74. While some have argued that the project of enumeration was brought to India by the British, Peabody, “Cents, Sense, Census,” has provided much evidence for its origins in the pre-colonial era.

British officials understand about the nature of the mosaic that confronted them as they counted heads, refined terms and distinctions, and speculated on matters of theology and doctrine? This section will argue that the emphasis on heterodox and revivalist movements evidenced in the selections made in the Census Reports for northern India, and in particular the Punjab, suggests that the rhetoric of reform and the hopes associated with Aligarh, discussed in the previous chapter, found widespread favour in the official mind, as expressed through the Census of India.

As one of the great projects of knowledge in the service of empire, it is somewhat surprising to find that studies concerning imperial Britain's understanding of Islam have neglected to utilize the sections of the census reports detailing the religious beliefs of Indian subjects, and their various sectarian allegiances. These sections went far beyond simple enumeration; at their most comprehensive, they provided information regarding the historical background, progress, doctrines, and caste/ethnic composition of each sect, or at least those deemed "of special interest or importance." As the Census Commissioner E. A. Gait noted in 1911 with regard to the section on religion,

This is one of the chapters in which it has always been the practice to go beyond the bare requirements of the statistics and to give as much information of a general nature regarding the religious beliefs of the people as can be collected within the time available.²³

This was justified by the sheer extent of religious diversity in India. The report for Bombay of 1881 made the case, arguing that

Except in the semi-orientalised countries of the east of Europe, the enumeration of religions in that continent is reduced practically to the record of the strength of the

²³ E. A. Gait, 6th May 1911. Central India Agency/Census /86. 1911, NAI.

different sects only, and as such, has been strenuously and hitherto successfully opposed in two-thirds of the United Kingdom. In central Europe we find but two main religious divisions; towards the east a third begins to appear. In Bombay we have nine, excluding small offshoots.²⁴

The nature of this information, however, evolved from 1871 onward, as each report built on the previous one, and British officials developed their understanding of Islam and religion in general. By and large, the 1871 reports accounted only for Sunnis, Shi‘a, and Wahhabis, offering mundane chronologies of the historical events leading to the Sunni-Shi‘i schism, and very basic explanations of the rival doctrines. As we have seen, in 1881 the so-called *Nechari* sect began to receive attention in the Punjab, although elsewhere the situation remained mostly as it was in 1871, with the three well-known sects considered alongside a fourth, the Fara‘idi movement of Bengal.²⁵ 1891, however, witnessed an increase of interest in the Punjab and other regions, with the author of the 1891 report for the Punjab, E. D. Maclagen, lamenting that an opportunity had been missed in 1881, and that he therefore intended to “note briefly the main points known regarding the origin and peculiarities of most of the sects which are recorded.”²⁶ In terms of the Hindus, Maclagen emphasized the progress made by those he called “The Reformers”, citing the approving Professor J. C. Oman on the Arya Samaj:

I am inclined to think that the Arya Samaj is at most destined to form one inconsiderable sect amongst the innumerable sects into which Hinduism is divided. But even as a numerically inconsiderable Hindu sect, the Arya Samaj, composed as it is mostly of men who have received an English education, will probably be an important factor in the regeneration of India. The marked leaning of the society towards physical and natural science is a most hopeful augury of its intellectual future, whilst its open abandonment of idolatry and its public profession of monotheism cannot fail to have a healthy influence on religious opinion in India.²⁷

²⁴ Baines, *Imperial Census of 1881*, 45.

²⁵ In fact the Fara‘idis had been enumerated already in 1871 in Bengal. See H. *Report on the Census of Bengal 1872* (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1872), 136. On the Fara‘idis, see Muin-ud-din Ahmad Khan, *History of the Fara‘idi Movement in Bengal, 1818-1906* (Karachi: Pakistan Historical Society, 1965).

²⁶ Maclagan, *Census of India, 1891*, 100, para 40.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 179, para 119.

Turning to the Muslims, Maclagen identified three categories. First were the “sects”, who he compared to “those of the Christian Church” who differ on matters of doctrine. In this group he included the Sunnis, Shi‘a, Wahhabis, and *Necharis*. Next, he considered the Sufi orders, noting their division into “regular” or *Ba-shara*, “who follow the fundamental rules of Islam”, and the “irregular”, or *Be-shara*, who, “while calling themselves Musalmans, do not accommodate their lives to the principles of any religious creed.” Finally, he noted the prevalence of saint-worship among the Muslims, who were often joined by their Hindu neighbours during devotions.²⁸ Ultimately, however, Maclagen was once again left disappointed, as he noted that while 98% of Muslim census respondents had returned themselves as Sunni, “[we] have...lost almost all record of any kind of the numberless sects and subdivisions into which the Sunni persuasion is divided, and it is just regarding these that we are most ignorant and most in want of information.”²⁹ The error was corrected in the 1901 return, and it is here we begin to see an emphasis on reform emerge, and not solely in the Punjab. The immediate spark for this interest seems to have been the emergence of the Ahmadiyya movement in the Punjab. Led by their founder, the charismatic preacher Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, known popularly and in official discourse as “the Mirza of Qadian”, the Ahmadiyya appeared to believe that Ghulam Ahmad was the promised Mahdi, brought to earth to usher in the Last Days. The general Census of India report for 1901 noted,

It is also interesting to notice that there is at the present time in Northern India a religious teacher of the name of Ghulam Ahmed who claims to be the Mahdi or Messiah expected by Muhammadans and Christians alike, and has obtained a considerable number of followers in the United Provinces, the Punjab and Sind.³⁰

The Punjab report of the same year offered a lengthier description:

²⁸ *Ibid*, 187-193.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 187, para 130.

³⁰ H. H. Risley & E. A. Gait, *Census of India 1901, vol. 1: Part 1, Report* (Calcutta, 1903), 653.

The Ahmadiyahs: “the Mirza...advanced claims to be the Mahdi or Messiah, expected by Mohammadans and Christians alike. The sect however emphatically repudiates the doctrine that the Mahdi of Islam will be a warrior and relies on the Sahih Bokhari, the most authentic of the traditions which says ‘he shall wage no wars, but discontinue war for the sake of religion.’ In his voluminous writings the Mirza has combated the doctrine of Jihad and the sect is thus opposed to the extreme position of the Ahli-i-Hadis.³¹

The Bombay report noted that Ghulam Ahmad had been attempting to ensure a complete return for his followers in the census,³² and by the time of the 1911 census, the new sect was well known to British authorities in northern India. In 1913, a Government of India report claimed that

in 1890...with a view to the Census, the title of “Ahmadi” Muhammadans was adopted by him, and a notice issued to all his followers, enjoining their registration as members of the Ahmadiya sect. In this notice he claimed to have over 30,000 adherents; but according to the returns, which the Census Superintendent considered practically correct, their number in the Punjab was only 1,134.³³

It is reasonable to assume these numbers grew considerably in the twenty-years period which followed the 1891 count. The 1911 census recorded 18,695 Ahmadi in the Punjab, and the following year adherents of the movement were involved in a controversy in a Hong Kong mosque, where they were banned by the “Trustees of the Mosque and Guardians of the Muhammadan Cemetery.” Opposing the ban, the Colonial Secretary in Hong Kong, P. P. J. Woodhouse stated that in his experience, the Ahmadi professed “an advanced form of Muhammadanism with very broad-minded views,” with the Government of India affirming their right to use the mosque:

Though, no doubt, in the opinion of the orthodox they are heretics, the Ahmadi have a prescriptive right by reason of their recital of the Kalima, to use Muhammadan mosques as individuals, if not as a sect. Orthodox Muhammadans do not object to

³¹ Rose, *The Punjab, its feudatories*, 143, para 39.

³² R. E. Enthoven, *Census of India 1901, Volume IX: Bombay, part 1, report* (Bombay, 1902), 69.

³³ “Positions of Ahmadi in India.” Home/Political/46-47/Part A, November 1912, NAI.

individual Ahmadis entering the mosque and reciting their prayers when public worship is not in progress; but they would resent their attending in numbers or attempting to worship collectively according to their particular rites...any attempt to deprive them of the use of Muhammadan graveyards would be regarded in India as indefensible...so long as Ahmadis conduct themselves discreetly and inoffensively their exclusion from mosques and graveyards would not be countenanced, and the resolution adopted by the orthodox Muhammadan community at the general meeting in Hong Kong appears to go further than anything attempted by their co-religionists here.³⁴

The Ahmadis, however, tended to provoke a confused response from colonial authorities. Despite the movement's explicit rejection of militant jihad, noted in the Punjab report above, their international activism drew suspicion in the age of pan-Islam. A report penned in Simla at the end of the First World claimed that in the late nineteenth century, Ghulam Ahmad had been involved in a conspiracy targeting the Arya Samaj Hindu reformist movement in alliance some Wahhabi partners. Furthermore, their most notable activist of the time, Khwaja Kamal al-Din, was suspected of organizing pan-Islamic intrigue targeting from his base at the Woking Mosque near London. The report went on to outline the factors driving Simla's doubts:

The treatment of the Sect by the Government is a matter of delicacy, as the Sect in India is given to the expression of ultra loyal sentiments. The activities however of its members abroad afford some reason to think that its tendency is in the direction of anti-European feeling while the wide scope and rapidity of its development suggest that the purely religious precepts by which it is at present fostered, may in time give way to political activities.³⁵

Even so, the report noted that the Ahmadiyya had recently produced an English translation of the Qur'an, "with an elaborate commentary which interprets it on the lines of modern thought."³⁶ What the Ahmadi case shows us is that British interest in the prospects for reformative unity emerging from within Islam was a product not just of hope for the future,

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ "The Ahmadi Movement," 29th November 1918. FO 882/12.

³⁶ Ibid.

but also of the fear that such unity may be turned against British interests. The mysterious Ahmadis, though apparently condemned by their sectarian cousins as infidels, were by their nature suspected by some officials of conspiracy, while concurrently others interpreted them as a potentially reformative influence in Islam. In the meantime, an explosion of new sects had been recorded in the Punjab. In 1901, they were divided into Sunnis, Shi'a, and "Reformers", with the Sunnis subdivided into the *madhahib* schools and the Reformers subdivided into the *Ahl-i-Koran*, Ahmadi, *Ahl-i-Hadis*, and Muwahid. By this time, however, even obscure parochial movements were garnering enough attention from the Punjab authorities to merit a full page-length abstract on their tenets and activities. Once such movement consisted of the followers of a preacher named Ditte Shah, who was never heard of in the census before or after 1901. After a lengthy account of this "unorthodox" holy man's exploits in the Gujrat district, the report noted that while the number of his followers was said to amount to 2,000, just seven individuals returned themselves as a "Ditte Shahi" in the census return.³⁷ The *Ahl-i-Koran* movement³⁸ was perhaps more worthy of the attention it received, with the report noting that

They believe that Muhammad was not the Rasul (Messenger) but that the Messenger was the inspiration and that the Koran itself, as embodying the inspiration, is therefore the Rasul. As regards Hazrat Muhammad, they say that he only conveyed to the people, the Message of God contained in the words of the Koran. The sect thus has no belief in the Hadis and totally denies its validity.³⁹

Pride of place was, of course, accorded the Aligarh movement, described here as the "movement in favour of English education", which, despite the widespread orthodox opposition to its doctrines, "embraces men of great intelligence and resource." Already in

³⁷ Rose, *The Punjab, its feudatories*, 143, para 40.

³⁸ On which see Ali Usman Qasmi, *Questioning the Authority of the Past: The Ahl al-Qur'an Movements in the Punjab* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

³⁹ Rose, *The Punjab, its feudatories*, 170, para 241.

1891, MacLagan had turned to the writings of Amir ‘Ali in order to provide English readers with a description and categorization of the Wahhabis.⁴⁰ The 1911 Punjab census report marked the culmination of this focus on heterodoxy and reform, as three full pages were given over to the modernist poet and scholar Muhammad Iqbal in order to define for the English reader the essence of Islam. As we have seen, Iqbal was a student of Thomas Arnold, and by extension regarded as a product of the spirit of Aligarh. Teena Purohit has noted that Iqbal’s father was, for a time at least, an adherent of the Ahmadiyya, and Iqbal was suspected of harbouring heterodox tendencies throughout his life.⁴¹ The census report quoted at length from a lecture titled “Muslim Community”, in which Iqbal described how Islam laid the foundations for a unique nation in the modern world, one based not on ethnic, linguistic, caste, or economic interests and solidarity, but on faith alone:

The essential difference between the Muslim community and other communities of the world consists in our peculiar conception of nationality. It is not the unity of language or country or the identity of economic interests that constitutes the basic principle of our nationality. It is because we all believe in a certain view of the universe, and participate in the same historical tradition that we are members of the society founded by the Prophet of Islam...The point that I have tried to bring out...is that Islam has a far deeper significance for us than merely religious; it has a peculiarly national meaning, so that our communal life is unthinkable without a firm grasp of the Islamic principle. The idea of Islam is, so to speak, our eternal home or country wherein we live, move, and have our being. To us it is above everything else as England is above all to the Englishman and “Deutschland uber alles” to the German.⁴²

In the census report for the Punjab of 1911, Islam was defined by a modernist thinker associated with Aligarh as a spirit which could locate a place for the world’s Muslims alongside the so-called civilized nations of the modern world. In the forty years since the 1871 census reports had been published, the emphasis in British official discourse

⁴⁰ MacLagan, *Census of India 1891*, 191, para 134.

⁴¹ Teena Purohit, “Muhammad Iqbal, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, and the Accusation of Heresy”, *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 36, no. 2 (2006): 247.

⁴² Muhammad Iqbal, “Muslim Community,” quoted in Kaul, *Census of India*, 162, para 233.

concerning Islam had, in the Punjab at least, evolved a considerable distance from stale narratives of sectarian schism in seventh-century Arabia; rather, Islam was being presented as a “Moral and Political Ideal” whose object was to “free man from fear.”⁴³

But what about sectarianism? Having the last word, Iqbal made a plea for unity in the face of a sectarianism that had brought Islam to its knees:

Religious adventurers set up different sects and fraternities, every quarrelling with one another; and then there are castes and sub-castes like the Hindus! Surely we have out-Hindued the Hindu himself; we are suffering from a double caste system – the religious caste system, sectarianism, and the social caste system, which we have either learned or inherited from the Hindus. This is one of the quite ways in which conquered nations revenge themselves on their conquerors. Islam is one and indivisible; it brooks no distinctions in it. There are no Wahabis, Shias, Mirzais or Sunnis in Islam. Fight not for the interpretation of the truth, when the truth itself is in danger. Let all come forward and contribute their respective shares in the great toil of the nation. Let the idols of class-distinctions and sectarianism be smashed for ever; let the Mussalmans of the country be once more united, into a great vital whole.⁴⁴

As we shall see in the next chapter, the prospect of Muslims transcending their sectarian boundaries was one occupying British minds at that very moment, though perhaps not so much in India. For while the years 1891-1911 were, in some places, dominated by a concern with the potentially unifying appeal of the Ottoman sultan’s pan-Islamic call, the census reports of northern India in this period take little if any note of the pan-Islamic activism then drawing so much British attention in places like Cairo and Jidda. A sole, brief section from the census report for the North-Western Provinces and Oudh in 1901 noted the existence of the Nadwat al-‘Ulama’, ‘society of the learned’, describing it as “avowedly reactionary in its aims” and noting its program which aimed to “to obliterate all sectarian differences.”⁴⁵ It

⁴³ Muhammad Iqbal, “Islam as a Moral and Political Ideal.” Quoted in *ibid*, 164.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*.

⁴⁵ Burn, *Census of India, 1901*, 97-98, para 93.

was perhaps this last quality which earned the Nadwat the moniker of “Pan-Islamic Movement” in an intelligence report which circulated the previous year. Yet no mention was made of any international networks or conspiracies in which the society may have been involved in, even as serious activism on behalf of the Ottoman Empire was beginning to get underway in India.⁴⁶ For British officials on the ground in regions such as the Punjab, Sindh, and the North-Western/United Provinces, the influence of places like Istanbul and Mecca was felt far less than that of London.

* * * * *

This section will examine how British officials based in the Persian Gulf conceptualized Arabia and its hinterlands in terms of Islam. Imperial Britain’s engagement with Arabia has typically fallen under one of three historiographical categories. The first concerns the place of Arabia in the broader geostrategic dynamics concerning the Eastern Question and Great Game, a subject of increasing interest in British circles as the nineteenth century wore on and the geopolitical order largely defined by the Qajar-Ottoman rivalry began to give way in the face of an ever-growing perceived Russian-German influence on either side of the Shatt al-Arab.⁴⁷ The second considers Arabia as a political and, at the level of elite relations, cultural frontier of the Raj, a region to which the Government of India extended and exported indirect forms and styles of imperial rule.⁴⁸ The final theme focuses on Arabia as an imaginative land shaped by the unique Arab character of the region’s peoples, a character which lent the region a particular mystique which in turn helped to shape alternative political approaches as British control over the Eastern Mediterranean, Red Sea, and Persian Gulf

⁴⁶ “Pan-Islamic Movement,” Foreign /Secret-F/165. January 1900, NAI.

⁴⁷ See for example Yapp, “British Perceptions of the Russian Threat to India.”

⁴⁸ Rich, *The Invasions of the Gulf* and Onley, *The Arabian Frontier of the British Raj*.

became consolidated over the course of the First World War.⁴⁹ It is not the purpose of this section to take aim at and refute this last approach; rather, I would like to elaborate on it by suggesting that the place of Arabia in the British ‘official’ imagination cannot be fully understood without reference to Islam, while conversely the nature of Islam as it appeared to those British officials present in the Persian Gulf cannot be fully understood without reference to the special sectarian geography, history, politics, and ethnography of the region. This section will argue that British attempts to come to terms with the conceptual relationship between Arabia and Islam inevitably produced a sectarianized vision of the latter, which in turn helped forge new ideas in the official mind regarding Islam and the future of a region whose destiny was increasingly in question in the decades preceding the First World War. It will conclude by examining how the emphasis on reform discussed throughout the chapter had the effect of drawing British eyes in the Gulf region towards two major novel tendencies they identified there, Babism and Wahhabism.

The men who staffed the remote postings on this ‘frontier’ of the Raj were drawn from the same pool of recruits as that which staffed the administration of British India. They were overwhelmingly men with Indian experience or background,⁵⁰ and so shared the same concerns with hierarchical tribal, ethnic and religious classifications, and indeed the general ethnographic project of empire, which so animated their colleagues to the east. Yet the process of encountering, identifying, and ordering the regional sectarian groups and their characteristics proceeded along different lines to India. Officials based in Bushire and elsewhere in the Gulf found themselves in relatively isolated, lonely postings, reliant on a

⁴⁹ Kathryn Tidrick, *Heart-Beguiling Araby* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981) and Satia, *Spies in Arabia*.

⁵⁰ “Of the sixty-six Gulf Residents and Agents between 1858 and 1947, at least twenty-four had fathers who spent part of their careers in India...At least twenty more had close relatives who served there, such as a brother or uncle.” Rich, *The Invasions of the Gulf*, 54.

more limited version of the long-established ‘information orders’ into which the British in India had been able to tap in pursuit of intelligence of all kinds.⁵¹ While Muslim agents such as one Agha Muhammad Khalil could help furnish information regarding the various Shi‘i sects,⁵² as late as 1899 the Political Resident in Bushire Col. M. J. Meade was complaining to Simla that, as regards Najd, “Little is known of the present state of affairs in that part of Arabia and it would be useful if an officer could be deputed to travel there and obtain information of what is going on.”⁵³ Furthermore, the forms of indirect rule which characterised the establishment of British power in the Gulf did not encompass the kind of civil governance through which the British in India were forced to come to terms with the diversity of Islam in the subcontinent – areas such as law, education, and policing remained firmly in the hands of the local tribal elites on whom the preservation of British hegemony in the Gulf depend. This lack of direct, hands-on engagement with the day-to-day lives of the peoples of the Gulf region determined the nature of the sources available to Bushire when officials based there attempted to build a general ethnographic survey of the region. A read through the bibliography of sources listed by Lorimer in the *Gazetteer* reveals an overwhelming dependence on two categories of published material – works of historical scholarship of the type we have examined in chapters one and two, and the accounts of an assortment of travellers who had previously traversed parts of the region from Ottoman Europe to India. A third, less regularly utilized category, comprised translations of Arabic source material concerning the history and religious character of Arabia, while a fourth category consists of the intelligence reports of previous officials based in Bushire over the

⁵¹ Bayly, *Empire and Information*, 3 - 4. Onley, *The Arabian Frontier of the British Raj*, does show the extent to which British officials in the Gulf depended on local agents; yet the scale is minimal in comparison to India, and their impact on the shaping of projects such as the *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf* is rarely explicitly apparent – some notable exceptions are discussed in this chapter.

⁵² Lorimer, *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf vol. 1, part 2*, 2349. IOR/L/PS/20/C91/2, BL.

