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**Protesting the Heresies of Modernity:
The Politics of Islamic Fundamentalism in South Asia**

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In this paper, I analyze the emergence and evolution of a religio-political public sphere in South Asia starting from the late eighteenth century. My main purpose in conceptualizing such a public sphere is to show that, despite claims made by Islamic fundamentalists to restore a pristine 7th century version of Islam in Muslim societies and corresponding popular contemporary beliefs about Muslims in the West; Islamic fundamentalism is a fairly recent phenomenon. Given this rather short history, any real understanding of Islamic fundamentalism requires that we view it precisely within the bounds set by the defining characteristic of the period in human history, which contains the whole experience of Islamic fundamentalism since its birth. This defining characteristic was the advent of modernity, and the beginning of Islamic fundamentalist political thought was a result of the initiatives taken by traditional scholars of Islam known as the *'Ulema* (singular: *'Alim*) to retain their control of 'the religious', in Muslim societies. In the quest to retain their usefulness in the face of novel challenges posed by modernity and Western domination, the efforts of these *'Ulema*, (perhaps inadvertently) resulted in an expansion of their traditional role in Muslim societies and created avenues for later generations of Muslims to penetrate and reshape the political sphere in ways unparalleled in Islamic history.

In the above context, I first briefly discuss the training and role of the *'Ulema* in the pre-modern period and the challenges that they faced with the advent of modernity and western colonialism. In particular, I discuss the role of print technology, western education system, and introduction of English law in South Asia. Second, I look at the generation of Islamic thinkers and activists who formed their ideas in context of the changes already introduced by the *'Ulema* in South Asia. These thinkers, or as they are commonly called, the modernists and the Islamists

(or fundamentalists), developed their ideas outside the traditional religious education system. Here I specifically look at the political ideas of *Sayyed Ahmad Khan* and *Abul Ala Maududi*. Third, I discuss the transformed nature of the Islamic political sphere in Modern India by comparing the political and religious ideas of all three, i.e., the '*Ulema*', the Modernists and the Islamists and look at the possibility of an emerging religio-political public sphere in Muslim societies. Finally, I discuss implications of the emergence of such a public sphere for understanding Islamic fundamentalist political thought in particular and the contemporary politics of Muslim societies in general.

The '*Ulema*: As Custodians of a Venerated Tradition

The significance and influence of the '*Ulema*' in Islamic societies can perhaps be best understood from the fact that these traditional Muslim scholars successfully resisted the introduction of print technology in Islamic lands for four hundred years, after it had already been firmly established in the Christian West.¹ Grasping the reasons behind this resistance are fundamental to understanding the very different ways in which traditional religious scholars perceived new challenges to their authority in the east and the west. In case of Islamic societies, however, they hold a special significance as this resistance reveals not only the nature of religious authority itself but also how such authority was constructed in the first place. This is clear from the fact that when finally print technology became established in Islamic societies, especially in South Asia, it was not because '*Ulema*'s resistance was defeated by secular forces, but because it was the '*Ulema*' themselves who started using it as a means towards preserving the

¹ For details see Thomas F. Carter, "Islam as a Barrier to Printing", *The Moslem World*, 1943 XXXIII, pp, 213-216 and Muhammad Qasim Zaman, "Commentaries, Print and Patronage: *Hadith* and the Madrasas in Modern South Asia" *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London*, Vol. 62, No. 1 (1999) p. 60

same ends for which they earlier resisted it.² The story of print technology in Islamic societies, therefore, is key to understanding the development of modern religio-political attitudes that have no precedence in Islamic history. Here it is also useful to remember that throughout Islamic history, Muslims rarely studied politics in isolation from related disciplines. Problems such as the nature of the state, varieties of government and qualifications of rulers, limitations on their power and the rights of the ruled, were discussed as part of the comprehensive treatises on jurisprudence and theology all enveloped within the secure walls of the *Shariah*.³ Isolated works on what it means to be a Muslim and what should be the nature of a Muslim polity appeared only after print technology was adopted by the *'Ulema*. Throughout Islamic history, revolts with a religious aspect or ideology have been a norm, which suggests that challenges to the state and the *'Ulema* were not a new phenomenon, still it was only the challenges faced by Muslims in late 18th and early 19th century, which pushed the *'Ulema* to embrace a modern technology that was available since four centuries but was deemed detrimental to the spirit of Islam.⁴

As stated above, the *'Ulema* are the traditional elite Muslim scholars who are in a sense the custodians of knowledge in the Islamic world for their own generation. An understanding of the source of their authority therefore lies in the way knowledge and education were acquired and transmitted in the Muslim world, since the dawn of Islam in the 7th century till the advent of modernity or more specifically European colonialism.

