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Muslim Response to the Bible: A Study of the Urdu *tafsir* of Mahmudul Hasan (1851-1920), Daryabadi (1892-1977) and Mawdudi (1903-1979)

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ABSTRACT

The genre of *tafsir* (Quranic exegetical literature) reflects the Muslim intellectual history at its sharpest. For, the best Muslim minds of every time, place, ethnic origin and linguistic group, down the ages, have always regarded it as their highest privilege to devote themselves heart and soul to the study of the Quran. What strikes one most in this discipline is the substantial contribution in Urdu by 'Ulema of the Indo-Pak sub-continent. The credit goes, in the main, to Shah Waliullah for having set in this trend.

The traumatic end of Muslim rule in India had thrown up challenges to Islamic faith. Of these, the most formidable, the British rule over India, with its attendant Westernization, and Christian missionary onslaught.



Since that time many commentators embarked on facing this challenge, Prominent among them were Mahmudul Hasan, 'Abdul Majid Daryabadi's and Sayyid Abul A'la Mawdudi. Mahmudul Hasan's, Daryabadi's and Mawdudi. They draw on the Bible for providing a historical account of certain Quranic allusions. So doing, these distinguished Muslim scholars both follow and extend the standard Muslim stance on comparative religion. Further, this stands out as a testament to the sound methodology employed by them for disseminating the universal, eternal guidance from the Quran.

Tafsir has been a rich, prolific academic tradition in Muslim society. What strikes one most in this discipline is the substantial contribution in Urdu by 'Ulema of the Indo-Pak sub-continent. If the number of translations and *tafsir* works of the Quran in a world language is taken as the indicator of religious activity and devotion, Urdu—the main literary language of Muslims in the subcontinent—holds the pride of place. It surpasses even Persian and Turkish languages, which have been associated with Muslims for a much longer period of time. It emerges from the *OIC World Bibliography of the Quran Translations*⁴ that Urdu stands at the top of the list of world languages, with more than 300 exegetical works/translations of the Quran until 1980, as compared to a paltry 107 each in Persian and Turkish.

The credit goes, in the main, to Shah Waliullah Dehalvi (1703-1762), the Islamic revivalist, for having set in this trend for intellectual and spiritual movement among Indian Muslims. Prior to the appearance of Shah Waliullah's Persian translation of the Quran, the study of the Quran was confined to the elite group of Ulema. Notwithstanding their fervent attachment to the Quran, the generality of Indian Muslims being largely ignorant of Arabic could hardly gain a first-hand knowledge of the meaning and message of the Quran. Not only did Shah Waliullah's



venture succeed in transmitting the message of the Quran to a larger readership, as Persian was the court language of the day, it paved also the way for the appearance of Urdu translations at a later date. It was not a mere coincidence that two major Urdu exegetical works were produced only within forty years after Shah Waliullah's *Fath al-Rahman*, and more significantly, by two of his own illustrious sons--Shah Rafi 'al-Din (1749-1817) and Shah 'Abd al-Qadir (1753- 1827). Both of these translations - Rafi 'al-Din's *Fath al- 'Aziz* (1776), and more particularly, 'Abd al-Qadir's *Mudih al-Quran* (1790), in chaste, idiomatic Urdu went long way in articulating among the Muslims the life-giving message of the Quran. These translations enabled them to relate their lives to the eternal guidance embodied in the Quran.

As already indicated, *tafsir* literature stands out as the most eloquent and cogent representation of the Muslim religious and intellectual thought. It holds a mirror to Muslim scholars' vigorous engagement with the challenges of the day, especially those which are related to the domain of faith. The traumatic end of Muslim rule in India by Shah Waliullah's day had thrown up numerous challenges to Islamic faith and practices. Of these, the most formidable, rather intractable was the British rule over India, with its attendant hazards of Westernization, secularism, modern education and Christian missionary onslaught.