⁵³ Meade to Simla, Bushire, 3rd July 1889, 10 – 11, in “Persian Gulf Administration Report 1898–99”, no. 104. IOR/R/15/1/709, BL.

course of the preceding century who, in turn, often referred back to the two dominant categories mentioned above, thus helping to create a kind of repetitive self-referential cycle of information which could ultimately be traced back to a limited collection of scholarly sources and travel accounts.⁵⁴

This section will use the *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf* and its source material in order to examine how British officials stationed on the “frontier” of the Raj conceptualized the landscape in which they found themselves in terms of Islam. The religious character of the lands with which the Bushire Residency was concerned came to be perceived in the official mind as inextricably marked by sectarian schism; it was a sacred landscape from which aspiring overseers such as the British could draw ethical assessments with a view to shaping the region’s future. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Lorimer’s *Gazetteer*, perhaps the most outstanding example of knowledge in the service of empire produced by the pre-war British. A product of British India’s grand ethnographical project, the *Gazetteer* vastly outweighs its regional cousins, constituting “a voluminous geographical and historical compilation dealing with one of the peripheries of the British Indian Empire which is still used widely by historians as a source of information on the region.”⁵⁵ While much of the *Gazetteer* is concerned with geographical intelligence of potential strategic and military relevance, for which, as Nelida Fuccaro has noted, Lorimer depended almost wholly on “direct observation and human intelligence”,⁵⁶ those sections dedicated to historical

⁵⁴ A good example of this tendency is revealed in the “Précis of Nejd Affairs 1804-1904”, authored by one J. A. Saldanha and cited by Lorimer in the *Gazetteer*, which to a large degree directly quotes from sections of a memorandum on the Wahhabis of Arabia authored by the British Indian official and historian James Talboys Wheeler. See *Persian Gulf Gazetteer, Part I Historical and Political Materials*, Précis of Nejd [Najd] Affairs, 1804-1904, p. 1. IOR/R/15/1/725, BL. In turn, Wheeler’s memo, which is available to read in full in the *Mayo Papers*, cites the Arabian travel accounts of Gifford Palgrave, Johann Ludwig Burckhardt, and Carsten Niebuhr, as well as Sir William Muir’s *Life of Mahomet*. See “Memorandum on the Wahabees”, MS Add 7490-39-3, *Mayo Papers*, CAM.

⁵⁵ Fuccaro, “Knowledge at the service of the British Empire”, 17.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 24.

narratives for particular regions, and most pertinently, the entire section dedicated to the discussion of religion and sects in the region, relied on the four categories of source material discussed above. For this reason, it is necessary to examine some of the primary examples of this material before we consider the *Gazetteer* itself. We will focus first on the writings of a number of nineteenth century travellers cited in Lorimer's *Gazetteer*.⁵⁷ Travel accounts constitute by far the largest genre of secondary source material utilized in the *Gazetteer*, as the region increasingly opened up to European exploration and travel throughout the course of the century, enabling intrepid diplomats, amateur scholars, or simply interested civilians, to penetrate the scenes of the sectarian episodes they were familiar with through the writings of Gibbon and his scholarly successors. These sections will therefore take us from the Hijaz, across the Arabian deserts to "Turkish Arabia", before bringing us back to Najd, with the major theme being the ambiguous treatment of the Shi'a and Wahhabi sects and their doctrines and rituals as encountered across the region and reflected in their mutual relationship.

* * * * *

While the holy cities of the Hijaz had always exercised a powerful hold on the imagination of interested non-Muslims, it was Mecca which had always been the focus. Perceived as the cosmopolitan heart of Islam, it was increasingly identified with pan-Islamic intrigue and more generally as the epitome of the monolithic vision of a unified Islam as the century wore

⁵⁷ In some cases, such authors were actively consulted; for example Charles M. Doughty, described by Lorimer as "without doubt at once the greatest, the most exact, and the most sympathetic of all Central Arabian explorers", and D. G. Hogarth, not an Arabian traveller himself but author of the authoritative *Penetration of Arabia*, both examined early drafts of the section on Najd. See Lorimer, *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf*, vol. I, parts 1a & 1b, 1168. IOR/L/PS/20/C91/1, BL, and Lorimer, *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf*, vol. II, 1313. IOR/L/PS/20/C91/4, BL.

on; reflecting the former anxieties, Isabel Burton would write that “Mecca is not only a great centre of religion and commerce; it is also the prime source of political intrigues, the very nest where plans of conquest and schemes of revenge upon the infidel are hatched.”⁵⁸ In contrast, the description of Medina offered by her husband Sir Richard portrayed a city riven by sectarian ritual and tension.⁵⁹ A man of notoriously eclectic interests, Burton’s famous ‘pilgrimage’ took him to the ostensible centre of Islamic ‘orthodoxy’, yet his account betrays an unusual awareness of and fascination with the variety of beliefs, rituals and experiences on display at the major sites, an element of his narrative which seems to distinguish him from some of the later travellers of the Arabian interior such as Charles M. Doughty and the Blunts. Their wanderings with the Bedouin and Wahhabis seem to have consolidated a more rigid conception of division within Islam wherein the Arabs of the peninsula retained a uniquely authentic aura. The sectarian composition of the local population captivated Burton, who identified a number of ‘heretical’ sects living amidst “the fountain-heads of the faith”.⁶⁰ Medina was home to a number of mosques and shrines associated with Muhammad, the *Ahl al-Bayt*,⁶¹ and the *Sahabah*.⁶² Burton’s speculation on the actual location of Muhammad’s body during his visit to the *Masjid al-Nabawi* exhibits a level of distrust in standard Islamic explanations and an unwillingness to accept without reserve the claims of one or another ‘side’ to any particular disagreement unusual in British writers of the time,⁶³ while the origins, history, and even spiritual ranking of the Prophet’s mosque and adjacent

⁵⁸ Quoted in Mishra, *Pilgrimage, Politics, and Pestilence*, 120. For more on the view of Mecca and the Hajj as facilitators of anti-imperialist, pan-Islamic sentiment and plots, see Low, “Empire and the Hajj.”

⁵⁹ Perhaps the first British traveller of the nineteenth century to cross Arabia from the Gulf to the Red Sea coast (1819), G. Forster Sadlier, would note Medina as the location not only of Muhammad’s tomb, but also of “four others, sacred to Fatima, Omar, Aboobekar, and Ali” as well as two mosques administered by “two mooftees, the one of the Hanifeite, and the other of the Shafeite sect, to expound the laws and doctrines.” See Sadlier, Captain G. Forster, *Diary of a journey across Arabia from El Khatif in the Persian Gulf, to Yambo in the Red Sea, during the year 1819. (With a map.)*, 93. V 6499, BL.

⁶⁰ Burton, *Personal Narrative*, vol. 2, 151.

⁶¹ Muhammad’s family.

⁶² Muhammad’s companions.

⁶³ Burton, *Personal Narrative*, vol. 2, 51–53.

shrines are permeated with a sectarian significance which even distinguishes the four Sunni *madhahib* from each other.⁶⁴ Approaching the prophet's tomb with his guide, Burton became keenly aware of the demands this uniquely sectarian atmosphere placed on the 'heretical' pilgrim conducting the specific rituals associated with each site:

Shaykh Hamid...permitted me to draw near to the little window, called the Prophet's, and to look in. Here my proceedings were watched with suspicious eyes. The Persians have sometimes managed to pollute the part near Abubekr's and Omar's graves by tossing through the aperture what is externally a handsome shawl intended as a present for the tomb. After straining my eyes for a time I saw a curtain, or rather hangings, with three inscriptions in long gold letters, informing readers, that behind them lie Allah's Prophet and the two first Caliphs.⁶⁵

The spectre of the hapless Shi'i pilgrim - a Persian fish out of water in the Semitic heartland, haunted *en route* by fanatical Wahhabi 'guides' and the subject of suspicion and target of abuse at his destination, with only his doctrine of *taqiyya* for protection - became a common theme throughout the various travel accounts of the period. Burton had previously attracted attention before setting out for the Hijaz from Alexandria, where his initial disguise as an 'Ajami', or Persian, of the Qadiriyya Sufi order, drew a rebuke from a fellow pilgrim.⁶⁶ Having set sail from Suez, the bizarrely obstinate customs of the Shi'i pilgrims Burton encountered on the Red Sea voyage became the object of much contemptuous ridicule on the part of his fellow, 'orthodox', travellers:

They would not land at first, because they feared the Bedawin. They would not take water from the town people, because some of these were Christians. Moreover, they insisted upon making their own call to prayer, which heretical proceeding - it admits five extra words - our party, orthodox Moslems, would rather have died than have

⁶⁴ Ibid, 22.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 35. Charles M. Doughty, *Travels in Arabia Deserta*, 2 Vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1921), vol. 1, 68, reported that "Sometimes at Medina there has befallen certain imprudent and embittered Persians an extreme and incredible mischief; this is when they would spitefully defile Mohammed's sepulchre, in covertly letting fall dung upon it."

⁶⁶ Ibid, vol. 1, 45-46.

permitted...After we had eaten and drunk and smoked, we began to make merry; and the Persians, who, fearing to come on shore, had kept to their conveyance, appeared proper butts for the wit of some of our party: one of us stood up and pronounced the orthodox call to prayer, after which the rest joined in a polemical hymn, exalting the virtues and dignity of the three first Caliphs. Then, as general on such occasions, the matter was made personal by informing the Persians in a kind of rhyme sung by the Meccan gamins, that they were the “slippers of Ali and the dogs of Omar.”⁶⁷

These attitudes would be encountered and relayed to the reader in the Arabian travel accounts of William Gifford Palgrave, Charles M. Doughty, and Lady Anne Blunt; Palgrave in particular seems to have taken delight in describing the trials and tribulations of the Persian pilgrims he met crossing the peninsula on their way to the Hijaz, never shying away from deriding in various terms their beliefs and practices, and displaying a particular interest in the doctrine of *taqiyya*, described as “unmanly” by Sir John Malcolm.⁶⁸ Indeed, he seems to have taken some pride in uncovering the practitioners of this deceptive tenet, one of whom included a spy of the Amir Faysal, one ‘Abd al-Hamid, who professed to be a Hanafi of Balkh who had adopted Wahhabism after being shipwrecked in the Gulf:

Native not of Balkh but of Peshawur, not a Sonnee but a Shiya'ee of the Shiya'ees, no governor's son but of plebian extraction and worse than plebian morals, he had in a market squabble stabbed a man, and anticipated justice by flight...a true Shiya'ee at heart, he never failed to couple every uttered blessing on the Caliphs, the Sahhabah, and their living copies around him, with an inward curse on them all, and amused himself with the credulity of men whom he held in his heart for very fools and infidels...All this we learned subsequently through the Na'ib, who, himself a native of a cognate country, and in his earlier years a frequent traveller in the upper valley of the Indus, proved...too sharp for our Peshawuree, and entertained me with a Hindoostanee version of the whole affairs...I...drew out of Abd-al-Hameed...sufficient confirmation of whatever the Shirazee had told.⁶⁹

Anticipating some of the unfavourable contrasts drawn between the Shi‘a and their Wahhabi tormentors which would come to dominate the official reports of the Bushire Residency in

⁶⁷ Ibid, 198 and 216.

⁶⁸ Malcolm, *The History of Persia*, vol. 2, 262.

⁶⁹ William Gifford Palgrave, *Narrative of a Year's Journey through Central and Eastern Arabia (1862-63)*, 2 Vols (London: Macmillan and Co., 1865), vol. 1, 404–406.

later decades, Palgrave mocked the Persian habit of counting the beads of the *misbaha*, or rosary to Palgrave, as a “ridiculous custom...justly reprobated by the Wahhabees”,⁷⁰ while Doughty, in his distinctive verbiage, also noted their fastidiousness:

The Persian pilgrims...are civil and ingenious (so is not the Semitic nomad race); but of a cankered ingenuity in the religion, sinners against the world and their own souls. If but thy shadow pass over their dish it is polluted meat, they eat not of it, neither willingly eat they with any catholic Moslem, an observer of the Sunna (the Mohammedan Talmud or canonical tradition). A metal ewer for water hangs at all their saddles, with which they upon every occasion go superstitiously apart to perform certain loathsome washings.⁷¹

The Persians, according to a Hijazi encountered by Lady Anne Blunt, were “disliked as Persians as well as heretics, and often got beaten in Medina.”⁷² Yet while Shi‘i doctrines and rituals could draw ridicule and even moral condemnation,⁷³ particularly when contrasted with the rigid yet ‘rational’ Wahhabi tenets which, as we shall see, were becoming the focus of such interest in the ‘official mind’, the accounts of those who ventured into the perceived heart of the Shi‘i world in Turkish Arabia were typically less prone to such partiality, in some cases even reflecting a degree of sympathy for Shi‘ism which may, due to the position on Shi‘ism ultimately expressed by the Lorimer in the *Gazetteer*,⁷⁴ justify characterizing such accounts as dissident. From the 1870s onwards, the region drew a large number of travellers attempting to make sense of its geostrategic significance in light of the very real prospect of Ottoman collapse, to the extent that Sir Mark Sykes, writing in his *Dar-ul-Islam* in 1904, felt obliged to apologize to his readers for adding “yet another gallon to that deadly,

⁷⁰ Ibid, vol. 2, 107–108.

⁷¹ Doughty, *Travels in Arabia Deserta*, vol. 1, 60.

⁷² Lady Anne Blunt, *A Pilgrimage to Nejd, the Cradle of the Arab Race. A Visit to the Court of the Arab Emir, and “our Persian Campaign,”* 2 Vols (London: John Murray, 1881), vol. 2, 47.

⁷³ See for example Curzon, *Persia and the Persian Question*, vol. 1, 164–165, who, after witnessing the practice of *mutah*, or temporary marriage, in Mashhad, described that city as the most “immoral” in Asia.

⁷⁴ See chapter two.

dreary, weary, dismal ocean of literature which is composed of bad books of travel.”⁷⁵ The African explorer Verney Lovett Cameron’s contribution to the genre was justified generally by “[the] interest that is felt by all in the Eastern Question”,⁷⁶ and more specifically by the idea that

the course political affairs were taking in the East would, sooner or later, render the establishment of railway communication between the Persian Gulf (and ultimately our Indian possessions) and the coast of the Mediterranean more and more of an imperial necessity.⁷⁷

Strategic concerns aside, the holy provinces of lower Iraq drew increasing attention in British circles at this time due to imperial Britain’s growing interest in projecting herself as embodying the interests of her Muslim subjects, including of course the large number of Shi’i pilgrims of Indian origin who flocked to Najaf, Karbala, and the other shrine cities of the region each year.⁷⁸ For Colonel William Tweedie, political resident at Baghdad intermittently throughout the 1880s, strategic concerns and Indian Muslim interests were intertwined; on his visit to Najaf and Karbala in 1887, he would write that:

The Sultan clings as tenaciously to those two little desert towns as to his richest cities. Persia covets them as keenly as ever Christendom did the holy sepulchre. England, as disposing perhaps almost as many Muhammadan subjects as Shah and Sultan put together, is bound to look on them as not outside the circle of her protection.⁷⁹

⁷⁵ Mark Sykes, *Dar-ul-Islam: A Record of a Journey Through Ten of the Asiatic Provinces of Turkey* (London: Bickers & Son, 1904), 1.

⁷⁶ Verney Lovett Cameron, *Our Future Highway, 2 Vols* (London: MacMillan & Co., 1880), vol. 1, v.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁷⁸ On which for the nineteenth century, see Meir Litvak, *Shi’i Scholars of Nineteenth-Century Iraq* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

⁷⁹ Tweedie, *Turkish Arabia*, 41.

Furthermore, British involvement with the Oudh Bequest,⁸⁰ ensured a direct interest in the religious politics of the shrine cities, warranting discussion in the travel accounts of both Tweedie and Grattan Geary, editor of the *Bombay Gazette*, whose account would be repeatedly cited by Lorimer for the history of Turkish Arabia.⁸¹ The lowly reputation of the recipients of the Oudh Bequest, the mujtahid class of the shrine cities, was frequently acknowledged in the accounts under review here, and it is not unreasonable to speculate that it may have suffered further with the involvement of major Persian mujtahids in driving the anti-British sentiment which accompanied the Iranian Constitutional Revolution of 1905 and the Iraqi uprising of 1920.⁸² Yet our travellers frequently repudiate the image of the fanatical bigoted Shi'i cleric and populace, finding such reports, in the words of Geary, to be "gross exaggerations":⁸³

The fanaticism of the inhabitants of the holy cities, of which I had heard a good deal before setting out, was not made apparent either by word or sign. I was never once the object of even a discourteous stare in Kerbella or Nejed, or at any of the stopping-places. It is doubtful whether a native of Turkish Arabia could go through some of the remoter districts of England and say the same at the end of his journey.⁸⁴

⁸⁰ See chapter two.

⁸¹ Tweedie, *Turkish Arabia*, 43, and Grattan Geary, *Through Asiatic Turkey. Narrative of a Journey from Bombay to the Bosphorus, 2 Vols* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle, & Rivington, 1878), vol. 1, 168–169.

⁸² See for example Hardinge to Grey, 23rd December 1905, no. 1 in *Iran Political Diaries 1881 – 1965, Vol. 2: 1901 – 1905*, ed. Dr. R. M. Burrell (Cambridge: Archive Editions, 1997), 491–492, in which Hardinge opines that the "Shiah Church...combines with Papal pretensions a total lack of the discipline of the Papal system...[the Mujtahids] are determined opponents of all progress on modern lines, and the frequent advocates of intolerance and persecution in the case of Armenians, Jews, Babis, and other dissenters from the orthodox faith, whilst many of them are personally rapacious and corrupt."

⁸³ Geary, *Through Asiatic Turkey*, vol. 1, 165.

⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 196 – 197.

Meanwhile H. Swainson Cowper found in Karbala “little or no trace of the anti-Christian intolerance which the inhabitants are usually credited with”,⁸⁵ while granting special praise to his host in Hillah, one “Sayyid Hassan” who

greeted us with a cordiality which was certainly not feigned, in spite of the artificialness and formality of Persian manners in general...a kinder host we could not have found...In spite of his descent he is absolutely without any feelings of fanaticism towards Christians, and the great courtesy and hospitality he has shown to more than one English traveller shows the feelings he entertains towards our nation.⁸⁶

In searching for an explanation of the perceived growth in pro-British sentiment among the local populace, Geary cited the growing British involvement with the Shi‘i pilgrim traffic from India, noting the beneficial effects on Shi‘i feelings of the use made of the Oudh Bequest in helping to repatriate stranded destitute Indian Shi‘i pilgrims,⁸⁷ while Cowper speculated more generally on the favourable attitude of the Indian Shi‘a in regards to their British rulers, as well as the “the shrewd insight of the better-class Persians themselves, on whom the fact has dawned that Christian Europe and not Mohammedan Asia is now the true fountain-head of civilisation, progress, and of commerce itself.”⁸⁸ Here we can see the basis of the dissident British take on the potentialities of Islam in regards to the general progress of civilization and the role of Shi‘ism therein, further evidenced in Tweedie’s narrative and his adoption of the Shi‘i narrative of early Islamic polemics. Tweedie’s temperament can perhaps be discerned in his description of a meeting with the leading mujtahid of Najaf, one

⁸⁵ H. Swainson Cowper, *Through Turkish Arabia: A Journey from the Mediterranean to Bombay by the Euphrates and Tigris Valleys and the Persian Gulf* (London: W. H. Allen and Co., 1894), 367.

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 330. Malcolm and Curzon, who had both personally encountered some of the leading mujtahids of Iran during their time there, reported favourably on their impact on the delicate politics of that country, noting the mutual checks on power between the throne and the clergy which ensured that the despotic potential of each were balanced. See Malcolm, *The History of Persia*, vol. 2, 315–316 and Curzon, *Persia and the Persian Question*, vol. 1, 45–454.

⁸⁷ Geary, *Through Asiatic Turkey*, vol. 1, 169. The dilemma of destitute pilgrims left stranded at their destinations is a recurring theme in Slight, *The British Empire and the Hajj*.

⁸⁸ Cowper, *Through Turkish Arabia*, 264 – 265.

Sayid Muhammad, who “often called with several of his relatives and disciples. Intoned as he and his associates are with the real ideas and feelings of Asiatic people, their lives are at least useful as a protest against utilitarianism being made lord of all.”⁸⁹

* * * * *

This section will conclude by considering how the broad range of assumptions and value judgements on display throughout those sources manifested themselves in perhaps the most comprehensive and authoritative product of imperial Britain’s enthusiasm for geographic, historical, and ethnographic classification in the service of empire, the *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf*. The *Gazetteer* drew not only on the type of secondary material described in the preceding section, but also on the regular intelligence reports sent each year from Bushire to India, and a range of miscellaneous dispatches and memorandums which typically floated between the Gulf, Bombay, Simla, and Calcutta. In many cases specific sections of the annual administrative reports or historical précis would come to be deemed authoritative enough to comprise important components of the completed *Gazetteer*. An example of this practice is the account of Wahhabism authored by the political resident in the Gulf in 1880, Col. E. C. Ross, titled *Memoir on Najd*. Pre-Wahhabi Najd is described by Ross as riven by “chronic disorder and insecurity”, with only the arrival of the “reformer” Muhammad ibn ‘abd al-Wahhab bringing some semblance of peace and civility. Inevitably, Ross provided a brief bibliography of secondary sources on the Wahhabi movement which included the accounts of Palgrave and former political resident in the Gulf Sir Lewis Pelly,⁹⁰ while a later report on the al-Rashid rivals of the Saudis would cite Palgrave, the Blunts, and Doughty,

⁸⁹ Tweedie, *Turkish Arabia*, 46.