To understand what constitutes knowledge in the Islamic tradition one needs to begin from the word of God, which is the source of all knowledge, i.e., the *Qur'an*. Unlike the Bible in

² Zaman, *Ibid.*, 60-61

³ See Hamid Enayat, *Modern Islamic Political Thought*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982) pp. 3-4

⁴ For a discussion of the revolts in Islamic societies see Nikki R. Keddie, "The Revolt of Islam, 1700-1993: Comparative Considerations and Relations to Imperialism" *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (Jul., 1994), pp. 463-465

Christianity or the Torah in Judaism, the Qur'an holds a more central place in Muslim theology. Just as in Christianity the virgin birth of Christ is the proof of his divine nature, in Islam *Qur'an* is the proof of divinity for Muslims. Authors of classical Islamic texts give numerous accounts of *Qur'an's* elegant style, its beauty and its matchlessness in terms of any other literary work that man has ever created. These accounts are presented as proof of its divine character.⁵ The *Qur'an* itself means 'recitation' or reading out loud and it is only through recitation that it is realized and received as divine.⁶ It is a popular Muslim belief that the Qur'an, unlike other revealed books, is preserved in its original revealed form, and that God himself has guaranteed its safety.⁷ Nevertheless for the purpose of this paper, the reference to Qur'an is important as it tells us about the trustworthiness of knowledgeable claims in general. The prophet always transmitted the Qur'an to his followers orally who remembered it by heart and thus became custodians of the ultimate truth. Even after the death of the prophet and completion of the Qur'an, when it first began to be written it was only to aid the memory and oral transmission, and even to this day the written Qur'an serves the same function in the Islamic tradition.⁸ It is in this tradition of oral transmission and the subsequent checks developed later for determining the authenticity of the Qur'an and the Hadith that one sees the earliest foundations of an Islamic system of learning and the rise of the *'Ulema*. The oral transmission was based on the idea of person-to-person transfer of knowledge, the concern for authenticity of this transmitted knowledge was important because it was the unquestionable truth that one was dealing with, therefore lack of preservation could

⁵ For a detailed discussion see William A. Graham, *Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987) pp. 79-82, Also Sayyed Hossein Nasr, "Oral Transmission and the Book in Islamic Education: The Spoken and the Written Word", *Journal of Islamic Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 1, January 1992, pp. 1-14

⁶ Graham, p. 82

⁷ I base this claim here on personal experience; it is perhaps the most commonly heard argument if one is raised in a Muslim country and a Muslim household. In any comparison between Islam and other revealed religions this is normally the starting point. Just like Christ's virgin birth is indisputable, Qur'an's preservation in original form is also beyond question.

⁸ For an account of the essential orality of the Qur'an see Graham, pp. 79-115

result in perversion of the truth itself. The preservation of Qur'an also supplied Muslims with a methodology for transmission of all other knowledge.

According to Francis Robinson, the publication of a book in the early Islamic centuries served the same purpose as did the writing of the Quran, i.e., only to aid the memory. The author dictated his draft to a copyist from memory or his personal writing, the copyist would then read it back to him for corrections and amendments and the publication would take place through the copyist reading the text to the author in a public place such as a mosque, who could still make more changes in it. After several readings, the author would accord his '*ijaza* or permission'⁹ for the work to be transmitted from him. Further copies of the work had real authority only after they were read back to the author and approved by him. Even after a book entered a Madrassa the process of transmission would remain the same, the teacher, who had the '*ijaza* from the original author or his qualified intellectual descendant, would dictate the text to student who would eventually commit it to memory, commentaries of the book (created in the same way) would also be treated in the same manner and completion of a course of study would be announced only after the student read back the texts that he was dictated, to the teacher.¹⁰ In other words, the '*ijaza* was, and still is in some cases, the traditional Islamic equivalent of a western diploma or a degree. The student who received such a diploma was made acutely aware of the fact that he was a custodian, in his own generation, of a certain part of the great Islamic tradition of learning. But more fundamentally, it tells us that knowledge in Islam is intrinsically linked to the one who produces it; the whole system of publication of a book, as described above, seems to be focused on compensating the absence of the author i.e. while the book is being read. By implication here