That there existed an unmistakable nexus between British colonialism in India and Evangelism hardly calls for any elaboration. It is worth-noting that British Parliament had amended East India Act in 1813, under tremendous pressure by Evangelist groups, permitting conversion and missionary work in India. The Evangelists were too eager to save the millions of souls in India. It was the Rev. Karl G. Pfander's *Mizan al-Haq*² (1835) which triggered the long, drawn out and acerbic polemical battle between Christianity and Islam in India. Amid the Muslim rejoinders, the most noteworthy one is Rahmatullah Kairanavi's *Izhar al-Haq* (1864).³ As a stout reply to Pfander's work, which calls into question the authenticity



of the Quran and Prophet Muhammad's status as a Messenger of God, Kairanavi counters the attack by providing an exhaustive list of inner contradictions, factual inaccuracies and errors in each book of the Bible.

Apart from Kairanavi, the following exegetes too, responded in their own varied ways to the attack mounted by missionaries, as they asserted the veracity of the Quran and refuted the baseless allegations – ‘*Abd al-Haq Haqqani* in his *Fath al-Mannan ya Tafsir-i Haqqani* (1887-1900) and Thanā Allah Amritsari in his *Tafsir-i Thanai* (1907). The spirit of Shah Waliullah's mission was carried further by Shaykh-al-Hind Mahmudul Hasan (1851-1920), a renowned Islamic scholar associated with the famous Islamic seminary, Darul 'Ulum, Deoband. His exegesis, though incomplete, *Mudih al-Quran* was published posthumously in 1923.⁴ Before his death he had been able to write explanatory notes only up to Surah al-Nisa'. His objective in writing this *tafsir* was the same as of his worthy mentor, Shah Waliullah – to enable the general public to gain or renew acquaintance with the message of the Quran. Accordingly he seeks to elucidate the divine, universal guidance as revealed to and expounded by Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). It may be regarded as an epitome of the traditional understanding of the Quran – *tafsir bi al-mathur*. Little wonder then that the methodology followed in this work is inextricably linked with the Hadith corpus that deals with the circumstantial setting and explication of Quranic verses. His interpretation of the Quran is mostly the same as featuring in relevant Ahadith. Yet the learned author, Mahmudul Hasan appears somewhat alive to the proselytizing threat of the day, as represented by Evangelists. With this aim in mind he, at several places, points to the misconduct of the people of the Book and to their bizarre deviation from the straight way prescribed by Allah. In repeatedly affirming this, Hasan's main objective is to highlight the truth that divine, universal guidance is to be found in its pristine purity only in the Quran. Illustrative of this are the following examples:



i) **Verse 43 of al-Baqarah:** Attention is drawn to the contrariety of attitude betrayed by Rabbis. According to the Quran, true believers first practise good deeds before preaching the same to others. In other words, sincere and unquestioning devotion to faith alone can help one tap divine guidance.⁵

ii) **Verses 40-41 of al-Baqarah:** How the People of the Book acted ungratefully towards the divine bounties bestowed on them and how they took to the rebellious path of denying and opposing Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) even in the face of categorical Biblical prophecies about his advent are illustrated.⁶

iii) **Verse 48 of al-Baqarah:** The false notion harboured by the People of the Book about their deliverance in the Hereafter is exposed. Their other misperception about intercession by their Messengers on the Day of Judgment, too, is allayed. Believers are instructed in leading their lives in accordance with divine guidance as featuring in the Quran.⁷

iv) **Verse 89 of al-Baqarah:** Once again, a forceful reference is made to the wilful rejection of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) by the People of the Book notwithstanding their own fervent petitions to God for the advent of the Final Messenger.⁸

v) **Verses 35-64 of Al-Imran** are explained with the special focus on the outrageous doctrines of the later day Christianity which vitiate the Bible. In contrast to it, the Quranic account of Prophet Jesus and his mother, Mary reiterates the universal guidance – of worshipping the One True God and of shunning altogether any form or variety of polytheism.⁹

Nonetheless, a much more articulate and academic response, premised on the principles of comparative religion and rebutting the Biblical fallacies is typified at its best in 'Abdul Majid Daryabadi's *The Holy Quran: Translated With Lexical, Grammatical, Historical, Geographical*



and Eschatological Comments ... and sidelights on Comparative Religion.¹⁰ This largely unacknowledged work, though completed by Daryabadi in 1940s, appeared first only in 1957. When he embarked on the project of bringing out his English translation and commentary, there was hardly any such work available in English which represented faithfully the mainstream Muslim exegetical viewpoint in English. He was therefore urged by his illustrious mentor, Mawlana Ashraf 'Ali Thanawi (1863-1943) to fill this gap.¹¹