⁹⁰ Ross to Lyall, Bushire, 30th June 1880, no. 141, in “Report on the administration of the Persian Gulf Political Residency and Muskat Political Agency for the year 1879-80”, no. 171, IOR/V/23/37, BL.

whose work was described by Ross as “the standard English work on Arabia of modern times.”⁹¹

The *Précis of Turkish Arabia Affairs. 1801-1905*, compiled by J. A. Saldanha, provides a more extensive example of the impact of the secondary source material discussed previously on the shaping of historical narratives for the region. From the very beginning of the report, the character of Turkish Arabia is portrayed in sectarian terms; Abbasid Baghdad is described as the “Rome of the Sunni Mussulmans”, while Najaf, Karbala and Kadhimain are as “sacred” to the Shi‘a

as...Palestine [is]...to the Christians: such a province as this could not but be coveted land both of the Sunni and of the Shiah Mussalmans. It was thus after the fall of the Abbaside Caliphs in A. D. 1258 - a theatre of bloody wars between the Sunni Turks and Shiah Persians for several centuries.⁹²

The Wahhabi sack of Karbala of 1802, the more recent Turkish atrocities committed there in 1843, and the ongoing dispute over the demarcation of the Ottoman-Qajar frontier along the Shatt al-Arab bring the remainder of the historical narrative up to present times, linking the formative sectarian episodes of the classical age with the geostrategic status of the region in modern times, and in particular with the challenge presented to British imperial interests by the expansion of Russian influence in Iran, and the Iranian ‘ulama’s apparent opposition.⁹³

⁹¹ Ross to Durand, Bushire, 21st June 1889, no. 132, in “Persian Gulf Administration Report 1888–1889”, Appendix A to Part 1, 15. IOR/R/15/1/709, BL.

⁹² “Précis of Turkish Arabia Affairs. 1801-1905”, 1. IOR/L/PS/20/C236, BL. The same page cites Malcolm and Creasy among others.

⁹³ *Ibid*, 84.

The *Gazetteer* contains an appendix of “Religions and Sects of the Persian Gulf Region” in which Lorimer identified seven rival sects present on either coast of the Gulf – Sunnis, Shi‘a, Ibadhis, Wahhabis, Khojas, Zikris, and Babis – in each case noting the sources used in compiling the section and conceding that “among these the Wahhabis should perhaps, in strictness, be regarded as a branch of the Sunnis, and the Khojahs as a branch of the Shi'ahs.”⁹⁴ Source material relating to the Sunnis, Shi‘a and Wahhabis was copious; in addition to an array of secondary material, further information was gathered from a collection of intelligence reports produced by various agents, both British and Indian or Arab, at Lorimer’s behest. Such dispatches, however, occasionally presented difficulties. The section on the Sunnis of the region, centred around their supposed allegiance to the Naqib of Baghdad and head of the Qadiriyya Sufi order whose influence stretched across the Sunni Muslim world, depended heavily on a report on the Naqib drawn up by the Vice-Consul at Karbala Muhammad Hassan Mohsin. Noting the critical flavour of the report, which described the order’s founder ‘Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani in the most disparaging terms while describing his followers as “ignorant” and “foolish”, the political resident in Baghdad L. S. Newmarch explained that “[as] regards the tone of Muhammad Hassan's note it is perhaps necessary to say that he is a Shiah, though not of a bigoted kind, whereas the Nakib is, of course, a Sunni Muhammadan.”⁹⁵ More important for Lorimer, however, was the picture presented of the Naqib’s role as an agent of Ottoman influence among the Sunnis of Afghanistan and India – in recent years, according to Lorimer, “more than once reason was found for suspecting that Abdul Hamid, Sultan of Turkey, utilised the Naqib of Baghdad as a medium of communication with the Amir of Afghanistan.”⁹⁶

⁹⁴ Lorimer, *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf, vol. I, part II*, 2349 – 2350. IOR/L/PS/20/C91/2, BL.

⁹⁵ Foreign/Secret-E/150-153, February 1904, NAI.

⁹⁶ Lorimer, *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf, vol. I, part II*, 2372. IOR/L/PS/20/C91/2, BL.

The other sects - the Ibadhis, Khojas, Zikris, and Babis - garnered only limited attention; despite the extensive, long-standing British relationship with the Sultanate of Oman, sources available on the Ibadhi sect were limited to a translation of a medieval tract titled the *History of the Imams and Seyyids of Oman* provided by Arabic scholar and missionary George Percy Badger,⁹⁷ and an administrative report issued in 1881 by E. C. Ross,⁹⁸ while information on the Khojas was derived from reports on the infamous 1866 “Agha Khan case”.⁹⁹ Meanwhile the obscure Zikri sect of the Makran coast of Baluchistan was the subject of a report published in the Baluchistan District Gazetteer Series, in which it was stated that “[although] the Zikris call themselves Musalmans, their creed is full of superstitions and idolatrous beliefs, and the fact that they read the Koran appears to be the only link between them and orthodox Muhammadans.”¹⁰⁰ On the Babis, Lorimer turned to the writings of George Curzon and the dean of Iranian studies in Britain, Edward Granville Browne, both of whom had published accounts of their extensive travels throughout Iran. For these writers, Babism represented the fully flowered fusion of Islam with Iranian civilization, brought out by its encounter with the West. In *Persia and the Persian Question*, Curzon remarked upon the uniquely Iranian basis for the emergence of the new faith, noting the role of the “somewhat mystic and speculative character”¹⁰¹ of the Persians in providing a constituency for the early Babi preachers:

To those who know anything of the Persian character, so extraordinarily susceptible of religious influences as it is, it will be obvious to how many classes in that country the new creed makes successful appeal. The Sufis, or mystics, have long held that

⁹⁷ Salil Ibn Razik, *History of the Imams and Seyyids of Oman*, trans. George Percy Badger (London: The Hakluyt Society, 1870).

⁹⁸ Ross to Lyall, Bushire, 14th July 1881, ‘Note on the sect of Ibadhiyah of ‘Oman’, 45 – 51, no. 181. In “Report on the Administration of the Persian Gulf Political Residency and Muscat Political Agency for the Year 1880-81,” no. 144. IOR/V/23/40, BL.

⁹⁹ On which, see Chapter two.

¹⁰⁰ See R. Hughes-Buller, *Baluchistan District Gazetteer Series Vol. VII: Makran* (Bombay, 1906), 116–121.

¹⁰¹ Curzon, *Persia and the Persian Question Vol. 1*, 502.

there must always be a Pir, or Prophet, visible in the flesh, and are very easily absorbed into the Babi fold. Even the orthodox Mussulman, whose mind's eye has ever been turned in eager anticipation upon the vanished Imam, is amenable to the cogent reasoning, by which it is sought to prove that either the Bab, or Beha, is the Mahdi, according to all the predictions of the Koran and the traditions.¹⁰²

Curzon found Babism “alone among Oriental heresies” in embodying “ideas of amelioration and progress”;¹⁰³ it was a movement which represented “freedom of thought and purity of observance” and strove to achieve “the emancipation of women” while encompassing tenets of “Brotherly love, kindness to children, courtesy combined with dignity, sociability, hospitality, freedom from bigotry...[and] friendliness even to Christians.”¹⁰⁴ Meanwhile, Browne, who had the privilege of visiting in person the two rival successors to the Bab, Subh-i-Azal and Baha’ullah, found in the teachings of the latter, later to develop into the Baha’i religion, “a mighty force with...astonishing results...from which I believed (as I still believe) that results yet more wonderful might be expected in the future.”¹⁰⁵

In this dissident understanding of the potential of Islam to contribute to the progress of humanity generally understood in the ‘official mind’ to be embodied in Britain’s imperial mission, the spiritual passions that had characterized the history of religion in Iran had found fertile ground for development in the Shi‘i narrative of Islamic history, which when transformed by the impact of Western civilization during the nineteenth century produced a revolutionary creed with the potential to make genuine contributions to the advancement of humanity. This was not reform or revitalization from within Islam; rather, it was the forging

¹⁰² Ibid, 503 – 504.

¹⁰³ Ibid, 504.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 502.

¹⁰⁵ Edward G. Browne, *A Traveller's Narrative written to Illustrate The Episode of the Bab: Edited in the Original Persian, and Translated into English, with an Introduction and Explanatory Notes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1891), xxi.

of a novel pantheism from the heretical periphery of Islam through the medium of Persian civilization.

As we have seen, far more prevalent, and of far greater political import, was the growing tendency in the nineteenth century to seek the rejuvenation of Islam from within, through the identification of its nascent essence; for travellers exploring Arabia and officials stationed in the Persian Gulf, the Wahhabi movement represented the most recognizable manifestation of this potentiality, and became the greatest object of fascination in discussions of religion in the region, whatever its fluctuating fortunes as a political movement or its perceived strategic value in terms of the Eastern Question. It is by now rather banal to note the frequent analogy drawn by Victorian travellers between the Wahhabis of Arabia and the puritan movements of Reformed Christianity;¹⁰⁶ more interesting in terms of this chapter is the repeated characterization of the movement as ‘orthodox’ in contrast to its many sectarian rivals. In this conception, ‘orthodoxy’ could not have had any relation with simple majority status – in terms of number of adherents, the British frequently recognized the rather marginal position of the sect in relation to the mainstream forms of Sunnism they were familiar with in India. It also had no institutional basis in terms of a perceived ‘church’ or school of jurisprudence; like their Indian counterparts, the Arabian Wahhabis were understood to reject the authority of the four ‘orthodox’ *madhahib*. Instead, we shall find that when British writers on Wahhabism described the ‘orthodoxy’ of the sect, they were declaring Wahhabi doctrines to be ‘correct’ in terms of their relation to British understanding of the Qur’an and how they understood the spirit of ‘true religion’, a position evident in the historian Andrew Crichton’s account, in which he describes the Wahhabis as “perfectly orthodox” due to their rigid adherence to monotheism and rejection of all worldly forms of

¹⁰⁶ See Bonacina, *The Wahhabis seen through European Eyes*.

divine mediation, reflected most famously in their insistence on the basic mortality of Muhammad.¹⁰⁷ Even for a harsh critic such as Crichton, the introduction of such basic religious principles to primitive society was ultimately beneficial; Muhammad ibn ‘abd al-Wahhab’s mission in eighteenth century Najd

had a favourable effect on the people, by suppressing the infidel indifference which universally prevailed, and which has generally a more baneful effect on the morals of a nation than the decided acknowledgment even of a false religion.¹⁰⁸

Such assumptions permeated the accounts of the Wahhabi movement offered by the Arabian travellers Doughty, the Blunts, Johann Ludwig Burckhardt - whose *Notes on the Bedouins and Wahábys* (1831) remained the standard work on the movement for the rest of the century¹⁰⁹ - and others. These accounts typically accepted the standard Wahhabi critique of pre-Wahhabi Arabian society, noting Wahhabism’s civilizing effect on Arabian society, and frequently drawing parallels between the nature and progress of the movement and the history of early Islam. According to one of the earliest observers of the Wahhabis, the diplomat Sir Harford Jones Brydges, Ottoman officials in late eighteenth century Basra were seriously concerned by the theological challenge presented by the expansion of the Saudi polity in Arabia, viewing Wahhabi doctrines as “perfectly orthodox... when examined by the simple text of the Koran.”¹¹⁰ Brydges railed against Turkish-inspired charges that the Wahhabis were in fact propagating a new religion, citing Burckhardt throughout in arguing that

¹⁰⁷ Crichton, *The History of Arabia*, vol. 2, 255.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 256 – 257.

¹⁰⁹ John Lewis Burckhardt, *Notes on the Bedouins and Wahábys*, 2 Vols (London: H. Colburn and R. Bentley, 1831). D. G. Hogarth, *The Penetration of Arabia: A Record of the Development of Western Knowledge Concerning the Arabian Peninsula* (London: Lawrence and Bullen, 1904), 88 claimed that “no name of an Arabian explorer has been held in higher esteem than Burckhardt’s.”

¹¹⁰ Harford Jones Brydges, *An Account of the Transactions of His Majesty's Mission to the Court of Persia, 1807-11. to which is Appended a Brief History of the Wahauby*, 2 Vols (London: J. Bohn, 1834), Vol. 2, 9

not a single new precept was to be found in the Wahaby code; and when the Treatises on Religion written by Abdulwahaub himself were exposed and examined at Cairo, before and by the most learned oulemas of that city, they declared unanimously that if such were the opinions of the Wahaby, they themselves belonged altogether to that creed.¹¹¹

Ultimately, the victory of Muhammad ‘Ali over the first Saudi state was to be bemoaned;

for faulty as no doubt it [Wahhabism] was, time would have softened or corrected the worst of its faults; and I have no hesitation in saying, I prefer enthusiasm, or, if you will, fanaticism to atheism; the operations of the most imperfect laws, to the operations of anarchy; and that my imagination cannot figure to itself a more despicable, a more dangerous, a more cruel being to society, than an atheist Turk.¹¹²

It was Burckhardt who standardized the account of the Wahhabi movement, defining it in terms familiar to the educated nineteenth century reader, allowing that it “may be called the Protestantism or even Puritanism of the Mohammedans.”¹¹³ Concerned, like Brydges, to correct the notion that Wahhabism represented something novel, Burckhardt described the motives of ibn ‘abd al-Wahhab in terms familiar to anyone familiar with the story of Muhammad and early Islam:

Enthusiastically attached to the primitive doctrines of his religion, justly indignant at seeing those doctrines corrupted by the present Muselmans, and feeling, perhaps, no small degree of spite at having been treated with scorn in the Turkish towns, wherever he preached against disorders, Abd al Wahab...professed nothing but a desire to bring back his adherents to that state of religion, morals, and manners, which ,as he had learnt from the best historical and theological works of his nation, prevailed when Islam was first promulgated in Arabia...Not a single new precept was to be found in the Wahaby code...To describe, therefore, the Wahabys religion, would be to recapitulate the Muselman faith.¹¹⁴

¹¹¹ Ibid, 112 – 113.

¹¹² Ibid, 114.

¹¹³ Burckhardt, *Notes on the Bedouins and Wahábys Vol. 1*, 101 – 102.

¹¹⁴ Ibid, *Vol. 2*, 111 – 112.

The civilizing benefits of the Wahhabi preacher on Arabian society were, likewise, described in terms similar to those we have seen applied to the mission of Muhammad in the seventh century Hijaz:

In delivering his new doctrines to the Arabs, it cannot be denied that Abd el Wahab conferred on them a great blessing; nor was the form of government that ensued unfavourable to the interests and prosperity of the whole Arabian nation. Whether the commonly received doctrine considered as orthodox, or that of the Wahabys, should be pronounced the true Mohammedan religion, is, after all, a matter of little consequence; but it became important to suppress that infidel indifference which had pervaded all Arabia and a great part of Turkey...The merit, therefore, of the Wahabys, in my opinion, is not that they purified the existing religion, but that they made the Arab strictly observe the positive precepts of one certain religion; for although the Bedouins at all times devoutly worshipped the Divinity, yet the deistical principles alone could not be deemed sufficient to instruct a nation so wild and ungovernable in the practice of morality and justice.”¹¹⁵

The supposedly chaotic and paganistic status of pre-Wahhabi Najd was a theme accepted even by Palgrave, the most dramatically critical writer of the period, who noted the “utter anarchy” which defined relations among the Bedouin at the time of ibn ‘abd al-Wahhab’s preaching,¹¹⁶ while according to Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, prior to the preaching of the “Luther of Mahometanism” in Arabia, “Religion, except in its primitive Bedouin form, had disappeared from the inland districts, and only the Hejaz and Yemen were more than nominally Mahometan.”¹¹⁷ Meanwhile, Doughty’s narrative regularly drew attention to the law and order imposed by the Saudi dynasty, writing “The Wahaby rulers taught the Beduw to pray; they pacified the wilderness: the villages were delivered from factions; and the people instructed in letters.”¹¹⁸

¹¹⁵ Ibid, 116 – 117.

¹¹⁶ Palgrave, *Narrative of a Year's Journey Vol. 1*, 317.

¹¹⁷ Blunt, *A Pilgrimage to Nejd Vol. 1*, xiii – xiv.

¹¹⁸ Doughty, *Travels in Arabia Deserta Vol. 2*, 425.

In 1904 David George Hogarth, the future acting director of Cairo's wartime Arab Bureau, published *The Penetration of Arabia*, a study of the accounts of the various European travellers who had explored the Arabian Peninsula in the previous two centuries, and a book whose conclusions on Wahhabism epitomized the assumptions and value judgements described above. Surveying the moral degradation of eighteenth century Islam, Hogarth noted that "the Moslem world was about to be rudely revived by the same Arab race that had first inspired its life"; the Arabs' agent in this case would be a new prophet, Muhammad ibn 'abd al-Wahhab.¹¹⁹ For Hogarth, the Islamic world's inevitable reaction to decline in the face of non-Muslim expansion was to "return to the spirit in which the Prophet first prosecuted his mission", a trend imperfectly manifested in the Mahdi and Sanusi movements of distant North Africa;¹²⁰ yet in Hogarth's telling, the moral character of ibn 'abd al-Wahhab was elevated not only above that of the founders of those two orders, but above that of the prophet Muhammad himself:

the severest critic of Wahabism has never impugned the motives or the conduct of its founder. Unlike the earlier Prophet, the later seems never to have compromised for a moment with popular materialism in the interests of the establishment of his creed. He claimed neither divine inspiration nor prophetic dignity; still less did he aim at temporal power. He saw those whom he had persuaded force his conception of God and life on almost all the vast peninsula of Arabia; but he died at a patriarchal age, a teacher, not a king.¹²¹

Hogarth would go on to describe the Wahhabi sacking of Karbala in 1802 as the inauguration of "the reform of the holy places", describing the shrine city as "the wealthy and corrupt seat of Shiah idolatry".¹²² Whatever its faults – and Hogarth made sure to mark his acceptance

¹¹⁹ Hogarth, *The Penetration of Arabia*, 47.

¹²⁰ Ibid, 70 – 71.

¹²¹ Ibid, 74.

¹²² Ibid, 75 – 76.

of elements of Palgrave's critique¹²³ – the civilizing tendency within Wahhabism was undeniable:

Those Europeans who came in contact with the Wahabis in the great days of the movement unanimously recognised in their doctrine a true reform, and in the men, however rude and fanatical, devotees of better purpose and purer conduct than the mass of Moslems, or the official teachers and professors of Islam in its holiest and most official centres.¹²⁴

Lorimer's writings on the Wahhabi movement reflected an almost complete identification with the claim to Islamic authenticity made by that movement. The section on the 'History of Najd or Central Arabia' devoted much space to assuring the reader of the basic legitimacy, in terms not only of the literal reading of the Qur'an but also of the 'spirit' of Islam, of Wahhabi doctrine:

That the Wahhabi belief, if tried by the standard of the Quran and the best accredited traditions of Islam, will be found strictly orthodox seems to be generally admitted; and the difference between the true Wahhabi and the ordinary Muhammadan appears to be due to the declension of the latter from the spirit of his own religion rather than to any eccentricity on the part of the former...their opponents, conscious of the logical soundness of Wahhabi doctrine and exasperated by the pluralism of Wahhabi virtue, had recourse to calumnies and misrepresentations.¹²⁵

Full of praise for the austerity, piety, and "liberal" commercial policy of the Sa'udi Amir Sa'ud bin 'Abd al-'Aziz, the chapter contained a subsection titled "Civilising tendency at

¹²³ Palgrave's journey was the subject of much suspicion in official circles; see IOR/L/PS/6/547 PT 5, Coll 37/22, for the official correspondence on allegations made by Palgrave's guide that Palgrave travelled to Najd as a Muslim and intended to convert the Arabs to "another religion." The episode is a fine example of the lack of reliable information available to the Gulf officials on the state of affairs in the interior. Hogarth's account of Palgrave's journey and motives is highly critical, while retaining a certain degree of admiration for Palgrave's intrepidity. See *Ibid*, 247 – 249 and 297 – 303.

¹²⁴ *Ibid*, 78.

¹²⁵ Lorimer, *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf, vol. I, parts 1a & 1b*, 1052. IOR/L/PS/20/C91/1, BL.

home of the Wahhabi government” in which the virtues of Wahhabi delivered security were contrasted with the barbarous pre-Wahhabi status of Arabian society:

The tendency of the Wahhabi government in Najd, in comparison at least with the system of no-system which had preceded it, was essentially civilising. Among the principal objects kept in view were the establishment of law and order...¹²⁶

In a final section in the *Gazetteer's* chapter on the religious sects of the Persian Gulf, Lorimer added a short note on the subject of pan-Islam:

Pan-Islamic ideas seem to have obtained little or no hold in the countries of the Persian Gulf...In Persia, and wherever the people are Shi'ahs, the pretensions of the Sultan of Turkey to the leadership of the Muhammadan world are rejected and even ridiculed; and a somewhat similar obstacle is present in the 'Omani Sultanate, where the bulk of the population belong to the Ibadhi sect.¹²⁷

The one partial exception, he noted, concerned the distribution of pamphlets and proclamations issued by Muhammad Ahmad, the so-called Mahdi of the Sudan. Lorimer concluded that “[this] appears to be the only external religious movement that has made any stir in the Persian Gulf in recent years.”¹²⁸ What is noteworthy here is that Lorimer did not consider the Wahhabis in terms of pan-Islam. While they may have embodied the spirit of the early years of Islam to the closest degree, they apparently made no universalist claims to the loyalties of the world’s Muslims. Nowhere in the vast amount of information collected on the Wahhabis by British authorities in the Gulf and elsewhere do they describe the Sa‘udi Amirs challenging Ottoman authority by contesting the sultan’s title of *caliph*, nor do they ascribe any *Mahdist* tendencies to Najd. For a survey of that final element of Britain’s Islamic universe, it is necessary to cross the Red Sea to Cairo.

¹²⁶ Ibid, 1064.