⁹ More literally '*Ijaza* means to make lawful' see Francis Robinson, "Technology and Religious Change: Islam and the Impact of Print", *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol., 27, No. 1, Special Issue: How Social, Political and Cultural Information is Collected, Defined, Used and Analyzed (Feb., 1993), pp. 230

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 235-6

then, a better preserved book would be deemed as containing superior knowledge. This also suggests that all published works were considered dead books by Muslim scholars, dead because, just like the Qur'an the truth that they were supposed to expose had reached a final point. Furthermore, as all books contained references to the ultimate truth, that is, the Qur'an and the Hadith, further references to an author in a commentary of an existing work could only site him as an authority and not as somebody who held a certain opinion. The soundness of the authority of an author was in turn based on how far down he could be traced to the earliest custodians of knowledge. Therefore, challenging the work of an author would mean questioning his intellectual lineage, which could go back to the prophet or other indisputable figures in the Islamic tradition such as the *Sahaba* (the prophet's companions), the *Umhat ul Momineen* (wives of the prophet [literally, mothers of the faithful]) and the *Khulafa e Rashdeen* (the four rightly guided caliphs). Even more significant is the notion here that all texts or manuscripts transmitted through this person-to-person mechanism had only one true meaning, i.e., the meaning that the original author intended to explain. In other words, even if a book was available, as books are today, reading it could not increase the knowledge of the reader because she was not entrusted with the custody of the truth that it contained. The written word, on the other hand could not tell what was between the lines and what the author really meant that was transmitted through personal contact only.

In the above context, the '*Ulema*'s resistance to the print technology is understandable to some extent. First, in the Islamic tradition an '*Alim*' was the embodiment of knowledge as he cherished the truth in his heart. And the only way in which true knowledge could be transmitted was when one '*Alim*' passed it on to another seeker of knowledge; nobody could self teach himself or herself and become a scholar. Therefore, the '*Ulema*' probably feared that if books

were made available at large, people would distort the truth they contained and hence learn what was in fact the opposite of knowledge. The truth or knowledge, as stated earlier, is not in the written words of a book but in the intellectual lineage through which it had been carried forward from older times. In other words, the history of Islamic scholarship and to an extent Islamic history itself is the history of transmission from person to person and the print technology could make this tradition extinct.¹¹ Second, if the books became widely available there was strong possibility that *'Ulema's* monopoly over knowledge and scholarship would have been seriously challenged. Printing which allowed for multiplication of texts, therefore, threatened the person-to-person transmission of knowledge and struck right at the heart of the *'Ulema's* monopoly over defining 'the religious' in an Islamic society.¹²

The 'Ulema: As Catalysts for Change

Following from above, the question arises as to why the *'Ulema* accepted the print technology as a means to disseminate knowledge in the second half of the 19th century? Does this signify a fundamental shift in the way knowledge was perceived or was it because they found novel uses for print and other elements of modernity to retain their monopoly? What were the factors that made the good in printing outweigh the obvious evil that it embodied? A tentative and cautious answer to these questions probably lies in the unique challenges posed by European colonialism during this period. The need to reach a wider audience and inform them about the essence of what it meant to be a Muslim occurred to the *'Ulema* only when the community at large had to deal with a direct, foreign and non-Muslim rule for the first time in their history. This context is especially relevant for the Muslims of India who despite being a minority (merely 25%) of the total population had ruled the sub-continent for over 600 years. Furthermore,

¹¹ Ibid., p.238

¹² Ibid., p.239

traditionally *'Ulema* had retained their authority more or less on a principle of live and let live. This is to say, that the *'Ulema* had little need to take an active part in political matters which were left largely to the prince or the emperor, who would be a Muslim. In addition, the *'Ulema* could also use their special status, as custodians of the Islamic absolute truths, to legitimize the actions or directives of the rulers. Such usefulness of the *'Ulema* can also be seen at several places in the *Mirrors for the Princes* and other advice manuals such as the *Hisba Manuals*, written by the scholars, for government functionaries, rulers and also common citizens.¹³ In a manner of speaking, *'Ulema* then were the 'king makers' who occupied a separate place situated above the general Muslim society. They gave opinions and verdicts on almost everything, ranging from governance to marital rights, purity rituals, rights of minorities etc., and protected this authority through exclusionary tactics in terms of the people to whom they chose to pass this knowledge on to, and by sticking to classical Islamic languages like Persian and Arabic which were not spoken or understood by an overwhelming majority of common Indian Muslims.¹⁴