Intended as the Quranic exegesis with "sidelights on Comparative Religion" 'Abdul Majid Daryabadi's work displays a wide ranging familiarity with relevant literature. Apart from hundreds of references to the *Authorized Version of the Bible*, in the course of his comparative study of the Quran and the Bible, Daryabadi makes use of the following prestigious sources:

- Pallen and Wynne's *New Catholic Dictionary*.
- Josephus's *Antiquities of the Jews*.
- Hastings's *Dictionary of the Bible*.
- Smith's and Cheetham's *Dictionary of Christian Antiquities*.
- Hastings's *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*.
- Cohen's *Everyman's Talmud*.
- Frazer's *Worship of Nature*.
- Valentine's *Jewish Encyclopedia*.
- Ragg's *The Gospel of Barnabas*.
- *A New Standard Bible Dictionary*.
- *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

Of the numerous references to the Biblical text in Daryabadi's work, for the constraints of space, only the significant ones in his exegesis of the first two Surahs of the Quran -*al-Fatihah* and *al-Baqarah* are analysed below:



Explaining the Quranic concept of God's absolute sovereignty on the Day of Reckoning as outlined in *al-Fatihah* 1:3, Daryabadi is quick to add: "The verse completely repudiates the Christian doctrine that Christ, not God, would be the judge" (Cf. *John* 5 :22).¹²

i) How the Quranic concept of worship radically differs from the Christian one is brought home by Daryabadi in this note on *al-Fatihah* 1:4: "Clearly there is no place in Islam for any son- prophet or angel worship. Contrast this with the open and avowed worship of Christ in the Christian church. 'The church never ceased to offer Prayer to Christ with the Father' (*Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, I, p.104). In the Catholic Church there are three distinct kinds of worship: (1) *latria* (due to God), (2) *hyperdulia* (due to the Virgin Mary) (3) *dulia* (due to the saints). Islam recognizes no such distinction. In it there is only one class of worship, that due to God alone"¹³.

ii) Daryabadi's comment on *al-Fatihah* 1:4 dealing with the Islamic concept of Prayer underlies a similar comparative note in that he juxtaposes the monotheistic tenor of the Islamic Prayer with this doctrine of the Roman church: "That the saints who reign with Christ offer to God their prayers for man; that it is good and useful to invoke them by supplication, and to have recourse to their aid and assistance in order to obtain from God His benefits through His Son"(*Encyclopedia Britannica*, XIX, p. 820).¹⁴

iii) In explaining the Quranic expression, *al-Sama'* (heaven) occurring in *al-Baqarah* 2:22, Daryabadi is quick to " refute the biblical notion of heaven as the dwelling place of God as mentioned in The Book of Psalms 11:4 and 33: 13 and 14. In a sharp contrast to this, Islam looks upon the idea of God occupying a certain space as preposterous".¹⁵

iv) Elucidating *al-Baqarah* 2: 48, discussing Divine forgiveness, Daryabadi points out that it aims to "repudiate the Rabbinical



doctrine that 'grace is to be given to some because of the merits of their ancestors, to others because of the merits of their descendants' (*The Jewish Encyclopedia*, vi. p. 61).¹⁶

v) On *al-Baqarah* 2:51 recounting the Israelities' image-worship of a golden calf, Daryabadi's note is worth-considering: "The Bible narrates the story of calf-worship by the Israelites in great detail (Exodus 32: 1-8). The Quran is in substantial agreement with it, except in one very important particular, where the Bible makes the Prophet Aaron-him of all the people-responsible for this act of outrageous impiety."¹⁷