¹²⁷ Lorimer, *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf*, vol. 1, part II. 2385. IOR/L/PS/20/C91/2, BL.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

6. Unity from division: The Mahdi, the caliph, and the limits of pan-Islam

In October 1876, Queen Victoria formally adopted the title *Kaisar-i-Hind*, ‘Empress of India’, as a means by which to define the nature of the authority she exercised over her Indian subjects. Prior to the uprisings of 1857-59, British rule in India had been characterized by official recognition of the authority of the Mughal dynasty. While the emperor was regarded as little more than a pensioner and referred to, perhaps contemptuously, as the “King of Delhi” in English, in legal terms the East India Company remained his vassal until the Government of India Act of August 1858, by which Britain assumed direct rule. As such, until its final days the Company continued to pay due deference to the imperial titles which symbolized his rule.¹ These comprised, at the time of the last emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar’s coronation in 1837, the following:

His Divine Highness, Caliph of the Age, Padshah as Glorious as Jamshed, He who is Surrounded by Hosts of Angels, Shadow of God, Refuge of Islam, Protector of the Mohammedan Religion, Offspring of the House of Timur, Greatest Emperor, Mightiest King of Kings, Emperor son of Emperor, Sultan son of Sultan.²

As Bernard Cohn has argued, the British believed that by acknowledging the emperor’s customary honorifics and appearing as his “protector”, they would assume his “nominal authority”.³ Thus, while the emperor’s trial and subsequent exile in the aftermath of the uprisings helped resolve the lingering ambiguities surrounding the formalities of the British administration of India, they also created a symbolic vacuum. Denied the legitimacy associated with the illustrious figure of the emperor, the British were forced to reconsider

¹ Bernard Cohn, “Representing Authority in Victorian India”, in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 174 and William Dalrymple, *The Last Mughal: The Fall of a Dynasty, Delhi, 1857* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), 432.

² Dalrymple, *The Last Mughal*, 21.

³ Cohn, “Representing Authority”, 170.

the exact nature of their relationship with their diverse subjects, and how best to express it. In this task they found it useful to appropriate a collection of “royal” titles which they conferred on the various pro-British Indian elites in order to construct a hierarchy of authority with Queen Victoria at the apex.⁴ Discomforted by the unstable conditions of the post-Mutiny era, however, British authorities delayed the assumption of an appropriate regal title for a more suitable moment.⁵

It was in this context that, in 1876, Gottlieb Wilhelm Leitner of the Government College in Lahore set about formulating a fitting title on behalf of the British monarch, now the undisputed sovereign over British India. Leitner’s primary concern was to uncover a title familiar to the Indian public which would be worthy, in their eyes, of the Queen’s unique worldly status. Considering a number of options with historical precedent, he found that the authoritative weight of many of the most commonly known titles had been diluted by their frequent use. Thus, according to George Birdwood, “In India the Queen has hitherto been officially designated *Malika*; but every owner of a plot of ground in India is *Malik*...or *Malika*.”⁶ Furthermore, the traditional titles associated with Muslim rule in India would not suffice:

Sultan is a delegated title, and for that reason would never do...*Shahinshah*, or *Padishah* would have done, but that the sovereigns of England are more than the Emperors of Delhi ever were, or the Persian King of Kings. These titles have become too common-place...how the noblest titles in India have, through the Oriental tendency to exaggeration, become depraved in their significance, and often, indeed, deprived of all importance, is well shown in the instances of the once proud titles of “Caliph,” now used for “a tailor,” and of *Mehtar*, for “a scavenger,” or “sweeper.”⁷

⁴ Ibid, 179-181.

⁵ Ibid, 184.

⁶ *The Athenaeum*, 11th November 1876, quoted in G. W. Leitner, *Kaisar-i-Hind: The Only Appropriate Translation of the Title of Empress of India* (Lahore: I. P. O. Press, 1876), 9.

⁷ Ibid.

With this in mind, Leitner determined that *Kaisar* alone remained standing as “one of the most formidable terms of empire that the natives know...striking, intelligible, and yet sanctioned by ancient flattery as an epithet for many a Muhammadan ruler.”⁸ This last quality was deemed particularly critical. For while Birdwood worried about a new title that would be “too exclusively identified with Mohammedanism”,⁹ both he and Leitner were clearly concerned that it should evoke the immemorial authority of the great empires which had straddled Eurasia from antiquity to the present-day, one of which survived in the form of the Ottoman Empire, whose ruler took the title (among many others) *Kaisar-i-Rum*.¹⁰ Criticizing the proposed title, the orientalist Robert Caldwell argued that *Kaisar* would only be familiar to speakers of ‘Hindustani’ or those who come from “Mecca or Cabul”, and unknown to the inhabitants of central and southern India.¹¹

Whether by design or otherwise, then, the adoption of *Kaisar-i-Hind* appeared to represent, first and foremost, an attempt at co-opting the loyalties of British India’s Muslim population, those subjects of the British Empire for whom the formal end of Mughal authority in 1858 was commonly regarded as the most traumatic. Yet if Muslims were the chief target of this appeal to authority, several developments in the years following 1876 would render *Kaisar-i-Hind* insufficient for the purpose. The expansion of British authority in regions such as the Nile Valley and Persian Gulf brought an increasing number of non-Indian Muslims into the British imperial fold in these years, often at Ottoman expense. While in many cases, most notably Egypt, the British were content to retain the façade of Ottoman authority, the

⁸ Ibid, 3-4.

⁹ Ibid, 9.

¹⁰ Ibid, 6 and 10.

¹¹ *The Athenaeum*, 25th November 1876. Caldwell further complained that the title of *Kaisar-i-Hind* “is ill-judged, and even absurd. It appears only too likely that we are about to make ourselves the laughing-stock of millions of our Eastern subjects”, while on 9th December Mir Aulad ‘Ali of Trinity College Dublin remarked that “in the annals of history, there will not be found such a strange compound as that suggested by Dr. Leitner, and highly approved of by Dr. Birdwood.”

traditionally solid foundations of the British-Ottoman alliance bore an obvious cost which helped contribute to the undermining of the Ottoman Empire as a whole. In these years the prospect of Ottoman collapse was perceived to be a very real possibility, and the uncertainty surrounding the future of the last great sovereign Islamic polity provoked questions concerning the allegiances of both Ottoman Muslims and those Muslims who had become subject to non-Muslim rule over the course of the preceding century.

For Sultan ‘Abd al-Hamid II, the answer to these questions lay in reasserting the Ottoman claim to the caliphate and evoking his universal authority as caliph. In strengthening the sentimental and spiritual bonds linking Istanbul to the Muslims of his empire and beyond, the sultan aimed to guard against further European encroachment on Ottoman lands by securing the loyalties of Ottoman Muslims and threatening to undermine the authority of the European powers over their own Muslim subjects. This was the call of what came to be referred to as ‘Pan-Islam’,¹² the subject of much alarmist European diplomatic correspondence in the decades preceding the First World War¹³ as Russian, French, Dutch, and British officials sought to assess the weight of the authority embodied in the title ‘caliph’ and the strength of the Ottoman claim to it. What was the nature of the caliph’s claim to the loyalties of non-Ottoman Muslims, in India and elsewhere? Was the Ottoman claim to the caliphate itself legitimate or ‘orthodox’ in Islamic terms? Did a legitimate caliph have the

¹² Landau, *The Politics of Pan-Islam*, 5 describes it as “the corpus of writings (and speeches) which focuses on the importance of overall Muslim unity – less from a religious standpoint and with greater emphasis on political or economic aspects – and proposes ways and means to achieve this end.” Landau, 5-6, argues that all such movements have recognized the need for a strong central authority headed by the caliph, and ultimately the establishment of a state comprising all the world’s Muslims. See also Kemal H. Karpat, *The Politicization of Islam: Reconstructing Identity, State, Faith, and Community in the Late Ottoman State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001). Martin Kramer, *Islam Assembled: The Advent of the Muslim Congresses* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), explores pan-Islam in the post-Ottoman context.

¹³ Fears of a general Muslim religious and political revival in Ottoman lands manifested as early as 1873, when the Foreign Office issued a request for information from diplomatic missions across the empire. See Marwan Buheiry, “Islam and the Foreign Office: An Investigation of Religious and Political Revival in 1873,” in *Studia Arabica Et Islamica: Festschrift for Iḥsān ‘Abbās on His Sixtieth Birthday*, ed. Wadād al-Qāḍī (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1981), 47-59.

potential to unite Muslim sentiment from French North Africa to the Dutch East Indies behind a common cause? And if so, how might Britain counter or manipulate pan-Islam to her advantage? These were questions which plagued the minds of British officials already predisposed to doubts concerning the loyalty of their Muslim subjects and, as we have seen, convinced of the symbolic value of lofty imperial titles with echoes of the exalted Islamic past.

How then are we to reconcile the spectre of a united Muslim menace, which clearly reflected deep-rooted anxieties afflicting British colonial discourses, with the fragmented, sectarian, and contested Islamic universe which we have seen constructed in the official mind in the previous chapters? This chapter will attempt to show how these two seemingly competing conceptions of the Muslim world coexisted in British official thought. For if the British ordered their fragmented Islamic universe according to hierarchies of orthodoxy and heterodoxy, then the possibility always existed that a movement or figure may emerge from the mosaic of sectarian and reformist trends to claim and successfully fulfil the mantle of orthodoxy. Consequently, the rhetoric of reform which we have considered in previous chapters became tied up in anxieties regarding Muslim sedition and resistance. We have previously seen how British surveys of Muslim sects and reformist movements in India and the Persian Gulf ultimately evaluated them as too particularist or heterodox to satisfy the universalist status represented by titles such as 'caliph' and 'kaiser'. In contrast, this chapter will examine how British authorities in Egypt responded to the explicitly universalist claims surrounding Muhammad Ahmad of the Sudan, Muhammad al-Mahdi al-Sanusi of the eastern Sahara, and the aforementioned Sultan 'Abd al-Hamid II. As individuals who dominated the respective movements and institutions which they oversaw, their significance

appeared to confirm Carlyle's theory on the Great Man as the primary agent of historical change, for whom "their religion...was the great fact about them."¹⁴

Being a product of Ottoman vulnerability rather than strength, the sultan's appeal to pan-Islamic authority did not go uncontested, and the British took a special interest in credible rival claimants to that appeal. In particular, the title of *Mahdi* seemed to suggest a figure whose religious significance would transcend the worldly authority of the caliph. The first and second parts of this chapter will analyse how British officials based in Egypt judged the claims of Muhammad Ahmad and al-Sanusi to this title respectively. They will consider in turn how the revivalist programs led by these men were measured in terms of their orthodoxy and their potential to succeed, before discussing how the British viewed their relations with the Turkish empire and the threats and temptations consequently posed. For while much of the literature on British responses to pan-Islam has emphasized the dangers it was perceived to hold in terms of the stability of Britain's Muslim empire, and the measures subsequently implemented in order to counter it,¹⁵ this chapter will argue that, concurrently, pan-Islam presented opportunities for British officials seeking to undermine Ottoman legitimacy and bolster imperial Britain's own growing claim to an authentic Islamic identity. In engaging with Mahdist Sudan and the Sanusi *tariqa* we see British officials pondering if, perhaps, an alternative to Ottoman pre-eminence in the Islamic world could be discovered from among the dozens of sectarian and reformist movements of the late nineteenth century, and succeed in partnership with Britain's imperial mission.

¹⁴ Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic*, 4-5.

¹⁵ See especially Özcan, *Pan-Islamism*, and John Ferris, "'The Internationalism of Islam': The British Perception of a Muslim Menace, 1840-1951", *Intelligence and National Security* 24, no. 1 (2009): 57-77.

The third part of this chapter will consider British responses to the Ottoman claim to the caliphate. It will show how, from a mid-century context in which they sought to use the Ottoman alliance in order to manipulate the prestige and authority associated with the caliphate for their own ends, the British sought means to counter that authority as the alliance began to wilt from the mid-1870s onward. As fears grew regarding the growing hold the sultan appeared to exercise over Indian Muslim sentiment, officials in Cairo and elsewhere began to question the legitimacy of the Ottoman claim in Islamic terms, seeking alternative figures with pro-British inclinations. At the same time, the rhetoric of sectarianism and the construction of a fragmented Islamic universe were employed in order to reassure anxious officials that, in fact, the prospective menace of Muslim unity was nothing more than an illusion.

This chapter will be based primarily on sources originating from British-occupied Egypt and adjacent diplomatic missions. Aware of her status among Muslims in the region as the “gate to the Kaaba”,¹⁶ officials found Egypt a conceptual Islamic crossroads where the proximity to the perceived political and spiritual centres of Islam, Istanbul and Mecca, was felt more sharply than in India. As such, the threats and temptations of pan-Islam carried considerably more urgency, particularly as the remoter areas to the south and west of Egypt were perceived to be teeming with potent revivalist potential. From Cairo, the shadows of the mysterious claimants to the role of the Islamic *Mahdi* active in the distant Sudan and inaccessible Western Desert were magnified out of scale, their real significance amplified by the uncertain, contested nature of what little information could be gleaned. At this Egyptian crossroads, where *mahdis* competed with caliphs and *ashrāf*¹⁷ within the

¹⁶ Dufferin to Granville, 4th August 1882, no. 106. FO 407/22, NA.

¹⁷ The class of descendents of the Prophet Muhammad who, for example, administered the Hijaz on behalf of Istanbul.

framework of British imperial dominance, British officials sensed more than anywhere else that the destiny of the Islamic universe which they had constructed and aimed to revive was in their hands.

* * * * *

In July 1910, British authorities in Ramleh¹⁸ received two reports concerning the activities of a man named Ahmad al-Haddad in the rural outskirts of Tanta, in the Nile Delta. Reportedly a graduate of al-Azhar, al-Haddad was known locally as a pious but eccentric holy man who had recently returned from Mecca. On arrival at his home village, he promptly declared himself to be the Mahdi and gathered a following of roughly forty armed disciples ready to head back to the Hijaz to announce his mission. The episode was ultimately regarded as insignificant. Yet as deputy consul-general Sir Milne Cheetham noted, the aspiring Mahdi had drawn a considerable number of adherents to his cause, enough to suggest a heightened sense of religious fervour in the region and so justify British interest.¹⁹ Indeed, in the decades preceding the First World War, British authorities across the empire maintained a keen interest in any news relating to the appearance and preaching of a charismatic Muslim figure making eschatological claims.²⁰ Just weeks following the reports on al-Haddad, Ramleh was notified of the presence of another aspiring Mahdi in the Sudanese region of Berber.²¹ Articles on such men were published relatively regularly in the

¹⁸ Not to be confused with the Palestinian city of Ramla, Ramleh, or Al-Raml, was a neighbourhood to the east of Alexandria which hosted the British consul-general in the summer months.

¹⁹ Cheetham to Grey, 9th and 10th July 1910, nos. 96 and 99. FO 407/175, NA.

²⁰ The phenomenon of *Mahdism* was also a topic of concern for French and German colonial authorities – see Christopher Harrison, *France and Islam in West Africa, 1860 – 1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 42, and Rebekka Habermas, “Debates on Islam in Imperial Germany,” in *Islam and the European Empires*, ed. David Motadel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 246.

²¹ Cheetham to Grey, 30th August 1910, no. 113. FO 407/175, NA.

vernacular newspapers of northern India, dutifully noted, translated, and archived by the relevant authorities in the region. They reported on the preaching of characters such as Sayyid Hussein of Cawnpore District, who claimed to have received direct word from God confirming his claim to be the expected Mahdi;²² and Sayyid Ahmad of Farrukhabad, who won an interview with the Commissioner in order to explain his mission to prepare people for the impending Day of Judgement.²³

By and large, authorities tended to dismiss these claims as the ravings of local madmen. Al-Haddad was described by Cheetham as “obviously mad”, while the District Superintendent of Police in Farrukhabad referred to Sayyid Ahmad as a “maniac”. In certain cases, however, the success and potential universality of the claims being made drew more serious attention. As we have seen in the previous chapter, British authorities were intrigued by the Ahmadi and Babi movements, both launched by founders claiming to be the promised Mahdi. Yet they were ultimately determined to be too heterodox to impress the minds of the Muslim masses. What really concerned the British when it came to the question of the Mahdi was the prospect of the appearance of a claimant with just cause to be regarded as legitimate according to the orthodox Islamic tradition, and so potentially challenge the established authorities, whether British or Turkish. According to Jamal al-din al-Afghani, Muslims across the world were anxiously waiting in expectation for the arrival of the promised figure.²⁴ The frequent skirmishes British authorities had with charismatic figures leading resistance to the consolidation and expansion of British imperial rule²⁵ helped fuel the idea

²² *Akhbar-i-Alam*, Meerut, 13th August 1895, UPPNR. IOR/L/R/5/72, BL.

²³ *Police News*, Meerut, 16th January 1899, UPPNR. IOR/L/R/5/76, BL.

²⁴ “[Every] Muslim keeps his eyes and ears open in expectation - to the East, West, North, and South - to see from what corner of the earth the sage and renewer will appear and will reform the minds and souls of the Muslims.” From “Commentary on the Commentator”, quoted in Keddie, *Sayyid Jamāl Ad-Dīn “Al-Afghānī”*, 169.

²⁵ See Benjamin D Hopkins, “Islam and Resistance in the British Empire”, in *Islam and the European Empires*, ed. David Motadel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 150.

that any broad movement launched on the basis of a generally accepted claim to be the Mahdi would necessarily stand in opposition to British rule in Muslim lands. Assessing such claims, however, required determining who exactly the Mahdi was and what was expected of him.

Regarded by Muslims as the “rightly-guided one” who will usher in an age of justice and righteousness in religion as the Day of Judgement approaches²⁶, the Mahdi’s appearance has been the subject of much speculation across Islam’s sectarian divisions. Yet while the canonical collections of Sunni *hadith* provide a “solid basis for the popular belief in the Mahdi”,²⁷ the mainstream Sunni scholarly tradition has tended to avoid elaborating on or drawing hard conclusions regarding him,²⁸ and the question of who exactly the promised man will be has been left vague beyond some general thoughts regarding his descent. The Mahdi has been more strongly and explicitly associated with the Shi‘i tradition, where among the Twelvers he is identified with a specific figure, the twelfth Imam Muhammad al-Mahdi, who went into occultation in the middle of the tenth century and is expected to emerge as the Last Day approaches.²⁹ The ways in which these sectarian distinctions were expressed or understood in the popular sense in the nineteenth century is unclear; however, given what we have learned in chapters one and two regarding the ambiguous nature of sectarian consciousness in rural north India, it is reasonable to suggest that much of the rural Muslim population of the British Empire was not acutely concerned with the alternative traditions. British observers, on the other hand, could fall back on sources such as Hughes’s *Dictionary of Islam*, which clearly outlined the existence of two rival interpretations of the

²⁶ *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Vol. 5-3 (Leiden: Brill, 1986), 1230-1231.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 1234.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 1235.

²⁹ Najam Haider, *Shi‘i Islam: An Introduction* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 95-96.

coming of the Mahdi.³⁰ They subsequently attempted to categorize the Mahdi-inspired episodes and movements they encountered accordingly, and in a broader sense to measure such movements in terms of their preconceived ideas on what constituted the most legitimate, orthodox Islamic understanding of the Mahdi. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the case of Muhammad Ahmad of the Sudan, the most consequential pretender of the period.

In the early nineteenth century, Muhammad ‘Ali of Egypt launched a modernization program which eventually encompassed the Sudan and was subsequently continued and expanded by his grandson Isma‘il under the auspices of Istanbul. By 1880 the Turco-Egyptian regime, known as the *Turkiyya*, had extended up the Nile Valley to the equator, and west to Darfur, and with European support had launched a ‘civilizing mission’ with the aim of centralizing rule, implementing effective taxation, banning the slave trade, and encouraging urbanization.³¹ Breaking the power of the traditional religious elites, who were typically associated with one of the major Sufi orders which dominated devotional life in the country, was considered key to achieving success. To that end, foreign experts were imported in order to administer the modernizing state, while Azhar-trained ‘ulama’ attempted to impose the ‘orthodoxy’ of the Maliki *madhhab* across the country at the expense of the orders.³² While the major Khatmiyya *tariqa* adapted to the new regime,³³ opposition soon emerged from the other orders, reflecting widespread unrest at the new measures and Isma‘il’s increasingly autocratic rule.³⁴ On the 29th of June 1881, Muhammad Ahmad, a sufi shaykh of the Sammaniyya order, announced his mission, proclaiming

³⁰ Hughes, *Dictionary of Islam*, 305.

³¹ Gabriel R. Warburg, *Sudan: Islam, Sectarianism, and Politics since the Mahdiyya* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002), 20-24.

³² *Ibid*, 20.

³³ *Ibid*, 8-9.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 27.

himself to be the promised Mahdi. Large swathes of the country began to fall to his rebel forces, triggering Egyptian interventions which, following the occupation of 1882, became the responsibility of the British authorities in Cairo. Yet the movement established by Muhammad Ahmad survived, most famously defeating the attempt led by Major-General Charles Gordon in 1884-85 to reassert Egyptian control over the country. The Mahdi's death just months following the capture of Khartoum and death of Gordon left the reigns of the newly consolidated Mahdist state in the hands of his designated successor (*khalifa*) 'Abd Allah ibn Muhammad, ultimately enduring until the Anglo-Egyptian reconquest of 1899. Mere survival within the confines of the Sudan was not, however, the limit of Muhammad Ahmad's ambition. Just before his death, Ahmad sent letters demanding allegiance from Muslim authorities from Morocco to Ethiopia, and even appointed a governor of the Hijaz.³⁵ Those who rejected his claims were condemned as unbelievers.³⁶ The universal nature of his appeal to Islamic legitimacy was symbolized in his organization of the movement to reflect that of the Prophet Muhammad's, as he appointed four *khalifas* in imitation of the *Rashidun*.³⁷

While contemporary scholarship has come to regard the Mahdist movement as just one regional expression of what was a coherent and comprehensible reformist impulse recognizably rooted in the Sunni Islamic tradition,³⁸ nineteenth-century British observers

³⁵ Ibid, 45.