The *'Ulema* lost much of their traditional authority with the advent of European colonialism. Even though they were still keepers of the traditional Islamic knowledge, they had fewer means to influence the Colonial administrators. For instance, in India the British felt that reliance on the *'Ulema* in the case of Muslims and Pundits in the case of Hindus compromised fairness in judicial decisions and by 1862 the British had completely abolished all vestiges of

¹³ See for example Sajida Sultana Alvi, *Advice on the Art of Governance: Mau'izah-I-Jahangiri of Muhammad Baqir Najm-I-Sani – An Indo Islamic Mirror for the Princes* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1989) and also M. Izzi Dien, *The Theory and the Practice of Market Law in Medieval Islam: A Study of the Kitab Nisab al-Ihtisab by Umar b. Muhammad al-Sunami* (Warminster, UK: E. J. W. Gibb Memorial Trust, 1997). Both of these are advice manuals, the first was to advise the Indian Muslim Emperor Jahangir and the second for the *Muhtasib* or the Islamic Market Inspector. As an example of an advice manual for common citizens see the *Bahishti Zewar* or *Jewels of Paradise* written by a famous Indian *'Alim* named Ashraf Ali Thanwi. This manual was meant specifically as a companion for Muslim women, and was designed to take the cause of Islamic reform into the harem. Barbra D. Metcalf, *Perfecting Women: Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanwi's Bahishti Zewar: A Partial Translation with Commentary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990)

¹⁴ For a detailed discussion see Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *The Ulema in Contemporary Islam: Custodians of Change* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002) Chapter 1 titled "Islamic Law in Colonial India"

pre-colonial law from India.¹⁵ The introduction of the 1862 Penal code coincides approximately with the time when the *'Ulema* completely abandoned their resistance to printing. This is also the period when one sees the stirrings of an Islamic revival in the Muslim world in general and India in particular. However before getting into the details of the nature of this revival in the next section of this paper, it will be useful to state some of the specific challenges that motivated the *'Ulema* to abandon the 1200 years old oral tradition of Islamic scholarship and the change of tactics that they then introduced.

To begin with, it was the first time that the *'Ulema* had to deal with a political sphere controlled by non-Muslims; this presented a special challenge to them, which can be understood in terms of a sort of redistricting of constituencies. *'Ulema* who had long monopolized their control of 'the religious' in Islamic societies and in a sense kept both the populace, as well as the state, hostage to their interpretations could no longer do so. Earlier the *'Ulema* had adopted a top down strategy in retaining their usefulness but they now needed to reverse tactics and employ a bottom up approach, making Muslims more knowledgeable about Islam by telling them how they could retain their faith under a European / Christian colonial rule. Print technology was instrumental in disseminating the opinion of the *'Ulema* regarding things and actions that were Islamic and those which were prohibited by religion. To achieve this they also needed to make their opinions available in the vernacular Urdu language instead of Arabic and Persian, which the majority could not speak.

Second, they faced challenges from social, educational and economic changes which colonialism brought with it. For instance, under the colonial rule the purpose of education became production of individuals who could be productive within the all-encompassing colonial

¹⁵ Ibid., pp.21-23

machine as against the traditional Islamic emphasis on being knowledgeable for the sake of knowledge and not with an overt intention of being active in worldly affairs.¹⁶ The introduction of the secular school system and western style university education put the validity of the whole Islamic person-to-person transmission system in jeopardy as the value of this new system was based on its being current and scientific rather than being based on how far back its origins could be traced. In these new circumstances, the *'Ulema* found themselves in a position where they had to prove to the Muslim populace, that their knowledge was still useful for Indian society. To do this they borrowed the organization techniques of the colonial educational administration and reformed their traditional seats of learning, i.e., *the Madrassas*, thus making them more inclusive in terms of students, adopted a curriculum, separate classes for students of different levels, a well-defined academic year, annual examinations, and networks of affiliated schools.¹⁷ The major structural change that this caused was that the *'Ulema* were institutionalized to a great degree. In India, the new reformed *Madrassas* became the seats from which *fatwas* or Islamic legal rulings began to be issued, unlike the past when an individual scholar or *Mufti* could issue such statements.¹⁸ There were at least two important outcomes of these changes. First, due to their exclusionary tactics in the past, it was only the *'Ulema* who possessed the kind of religious knowledge which was imparted in the *Madrassas*. In a sense, therefore, they compensated their loss of political power or more aptly the loss of power over the rulers or politicians in pre-modern times, by retaining their control over common Muslims, for whom in the absence of Muslim rulers they were now themselves the only authority figures. A second significant outcome was that knowledge ceased to be the special possession of the *'Ulema*. But why would

¹⁶ This is to say that being knowledgeable for the sake of knowledge had lost its utility in the changed circumstances of the Islamic world. An appropriate reference in this context would be the utilitarian education reforms suggested by J.S. Mill.