vi) Unlike other Muslim translators of the Quran in English, Daryabadi's choice of the expression "Nazarenes" for rendering the Quranic references to *Nasara* is significant. Daryabadi offers the following explanation for this choice: "The words *Nasarni* and *Nasara* I have invariably translated as 'Nazarene' and 'Nazarenes', not as 'Christian' and 'Christians'. The Holy Quran allows no status to Christianity as such".¹⁸ "*Nasara* is in its proper sense 'Nazarenes', not 'Christian'. A *Nasrani* is a 'Nazarene' in its original meaning and a Christian only in its secondary application (Lane's *Lexicon*). 'Nazarene' is derived from Nazareth, the place where Jesus passed his youth. The Nazarenes or primitive Christians were the followers of the original pre-Pauline Church, not quite like the present day Christians, of the Pauline variety. Nor is the title 'in itself disparaging' (Cheyne's and Black's *Encyclopedia Biblica*, n. 3356). Rather, it was a primitive designation for Christians' (Hastings's *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, III, p. 374)."¹⁹

vii) Another instance of refuting the Biblical account and bringing out the ethical superiority of the Quranic version is found in Daryabadi's detailed note on *al-Baqarah* 2: 102, which exonerates the Prophet Solomon (peace and blessings be upon him) from the



charge of polytheism: "King Solomon (973-933 BC) of the Bible, who, according to the teachings of Islam, was not an idolatrous King, but a true prophet of God and a benevolent and wise ruler. The Jews, true to their traditions of ingratitude and malevolence, have not hesitated to malign their own hero and national benefactor, Solomon, and to accuse him of the most heinous of all offences - idolatry: (1 Kings 11: 1-10). They have also unblushingly attributed to him the cult of crude occultism and witchcraft. The Quran upholds the honour of all prophets of God, to whatever race or age they may belong, and believes in the saintliness and stainlessness of everyone of them. It takes this opportunity to sweep aside all the ugly tales and outrageous imputations about Solomon, and says in effect that far from being an unbeliever or a blasphemer, he never practised any such black art as the pagans did".²⁰

viii) According to Daryabadi, *al-Baqarah* 2:115, describing God's omnipresence, "repudiates the pagan and the Christian practice of "Orientation". For, many Greek temples were also designed to face the rising sun. In the earliest Christian basilicas at Rome the apse was placed at the west end, so that the priest who served the altar from behind, facing the congregation, himself faced the East and the rising sun ... " (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, XVI, p.899).²¹

ix) That the Quranic concept of God, outlined in *al-Baqarah* 2:160, is radically different from the Biblical one is brought into focus by Daryabadi thus: 'The God of Islam, unlike the God of so many religions, is neither jealous nor vindictive. This requires frequent reiteration not only in view of the doctrines of the pagans but also of the teachings of the Bible' (cf. *Joshua* 24: 19).²²

x) The unmistakable strain of monotheism in *al-Baqarah* 2:163 elicits this comment from Daryabadi: "This unequivocally repudiates and condemns the Trinity of Christian godhead, the



dualism of the Zoroastrian Divinity and the Multiplicity of the gods of polytheistic peoples.

This is *monotheism, par excellence*, and not mere monoaltry. Verses like the above are meant to emphasize the fact that only one God *exists*, not that one God is to be worshipped to the exclusion of other gods".²³

xi) In spelling out the Quranic laws of war, laid down in *al-Baqarah* 2: 190, Daryabadi compares these with the war laws of the Bible occurring in *2Kings*3: 25, *1 Kings* 11: 16 and *1 Samuel* 15: 3, with a view to bringing out the ethical superiority of the Quranic laws of war.²⁴

xii) In elaborating the Quranic view that the believer should seek good both in this world and the Next, mentioned in *al -Baqarah* 2: 201, Daryabadi contrasts it with the Christian concept embodied in *John* 18: 36 and notes that the latter is concerned only with the Next life.²⁵

xiii) Discussing the Quranic regulations concerning the menstruating women, in *al-Baqarah* 2: 222 Daryabadi remarks that the Biblical regulations in this respect, as enumerated in *Leviticus* 15:19-21, are far more rigid.²⁶