³⁶ Ibid, 31.

³⁷ Ibid, 30-31.

³⁸ For example, both Warburg, *Sudan: Islam, Sectarianism, and Politics*, 40-41, and John O. Voll, "The Sudanese Mahdi: Frontier Fundamentalist", *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 10, no. 2 (May, 1979): 155-157, draw comparisons with the Wahhabi and Sanusi revivalist movements, noting their common rejection of *taqlid*, insistence on the necessity for *ijtihad*, and campaigns to cleanse Islamic society of innovation and corruption. Voll, 159-160, argues that "The movement of the Mahdiyya in the Sudan...fits clearly within the fundamentalist tradition of Islam...The difference among the various fundamentalist movements becomes primarily a difference in leadership styles or in local contexts in which the movements develop. One may conclude, then, that there is a fundamentalist style of Islamic experience that can be defined in terms of immanence-transcendence, unity-diversity, and openness-authenticity tensions within

were less certain of Muhammad Ahmad's credentials and claims to the mantle of true orthodoxy. Some struggled to identify the particular sectarian vision of the Mahdist mission he claimed to fulfil. Reginald Wingate, whose long experience in the Sudan³⁹ earned him a reputation as an authority on that country, wrote in 1891 that Muhammad Ahmad represented "the Shia point of view", evidenced by his use of the Persian term *darvish* and produced by the legacy of medieval Isma'ili Shi'i Fatimid rule in Egypt.⁴⁰ More common, however, was Wingate's vaguer assertion that the Mahdist movement represented a "revolt against the orthodox Moslem religion,"⁴¹ a belief supported by a widespread assumption concerning the general state of civilization and religious life in the Sudan on the eve of Muhammad Ahmad's initial declaration. To British observers, the Sudan appeared to rank close to the bottom of the civilizational hierarchy by which they measured the worth of the societies they encountered. In racial terms, the population was described by a young Winston Churchill as an unsavoury blend of contaminated Arabs and pristine black Africans: "The qualities of mongrels are rarely admirable, and the mixture of the Arab and negro types has produced a debased and cruel breed, more shocking because they are more intelligent than the primitive savages."⁴² As the Arab tribes who moved into the region in medieval times mingled and mixed with the peoples they encountered, the religion they carried with them became diluted in the confrontation with black African spiritual practices. The religious rituals of the people were viewed by Churchill and others as little more than the product of standard African paganism wearing an Islamic face. As Churchill wrote, "the Mohammedan

Islam; that such an experience has manifested itself in movements that have been led by people called Mahdis; and that the movement of Muhammad Ahmad al-Mahdi in the Sudan was such a mahdist fundamentalist movement."

³⁹ Following heavy involvement in the anti-Mahdist military campaigns of the 1880s and 90s, Wingate went on to serve as Governor-General of the Sudan for seventeen years following the Anglo-Egyptian reconquest in 1899.

⁴⁰F. R. Wingate, *Mahdiism and the Egyptian Sudan* (London: MacMillan and Co., 1891), 5-7.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, ix.

⁴² Winston Spencer Churchill, *The River War: An Historical Account of the Reconquest of the Soudan*, 2 vols (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1899), vol. 1, 16.

religion has been adapted to the older superstitions”,⁴³ while another well-regarded authority on the country, Lieutenant-Colonel D. H. Stewart,⁴⁴ referred to the “ignorance, superstition, and degraded state of the Mahommedan religion in these provinces”⁴⁵ and described the “negro tribes, notwithstanding their being officially inscribed as Mahommedans” as “all Pagans” with “no system of religious belief.”⁴⁶ Stewart argued that the widespread ignorance of the population had created an environment whereby Sudanese devotional life had come to be dominated by a collection of cynical, fraudulent spiritual leaders, or *fakis*, who exploited the superstitions prevalent throughout the country in order to enrich themselves.⁴⁷ Years later following the Anglo-Egyptian reconquest, Lord Cromer wrote in one of his annual reports on the Sudan that while the Muslim population of the country had taken “one distinct step forward” in having embraced Islam, however superficially, they remained “so backward a condition of civilization as to be but slightly removed from savagery.”⁴⁸

These typical appraisals of religion in the Sudan, however, produced alternative conclusions regarding Muhammad Ahmad’s significance in this context. For some, the Mahdi was an able and shrewd adversary who nonetheless stood as little more than simply the most successful and brazen of the *faki* class. Typical of this assessment is the account left by Thomas Archer in his four volume account of Gordan’s war in the Sudan:

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Stewart was an intelligence officer who accompanied Gordon to the Sudan. He was killed while attempting to escape the siege of Khartoum by boat in September 1884. See Dominic Green, *Armies of God: Islam and Empire on the Nile, 1869-1899* (London: Arrow Books, 2007), 208-209.

⁴⁵ Malet to Granville, no. 54, 20th January 1883. “Copy of a despatch from Lieutenant-Colonel Stewart, inclosing a history of the present rebellion in the Soudan, a biography of the Mahdi, and other stuff.” FO 407/27, NA.

⁴⁶ Malet to Granville, no. 102, 6th March 1883. “Inclosure 2: Report on the Soudan: History.” FO 407/27, NA.

⁴⁷ Malet to Granville, no. 54, 20th January 1883. “Note A.” FO 407/27, NA.

⁴⁸ Baring to Lansdowne, no. 82, 15th March 1905. “Report for 1904: Sudan Report.” FO 407/164, NA.

there was nothing particularly remarkable about the professed Mahdi except that he possessed tact and cunning in dealing with the tribes. He had not even personal courage to recommend him, for he seldom led his troops or exposed himself to danger, and though his proclamations were couched in language of a semi-religious kind, and declaring that he was the chosen leader in a holy war, he was in other respects, as well as in this, an unscrupulous liar, representing that he had achieved great things, and sending false intelligence to distant tribes in order to encourage them to continue the revolt after he had suffered defeats.⁴⁹

Wingate reached a similar conclusion on the factors underlying Muhammad Ahmad's success, arguing that it was primarily due to their backwardness and ignorance that the people of Kordofan accepted his claims.⁵⁰ For British observers of this inclination, it became common to refer to Muhammad Ahmad as a "false prophet".⁵¹ His movement might represent a genuine threat to British authority along the Nile Valley, and help fuel anti-British sentiments further afield, but it stood little chance of reshaping Islam as a religion beyond the Sudanese localities from which it emerged.

In contrast, Churchill's account of Muhammad Ahmad was marked by an absence of the contemptuousness present in others, in points reflecting an obvious admiration for the would-be Mahdi. Observing Gordon's campaign as a young soldier-journalist, Churchill discerned similarities in the rival military commanders' characters, describing Muhammad Ahmad as "an African reproduction of the Englishman" and referring to both men as "reformers" in the religious sense.⁵² Churchill acknowledged Muhammad Ahmad's religious education and commitment to the basic principles of Islam,⁵³ and was prepared to recognize his claim to belong to the *ashrāf* class of descendants of the Prophet Muhammad,

⁴⁹ Thomas Archer, *The war in Egypt and the Soudan: an episode in the history of the British Empire; being a descriptive account of the scenes and events of that great drama, and sketches of the principal actors in it*, 4 vols (London: Blackie & Son, 1886), vol. 2, 210-211.

⁵⁰ Wingate, *Mahdiism and the Egyptian Sudan*, 10.

⁵¹ Malet to Granville, no. 316, 19th December 1881. FO 407/18, NA.

⁵² Churchill, *The River War* vol. 1, 25.

⁵³ *Ibid*, 38.

absent any evidence that the assertion was false.⁵⁴ Most memorably, and in a similar vein to David Hogarth's respect for the character of Muhammad ibn 'abd al-Wahab, Churchill believed the historical figure of Muhammad Ahmad compared favourably with the Prophet himself:

There are many Christians who reverence the faith of Islam and yet regard the Mahdi merely as a commonplace religious imposter whom force of circumstances elevated to notoriety. In a certain sense, this may be true. But I know not how a genuine may be distinguished from a spurious Prophet, except by the measure of his success. The triumphs of the Mahdi were in his lifetime far greater than those of the founder of the Mohammedan faith; and the chief difference between orthodox Mohammedanism and Mahdism was that the original impulse was opposed only by decaying systems of government and society and the recent movement came in contact with a mighty civilisation and the machinery of science.⁵⁵

While for much of the British official establishment, Muhammad Ahmad's mission simply reflected the parochial vulgarities of Sudanese religious life on a national scale, Churchill believed that the Mahdist movement, in fact, embodied a reformist impulse with the potential to elevate the spiritual and indeed national lives of the Sudanese people, concluding his moral assessment of Muhammad Ahmad with the following words:

I believe that if in future years prosperity should come to the peoples of the Upper Nile, and learning and happiness follow in its train, then the first Arab historian who shall investigate the early annals of that new nation, will not forget, foremost among the heroes of his race, to write the name of Mohammed Ahmed.⁵⁶

In such ways the commonplace anxieties which plagued British discourse concerning the topic of anti-imperial Muslim activism came to absorb and reflect the rhetoric of civilizational reform we have discussed in previous chapters. In the process, the significance

⁵⁴ Ibid, 37.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 56.

⁵⁶ Ibid. For more on Churchill's views of Muhammad Ahmad, see Warren Dockter, *Churchill and the Islamic World: Orientalism, Empire and Diplomacy in the Middle East* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2015), 11, 35-37.

of Muhammad Ahmad's challenge to British authority in the Nile Valley was overstated, sparking enquiries regarding his status in the broader Islamic world, and questions over how best to counter his potential influence in terms of Islam. Reports regarding his stature in the Middle East and India were inconclusive. The consuls stationed in Jerusalem and Beirut acknowledged the existence of vague interest in Muhammad Ahmad's claim from among the "lower classes", although the more educated section of the population was thought to be dismissive, believing Arabia, if anywhere, to be the more likely origin of the expected Mahdi.⁵⁷ On the other hand, the British agent in Diyarbakir reported that the Kurdish 'ulama' had accepted Muhammad Ahmad's claims, and urged the British government to issue a declaration declaring him to be an imposter.⁵⁸ In the crucial Indian arena, reports from the Vernacular Press provided evidence to British authorities of an ongoing debate among a section of Indian Muslim society regarding the Mahdi's credentials, although the majority concerned articles which ultimately denied his legitimacy.⁵⁹ Of more concern was information received on the activities of the leading *Ahl-i-Hadis* figure Siddiq Hasan Khan, who we have encountered previously in chapter four. He was alleged to have sent agents to the Hijaz to make contact with emissaries from Mahdist Sudan, two of whom were subsequently arrested by Turkish authorities in Mecca while in possession of a number of Muhammad Ahmad's proclamations.⁶⁰ While little evidence linking Siddiq Hasan to the Sudan was actually uncovered, the episode served to highlight British anxieties regarding the pan-Islamic reach of Muhammad Ahmad's supposed appeal.

⁵⁷ Moore to Dufferin, 14th March 1884, and Eldridge to Dufferin, 22nd March 1884, enclosed in Dufferin to Granville, no. 37, 3rd April 1884. FO 407/61, NA.

⁵⁸ Bayajian to Everett, 22nd February 1884, enclosed in Dufferin to Granville, no. 37, 3rd April 1884. FO 407/61, NA.

⁵⁹ See for example *Naiyar-i-Azim*, Moradabad, 25th February 1884, which questioned whether Muhammad Ahmad was Sunni or Shi'i, and *Hindustani*, Lucknow, 18th February 1884, which argued that the Muslims of India had no sympathy for him. UPPNR. IOR/L/R/5/61, BL.

⁶⁰ Jago to Durand, 15th February 1886. "Wahabi Agents despatched by Sadik Hassan, husband of the Begam of Bhopal, to the Soudan, Hodeida, Yemen, and Mecca." IOR/R/1/1/40, BL. See also Alavi, *Muslim Cosmopolitanism*, 303-308.

For some British observers, this appeal presented a challenge even to Istanbul. Wilfrid Blunt believed that the respect Muhammad Ahmad commanded in the Sudan transcended the course of events in that country, making him a genuine rival to the Porte's authority. A report on the vaguely titled "Pan-Islamic movement" received in Cairo during the summer of 1885 stated that the "societies" were in favour of establishing "an Empire of pure Islamism" in the Sudan based on Muhammad Ahmad's claims, and would reject any claims to their spiritual allegiance made by the sultan, while respecting Ottoman sovereignty elsewhere.⁶¹ For Gottlieb Wilhelm Leitner, this challenge to Turkish pre-eminence and authority in the Islamic world was a consequence, at least in part, of the British occupation of Egypt and subsequent erosion of Ottoman prestige. British actions had "[crippled] the authority of the Sultan as Khalifa", producing a rival pretender to his authority who, as a Sunni Muslim, Leitner believed would otherwise have been forced to continue to recognize the Ottoman caliphate.⁶² This emphasis on worldly success and power as the key to securing the allegiance of the world's Muslims put the importance of orthodoxy in assessing Muhammad Ahmad's claims in doubt, and was echoed in various spheres. In India, the *Oudh Akhbar* of Lahore argued that if Mahdist forces reached the Hijaz and took Mecca and Medina, many Muslims would come to consider Muhammad Ahmad's claims more seriously,⁶³ while the consul in Jidda, James Zohrab, argued that while he appeared to fulfil many of the generally accepted characteristics of the promised Mahdi, his real significance lay in the success of his military exploits:

It should be noted that Mahomet Ahmet, a strict Mahommedan, is putting forth his power against Mussulmans and against the acknowledged Khalif, thus fulfilling the prophecy that vengeance would first fall on the degenerate Mahommedans...he is

⁶¹ Wolff to Salisbury, no. 71, 23rd August 1885. FO 407/76, NA.

⁶² Leitner, *Muhammadanism*, 20.

⁶³ *Oudh Akhbar*, Lahore, 29th December 1883, UPPNR. IOR/L/R/5/60, BL.

leading his hordes against the acknowledged Head of the Mahommedan religion, thus showing the vast influence he already exercises.⁶⁴

These doubts surrounding the ability of the Ottoman caliphate to exercise any kind of real authority over the minds of Sudanese Muslims led an exasperated Lord Cromer to conclude that, absent the presence of Turkish soldiers on the ground, any sort of dependence on Turkish prestige in the anti-Mahdist campaign was doomed to fail. “What evidence have we,” Cromer wondered, “to show that the name and prestige of the Sultan, backed by the most solemn utterances of Mahommedan orthodoxy, exercise any real influence over the fighting tribes of the Soudan?”⁶⁵ Referring to what he described as Gordon’s attempt to “combat heterodoxy with orthodoxy”, Cromer lamented that “we have, so far as I know, not one particle of positive evidence that Mahommedan orthodoxy, as embodied in the person of the Sultan, can be used as an effective weapon to tranquilize the Soudan.”⁶⁶

It is noteworthy, then, that although the British-led campaign to overthrow the Mahdist regime in the Sudan was conducted for the ostensible purpose of reasserting Ottoman sovereignty over the country, British attempts to counter Muhammad Ahmad’s appeal in the Sudan centred around the prestige of their own empire and its Islamic credentials. In an astonishing appeal to Islamic legitimacy, the British commander leading anti-Mahdist operations in the immediate aftermath of Gordon’s death, Lord Wolseley, framed the entire expedition as a battle of time-honoured orthodoxy, represented by British forces and their allies among the ‘ulama’, against fanatical heresy, represented by the Mahdi. His proclamation, which explicitly referenced the Qur’an and *hadith*, was issued to the notables of the country in February 1885, and gave full expression to the idea of the British Empire

⁶⁴ Zohrab to Granville, no. 83, 22nd December 1883. FO 407/60, NA.

⁶⁵ Baring to Salisbury, no. 130, 14th December 1887. FO 407/71, NA.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

as a worldly dominion sanctioned by the highest Islamic authorities and most sacred Islamic scriptures:

This is to inform you all that the great Queen of England, the mighty Potentate of Ind, to whom God has intrusted the welfare of many nations of His creatures, and whose Empire extends over many parts of the inhabited world, and who is obeyed by nations trusting in the justice and equity of her rule, and by many nations of Islam who behold her virtues and her well-ordered Government, dwelling in comfort after toil and in rest after weariness.

She has seen the wars and troubles in Egypt and in the Soudan, and cannot shut her eyes to them, and grieves at the spreading of the revolt, for she has at heart the peace and safety of the Moslems, their rulers, and their illustrious Ulema.

Wherefore she has determined to stop this rebellion at its sources, and has sent me into the Soudan to wipe off all trace of it, and this too with the obedience and support of you all - to give you peace and safety, to put an end to this strife and its evils. For, says the Koran, "If two Moslem tribes make war, do ye reconcile them." Wherefore Her Majesty has sent me to accomplish this one work, namely, to make peace among you Moslems. And he who opposes me, and will not accept, may God visit him with the direst punishment!

I appeal to you in the name of Islam! Take care, beware of following vile counsels! For how can ye be faithful believers when ye do not understand your Koran, which tells you that if your enemies wish to make peace, make peace also? And have ye not heard the same tradition of Mohammed, of him who if he be invited to makes peace and will not, how he shall be overthrown though mighty? And why are ye such fools as to be led astray by the Dervish Mohammed Ahmed and his false wiles, for he denies God and his Prophet, and lies as to what is lawful and unlawful, and has now flung you into these disasters...ye are impoverished and cut off from the world. And this because of your hostility to the Sacred Law (Sheria). For he (the Dervish) has no proof of true books, as the Ulema in their respective Fetwas have indeed stated. But the rebels do not understand God's truth, and are in ignorance.⁶⁷

In practical terms, the most important element in this foundation of orthodox Islamic support for British authority in the Sudan was that represented by the 'ulama', in this case of the Maliki *madhhab*. Noting their rejection of Muhammad Ahmad's claims, some officials determined that the would-be Mahdi was a heretic whose stated mission defied the commonly accepted conditions associated with the emergence of the Mahdi.⁶⁸ As such, orthodoxy in the Sudan came to be associated with stability and order, while its challengers,

⁶⁷ Baring to Granville, no. 364, 27th February 1885. FO 407/64, NA.

⁶⁸ Northbrook to Granville, 24th October 1884. FO 633/98, NA.

including the majority of the Sufi orders, represented a chaotic fanaticism. When, following the reconquest of Khartoum and Omdurman in 1898, General Herbert Kitchener became the subject of criticism for ordering the destruction of Muhammad Ahmad's tomb, he responded by arguing that "None of the Kadis, Ulemas, or inhabitants here consider the Mahdi to have been other than a heretic to the Mahomedan religion".⁶⁹ As a consequence, British authorities seeking to forestall the emergence of a new Mahdist claimant following the consolidation of the Anglo-Egyptian regime from 1899 onward imported Egyptian 'ulama' in order to act as judges and teachers, and lent only cautious support to a few solidly anti-Mahdist Sufi orders perceived to hold a generally passive position on the question of opposition to British rule.⁷⁰

While the Wahhabis of Arabia had denounced the Ottomans as infidels, their movement apparently made no claims to such lofty titles as Caliph or Mahdi, and was perceived to function to some degree as the legitimizer of a secular power, the Sa'udi dynasty. As such, British authorities typically overlooked them in discussions concerning the threat of pan-Islam. The movement of Muhammad Ahmad, on the other hand, raised for the first time in British minds the possibility that material opposition to the Ottoman Empire could emerge from within the fragmented Muslim sectarian landscape on the basis of a claim to orthodox Islamic authority which reached over Istanbul to appeal to the minds of Muslims across the Islamic world. Ultimately defeated by raw British power, its rise and fall nonetheless raised the prospect of other such challengers to Ottoman pre-eminence succeeding where Muhammad Ahmad as his successors had failed. In the deserts straddling the Libyan,

⁶⁹ Quoted in Daniel, *Islam, Europe and Empire*, 445.

⁷⁰ John O. Voll, "The British, the 'Ulama', and Popular Islam in the Early Anglo-Egyptian Sudan", *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 2, no. 3 (Jul., 1971): 213-214.

Egyptian, and Sudanese borders, an alternative contender drew British attention just as Mahdist power in the Nile Valley peaked.

* * * * *

While the Mahdist state established by Muhammad Ahmad endured until the end of the nineteenth century, his death in 1885 brought an end to serious consideration on the part of his British rivals that his movement may affect reformative change in the Islamic world beyond the Sudan. In the following three decades, British officials observed the rise of several militant and revivalist movements launched to some degree on the basis of Islamic principles. Some of these took the form of local anti-imperialist campaigns which aimed to challenge the authority of European rule in Islamic lands. As we have seen in chapter four, the remnants of the so-called Wahhabi camp at Sitana on the North-West Frontier of British India continued to launch intermittent military operations against British authority, but were dismissed as “Hindustani fanatics” with little or no relevance to the greater questions raised for British imperial policy by the phenomenon of revivalist Islam. The activities of Muhammad ‘abd Allah Hasan in the Horn of Africa held greater significance, yet he was similarly derided by British officials, who came to refer to him as the “Mad Mullah of Somaliland.”⁷¹ Elsewhere, however, two figures worthy of more serious consideration emerged on either side of the Red Sea - unlike the rebels of Sitana and Somaliland, their activities appeared to be directed against two of Britain’s imperial rivals.