¹⁷ Zaman, *Ulema in Contemporary Islam*, pp. 68-9

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 29

the *'Ulema* initiate a change which could eventually result in the democratization of their own special and exclusive skill? The answer is probably that in the past they never had any hope of actually forming the government in an Islamic society. The role of the *'Ulema*, as discussed earlier, was restricted as advisors to the rulers; their services were useful only insofar as they held patronage of the Muslim rulers which they more often than not gained by legitimizing their authority or actions, based on their religious knowledge. It was only after the advent of modernity and European colonialism that the *'Ulema* saw for themselves a possibility to act as political leaders of the Muslim community. Modernity in the Islamic context, therefore, signifies a total break from 1200 years of Islamic tradition of person-to-person transmission of knowledge. The printing and translation of classical religious texts into vernaculars was an admission that the traditional authority based on presence of the author when a text was read was no longer necessary.

Creation of a Religio-political Public Sphere

Another and perhaps most significant outcome of the above changes was the opening up of a new forum in the form of print where religious debate could now be conducted in Islamic societies. Because Arabic and Persian languages were no longer a compulsion, and neither was there a need to possess impeccable *'ijaza* in order to read a text, modernity allowed Muslims trained in schools with a secular westernized orientation to bring for debate sources from the Islamic as well as the Western civilizations. The vigor with which Muslims followed or participated in these debates is clear from the following description of the printing industry in India in the 19th century,

By the 1820s in the Indian sub-continent Muslim reformist leaders were busily printing tracts. By the 1830s the first Muslim newspapers were being produced.

By the 1870s editions of the Quran, and other religious books were selling in tens of thousands. In the last thirty years of the century, over seven hundred newspapers and magazines in Urdu were started. All who observed the world of printing noted how Muslims understood the power of the press. In Upper India at the beginning of the twentieth century 4000-5000 books were being published in Urdu every decade and there was a newspaper circulation of tens of thousands.¹⁹

The above facts hint at the urgency of the need felt by a majority of literate Muslims, to revive their faith in India. It also begs the question if the *'Ulema* actually foresaw such a response to their adoption of printing as an acceptable medium to disseminate the true meaning of Islam? The *'Ulema's* main concern was to retain their traditional influence among the Indian Muslims, and substitute the loss of their political influence due to the downfall of Muslim rulers in India, by urging common Muslims to revert to their traditional sources, of which the *'Ulema* were the custodians. But a public forum such as one created by the print industry in India in the 19th century suggests that while *'Ulema* were correct to understand the power of the press; they must also have faced several serious challenges in fulfilling their new agenda. These challenges came from both the Colonialists through their administration of India and the Muslims who developed their understanding of the world and Islam in Western style secular educational institutions. The bulk of the efforts of *'Ulema* was focused on retrieving and keeping relevant the teachings of true Islam from the vast edifice built by centuries of scholasticism based on imitation of earlier authorities and the intransigence of the religious specialists. These non-traditional Islamic scholars, on the other hand, were driven by the belief that once retrieved through a fresh reading of the foundational texts of Islam, i.e., Qur'an and Hadith, the teachings of Islam would appear manifestly in agreement with the positions recommended by modernity. The two however shared a strong common faith in the continued relevance of Islam and the

¹⁹ Francis Robinson, *Separatism Among Indian Muslims: The Politics of the United Provinces' Muslims 1860-1923*(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974) pp. 77-8

divine nature of the Qur'an and its message. Both were also absolutely convinced that they were reformers operating within the framework of what was deemed permissible under the true Islamic code.

