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Sir Syed: A Champion of Cordial Inter Faith Relations

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| ARTICLE DETAILS | ABSTRACT |
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| Article History: Published Online: _Published_ | Sir Syed's Ahmad Khan (1817-1898) stands out most probably as the first Muslim scholar who initiated and promoted Inter Faith Dialogue. As one goes back in time to Sir Syed's days, one realizes the importance and relevance of his contribution to this nascent field of Co-existence, Pluralism and Inter Faith Dialogue which became the buzz words only after 1970s. |
| Keywords: Intrfaith, Commonality among Religions, Islam, Sir Syed, | |

Introduction

Many initiatives have been recently taken, mainly in the West, by Christians, Muslims and Jews to address amicably such thorny issues as of religion, religious freedom, minority rights, mission,



and coercion in matters of faith. Reference may be made to the Berlin Declaration of, the International Conference on Dialogue of Cultures held on 23 April 1999 at Bellevue Palace, Berlin, Germany at the initiative of the President of Germany, Roman Herzog and under the patronage of the heads of states or governments of Austria, Egypt, Finland, Germany, Indonesia, Italy, Jordan, Malaysia, Morocco, Norway and Spain. Some of the salient pronouncements of the Declaration are:

- That we are convinced that contact between different cultures has become as much a basic feature of modern societies throughout the world as the interweaving of nations;
- That we aim to establish a strategy of Intercultural Dialogue that ... (is) relevant for the future of societies;
- That we recall values common to both Islamic and Western cultures.
- That we emphasize the golden rule "*Do not do unto others what you would not like them to do unto you.*" As part of a core of ethical values common to all great cultures and religions this should



inspire ways in which members of Western and Islamic societies behave towards each other.

- That we recommend that space or Intercultural Dialogue be created and that Intercultural cooperation between the respective countries be intensified in [several] areas of application.¹

Another instance in point is the move initiated by World Council of Churches in 1990s to which Muslims have responded energetically and positively. Another notable figure in the field in recent times is of Hans Kung who proclaimed that there could be no peace among nations without peace and understanding among religions and cultures across the world. The robust activity in the field is documented neatly in works such as C. A. Kimball, *Striving Together in the way of God: Muslim Participation in Christian-Muslim Dialogue* (Ph.D Thesis Harvard University, 1987) Leonard Swidler (ed.) *Muslims in Dialogue* (Lewiston, Edwin Mellen Press, 1992): Hans Kung, *Global Responsibility: in search of a New World Ethic* (New York, SCM Press, 1991); S. Sivaraksa, and C. Muzaffar, *Alternative Politics for Asia: A Buddhist – Muslim Dialogue* (Kuala Lumpur,



1999); B. H. Hary (Ed) *Judaism and Islam: Boundaries Communication, and Interaction* (Leiden, E. J. Brill, 2000); and R. Panikkar, *The Intrareligious Dialogue* (New York, Paulist Press, 1999).²

Sir Syed, however, carried out his daring venture in the traditional, self-contained world of 1850s, when an unmistakably exclusivist attitude towards other faiths prevailed. Notwithstanding being a small minority, Muslims had been the rulers of India for centuries. They were fully persuaded, and justifiably so, of the superiority of their faith, Islam over all other faiths. These factors had, however, spawned among them streaks of self-complacency and parochialism. Being dismissive of others, they found it hard to acknowledge others' presence, what to say of taking others as their equal or as superior to them in any respect. This stance of theirs accounts for the spate of polemical works appearing in the day. This must be nonetheless added at once that they were provoked into carrying out defensive, polemical work in the face of the Evangelical project launched by the aggressive Christian missionaries in the British India. The latter were emboldened by 1813 Act of British Parliament which had



sanctioned the Evangelical project. In sum, the whole atmosphere in 1850s reeked of bigotry, intolerance, hostility and hatred.