⁷¹ This was the title chosen by Douglas Jardine, who served in the administration of Somaliland during the First World War. See Douglas Jardine, *The Mad Mullah of Somaliland* (London: Herbert Jenkins Limited, 1923). See also John Slight, “British and Somali Views of Muhammad Abdullah Hassan’s *Jihad*, 1899–1920,” *BILDHAAN: An International Journal of Somali Studies* 10 (2010): 16-35.

In the first decade of the twentieth century, Muhammad ibn ‘Ali al-Idrisi launched a revolt against Ottoman authority in the west Arabian coastal region of ‘Asir, establishing a state which eventually attracted British support during the First World War and endured well into the 1920s, before its collapse and ultimate absorption into the nascent Saudi state.⁷² Reports received in Cairo in the years preceding the War described a figure revered for his prestigious ancestry, with connections across the Hijaz and North Africa, who was proving capable at uniting the tribes of the region in opposition to Ottoman corruption and decadence.⁷³ While al-Idrisi himself was alleged to deny any claim to divine origin, he was commonly referred to as the “Mahdi of ‘Asir”,⁷⁴ and his “extraordinary religious influence” was said to have attracted a significant number of Zaidi followers of Imam Yahya of Yemen to his cause.⁷⁵ While these early reports on al-Idrisi remained relatively scant until the outbreak of the war encouraged direct contact, they each emphasized al-Idrisi’s relationship with a figure referred to as “the Senussi”. Since 1902, this title had referred to a man named Ahmad Sharif al-Sanusi; yet for almost half a century before, “the Senussi” was identified with his uncle, Muhammad al-Mahdi al-Sanusi, who in turn was preceded by his father, the founder of the Sanusi order Muhammad ibn ‘Ali al-Sanusi. From the founder to his grandson, the individual characteristics of these three men attracted little interest in Cairo, with the depiction of Muhammad ibn ‘Ali in some early accounts serving to shape the order’s image in British minds long after his death. What mattered for British authorities was that they were the leaders of what had become the most influential Sufi order across northern Africa during the nineteenth century. As such, British observers of the movement

⁷² See Anne K. Bang, *The Idrīsī state in ‘Asīr, 1906-1934: politics, religion and personal prestige as statebuilding factors in early twentieth-century Arabia* (Bergen: Centre for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies, 1996).

⁷³ “Revolt against the Turks headed by al Idrissi”, undated. FO 882/10, NA.

⁷⁴ “The Rebellion in Asir”, 27th June 1912. FO 882/10, NA.

⁷⁵ “The Mahdi of the Yemen”, *Report by Egyptian War Office*, 15th September 1909. FO 371/664, NA.

attached the utmost significance to the title itself, as they attempted to understand its significance for the future of Islam in the Sahara and beyond.

A student of Ahmad ibn Idris of Fez,⁷⁶ the grandfather of al-Idrisi of ‘Asir, Muhammad ibn ‘Ali al-Sanusi emerged as the founder of the Sufi *tariqa* which took his name in the first half of the nineteenth century. By the time of his death in 1859, the Sanusiyya had spread beyond his birthplace in the Maghrib across the central and eastern Sahara, with its base in the desert borderlands of modern-day Libya and Egypt.⁷⁷ Typical of his reformist contemporaries, Muhammad ibn ‘Ali combined the roles of austere scholar and Sufi sage to preach the necessity for *ijtihad* within the established Islamic scholarly tradition, while also laying the organizational foundations for an enduring religious fraternity.⁷⁸ Under his successors, the Sanusi order would ultimately transform into a political movement and dynasty, involved in resistance to French and Italian rule in North Africa, and helping to give birth to the modern state of Libya.⁷⁹ The few early British accounts of Muhammad ibn ‘Ali spoke of a man who had earned a saintly and mystical reputation across North Africa and the Hijaz. The traveller James Hamilton learned of his status as “all that an Arab saint should be - exact in the observances of religion, gay, and a capital shot... a man respectable for his talents and probity,”⁸⁰ while Richard Burton encountered his disciples in Medina, some of whom regarding him as the Mahdi.⁸¹ However, it was only decades after the leadership had passed

⁷⁶ One of the major Sufi revivalist figures of the early nineteenth century, Ahmad ibn Idris travelled throughout North Africa and the Red Sea coastal regions of the Arabian Peninsula before settling in ‘Asir, and counted among his students some of the leaders of the foremost *turuq* to emerge in these regions later in the century. See Rex S. O’Fahey, *Enigmatic Saint: Ahmad Ibn Idris and the Idrisi Tradition* (London: Hurst, 1990), 130-153. According to O’Fahey, *Enigmatic Saint*, 170, Ahmad ibn Idris’s influence extended beyond the immediate network of students who gathered around him in the Hijaz to reach as far as east Africa and south-east Asia.

⁷⁷ Knut S. Vikør, *Sufi and scholar on the desert edge: Muammad b. ‘Ali al-Sanusi and his Brotherhood* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 1995), 1.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 2-3.

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, 1.

⁸⁰ James Hamilton, *Wanderings in North Africa* (London: John Murray, 1856), 268.

⁸¹ Burton, *Personal Narrative*, vol. 2, 24.

to his son Muhammad al-Mahdi that British authorities in Cairo began to take an intensive interest in the order, as they began to receive reports describing what appeared to be his involvement in a number of regional political intrigues involving French authorities in North Africa and the Mahdist state in the Sudan. From the mid-1880s onwards, Cairo struggled to establish a coherent profile of the order. Muhammad al-Mahdi proved elusive in his desert base at the Jaghbub oasis, and British attempts to categorize his movement depended heavily on second-hand information gleaned from often hostile French authorities in Tunisia and Algeria.⁸² Speculative analysis balanced the deficit in the absence of any significant reliable first-hand information regarding the order's size and influence. Typically drawing on fragmented biographical details of Muhammad ibn 'Ali and his son, and a general tendency to emphasize the potentially universalist Islamic impulse guiding all the analogous movements which British officialdom had become familiar with, a number of often lengthy intelligence reports produced a relatively consistent portrait of the order. These attempted to make sense of the Sanusiyya's impact on life in the Sahara, its status in terms of Islamic reform, and its relations with the various powers which surrounded it.

Perhaps the most influential early British analyst of the Sanusiyya was Gerald Herbert Portal, second secretary to Cromer in Cairo during the mid-1880s, whose 1885 memorandum laid the basis for the development of later British understandings of the order. In terms similar to those we have encountered previously in the sections concerning the Arabian Wahhabis and Mahdist Sudan, Portal described a puritanical religious society engaged in a civilizing mission among the largely bedouin communities of the Sahara. The main features of the Sanusi creed were, according to Portal, an uncompromising and

⁸² British authorities were especially indebted to French orientalist with expertise on the Sufi orders of the Sahara such as Louis Rinn, on whom see Harrison, *France and Islam in West Africa*, 19 and George R. Trumbull IV, *An Empire of Facts: Colonial Power, Cultural Knowledge, and Islam in Algeria, 1870–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 21-24.

intolerant commitment to the “severest and simplest” form of Islam, and organizational secrecy resembling that of the Jesuits. The order had won support through its openness to incorporating various parochial Sufi associations throughout the region under its broad wing, and by improving the daily lives of its adherents – Portal conceded that while the order forbade all relations between Muslims and Christians, “it cannot be denied that they have done something to civilize and improve the condition of their followers. They encourage agriculture, having worked wonders in reopening old and disused wells, and in creating fresh oases.”⁸³ The theme of Muhammad al-Mahdi as a religious reformer was expanded upon in the reports which followed. One memo described the Sanusiyya as the “Puritans of Islam”, rejecting the worship and intercession of prophets and saints, and desiring to restore the “true and pure religion of Islam as it was originally taught by Mahomet.”⁸⁴ Another sent to Cairo from the consul at Benghazi argued that Muhammad ibn ‘Ali al-Sanusi had “revived the religion of Islam” for the “nearly pagan” bedouin.⁸⁵ Other reports emphasized the movement’s apparent anti-Christian hostility. In Algiers, the Consul-General Robert Lambert Playfair argued that even the authority of the sultan could not convince the Sanusiyya to develop contacts with the Christian powers, and that the order’s presence in the region presented the British with another enemy in addition to the Sudanese Mahdists.⁸⁶ Wingate claimed that Muhammad ibn ‘Ali had been driven by a desire to “stem [the] wave of Western civilization, which seemed to him to shake the principles of Islamism to their foundation.”⁸⁷ In later years, however, Portal’s influence waned, and while the order was

⁸³ “Memorandum by Mr. Portal on the Religion of Sheikh Mahommed-ben-Ali-es-Senoussi-el-Mahdi”, 27th July 1885, no. 59. FO 407/66, NA.

⁸⁴ “Memo on the Senussi, translated by one Mr. Des Graz”, White to Salisbury, 16th March 1889, no. 149. FO 407/87, NA.

⁸⁵ White to Salisbury, 12th April 1889, no. 15. FO 407/88, NA.

⁸⁶ Playfair to Salisbury, 10th April 1889, no. 14. FO 407/88, NA.

⁸⁷ “Memorandum respecting the Senussi Movement”, Baring to Salisbury, 9th April 1889, no. 18. FO 407/88, NA.

still conceived of in terms of religious reformism and puritanism, little credence was given to the idea that it was dogmatically anti-Christian, an idea which one critic traced back to the influence of the French traveller of the Sahara Henri Duveyrier,⁸⁸ who had been heavily cited by both Portal and Playfair.⁸⁹ Instead, British attention began to focus more heavily on the Sanusiyya's status within the Islamic world.

It was widely believed that Muhammad ibn 'Ali had named his son *al-Mahdi* in the expectation that he would fulfil the role of the promised Mahdi. Although neither father nor son ever explicitly made such claims, British authorities expressed greater respect for Muhammad al-Mahdi's pedigree in this regard than they did for that of Muhammad Ahmad in the Sudan. Writing in 1889, Wingate considered the probable response in the Muslim world should Muhammad al-Mahdi make such a declaration, concluding that his reputation for piety, austerity, and religious knowledge – particularly in contrast to Muhammad Ahmad - would draw a considerable number of followers.⁹⁰ This position was supported in an extensive memorandum authored by J. S. Oswald, acting consul in Suakin, the same year:

It is very generally believed that by birth, position, and a combination of circumstances, the late Sheikh (and to a lesser degree the present) had more real claims to the title than any one living. Even now, were Senoussi to declare himself Mahdi, many thousands in all parts of Islam would instantly accept him.⁹¹

⁸⁸ On whom see Trumbull, *An Empire of Facts*, 41-42.

⁸⁹ "Notes on the history of Senussiism and its relation to the African possessions of foreign powers", 10th April 1908. FO 371/451, NA. Portal's dependence on Duveyrier had earlier drawn a rebuke from Donald A. Cameron, the consul in Benghazi, who boasted that "The French are scarcely our teachers in Islam. The French love detective stories of Secret Societies and of political plots." Cameron to Salisbury, 13 May 1889, no. 86. FO 407/88, NA.

⁹⁰ Baring to Salisbury, 9th April 1889, no. 18. FO 407/88, NA.

⁹¹ "Memorandum by Mr. J. S. Oswald", 5th July 1889, no. 18. FO 407/89, NA.

The prospect of a Sanusi Mahdi was strong enough to ensure that extensive correspondence regarding the Sanusiyya's influence in the Islamic world was exchanged between Cairo and Calcutta,⁹² fuelled also by the intensive interest in the order's fortunes expressed in the vernacular papers of northern India.⁹³ Elsewhere, officials attempted to gauge the numerical strength of the order. In an assessment remarkable for its certitude, the consul in Jidda C. G. Wood estimated the Sanusiyya's followers in the Hijaz to amount to just two thousand, although he predicted the order would find fertile ground for expansion in "the extensive field which India presents for its operations in the support of the unity of Islam."⁹⁴ Of even greater concern was the order's relationship with Turkish authorities in Tripoli and Istanbul, and its position on the question of the legitimacy of the Ottoman caliphate. On this topic, British observers discerned vaguely respectful but distant communications,⁹⁵ and concluded that while the Sanusiyya offered a nominal and reluctant recognition of the sultan's authority, the movement's calculated location beyond Turkish jurisdiction reflected a more deep-seated distaste, along with religious if not political opposition to Istanbul.⁹⁶ For his part, the Sultan 'Abd al-Hamid II was seen as effectively impotent in the face of the Sanusiyya's indifference, with Cromer arguing that "the authority of the Sultan over Senoussi, if he ever attempted to exercise it, would be found in practice to be slight."⁹⁷

The picture of the Sanusiyya that emerged from these reports was suggestive of an enigmatic religiopolitical confederation with a plausible claim to the mantle of Islamic orthodoxy and

⁹² Between 1889 and 1908 at least seven detailed reports on the fortunes of the Sanusiyya reached the Government of India. These are still available to view at the National Archives of India in New Delhi. For one such example, see "The El Senoussi Sect", August 1889. Foreign/Secret/45-47/Part E, NAI.

⁹³ See for example the *Shahna-i-Hind* of Merrut, 8th March 1901, UPNNR, which published an analysis expressing the belief that a conflict between the Sanusiyya and Ottoman authorities was inevitable. IOR/L/R/5/78, BL.

⁹⁴ Wood to Salisbury, 30th April 1889, no. 78. FO 407/88, NA.

⁹⁵ "Of late years, the present Sultan has sent him flattering letters to which Senoussi returns polite answers." Cameron to Salisbury, 13th May 1889, no. 86. FO 407/88, NA.

⁹⁶ See for example Wingate in Baring to Salisbury, 5th June 1889, no. 117. FO 407/88, NA.

⁹⁷ Baring to Salisbury, 9th April 1889, no. 18. FO 407/88, NA.

potentially consequential universalist ambitions and appeal. The relatively more direct British engagement with the order which began in 1889, however, suggested that this image may have been based on an inflated estimate of its magnitude and status within the Islamic world. Arab informants working on behalf of British intelligence played a key role in constructing a more realistic profile of the movement's influence. In April and May, Cairo began to receive information suggesting that Muhammad al-Mahdi was behind a campaign originating in the Saharan regions of Wadai and Darfur in the western Sudanese deserts to overthrow Mahdist rule in the Sudan.⁹⁸ Initial reports implied that the Sanusiyya intended to seize power in Khartoum and eventually declare Muhammad al-Mahdi to be the real Mahdi, in place of the pretender Muhammad Ahmad and his successor regime. Indeed, in late April Cromer reported that while reliable information had been hard to come by, he now had it on good authority that "followers of Senoussi have captured Khartoum."⁹⁹ From Benghazi, the consul Donald A. Cameron argued that the failures and corruption of the Khartoum government had proved a blessing for Muhammad al-Mahdi, as they served to highlight "the contrast between false and true Mahdism."¹⁰⁰ The downfall of the Mahdist state, he argued, would result in the automatic transfer of the Sudanese population's spiritual allegiance to Muhammad al-Mahdi.¹⁰¹ While Cromer maintained a more sober stance, he notified London that leading Muslim figures in Cairo were supportive of any attempt by the Sanusiyya to take control in the Sudan, believing a government headed by Muhammad al-Mahdi to be

⁹⁸ "Recent reports have reached Suakin and the southern frontier of Egypt that the forces of the Khalifa have been severely defeated by the adherents of Senussi, in the neighbourhood of Darfur; that there have been many engagements between the contending forces, which have always resulted in favour of Senussi; that several of the Dervish leaders have been killed or taken prisoners; that the whole of Kordofan and Darfur have risen against the Dervish rule, and instigated by the Senussya, are a menace to the safety of the Khalifa in Khartoum, who is reported to be in such fear of this movement that he is contemplating flight from Khartoum and is even reported to have already left." Wingate, 6th April 1889, inclosed in "Baring to Salisbury, 22nd April 1889, no. 18. FO 407/88, NA.

⁹⁹ Baring to Salisbury, 29th April 1889, no. 26. FO 407/88, NA.

¹⁰⁰ Cameron to Salisbury, 7th May 1889, no. 70. FO 407/88, NA.

¹⁰¹ Cameron to Salisbury, 7th May 1889, no. 70. FO 407/88, NA.

superior to that of the Mahdists.¹⁰² The prospect of a Sanusiyya regime in Khartoum began to fire British imaginations with the idea that Muhammad al-Mahdi could potentially pose a major challenge to the authority of Istanbul. From Jidda, Wood claimed that

should he be able to establish an united Government, there are people here who think that his renown for sanctity, coupled with his extensive power, will no doubt throw into the shade the prestige of the Sultan as the most powerful Mahommedan Ruler and Caliph of the Faithful.¹⁰³

Frenzied British anticipation reached a climax in July, when Oswald submitted his memo from Suakin. There, he identified the fortunes of the British Empire directly with those of the Islamic world, and argued that with the decline of Ottoman prestige and authority in the face of Muhammad al-Mahdi's growing power, Britain must reach out her hand and work in partnership with the Sanusiyya for the greater benefit of Muslims everywhere. "England alone," he argued,

has shown herself truly capable of governing Mahommedans. India and the British Empire are declared by the highest authorities in Islam "Dar-ul-Salaam," the country of peace. The Queen is recognized almost as much as the Sultan of Turkey as protector of their faith. England alone is looked to for religious toleration, and to my mind her responsibilities and duties are every day becoming heavier throughout Islam, and specially in Africa. But no country can meet the task as we can, and to make it easier we should make friends of the reformers of the Mahommedan religion. If Senoussi can be impressed with our power in the world, the justice of our rule as shown in India, the good we are doing in Egypt, and our objects in remaining there till it becomes a Power of itself free from the domination of the Turks and from the pernicious influence of foreign capitalists and speculators, all his widespread and powerful influence might be won over to us.¹⁰⁴

By that time, however, expectations in Cairo for a Sanusiyya march on the Sudan had dampened, as Cromer came to learn that, in fact, Muhammad al-Mahdi had little if anything

¹⁰² Baring to Salisbury, 9th April 1889, no. 18. FO 407/88, NA.

¹⁰³ Wood to Salisbury, 30th April 1889, no. 78. FO 407/88 NA.

¹⁰⁴ "Memorandum by Mr. J. S. Oswald, 5th July 1889, no. 188. FO 407/89, NA.

to do with events playing out in Wadai and Darfur, and in any case the Mahdist regime had survived. As early as May, Cameron was notified by a trusted informant, one Khalifa al-'Asma, that the Sanusiyya were not involved in the Sudan. Al-'Asma, who had lived for many years at the Sanusiyya base of Jaghub, believed Muhammad al-Mahdi to be a relatively insignificant figure in the region, whose influence was limited to the bedouin of the sparsely populated desert areas where he was based. Although Muhammad al-Mahdi was said to harbour no ill feelings with regard to the British, al-'Asma claimed he mistrusted Istanbul – “he begged me not to get him into trouble with the Turks.”¹⁰⁵ Cameron concluded that al-Mahdi knew nothing of the Sudan, and was a “local political question of the Cyrenaica, and...nothing else.” By June, Cromer was inclined to agree, as an intelligence report based on information from another informant who had travelled to Jaghub arrived in Cairo.¹⁰⁶ The informant was adamant that the people of Jaghub were perplexed by the association of the title *al-Sanusi* with the anti-Mahdist revolt, speculating that perhaps Sanusi tenets had won favour among some in Darfur and Wadai, who had subsequently attached the Sanusi name to their movement. He determined that “if the Senoussi is directing the movement he is doing so quite secretly, and not a person in Jerboub knows anything about it.”¹⁰⁷ While Wingate remained convinced of al-Mahdi's direct, if subtle, involvement in the Sudan, this information was sufficient for Cromer to decide that he had been misled by earlier reports, and that the Sanusiyya order had “little or no direct share” in the anti-Mahdist push.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵ Cameron to Salisbury, 13th May 1889, no. 86. FO 407/88, NA.

¹⁰⁶ According to Wingate, the informant was “a most trustworthy Arab, who held a good position in the Soudan some five years ago, and was greatly respected on account of his religious life and intimate knowledge of the Arab tribes. He was of invaluable service to the Intelligence Department during the Nile Expedition, and, having thrown in his lot with the English, he left the Soudan as a refugee on the evacuation of Dongola...[he] has been for some time a secret agent of the Intelligence Department.” Baring to Salisbury, 5th June 1889, no. 117. FO 407/88, NA.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

While 1889 represented the peak of British interest in the Sanusiyya as a potentially mobilizing force in the Islamic world, Cairo was not quite ready to discount Muhammad al-Mahdi, or his successor Ahmad Sharif, as a major factor in the region's politics. The idea of making direct contact with Jaghbub had been floated since 1885, when Portal suggested that a British delegation might impress al-Mahdi with the extent of British strength, and thus discourage him from launching an anti-British jihad or forming an alliance with France or Russia.¹⁰⁹ Two years later, Cromer received information from an informant that al-Mahdi wished to use the common interest he shared with Cairo in suppressing the Saharan slave trade as a pretext to make contact. While Cromer was reluctant to arrange a direct meeting, he sent word to Jaghbub that Britain would be interested in a joint anti-slavery endeavour,¹¹⁰ and later noted the basically Islamic impulse guiding the Sanusiyya's anti-slavery stance:

There is nothing extraordinary in the fact that Senoussi should wish to suppress the Slave Trade, for, as I pointed out to your Lordship in a recent despatch...the Traffic in Slaves is contrary to the teaching of Mahommed, and the Senoussi sect, like the Wahabites, are more or less religious parish priests who wish to revert to the strict text of the laws and practices laid down by the founder of the Mahommedan religion.¹¹¹

Any contacts opened with Muhammad al-Mahdi, according to Cromer, must be mediated by a select group of respected Muslims steeped in the Islamic tradition, as they would be more likely to win the ear of al-Sanusi "than Egyptians who have been educated in Europe or under European influences."¹¹² Ultimately, nothing resulted from these tentative first messages, and while Wingate continued to submit reports emphasizing Muhammad al-Mahdi's pan-Islamic appeal,¹¹³ the lack of any substantive movement or action associated

¹⁰⁹ Note by Portal, 27th July 1885, no. 60. FO 407/66, NA.