It helps to remember here that the *'Ulema* were never a single, monolithic bloc. Unlike the priests of the medieval Roman Catholic Church, their authority throughout Islamic history was exercised through a number of loosely structured communities of believers. One mechanism for articulating this authority was commentary on religious texts necessitated by the fact, that the works of the classical authors were highly condensed and subject to multiple interpretations.²⁰ In pre modern Islam, these commentaries were kept alive and restricted, through the *'ijaza* system. In the wake of new opportunities with fewer traditional restrictions provided by the rise of printing industry, the commentary became a means of advancing one's own ideological beliefs. Both the *'Ulema* and the non-traditional scholars took advantage of this potential of the commentary and used it to present their own view of the world in modern times.²¹ As a result, in the second half of 19th century Indian Muslims saw a number of reform movements, the more famous of which are the Deoband, the Ahl-i-Hadith, The Bareilvis, Nadwah, Ahmaddiyah and Sayyed Ahmad Khan's Aligarh Movement.²² These reform movements ranged from being semi traditional and Madrassah based, such as the Deoband and the Nadwah, to the Ahmaddiyah whose founder, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, made claims that he was the promised Messiah of the Christian and Muslim traditions, to the straightforward modernistic such as Syed Ahmad Khan's Aligarh Movement. The characteristics of the semi traditional (or reformed-traditional) movements have already been discussed and the discussion of the Ahmaddiyah movement is

²⁰ Zaman, *Ulema in Contemporary Islam*, p. 63

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 60-86

²² For a detailed discussion of these movements see, Barbara D. Metcalf, *Islamic Revivalism in British India: Deoband: 1860–1900* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982)

outside the scope here. A brief discussion of the Aligarh movement, however, is relevant for the purposes of this paper.

Sayyed Ahmad Khan is undoubtedly the founder of Islamic Modernism; his major concern was to show that Islam made sense in the light of Western science and his stated objective was to reconcile Muslims to western civilization and British rule. A self taught scholar, he explored contemporary western science and biblical criticism and perhaps to this date remains the only Muslim thinker who produced commentaries on both the Bible and the Qur'an.

According to Christian W. Troll,

[I]n developing the new Islamic theology, he echoed the Christian natural theologians of his time: the word of God and the work of God cannot be in conflict. If they seemed to be in conflict it was the fault of Muslim understanding.²³

With his new sense of history Sayyed Ahmad drew a distinction between the spirit of the Qur'an and other traditional sources of Islamic knowledge, and that which belonged to the historical period at the dawn of Islam. At the heart of his modernist method was his concern to completely pull the spirit of Islam into the modern era and cut away the chains of the past. It is noteworthy that such a religious understanding could never have been developed within the traditional Islamic learning system or even the reformed Madrassas.²⁴

Yet another towering figure, not educated in a *Madrassa* and standing outside the traditional oral systems of transmission, was Abul Ala Maududi. He was a journalist by profession i.e. before he totally immersed himself into politics. Maududi was also the founder of

²³ Christian W. Troll, *Sayyed Ahmad Khan: A Reinterpretation of Muslim Theology* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1978) p. 155

²⁴ Sayyed Ahmad Khan was the founder of the famous Mohammedan Anglo Oriental College (later named Aligarh Muslim University) in India in 1875, which was created on the lines of a Classical western university and which remains to this day one of the most prestigious seats of higher learning for Muslims world over. In his own words his vision of the MAO College was, "...we aim to turn this M.A.O. College into a University similar to that of Oxford or Cambridge ... Like the churches of Oxford and Cambridge, there will be mosques attached to each College..." From the website of the Aligarh Muslim University <http://www.amu.ac.in/ssvision.htm>

the Jamat e Islami in India and may rightly be called the father of the Fundamentalist/ Islamist movement globally due to his influence on the Egyptian Syed Qutb and other likeminded theorists and activists in the Muslim world. Like Sayyed Ahmad Khan, Maududi was also self-educated in European social and political thought and produced commentaries on the Qur'an. Politically, his main concern was that Muslims should be able to withstand their increasingly deadly encounter with the West. To do this, he believed that rightly guided Muslims had to understand the demands of modern politics and take control of the modern state.²⁵ Political power, according to Maududi, was to be used to put revelation into operation on earth.²⁶ However, like other Muslim scholars, regardless of their orientation, Maududi also maintained that all the guidance that was needed already existed in the holy law, i.e., the *Shari'ah*, which embraces all human activity. God and not man is the sovereign on earth, and the State run by the rightly guided Muslims, is God's agent.²⁷ Maududi's significance is also unparalleled in that he was the first to seriously identify and strengthen a layer of pan-Islamism in the Muslim sense of identity, through his numerous writings, which have been translated in several modern languages.²⁸