Sir Syed's Pioneering Works for Cordial Inter Faith Relations

It was against this backdrop that Sir Syed, swimming against the tide, conceived and executed the ambitious project of producing *Tab 'in al-Kalam fi Tafsir al-Tawrat wa al-Injil 'ala Millat al-Islam* (The Mohammedan Commentary on the Holy Bible), published at Aligarh in 1865.³ Far from being a narrow, vitriolic polemical work, it represents an earnest, warm-hearted attempt at launching Inter Faith Dialogue, a major and sober exercise in comparative religion and a trend-setting writing in Urdu premised on critical enquiry and scholarly objectivity. Sir Syed's work is grounded thoroughly in the ideal of religious co-existence and appears to have grown out of his conviction that all faiths deserve equal space and mutual respect. Significantly enough, for achieving this object Sir Syed, strategically employs rich, evocative Islamic theological symbols and terminology. Take the title of this work as an illustration.⁴ The Arabic title introduces the work as "tafsir" of the Torah and the



Gospels. It goes without saying that the use of the term “tafsir”, otherwise associated in the Muslim mind specifically with the Quran, for the Bible is intended to drive home the point that the Bible being the Scripture deserves to be treated with respect. Same accounts for Sir Syed designating the Bible as “The Holy Bible” on the title page. That the Bible is marred at places by distortion and fallacious articles of faith is not passed over in silence in order to placate the British rulers. For Sir Syed makes it a point to refute some of its tendentious contents in his commentary. Nonetheless, what is emphasized both in the title page and throughout the work is the commonality between the two Scriptures – the Quran and the Bible, particularly their universal ethics. The Quranic passage inscribed on the title page makes this point loud and clear:

God sent down the Torah. There is guidance and light in it. The Prophets who had submitted themselves to God used to judge by it among the Jews. So did the rabbis and scholars. They were asked to protect the Book of God and to be witnesses to it. So do not fear men; fear God. Do not sell God’s verses for a small price.

(al-Maida 5:44)



In keeping with the highest standards of scholarship Sir Syed relates faithfully the Biblical dogma, stating objectively what Jews and Christians believe. Same holds true for his attempt at the authentication of the Bible by way of specifying such Quranic passages which bear out what the Bible says. More importantly, he introduces and defines the Bible in exclusively Quranic terminology in designating it as “al-Kitab” (*al-Baqarah* 2: 113) “al-Tawrah” (*al-Maida* 5: 49), “Suhuf Musa” (*al-Najm* 54: 36) and “al-Zubar/Zubur” (*al-Shu’ara* 26:196). Needless to add, this catalogue of Quranic terms is meant to persuade his Muslim readers of the divine origin of the Bible. Sir Syed elaborates further on the point thus:

The particulars of the creation of the world related in the Bible, which it was impossible to know without the aid of inspiration (*ilham*), and the several narratives which are contained in our Holy Koran, in which we have explicit belief, are also found embodied in it. We Mohammedans accept and defend the arguments of Mr. Horne, with some



exceptions, on the issue that the narratives in the Bible constitute the real fact.⁵

In a similar vein is Sir Syed's assertion that it was Prophet Moses (peace and blessing be upon him) who had inscribed the Torah⁶ and that this codex survived even Nebuchadnezzar's pillage and destruction.⁷ The claim by Christian divines, Sir Syed points out, that their sacred Scriptures have escaped destruction is in "no way opposed to the dictates of our religion and is quite worthy of acceptance".⁸

Apart from highlighting the identical origin of the Quran and the Bible, Sir Syed harps also at the equal status enjoyed by all the Messengers of God in the following observation: "No distinction of any kind is allowed by us Mohammedans between the Prophets, for they all are from the same source."⁹ Furthermore, all major world faiths, Islam and Christianity included, share the same morality in professing and practising an identical set of moral values. Rather, this was one of the objectives behind the advent of Messengers of God in all times and places: "God sent the Prophets to regulate our morals and to sanctify our souls and made



revelations to them, in order that we might improve our lives and attain eternal salvation.”¹⁰