xiv) Daryabadi's explanatory note involving a comparative study of the Quran and the Bible, on *al-Baqarah* 2:228, dealing with the Quranic concept of divorce, is directed at establishing the ethical superiority of the Quran: 'The course of divorce, or the dissolution of marriage tie, among ancient nations has been erratic, some making it too loose, others making it too tight... The Jewish law allows it as a matter of no great concern (cf. *Deuteronomy* 24: 1,2). Christianity, on the other hand, taking its stand on the reported saying of Jesus (cf. *Mark* 10: 9,11) and also upon the dictum of Paul (cf. *1 Corinthians* 7:10) has interdicted

divorce altogether. ... The climax was reached in the rules of the Roman Catholic Church It treats marriage as a sacrament and demands indissolubility and unchanging fidelity. The Protestants allow it no doubt, but on such grounds as are of comparatively rare occurrence, fornication, for example. Islam has steered its course midway between the two, avoiding the extremes of either making divorce too rigid and banning it altogether, or of making it too loose and frivolous. Islam has adopted the only wise course open - that of imposing certain conditions and limitations upon the right of the husband to dissolve the matrimonial bond"²⁷

xv) Similarly, in comparing the status of woman in the Quran(*al- Baqarah* 2: 228) and the Bible, Daryabadi notes the lead taken by Islam in restoring dignity to women: '(According to the Quran), women have rights quite similar to those of man. This bold and explicit declaration of the rights of women centuries and centuries before a Mill dreamt of writing on the 'Subjection of Women' has no parallel in the pages of other Divine Scriptures. Contrast with this the attitude of the Bible which as a punishment of the sin of Eve makes wife a subject to her husband who is to rule over her. According to the Old Testament, woman is responsible for the fall of man, and this became the cornerstone of Christian teachings ... it is a remarkable fact that the Gospels (barring divorce Cf. *Matthew* 19: 9) contain not a word in favour of woman *The Epistles of St. Paul* definitely insist that no change be permitted in the position of woman ... St. Jerome has aught but good to say of woman: "Woman is the gate of the devil, the road of evil, the sting of the scorpion". Canon law declares: 'Man only is created to the image of God, not woman: therefore woman shall serve him and be his handmaid'. The Provincial Council of Macon (sixth century) seriously discussed the question' whether woman had a soul at all' (Kraft-Ebing , *Psychopathia Sexualis*, p.4).²⁸



xvi) While discussing the Quranic concept of intercession, outlined in *al- Baqarah* 2: 254, Daryabadi critically examines the Jewish and Christian concepts as recorded in *The New Catholic Dictionary* (p. 617), *Dictionary of the Bible* (III, p. 320) and *The Jewish Encyclopedia* (VIII, p. 409) and concludes: ' Islam sweeps away all such fanciful, and essentially pagan, ideas of mediation, intercession and propiation'.²⁹

xvii) Elaborating the Quranic account of God's attributes, stated in *al-Baqarah* 2:255, Daryabadi is quick to point out that it 'repudiates the Jewish and Christian idea of God "resting" on the seventh day after His great exertion in creating the universe' (Cf. *Genesis* 2: 2-3).³⁰

xviii) In explaining the Quranic injunction prohibiting usury (*al-Baqarah* 2: 275, and 279), Daryabadi once again points to the ethical superiority of the Quran: 'The devastating propensities of usury are visible to every eye ... Yet it is Islam alone that has the unique distinction of declaring this pernicious practice illegal absolutely and unconditionally. Greece and Rome both groaned heavily under its yoke but none of their legislators, like the economists of modern Europe, thought of banning it altogether. ... The Bible went no doubt many steps further inasmuch as it forbade the advance of usurious loans to the Israelites (Cf. *Exodus* 22: 25 and *Deuteronomy* 23: 19). But even the Biblical prohibition did not include usurious loans to non- Israelites. It is the Holy Quran, which, to its everlasting glory, has forbidden usury in all its forms categorically...' ³¹

Next, let us discuss Sayyid Abul A'la Mawdudi's influential and oft-reprinted interpretative rendering of the Quran, *Tafhim al-Quran* (1942-1972), rather its English version, *Towards Understanding the Quran*. Unlike Daryabadi, Mawdudi (1906-1979) does not use the Bible so extensively in his exposition of the Quranic message. For, in his exegesis Mawdudi's



main concern, representing Waliullah's revivalist tradition, is to present the Quran to his readers as book to be lived by and a mission to be lived for. In approaching the Quran, in the main, as a book of guidance *par excellence*, Mawdudi is found constantly relating, through his exhaustive notes, the universal message of the Quran to his own time and its specific problems. Yet he accomplishes this task without abandoning the invaluable traditional understanding of the Quran as handed down by the Companions of the Prophet and succeeding generations of Muslim scholars.