Between the traditional '*Ulema*, the modernists like Syed Ahmad Khan and fundamentalists such as Maududi, one sees the development of a religio-political public discourse in Muslim India. The boundaries of this public discourse were defined, on one side, by the '*Ulema*, who preached that the only path to salvation for Muslims in the modern world was to go back to their original religious tradition, that it was incumbent on all Muslims individually

²⁵ Syed As'ad Gilani, *Maududi: Thought and Movement* (Lahore: Farooq Hassan Gilani & Shirakat ul-Faisal, 1978) pp. 72-75

²⁶ Ibid. pp. 212-3

²⁷ Ibid. 114-6

²⁸ Though this could have also been an effect of the Khilafat Movement in which Muslim leaders urged Muslims of India to migrate to Turkey, which was ruled by a Muslim Caliph at that time.

to ensure that they know exactly how to be a good Muslim. The leadership required for this ongoing training to these common Muslims was to be provided by these Ulema in their reformed Madrasas. Modernists such as Syed Ahmad led the second main strand in this discourse. Instead of proving that Islam was the best ideology and Muslims were God's chosen people, they tried to show Islam's compatibility with modernity and stressed the need for Muslims to realize the implications of the changes brought about in their environment by modernity. In short, these modernists focused on transforming the Muslim self-understanding by stressing that being a good Muslim was not enough, one also needed to be a modern citizen to be triumphant in this world and that Islam when redefined, could be a stepping stone in achieving this victory. Maududi and so-called Islamic fundamentalists championed the third, and perhaps the most important dimension, of this new public discourse. As has been argued above, Maududi focused on preparing a new community of individuals, well schooled in what he understood as the fundamental Islamic norms and ready to lead the rest of the society on the path of an Islamic revolution which did not necessarily need to be violent. This revolution Maududi hoped would be brought about by the righteous individuals in positions of leadership, whose training and extended Islamic socialization would be the surest means not only of bringing about effective change but also of serving as a bulwark against any temptations to deviate from the straight path once they had been set on it.²⁹ For Maududi, therefore, Islam merely becomes a means to achieve the end of controlling the state. If one somehow avoids the temptation of suggesting here that Maududi saw a greater good in controlling the state than in practicing true Islam, the only other possibility is to argue, that for him Islam and the Islamic State are ultimately synonymous. Till such time that the control of the state is acquired by the rightly guided, there is no possibility of

²⁹ Ibid. pp. 209-210, also for a more detailed analysis see Syed Vali Raza Nasr, *Mawdudi and the Making of Islamic Revivalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996) pp. 67-70

realizing the true potential of Islam. As regards the ultimate task of an individual Muslim, it was to strive for the establishment of an Islamic state which would guide him or her to live an Islamic way of life. To quote Maududi,

The struggle for obtaining control over the organs of the state, when motivated by the urge to establish the din [religion] and the Islamic Shari'ah and to enforce the Islamic injunctions, is not only permissible but is positively desirable and as such obligatory.³⁰

Conclusions: Muslim Politics Today

Brief description of the basic ideas of three main strands of Islamic politics and the story of their development above, has several implications for understanding politics in Muslim societies today. To begin with, even though the three dimensions of this religio-political public discourse in Muslim India are essentially contradictory in what they individually emphasize, they nevertheless all show a unity of objective, i.e., to inculcate a renewed sense of personal religious responsibility as a way of coping with the challenges posed by modernity. It is also important to note that the *'Ulema* who could see themselves as becoming redundant in modern times, could not foresee that modernity had already fundamentally transformed their traditional constituency. By making their closely guarded tradition publicly available, through the medium of print, they opened themselves, as well as their solutions to revive the Muslim identity, for critical appreciation more to their coreligionists rather than the feared non-Muslim anti religious elements of modernity. The fact that both Sayyed Ahmad and Maududi achieved legitimacy as leaders of Muslims, through producing modern commentaries on the Qur'an, should have confirmed the worst fear of the traditional *'Ulema*, who insisted on a person-to-person transmission of Islamic knowledge in order to retain this privilege for themselves.

³⁰ Sayyid Abul Ala Maududi, (Tr and Ed.) Khurshid Ahmad, *Islamic Law and Constitution* (Lahore: Islamic Publications, 1977) p. 77.