In Sir Syed’s commentary on the Bible Islam and Christianity are perceived as members of God’s family. This is driven home with a pointed reference to the opening passage of the Bible (Genesis 1:1) on the phenomenon of creation, which is explained in the light of some Quranic passages (al-Zumar 39:62-63 al-An’am 6:1; al-Nahl16:40 and al-Furqan 25:2) The descent of entire mankind from the same parents – Adam and Eve, is stated in both the Quran and the Bible. Sir Syed presses home this point with a view to emphasizing the essential unity of mankind. This account is intended also to demolish the false, rather tendentious notions about the superiority of a particular race, colour or creed, which were rife in his days.

The above discussion should not, however, give rise to a misconception about Sir Syed which had clouded many minds for long. Notwithstanding his forceful espousal of the cause of a better understanding of Christianity, which lies at the core of his commentary on the Bible, Sir Syed makes no compromise



whatever on the essential articles of Islamic faith. On noting anything in the Bible which is discordant with the Quran, he is quick to point it out and vindicates stoutly the Quranic stance. As for example, he rejects outright the notion of Trinity which has crept into the Bible, for it runs counter to the Islamic ideal of monotheism (*tawhid*).¹¹ Same holds true for his reservations about some illogical, rather fanciful reports about creation. Without mincing words he refutes these, asserting: “But all other references which the learned have assessed on the authority of their own opinions, are not considered or admitted by us in the same light i.e. as being inspired or infallible.”¹²

On the socio-culture plane, Sir Syed’s commitment to the ideal of co-existence and a better understanding among the adherents of major faiths is reflected at its sharpest in his treatise: *Risala Ahkam Ta’am Ahl-e Kitab* (On Eating Meals with the People of the Book). In the wake of post - 1857 upheaval the social relations among Indian Muslims and the British were at their nadir. Sir Syed sought to address and resolve this otherwise intractable issue while employing the Islamic theological idiom and terminology. For he



knew well that his co-religionists could reconcile only to a position which was sanctified by Islamic texts, particularly the Quran, Hadith and Sunnah. Sir Syed's designation of the British as the "Quranic" "People of the Book" aimed at bridging gaps and at making them somewhat acceptable to Muslims. Had Sir Syed's approach not been so thoroughly grounded in Islamic texts, he could hardly achieve any success in the emotionally surcharged atmosphere of the day. On the authority of the Quran and Prophet Muhammad's illustrious example, he made it plain that it is perfectly legitimate to share meals with the British who being Christians belong to the Quranic category of the "People of the Book" It was indeed a big step forward towards forging cordial social relations between the two communities. This, in turn, helped dispel mutual suspicion and hatred. The above point is amply borne out by Sir Syed's biographer, Altaf Husain Hali's observation: "Sir Syed answered all the doubts which the Indian Ulema used to raise about eating with the "People of the Book" and because of which Muslims refrained from eating and drinking with



the British. These answers were ... enough to convince any fair-minded person of their validity.”⁽¹³⁾

The ideal of socio-cultural and religious co-existence in a pluralistic society is to the fore in other writings of Sir Syed as well, particularly his essays, written with his reformative zeal which appeared regularly in his celebrated periodical, *Tahzibul Akhlaq*. This magazine was wedded to the cause of social reform and moral rejuvenation, especially among Muslims. What is more significant is its emphasis on the principle and philosophy of co-existence. Mention may be made in this context of the following pieces of Sir Syed. In the essay “Qaumi Ittifaq” (National Unity) he makes it abundantly clear that national unity cannot be achieved by abandoning the various faith practices by Indians and by opting for a single faith overnight. For this amounts to flouting basic freedom, free will and common sense. Any coercion in matters of faith is highly reprehensible. Change of faith at a mass scale is impractical and would pose more problems than it may seem to resolve. On the contrary, national unity can be attained by professing and practising mutual friendship, love, cooperation and sympathy.