¹¹⁰ Baring to Salisbury, 24th April 1887, no. 156. FO 407/70, NA.

¹¹¹ Baring to Salisbury, 9th April 1889, no. 18. FO 407/88, NA.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ See for example Baring to Kimberley, 9th May 1895, no. 103. FO 407/131, NA.

with the Sanusiyya order over the following two decades led Cairo to lose interest, an indifference largely unaffected by Muhammad al-Mahdi's death and replacement by Ahmad Sharif in 1902. British intelligence was still engaged in tracking the order's movements, assessing its increasing willingness to violently resist French encroachments, and measuring its influence among the Saharan tribes.¹¹⁴ But in the decade preceding the First World War, the Sanusiyya was no longer considered a potential agent of reformist change in Islam. Rather, it was now the movement's allegedly heterodox tendencies and alienation from mainstream Islamic teachings which defined its global status for the British, as aptly summarised in a French article translated and delivered to Cairo in 1907:

The Senussiyya are looked on askance by the great majority of orthodox Mussulmans, who accuse them of heretical tendencies...it is not surprising that the orthodox in many localities makes a distinction between Mussulmans and Senussiyya...The Senussiyya should not be considered as being in any special sense partisans of Pan-Islamism...In any case the Senussiyya, being more than suspected of heresy, would not play the game of the orthodox Mohammedans.¹¹⁵

In 1912, the Foreign Office diplomat Robert Vansittart, who had just returned from two years serving as second secretary in Cairo, authored an extensive memorandum on Jaghbul which laid to rest what he referred to as the "Senussi myth." This he blamed primarily on the alarmist reports of Portal, who had estimated the movement's adherents to total 25 million, rather than the number of 3 million "widely scattered" followers which Vansittart accepted as correct. The order's self-imposed desert isolation had added to the mystery, with the lack of visitors to Jaghbul only strengthening the perception that the Sanusiyya were preparing to make their mark on the world of Islam. According to Vansittart, "everyone was

¹¹⁴ See Findlay to Grey, 28th July 1906, no. 74. FO 407/167, NA, and "Notes on the history of Senussiism and its relation to the African possessions of foreign powers", 10th April 1908. FO 371/451, NA.

¹¹⁵ "The Characteristics of Senussiism", translated from the *Journal de l'Afrique Occidentale Francaise* of 12th October 1907. In "Notes on the history of Senussiism and its relation to the African possessions of foreign powers", 10th April 1908. FO 371/451, NA.

rather afraid of the portentous bogey-man.” Yet no British official ever made the journey to Jaghbub, and Vansittart believed that no Turkish official had visited since 1891. The movement had become “increasingly shy in proportion as [it has] been let alone”, and Cairo was happy to assist in maintaining its seclusion, whatever claims Britain might rightfully have over the Jaghbub and Siwa oases.¹¹⁶

Along with other Egyptian-based officials, Vansittart believed that the Sanusiyya would only engage in military actions against British authority if provoked.¹¹⁷ So it may have come as a surprise to Cairo when the order launched attacks on British positions in the Western Desert during 1915, apparently at the behest of Istanbul.¹¹⁸ While the ease with which British forces dealt with their assailants, and the lack of support the Sanusiyya received from Egyptian Muslims, suggested that Vansittart was basically correct in his evaluation of the movement’s significance, the Sanusiyya would go on to challenge Italian colonial rule in the twin Ottoman provinces of Tripoli and Cyrenaica, and later the unified Italian colony of Libya, ultimately working with the British during the Second World War to evict the Italians and establish an independent state.¹¹⁹ Indeed, the Sanusi leader Muhammad Idris al-Sanusi, son of Muhammad al-Mahdi, became the first king of an independent Libya in 1952. The Sanusiyya order may have disappointed British expectations that it could affect dramatic, reformative progress in the Islamic world, but it left its mark on the history of its immediate region, fulfilling Cameron’s earlier appraisal of the order as an essentially regional phenomenon.

¹¹⁶ “Memorandum by Mr. Vansittart on Jaghbub”, 31st May 1912, no. 194. FO 407/178.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁸ See John Slight, “British Understandings of the Sanussiyya Sufi Order’s Jihad against Egypt, 1915–17”, *The Round Table* 103, no. 2 (2014): 233-242.

¹¹⁹ On the war-time alliance with the British, see Dirk J. Vandewalle, *A History of Modern Libya* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 36-37.

The Mahdist and Sanusi movements of northern Africa, apparently born to some degree in defiance of Ottoman authority, signalled to British observers that Istanbul's supposed hold over the Islamic world was, perhaps, tenuous. Since the Ottoman conquest of Syria, Egypt, and the Hijaz in 1516-17, Ottoman sultans had claimed to be the legitimate successors of the Abbasid caliphs,¹²⁰ and so made a claim to the loyalties of Muslims across the world. Yet it was only with the encroachment of the European powers in Islamic during the course of the nineteenth century that the claim was made explicit¹²¹ and began to attract serious interest from both non-Ottoman Muslims and European authorities. The story of pan-Islam has been recounted elsewhere and need not detain us here at length. While practical results were limited, solidarity with the Ottoman plight during the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-78, the Greco-Turkish War of 1897, the Italo-Turkish War of 1911-12, the Balkan Wars of 1912-13, and finally the First World War, helped mobilize Muslims across India to raise subscriptions for the relief of Muslim refugees, arrange for pro-Ottoman petitions to be submitted to the Queen on their behalf,¹²² and organize societies to lobby the Government of India on specific issues such as the safety of the Muslim holy places in the Hijaz.¹²³ A poem penned by Shibli Nu'mani, formerly a colleague of Thomas Arnold at Aligarh and

¹²⁰ The claim was based on a 'tradition' describing how, on capturing Cairo from the Mamluks in 1517, Ottoman forces had transported the last Abbasid 'shadow-caliph' to Istanbul where he authorized the transfer of the caliphate to the Ottoman sultan. The 'shadow-caliph' was a descendent of a member of the Abbasid house who had escaped the Mongol destruction of Baghdad in 1258 and made his home in Mamluk Cairo, where he assumed the role of bestowing caliphal legitimacy on the Mamluk Sultanate. See Selim Deringil, "Legitimacy Structures in the Ottoman State: The Reign of Abdulhamid II (1876-1909)," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 23, no. 3 (Aug., 1991): 346.

¹²¹ See for example the Ottoman Constitution of 23rd December 1876, which stated that "the Exalted Ottoman Sultanate possesses the Great Islamic Caliphate, which is held by the eldest member of the Ottoman Dynasty in accordance with ancient practice... His Imperial Majesty, The Padishah, by virtue of the Caliphate, is the protector of the religion of Islam and the Ruler and Emperor of all Ottoman subjects." Quoted in Ş. Tufan Buzpinar, "Opposition to the Ottoman Caliphate in the Early Years of Abdülhamid II: 1877-1882", *Die Welt Des Islams* 36, no. 1 (1996), 60.

¹²² See Özcan, *Pan-Islamism*, 65, and M. Naeem Qureshi, *Pan-Islam in British Indian Politics: A Study of the Khilafat Movement, 1918-1924* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 29-32.

¹²³ Landau, *The Politics of Pan-Islam*, 198.

now one of the leading figures behind the Nadwat al-‘Ulama’ in Lucknow, captured the melancholic zeitgeist which helped shape much elite Indian Muslim sentiment in the immediate pre-war period:

When decline has set in over political power, The name and banner will stand – how long?
The smoke from the burnt candle of a vanished assembly will rise – how long?
Gone is Morocco, gone is Persia.
We have now to see this helpless sick man of Turkey will live – how long?
This tide of woe which is advancing from the Balkans, the sighs of the oppressed will stem – how long?
Shibli: should you long to migrate, where can you go now?
Syria or Najd or Cyrene are sanctuaries – how long?¹²⁴

What is of interest here, however, is how British authorities responded and sought to find means by which to counter pan-Islam’s apparent power, or else wield it in their own interest. For much of the century, the alliance with Istanbul provided what they believed was indirect leverage over their own Muslim subjects, although in moments of crisis its value appeared questionable. During the uprisings of 1857, Britain secured a proclamation from Sultan ‘Abd al-Majid I advising Indian Muslims against further actions,¹²⁵ and although the intervention had little effect, the link in British minds between Ottoman authority and Indian Muslim sentiment was cemented. As the British-Ottoman alliance began to fray during the Balkan crisis of 1875-78, this apparent link was transformed in some minds into a sinister conspiracy, stoked by belligerent comments by the Sultan ‘Abd al-Hamid II¹²⁶ and the activism of a small cadre of Indian Muslim refugees who had gathered in Istanbul in the

¹²⁴ Quoted in Mushirul Hasan, *Nationalism and Communal Politics in India, 1885-1930* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2000), 61.

¹²⁵ Özcan, *Pan-Islamism*, 16-17.

¹²⁶ “Unlike the Czar, I have abstained till now from stirring up a crusade and profiting from religious fanaticism, but the day may come when I can no longer curb the rights and indignation of my people at seeing their co-religionists butchered in Bulgaria and Armenia. And once their fanaticism is aroused, then the whole Western world, and in particular the British Empire, will have reason to fear.” Sultan ‘Abd al-Hamid II to Layard, British ambassador in Istanbul. Quoted in Karpat, *The Politicization of Islam*, 180.

years following 1857.¹²⁷ It built on the widespread instinctive British belief that global Muslim sentiments were uniquely tied by a religious bond which had the potential to express itself politically, expressed by the former consul-general in Egypt Edward Malet in 1901:

The Mahomedan world breathes with a more uniform rise and fall than the Christian world. It is a body of which the head is the keeper of the holy places. Imagine a giant lying at length on the earth with his head on the Bosphorus and his limbs stretching over Asia and part of Africa. Then, like Jack the Giant Killer, advance warily, when he is asleep, and put your finger in his eye, the limbs will at once show signs of unrest, and with a marvellous instinct they will know whether Jack is Russian, French, or British.¹²⁸

For some British Indian officials, the task of uncovering the conspiracy provoked a fear of Muslim sedition in India not seen since the Wahhabi trials of the 1860s, now internationalized and magnified out of all proportion with the actual level of material support for the Ottoman cause. Casting their eyes across the subcontinent, they found cause for the surveillance of Muslim schools,¹²⁹ the new pan-Islamic societies,¹³⁰ and any Indian Muslim visitor to Ottoman lands.¹³¹ Yet the fear of pan-Islam was undermined by several factors, and amidst the hysteria British officials found tempting opportunities by which to consolidate what they believed to be the self-evident identification of the British Empire with the interests of the world's Muslims.

¹²⁷ On whom, see Karpal, *The Politicization of Islam*, 212, Kramer, *Islam Assembled*, 5-6, and Seema Alavi, "Fugitive Mullahs and Outlawed Fanatics': Indian Muslims in nineteenth century trans-Asiatic Imperial Rivalries", *Modern Asian Studies* 45, no. 6 (November 2011): 1337-1382.

¹²⁸ Edward Malet, *Shifting scenes; or memories of many men in many lands* (London: John Murray, 1901), 104.

¹²⁹ Hardy, *The Muslims of British India*, 177.

¹³⁰ "Anjuman-i-Khuddam-i-Kaaba, 1913-14." IOR/L/PS/20/242, BL.

¹³¹ A report from Cairo in March 1914 warned that "almost every Indian who visited Constantinople went back to his country fully prepared to serve the Turks by helping to spread the principles of Panislamism." See "Note on the Panislamic Movement and its effect on political agitation in India", 19th March 1914. FO 141/492, NA.

British responses to pan-Islam must be understood in the context of the sectarianized nature of the Islamic universe they were at that moment conceptualizing. At certain times, this could work to generate further anxieties, as authorities looked to the vast array of newly discovered sects and movements for the figure who might fulfil the promise of pan-Islam, in hostility to Britain. The case of one Maulvi Abu Sayid al-‘Arabi, an Indian who had spent time in Istanbul and Cairo, highlights the fluid nature of pan-Islamic activism at this time. Although regarded as a “pan-Islamic agitator”, authorities struggled to determine the particular sectarian impulse guiding his actions, as al-‘Arabi appeared to drift from one sect to the next, perhaps on his own search for the one movement which would satisfy the demands of pan-Islamic solidarity. As one intelligence report noted, he was “stated to have first been a Hanafi, then to have become a Ghair Mukallid, after which he professed to believe in the Mirza of Qadian”, although in a letter sent to Nawab ‘Ishaq Khan of Aligarh, he explicitly cited “the holy sheikh Sennoussi.”¹³²

Yet although pan-Islamic sentiment may have generally transcended sectarian boundaries,¹³³ by and large it was not translated into a united course of action, with the Shi‘a of India, as we have seen in chapter two, repeatedly distancing themselves from pro-Ottoman declarations and acts which would place their pro-British loyalties in question. Elsewhere, sectarian demography ensured that the sultan’s name carried little weight in the face of a rival contender. With regards to the anti-Ottoman revolt in the Yemen which raged in the decade preceding the First World War, British authorities noted Turkish exasperation at attempts to pacify the country’s predominantly Zaidi population. An article in a Turkish newspaper translated and sent to the foreign office argued that

¹³² “Pan-Islamic history sheet of Maulvi Abu Said el-Arabi”, P-1744, 1914. IOR/L/PS/1177, BL.

¹³³ See Kramer, *Islam Assembled*, 2-3 and Özcan, *Pan-Islamism*, 147.

the real Yemen problem for us [Turks] is constituted by the Zeidis. According to the Zeidis' religion, the imam of the Zeidis considers himself Khalif, and cannot be in subjection to anyone. He is bound by his religion to proclaim a holy war...even if Imam Yahya disappears, the Zeidis will of course choose another imam, who will consider it a religious duty to make war on us.¹³⁴

British evaluations of the state of Islam in India – from the popular religion of the countryside to sectarian relations in the cities - worked on the official mind to dilute the potential ferocity which might be unleashed by an Islamic world working in unison against the European powers. Authorities in India regularly organized country-wide investigations to ascertain the extent of pro-Ottoman sentiment among the Indian Muslim population, proposing survey questions for army officers to consider such as “Is there any evidence to show that the Turco-Italian War has had any effect upon Indian Muhammadans?” and “What is your opinion regarding the Pan-Islamic feeling amongst Muhammadans in India?”¹³⁵ One such investigation was conducted in the aftermath of the Taba Crisis of 1906, when British Egyptian and Ottoman authorities clashed in the Gulf of Aqaba. A Government of India report, including dispatches on the state of Indian Muslim opinion with regards to the crisis, was submitted to the India Office in June, and concluded with the following assessment:

the policy recently pursued by the Powers towards the Porte has not evoked any very strong expression of feeling among Indian Muhammadans, although in the event of pressure being brought to bear on Turkey in order to enforce compliance with the demands of the Powers a certain class of Muhammadans on the North-West Frontier, and the Mullas in particular, may always be expected to sympathise strongly with the Sultan...Elsewhere the Sunnis take a certain amount of interest in the Sultan as the strongest extant representative of Muslim rule, and by some he is regarded as the legitimate Caliph, though he does not belong to the Arab tribe of Koreish. The Shiah, on the other hand, hold him in no consideration.¹³⁶

¹³⁴ Extract from the *Tanin* of 1st March 1911. Enclosed in Lowther to Grey, 28th February 1911, no. 124. In *Arab Dissident Movements 1905-1955, volume 1: 1905-1920*. Edited by A. L. P. Burdett (Archive Editions, 1996), 119-121.

¹³⁵ “Questions asked by the Army in India Committee on religious sects.” Home/Political/16/Deposit. July 1912, NAI.

¹³⁶ “Muhammadan feeling in India in respect of the recent policy of the Powers towards Turkey.” Government of India to Morley, 28th June 1906. FO 371/67, NA.

Typical of the regional reports was that submitted from the Central Provinces, which noted that while the sultan's name was evoked in the mosques, and the educated class of Muslims would regret any damage to Ottoman strength and prestige, the great majority of the Muslim population were "backward and more than half Hindu in their customs and superstitions", expressing little or no interest in international affairs.¹³⁷ Similarly, the respondent from Meerut opined that "the great majority of Indian Mussulmans, the ignorant descendants of imperfectly converted Hindus, have never even heard of the [Sultan] and his grievances."¹³⁸

A similar survey was undertaken in 1912 in the context of the Italo-Turkish War, the recent Russian bombardment of Mashhad in north-east Iran, and the cancellation of the 1905 partition of Bengal, widely perceived as a blow to the interests of Bengali Muslims who had benefited from the creation of a Muslim-majority province in east Bengal.¹³⁹ According to the Government of the United Provinces, this investigation was prompted by an explosion of interest in these events evidenced by the number of articles concerning them published in the vernacular papers.¹⁴⁰ The report submitted by Sir George Roos-Keppel, Chief Commissioner of the North-West Frontier Province, reflects a relatively clear-sighted appraisal of the factors driving this interest:

we must accept the fact that all Musulman communities, however widely scattered, feel themselves to be members of one great family of nations and are proud of the feeling. Thus the sorrows of one demand and receive the sympathies of others and tend to strengthen the bonds uniting all. There exists without doubt an uneasy suspicion, amounting in some cases to belief, that the Christian nations of the world are arrayed against the Musulman and that a conspiracy is on foot to crush Islam for ever...That this belief is entirely unreasonable and without any foundation can hardly be said, as a glance at a map shows that every Muslim country from Morocco

¹³⁷ Slocock, Central Provinces, 8th March 1906. FO 371/67, NA.

¹³⁸ Conyheare to Winter, Meerut, 20th March 1906. FO 371/67, NA.

¹³⁹ See Hardy, *The Muslims of British India*, 148-153.

¹⁴⁰ Burn to Secretary to the Government of India, 16th July 1912 In "Turkey and the Powers feeling among Indian Muhammadans", P-522, 1913. IOR/L/PS/11/45, BL.

to India is either at war with, in revolt against or in the possession of some European Power and that the encroachment of Europe upon Islam has been particularly rapid in the last few years...Musulmans cannot be blamed for a suspicion, which is but natural...¹⁴¹

Yet there was still little sign that Indian Muslims were preparing to undertake any sort of unified action against British authority to address their grievances. Indeed, less than a year later, Sir Harcourt Butler explicitly expressed the opinion such action was beyond them:

The pan-Islamic movement is, so far as India is concerned, a pure myth. The Muhammadans in India were never more divided than they are at the present time and I certainly cannot find, going about India, much evidence - though there is a good deal of suspicion - that a considerable body of Muhammadans is really moved by its sympathy for Islam, to any positive or aggressive political position.¹⁴²

By this time, many British officials had concluded that Ottoman authority beyond Istanbul's own shrinking domains was a phantom.¹⁴³ According to Cromer, 'Abd al-Hamid II's influence in Egypt was so limited that even the façade of British cooperation with Istanbul in the administration of Egypt, long touted as a possible means by which to allay Egyptian frustrations with a non-Muslim regime, would have little or no impact.¹⁴⁴ We have seen how the impotency of Istanbul in the face of the Mahdist and Sanusi movements led Cairo-based officials to conclude that the time was ripe for a reformist challenge to Ottoman authority, perhaps with the support of British power and prestige. In the official mind, this state of affairs left something of a power vacuum in Islam, an absence of legitimate, central authority which Britain herself was keen to assume. While some speculation surrounded the potential for the Khedive in Cairo to assume the role of Caliph,¹⁴⁵ the primary focus fell on the Hijaz,

¹⁴¹ Roos-Keppel to Wheeler, 6th September 1912. In "Turkey and the Powers feeling among Indian Muhammadans", P-522, 1913. IOR/L/PS/11/45, BL.

¹⁴² Butler to Lovat, 8th April 1913. *Butler Papers*, Mss Eur F116/71, BL.

¹⁴³ For example, Curzon believed that the sultan's influence could be discounted as a political factor in India. See Karpat, *The Politicization of Islam*, 234.

¹⁴⁴ Baring to Salisbury, 14th December 1887, no. 130. FO 407/71, NA.