As to Mawdudi's use of the Bible, the following notes in his work are worth-considering:

i) In comparing the Quranic (*al-Baqarah* 2:30-39) and Talmudic account of the creation of Adam, Mawdudi observes that the Talmudic 'account lacks the spiritual significance underlying the Quranic version'.³²

ii) In explaining the Quranic allusions to a certain town in *al-Baqarah* 2:58 and the Israelites' slaying of the Prophets in *al-Baqarah* 2:61 Mawdudi draws on the following Biblical passages: *Numbers* 25:1-9; *2Chronicles* 16:7-10 and 24: 21; *1 Kings* 19: 14 and 22:26-27; *Jeremiah* 15: 10, 18: 20- 23, 20: 1-18 and 36-40; *Amos* 7: 10-13, *Mark* 6: 17-29 and *Matthew* 27: 20-26.³³

iii) While explicating Jacob's testament (*al-Baqarah* 2: 133) Mawdudi remarks: 'In the Bible the events connected with the death of Jacob (peace be upon him) are narrated in detail. It is amazing that this narrative makes no reference to his testament. However, the contents of the detailed testament embodied in the Talmud greatly resemble the Quranic version'.³⁴

iv) In reiterating the Quranic view that Jesus believed in and confirmed the validity of the teachings of the original religion which had been preached at God's behest by the earlier Prophets



(*Al-'Imran* 3:50) Mawdudi remarks: 'The fact that Jesus preached the same religion as that expounded earlier by Moses and the other Prophets is also borne out by the statements of the existing Gospels (Cf. *Matthew* 5: 17,22:37-40 and 23: 2-3)".³⁵

v) The Quranic remark about the misdeeds of some of the People of the Book, in *Al-'Imran* 3: 75, is illustrated thus by Mawdudi: 'With regard to injunctions on loans and interest the Bible makes a clear distinction between an Israelite and a non-Israelite (*Deuteronomy* 15: 1-3 and 23:20). It is stated in the Talmud that if the bullock of an Israelite injured the bullock of a non-Israelite, the former is not liable to any penalty, but not *vice versa*. Similarly, it is laid down that if anyone finds an unclaimed article, he should enquire amongst the people who live nearby. If they are Israelites, he should announce his find, if not he may keep it without saying anything further' (Cf.P.I. Hershon, *Talmudic Miscellany*, London, 1880, p.37).³⁶

Conclusion:

In the light of the above discussion, following points emerge regarding Mahmudul Hasan's, Daryabadi's and Mawdudi's use of the Bible:

- They draw on the Bible for providing a historical account of certain Quranic allusions, mostly about the Jewish history. Since this does not involve any theological issue, they consider it safe to glean material from the Bible.
- In elucidating moral teachings and concepts of the Quran they point out that they are found in the Bible as well. So doing, however, they emphasize the Muslim belief about the common Divine origin of all Scriptures and that a single original religion has been preached at God's behest by all the Prophets down the millennia.



- Notwithstanding such Quranic passages which expose the fallacious beliefs of the Jews and Christians, on comparing many other Quranic passages with the Bible they bring out the ethical superiority of the Quran. It serves to Vindicate the Quranic view on the *tahrif* (tampering with the text of the Scripture) in the Bible.
 - Show that far from borrowing from the Jewish and Christian sources, the Quran rather rectifies the errors, inconsistencies and inadequacies in the tampered Biblical text, and
 - Underscore the Muslim belief that the Quran being the final, perfect Divine message, preserved in its pristine purity is to guide mankind for all times and in all places.

So doing, these distinguished Muslim scholars both follow and extend the standard Muslim stance on comparative religion.³⁷

Further, this stands out as a testament to the sound methodology employed by them for disseminating the universal, eternal guidance from the Quran.

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