Notwithstanding the diversity of faith, we can and should develop a strong bond of brotherhood and fraternity. Every faith makes it obligatory on its adherents the maintenance of cordial social relations with neighbours, irrespective of their faith. It is our bounden duty to extend every possible help to our neighbours who are fellow human beings. This is the way to attaining national unity.

Equally forceful in preaching co-existence is Sir Syed's other piece entitled "Mohabbat" (Mutual Love). He argues that it is perfectly legitimate for one to maintain close social relations with adherents of other faiths. Islam does not forbid such a relationship. Rather, a genuine believer nurtures and expresses his overflowing love for all the creatures of God. Such love does not negate, in any way, his love and reverence for his religious ideals. In many essays Sir Syed is found emphasizing the role of conscience in the human life. In the essay "Conscience" he brings into sharper relief the guidance imparted by conscience. It helps man discern between good and evil. The moral sense instilled by conscience should govern both our private and public life. By the same token, Sir Syed



denounces the prejudice and persecution born of bigotry. His other piece “Ta’ ssub” (Prejudice) stands out as a testament to his moral fervour. The piece opens with his attack on prejudice of every kind, which he regards as one of the worst vices plaguing the society. Prejudice stems from ignorance and culminates into perpetrating unfair practices and injustice. Sir Syed reproaches those Muslims who are swayed by religious prejudice and refuse to see any merit in other faiths or their followers. While elaborating on the point he maintains that no prejudice should befog our mind and our approach to the latest advancements in science and technology. These developments anchored in unalterable laws of nature cannot and do not pose any threat to the universal truth which Islam embodies. Rather, scientific progress demonstrates all the more the life-sustaining role of faith. Since prejudice is fed on ignorance, those harbouring it cannot attain any progress. Sir Syed draws a distinction between one’s unflinching commitment to his faith and one’s hostility for members of other faith communities. The two stances do not complement, rather these run counter to each other.

Conclusion



In sum, apart from his immense contribution to education, social reform, Urdu language and literature, and history, Sir Syed deserves credit also for his insightful works which infused among Muslims the ideal of peaceful co-existence with other faith communities.

His achievement consists mainly in projecting religion as the most potent element in creating homogeneity at a time when religion was abused for polemical debates and as a divisive factor. He emphasized the ideal of the family of God at a time when our polity was sharply divided along religious, sectarian and racial lines and history was manipulated for engendering chauvinism and for instilling the spirit of revenge and retaliation. Sir Syed's clarion call to constructive and positive action on this front is of immediate relevance in today's ever-growing multifaith world in general and in our pluralistic country in



particular. The sooner we greet Sir Syed's message, the better it would be for our community, our country and humanity at large.

Notes and References

1. For details see, "International Conference: Dialogue of Cultures- The Future of Relations between Western and Islamic Societies," *Encounters* (Leicester, UK) 5:2, September 1999, pp. 199-203.
2. For an update of the titles in this field see the bibliographical periodicals particularly *Index Islamicus* (Cambridge, UK) and *Muslim World Book Review* (Leicester, UK).
3. *The Commentary* covers the first eleven chapters of the Book of Genesis and the first five Chapters of Matthew. The English translation appears along with its Urdu version. In one column the Hebrew text is set out with its English and Urdu translation underneath and in the second column an appropriate Quranic verse is cited, which is followed by Sir Syed's commentary.
4. Syed Ahmed Khan, *The Mohammedan Commentary on the Holy Bible*. Aligarh, printed and published by the author at his



private press, 1865. Cited as *The Commentary* in all subsequent references.

5. *The Commentary*, pp. 26-27 and 30.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 10
7. *Ibid.*, p. 11
8. *Ibid.*, p. 14
9. *Ibid.*, p. 15
10. *Ibid.*, p. 131
11. *Ibid.*, p. 40
12. *Ibid.*, p. 23
13. Hali, Khwaja Altaf Husain, *Hayat-i Jawed* (A Biographical Account of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan). Translated into English by Rafi Ahmad Alavi. Aligarh, Sir Syed Academy, AMU, 2008, p. 81.