¹⁴⁵ O'Connor to Salisbury, 14th February 1900, no. 26. FO 407/155, NA.

where the Hashimite Sharif of Mecca administered the holy cities on behalf of Ottoman authorities. An unsigned memo which arrived in Cairo in 1884 made the case that the wave of revivalism then afflicting the Islamic world was in fact directed against Istanbul, and likely originated in the Hijaz:

the power of the Porte has been humbled, but not that of Islam, which, as a morbidic principle in society, is as active as ever, and even hostile to the Ottoman Power itself...The Grand Khalif of Constantinople, in the eyes of the Islamism of Mecca, is a parasite which has usurped the plant which bred it. Hence all the attempts at revolution of Mecca, the real country of Mahomet and fatherland of Islamism.¹⁴⁶

Here we see explicit the idea that Mecca, and not Istanbul, represented Islamic orthodoxy, and by extension the belief that the Arabs were the most suitable and rightful claimants to political authority in Islam. In the advancement of this cause, British observers began to make the case that the Ottoman claim to the caliphate was unlawful, illegitimate, and heretical, and that the demands of orthodoxy required the caliph to be an Arab descendent of the Prophet's tribe, the Quraysh. Writing in *The Times* in 1877, George Birdwood argued that

there is not the slightest authority for the claim of the Sultans of Constantinople to the Caliphate; that their assumption of the title is an illegal and heretical usurpation; and that the acceptance of their preposterous pretension to it by Mohamedans is discreditable equally to their orthodoxy, their intelligence, and their good faith.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁶ Unsigned memo on Abyssinia to Granville, 11th February 1884, no. 311. FO 407/60, NA.

¹⁴⁷ Quoted in Kramer, *Islam Assembled*, 13. The language used is similar to Hughes, *Dictionary of Islam*, 264, who writes that "the assumption of the title [caliph] by any one who is not of the Koreish tribes is undoubtedly illegal and heretical." The ruling was accepted by the eleventh century Shafi'i 'alim al-Mawardi, who articulated perhaps the most comprehensive and influential theory of just Islamic governance. See Al-Mawardi, *The Laws of Islamic Governance*, trans. Asadullah Yate (London, Ta-Ha Publishers, 1996), 12.

For Wilfrid Blunt, who was heavily influenced by Birdwood,¹⁴⁸ the fact that the Hanafi ‘ulama’ of the Ottoman Empire and South Asia had successfully defended the Ottoman claim to the caliphate was only evidence of their complicity in the stifling of *ijtihad*,¹⁴⁹ a position which placed them in opposition to the reformist, progressive trend which he believed was destined to revitalize the world of Islam. A properly orthodox, reformed Islam would, it was believed, operate independently of, or even against, Ottoman political power, opening the way to a true partnership with the British Empire. From Cairo, Mecca in particular appeared to British authorities to represent the spiritual heart of Islam,¹⁵⁰ waiting to be liberated from the Turkish yoke under the guiding hand of the British Empire. An Islamic world largely freed from concerns of worldly power formed the essence of Blunt’s vision as expressed in *The Future of Islam*,¹⁵¹ as a Hashimite Caliphate would transcend sectarian divisions and consolidate the spiritual basis of the faith. In an excited passage reflecting the heightened sense that Britain had it within her power to actively shape the Islamic world for the benefit of the world’s Muslims, Blunt speculated that the transfer of the caliphate to the Hijaz would achieve what Ottoman pan-Islam could not:

I have even heard it affirmed that a Caliphate of the Koreysh at Mecca would go far towards reconciling the Schismatics, Abadhites, and Shiahhs with orthodoxy; and I have reason to believe that it would so affect the liberal three-quarters of Wahhabism. To the Shiahhs, especially, a descendant of Ali could not but be acceptable; and to the Arabs of Oman and Yemen a Caliph of the Koreysh would be at least less repugnant than a Caliph of the Beni Othman.¹⁵²

Stripped of political significance, the caliph in Blunt’s vision would be largely confined to a spiritual function, while the end of the Ottoman Empire and its claim to authority in Islam

¹⁴⁸ Kramer, *Islam Assembled*, 12-13.

¹⁴⁹ Blunt, *The Future of Islam*, 72.

¹⁵⁰ According to Cromer, “Mecca, and not Constantinople, is...the centre of the Mahommedan faith.” Baring to Grey, 22nd March 1906, no. 293. FO 407/166, NA.

¹⁵¹ Blunt, *The Future of Islam*, 129-130.

¹⁵² *Ibid*, 130.

would elevate the Muslim population of India, and by extension the British Empire, to a position of unparalleled importance in the world of Islam – “It will...be expected of the English Crown that it should then justify its assumption of the old Mohammedan title of the Moguls, by making itself in some sort the political head of Islam.”¹⁵³ Though Cromer was keen to allay Ottoman concerns that Cairo was involved in a conspiracy to supplant the authority of the sultan,¹⁵⁴ by the entrance of the Ottoman Empire to the First World War, active plans were already underway to support the claim to the caliphate of the Sharif Husayn of Mecca, an Ottoman regional administrator with ambitions for independence. In September 1914, Kitchener, acting Secretary of State for war, opened a correspondence with Mecca, during which Husayn’s son ‘Abd Allah expressed disillusionment with Ottoman rule in the Hijaz and confirmed that an independent Hashimite state would naturally look to Britain for support.¹⁵⁵ A further message from ‘Abd Allah of 30th October referred to the Ottoman state as “the Khalifate”, and noted that Hashimite loyalty to Istanbul was based on two conditions which the Ottomans were in danger of breaching: fidelity to Islam and non-interference in the affairs of the Hijaz.¹⁵⁶ The following day, Kitchener penned his now famous message to ‘Abd Allah, in which he opined that in the event of war between Britain and the Ottoman Empire, “[It] may be that an Arab of true race will assume Caliphate at Mecca or Medina and so good may come by the help of God out of all evil that is now occurring.”¹⁵⁷

¹⁵³ Ibid, 194.

¹⁵⁴ Baring to Grey, 22nd March 1906, no. 293. FO 407/166, NA.

¹⁵⁵ Elie Kedourie, *In the Anglo-Arab Labyrinth: The McMahon-Husayn Correspondence and its Interpretations 1914-1939* (London: Frank Cass, 2000), 15-17.

¹⁵⁶ “Summary of historical documents from the outbreak of the war between Great Britain and Turkey 1914 to the outbreak of the Revolt of the Sherif of Mecca”, 26th November 1916, report by Capt. Ormsby-Gore. FO 882/5, NA.

¹⁵⁷ Kitchener, 31st October 1914, no. 303. FO 141/587/2, NA.

Epilogue: The Caliphate Question

In the summer of 1916, Husayn declared his revolt against the Ottoman Empire, bringing the new Kingdom of the Hijaz into the First World War on the side of the Allied Powers. Over the course of the previous two years, Cairo and Mecca had negotiated the terms of this alliance, reaching the understanding that, should they succeed in bringing an end to Turkish rule in the Hijaz, Husayn would be entitled to an independent state in the region. The nature of the frontiers of that state was a topic left open to interpretation, leading to controversies and allegations of betrayal in the future.¹⁵⁸ Another aspect of the negotiation, however, concerned the caliphate, with the British side affirming that, if Husayn chose to make a caliphal claim, they would be happy to recognize his authority in this regard. The nature of that authority was, like the territorial boundaries of the new states, left ambiguous. In public, British officials tended to speak of a spiritual caliphate, with Mecca serving as an Islamic Vatican under the broad wing of British protection, while dangling the prospect of a limited temporal realm in front of Husayn. In private correspondence it became apparent that they were depending on the fragmented reality of Islamic sectarian landscape to ensure that Husayn, or indeed any rival claimant, could not succeed in winning the recognition he needed in order to be legitimized as caliph. In 1915, in the middle of the Anglo-Arab negotiations, Reginald Wingate informed the Arab Bureau that Britain has “everything to gain” from the disunity then prevailing in Islam, and that there was great benefit to be had from having “the strongest spiritual in the hands of the weakest temporal power.”¹⁵⁹ Not just against Husayn, the sectarian card could be wielded against those advocating for the maintenance of the Ottoman caliphate. In November 1915, the Agha Khan arrived in

¹⁵⁸ See Kedourie, *In the Anglo-Arab Labyrinth*.

¹⁵⁹ “The Khalifate,” Wingate to McMahon, 27th August 1915. FO 882/13, NA.

London, warning Maurice de Brunsen that Indian Muslims would never accept an Arab caliphate under British protection.¹⁶⁰ In response, Wingate noted the Agha Khan's status as the "Head of the Isma'ili Sect" and the sectarian affiliation of his colleague Amir 'Ali, arguing that, whatever their claims, they could not be understood to speak on behalf of India's Muslims:

The opinions expressed...by the Agha Khan seem to me to be such as were to be expected from the Head of the Ismailia Sect...it is a subject to me for speculation how far a Westernized Moslem of his type or even an advanced thinker such as Syed Ameer Ali are able truly to reflect the attitude of the bulk of their nominal co-religionists in matters of religious sentiment. In any case I hazard to venture the opinion that neither of these individuals is in a position to represent the views of the Sunnite population of India on the question of the Khalifate.¹⁶¹

The following January, the Director of Intelligence in Cairo, Gilbert Clayton, commented on the perception in India that Indian Muslims were increasingly dismayed by the prospect of an Arab revolt against Ottoman authority which would result in the transfer of the caliphate from Istanbul to Mecca. The idea of an independent Arab state in the Hijaz had not been well received by officials at the India Office or in New Delhi, whose relationship with Husayn's great rival Ibn Sa'ud, and concern at the growth of unrest among Indian Muslims, led to a barrage of back-and-forth diplomatic correspondence aiming to uncover Cairo's true intentions. Clayton sought to assure India that, in fact, no grand Arab state would emerge following the war:

though the Sherif might become the nominal head of the Arab confederation and thus qualify himself to assume the Khalifate, the lack of cohesion which is always quoted is our main safeguard against the establishment of a united Arab Kingdom which might be a threat against British interests.¹⁶²

¹⁶⁰ Foreign Office to MacMahon, 2nd November 1915, no. 231. FO 141/587/2, NA.

¹⁶¹ Wingate to McMahon, 1st December 1915. FO 141/587/2, NA.

¹⁶² Clayton to Khartoum, 28th January 1916. FO 882/12, NA.

Following the war, Britain lost interest in Husayn's ambitions if not the question of the caliphate itself. When, following Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's abolition of the Ottoman caliphate in 1924, Husayn declared himself caliph in Mecca, the Muslim world scarcely took notice, with British surveys of opinion across the empire revealing a deep indifference to the Sharif's proclamation.¹⁶³ As the Hashimite Kingdom of the Hijaz crumbled in the face of Sa'udi incursions over the following year, the prospects for a renewed caliphate ended. Britain had helped achieve the shift in emphasis away from a political conception of pan-Islam, much as they had intended. But the spiritual empire they envisioned would replace it proved beyond their means to secure. Indeed, their own conception of the Islamic world as inherently fragmented, divided between mutually hostile sects, had helped undermine it.

¹⁶³ See for example Bombay to Government of India, 7th April 1924. FO 371/10218, NA, where Husayn was widely condemned as a British agent, a traitor to Islam, and an incompetent administrator of the hajj.

Conclusion: Britain's Muslim empire and the pacification of Islam

This dissertation has argued that the reality of sectarian diversity within Islam was a crucial, yet mostly overlooked, element in the nineteenth century British official encounter with the Muslim peoples of their empire. Rather than making the case that the British viewed Islam as a collection of legitimate 'islams' competing with each other on a level playing field, however, it has argued that post-Reformation understandings of what constituted so-called "true religion" had the effect of anchoring British understandings of Islamic diversity in the familiar concepts of orthodoxy, heterodoxy, and reform. These constituted a shared framework for enquiry into the fragmented world of Islamic sectarianism and reform, fuelled by a set of shared assumptions held by the collective of the British officials involved.

This dissertation has utilized the concept of the 'official mind', adapting it to serve our methodological needs. With such a vast number of British officials involved in the task of governing Muslim peoples across the empire, the idea of the 'official mind' has provided a level of coherence to our case study, which has been the network of officials who were instinctively concerned with role of the Muslim world in the pursuit of British imperial policy. Within the official mind, there was room for a variety of interpretations on questions such as the exact nature of Islamic orthodoxy, the boundaries of sectarian identity, and the potential for reformative change within Islam. These variations occurred within the basic framework of British supremacy and the belief that Western civilization, represented by the British Empire, represented the peak of human civilization. They were, however, the product of several alternative contexts.

In chapter one, we examined how the idea of the essence of Islam as a rigidly monotheistic, textual faith, became embedded in the official mind through the transmission of the scholarly

knowledge and arguments of a collection of eighteenth and nineteenth century writers deemed authoritative. The general approval which accompanied the lesson of the victory of Islam over the pagan Arabs of the seventh century Hijaz produced the idea that, in its original spirit, Islam was a reformatory religion capable of inspiring men to make their mark on history. Transported with the functionaries of empire to the rural hinterlands of northern India, however, this idea clashed with the reality of Muslim devotional life along the Indus. There, the Muslims appeared mired in superstition and blasphemy, unable to shake off the legacy of their Hindu past. The contrast with the early Muslim community of Medina could not have been more stark, and British observers came to terms with the apparent aberration by locating the root of the problem in perceived primordial Indian religious traditions. This in turn drew an emphasis on the authentic, Arabian spirit of Islam as the measure of orthodoxy. In the countryside, British officials identified two competing trends claiming the mantle of Islam which attempted to give rural life some measure of an Islamic basis. The Sufis, however, were viewed by the British as fair-weather Muslims, informed by a 'foreign', non-Arabian, spirit. Conversely, the 'ulama', associated most strongly with the Sunnis, represented a legal and textual legacy reaching back to the early days of Islam, and provided their assistance in imposing a measure of law and order on India's Muslims through their contribution to the elaboration of Anglo-Muhammadan Law. Thus, they were privileged with the mantle of orthodoxy, which was subsequently applied to Sunnis everywhere.

The experience of governing Muslims, however, highlighted to British officials that terms such as orthodoxy, heterodoxy, and fanatic, had limited utility in the pursuit of colonial policy. The Shi'a were originally conceived of as the Sunnis' classic *other* – they lacked a commitment to monotheism, they were inspired by Iranian rather than Arabian civilization,

and their legal code rested on the judgements of charismatic ancients rather than on reasoned argument. However, as the classic colonial modes of governance were imposed on the Shi‘a, opportunities for the community to represent itself as a monolithic and legitimate religious minority arose. Through the census enumeration process and the court system, questions relating to the exact nature of Shi‘i identity were raised and settled, with the result that the traditionally blurred boundaries which distinguished them from their rival movements were becoming ever more concrete. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the British arbitration of Sunni-Shi‘i sectarian disputes. While the British may have instinctively believed in the inherent orthodoxy of the Sunnis, the ostensible neutral platform of the colonial state meant that Shi‘i positions, narratives, and doctrines had to be reckoned with on an even basis with their Sunni neighbours. Through these processes, the Shi‘a in British India evolved from a heterodox ‘sect’ to a legitimate religious minority, with all the rights that such a status implied.

Likewise with the *Ahl-i-Hadis* movement. Though condemned as seditious Wahhabis in the aftermath of the uprisings of 1857, British engagement with the doctrines of this puritanical reformist trend had the effect of relegating the question of the movement’s ambiguous position on the legitimacy of British rule in India to the periphery of the conversation. Several factors led a growing British identification with the movement, in particular its disdain for the popular religious practices of the rural masses, equalled condemned by the British. Meanwhile, the intervention of helpful Muslim intermediaries such as Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan helped pacify the movement in the official mind, as it shook off its Wahhabi label to embrace a title with echoes of the exalted Islamic past. While a small party of Wahhabis lingered on in defiance of British authority, the *Ahl-i-Hadis*, as the general reformist trend now referred to itself, engaged with the colonial state on an equal basis with

their Hanafi and other rivals. Ultimately, their novel doctrine of rejecting the authority of the 'ulama' opened up the official mind to the possibility that reform outside of the orthodox tradition was a possibility.

In the figure of the founder of the Aligarh College, Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan, British Indian officials located the most likely source for such a reform. Staunchly loyal and dedicated to bringing a modern, English-style education to the Muslims of northern India, Sir Sayyid won a devotional following from among a certain class of British official, many of whom became enthusiastic supporters of his religious reformist thought. This was based on the idea that the original spirit of Islam was progressive and reformist, waiting to be unleashed again for the benefit of humanity. Transported to Cairo, however, and Sir Sayyid's ideas appeared out of touch, as the specific conditions prevailing in the Egyptian capital had already produced an analogous reformist movement, though wearing a rather different face. While Aligarh was cited as the measure of reform even in distant Cairo, Sir Sayyid was condemned as a heretic, home and abroad, and at the institution he had founded in the North-Western Provinces, his religious thought remained untaught. The space was filled by the guardians of orthodoxy from the Deoband seminary, and as Aligarh entered the twentieth century, the hopes and expectations that had been placed on it evaporated. Absent the progressive religious content inherent in Sir Sayyid's vision, the student body turned to politics, becoming embroiled in the anti-British activism sweeping the country at that time. This was, indeed, the first of many disappointments as British officials searched for the one movement they believed could affect reformative change in Islam.

That search got underway just as those great ethnographic projects in the service of empire, the Census of India and the District and Imperial Gazetteers, were developing into the most

prestigious sources of information on the peoples of the empire available to colonial officials. Naturally, the British took a disproportional interest in the religious allegiances of their subjects, and in the age of Islamic reform, this interest produced a tendency to emphasize minority, heterodox sects at the expense of their more numerous, normative counterparts. While the Census of India ultimately privileged the modernist successors of Sir Sayyid with the right to define Islam for the English reader, it also drew a focus on sporadic eschatological movements, as well as on those new sects whose diversion from the orthodox tradition was so great as to resign them to a minor role in the grand discussion revolving around the future of Islam. Moving to the Persian Gulf, and British officials operated under an entirely different set of circumstances. There, the sacred sectarian landscape produced an emphasis on sectarian conflict, which a collection of nineteenth century travellers primarily experienced in the form of Wahhabi-Shi'i antagonism. Ultimately, however, the urge to identify a reformist tendency led to an exploration of the possibility that it might emerge from one of the two competing sects. While the Babi movement represented a clean break with even the more radical Shi'i traditions, and so was felt to have moved outside our Islamic universe, the Wahhabis appeared determined to dominate its orthodox core, even if they made no explicit appeal to political authority in the Islamic world.

In the late nineteenth century, that appeal was being made primarily by the Ottoman Sultan 'Abd al-Hamid II, whose influence could be deeply felt by those British officials based in Cairo and the adjacent outposts of empire. Yet across the Red Sea lay the holy land of the Hijaz; and in the deserts of the Sudan and eastern Sahara, two challengers to the sultan's authority appeared to emerge. In seeking to discover if it might be useful to appropriate the authority and prestige of these challengers for their own ends, British officials attempted to

measure their orthodoxy and chances for success in appealing to the hearts of Muslims worldwide in defiance of the sultan's status as caliph. Muhammad Ahmad of the Sudan was judged too heterodox by most to mount a serious challenge, with the result that when Britain re-established control of the country, the new rulers turned to orthodoxy in order to prevent the emergence of a new 'Mahdi'. The Sanusiyya order of the Western Desert, however, appeared to fulfil the credentials required to claim the mantle of authority in Islam. Being isolated in the oasis of Jaghub, however, British officials struggled to paint a coherent picture of the order and its leader, typically referred to as "the Senoussi", whether the founder or his two successors. Unreliable reports on the stature and global influence of the order inflated the Sanusi's importance in British eyes, with some identifying him as a figure capable of uniting large parts of the Muslim world. However, Cairo soon discovered that his influence extended little beyond the sparse deserts in which he operated, and although the Sanusiyya would go on to play a major role in the establishment of the modern state of Libya, it never came close to fulfilling the expectation placed on it by certain British officials.

That left 'Abd al-Hamid II largely unopposed as recipient of the respect and prestige associated with the last great Islamic empire left standing. Though the British had attempted to appropriate this prestige in the past, the fraying of the Ottoman-British alliance left them looking for alternatives. With the failure of the Sanusiyya, Cairo increasingly looked to the Hijaz, where the Sharif of Mecca was identified as the most suitable candidate to assume the role of spiritual caliph, backed by British power. Ultimately, however, the nature of the fragmented, sectarianized conceptual world the official mind had constructed over the previous half century, undermined the potential for such a project to succeed.

In 1918, a British official with the initials R.W.G.¹ accused the Islamic world of political dysfunction and backwardness due to its apparent obsession with re-establishing the glory days of the great Islamic empires of the past. Such sentiments, he argued, had no place in the modern world:

The claim of any Moslem Prince to the Temporal Khaliphate, as understood by the Turks, is incompatible with the sovereign rights of other States over their own Moslem subjects...the Moslem states have never been fully admitted to the "Comity of Nations". As long as these ideas prevail, they must not expect to be treated in a footing of equality by the Western Powers, or accepted as civilized Communities...By the defeat of Turkey in the present war, an end has been put to the Turkish claim to the Khalifate...If the new Arab States which are coming into existence wish to escape the fate of Turkey they must lay this lesson to heart.- All claim to a Temporal Khalifate must be abandoned, as well as all attempts to force a Theocratic Islamic Government upon unwilling populations.²

The irony, as we have seen, is that British officials themselves had played a role in stoking such hopes. Yet in the aftermath of the war, the importance granted Islam as a defining factor of life in Muslim societies, and by extension politics, appeared to shrink. Nationalist politics became the order of the day from Cairo to Calcutta, as the fragmented Muslim world attempted to join the "Comity of Nations." Britain had helped open a conceptual gap in legitimate Islamic authority that she could not subsequently fill, either in partnership with the legitimate spiritual heirs of the Prophet Muhammad, or by the blunt application of Western power. The shared set of assumptions and knowledge regarding the conceptual Islamic universe that imperial Britain had constructed began to lose their value, and with it the British identification with Islam.

¹ Suggestive of Reginald Wingate, but not confirmed.

² Minute by R.W.G., 30th October 1918. FO 882/14, NA.

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