Modernity therefore signifies a massive rupture in the continuity of the Islamic tradition, causing serious divisions within Muslim societies. The point here is not that the significance of Islamic faith as a fundamental element of Muslim identity had been eroded in any way; instead it was actually reinforced powerfully during this period. But this Islamic revival also resulted in a relocation of the traditional Muslim faith based identity into a modern Islamic political ideology.

The intellectual positions of the *'Ulema*, the modernists and fundamentalists demarcate the boundaries of the Muslim public sphere today, one which is characterized by an overlapping consensus on the foundational basis of the political community, but radically different and hence publicly contestable visions of what that basis means. This essential contestability of what foundational documents mean in different contexts is the hallmark of the modern (western) political discourse. The appearance of this phenomenon in Muslim societies has profound implications for understanding Islamic fundamentalist political thought in particular and the contemporary politics of Muslim societies in general. At the very least, it urges us to reevaluate and reposition the claims of modern Islamic thinkers by placing them completely within the context of modernity i.e. even if they formulate their views in contradistinction to the dominant themes of the modern age. As I have argued earlier, these thinkers and their ideas were not even conceivable in the pre-modern Islamic tradition. Second, the story of the creation of a Muslim religio-political public sphere in India, tells us that fundamentalist Islamic political thought is not a stagnant phenomenon, It derives its power from the claims it has on the religious sphere and exercises that power in the political arena vis-à-vis the state, without actually requiring to be a formal part of that state. As their main purpose is to influence the state, therefore, they constantly redefine their political objectives in the light of religious injunction. This constant reinterpretation is further necessitated by the fact that the fundamentalists are in perpetual

competition with the modernists and the *'Ulema*, for a greater share in political power. This also suggests that their understanding of the world is far more flexible than is often acknowledged.

It is also noteworthy, that the three strands of Islamic thought mentioned above developed in colonial times, when Muslims were ruled by European powers. The premise on which this thought was based assumed ignorance on part of common people regarding their religion; therefore the approach adopted was to educate the people so that they become a viable political constituency in a modern polity. One would assume that after the de-colonization, when Muslims replaced the Europeans rulers, the strength of these religious arguments would decrease because now the Muslims or more specifically Islam was in no immediate danger. This claim seems reasonably strong when we see that at the time of Indian partition in 1947 and the creation of Pakistan as a state for Muslims of India, the Ulema and the fundamentalists did not support the cause of a separate state for Muslims. The only entity, which was pro Pakistan, was the Muslim League, a political party which was constituted predominantly by and for the modernists. Both the Ulema and the fundamentalists, led by Maududi, declared the modernists as having inadequate religious qualifications to lead the Muslim community. However, after Pakistan was created, they accepted the new state and redefined their objective as Islamization of the new state. To paraphrase Maududi's words there was a difference between a state for the Muslims and a Muslim state.³¹ According to the modernists Pakistan was a state for the Muslims but according to the Ulema and Maududi its creation was only justified if the new rulers made it an Islamic state by upholding the Islamic law within its boundaries. The task of both these factions therefore once again shifted from educating Muslims to advising the state in case of the Ulema, and overtaking the state in case of the fundamentalists. Modernists who had control of the state and who were by and large secular in nature, as is the case to this date, alternately used

³¹ Gilani, *Maududi*, p.72 & 202

both the Ulema and the fundamentalists to legitimize their rule (usually non-democratic) and their policies, which were either socialist or capitalist in nature. Therefore, the bases and expressions of the positions of these religious hardliners are complex and multifaceted and often contradictory, as they are driven by the need of the moment. The three strands have advanced their positions by siding with the government, against each other and with each other against the government. All of them maintain their political constituencies, which were cultivated in colonial times, and use them to survive politically. This quest for survival has been aided and influenced by the all aspects of modernity. Just like acceptance of print technology to disseminate their message was the beginning, today the Internet and electronic media allow them to spread their message. In a sense these new modern sources have actually removed the need for these religious leaders to answer their opponents in print, hence taking the whole movement back to an oral tradition. A classic example of this can be Khomeini's success in Iran is often attributed to the audio cassettes of his sermons.

To conclude, therefore, the politics of Islamic fundamentalism can only be understood in context of modernity. It is a dynamic, multifaceted and an immensely complex phenomenon which can be exceptionally deceptive in appearance, both in terms of its tenets as well as by the outlook and lifestyle of its adherents. However, as an ideology its adherents are well versed in the intricacies of modern politics and can resort to innovative ways in implementing their vision of a good society.