

***Muslim Nationalism in India:***  
*Ashraf 'Ali Thanawi, Shabbir Ahmad Uthmani*  
*and the Pakistan Movement*

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This essay will attempt to identify and examine the rich contributions made by Ashraf 'Ali Thanawi and Shabbir Ahmad Uthmani in the struggle for Pakistan. These 'ulama' responded to the concerns of the emerging nationalist consciousness of the Muslim community and fully involved themselves as leaders in Muslim Indian politics.

The involvement of the 'ulama' in the Pakistan movement has not received the due scholarly attention they deserved. The political activism of Indian 'ulama' has generally been considered an appendage to the activities of All India Muslim League. Thus this sector of Muslim politics in modern India has remained a void.<sup>1</sup> As a result, the impression has arisen that the Muslim religious circles either did not provide the community with any lead as a separate or distinct group or were merely the camp followers of the Muslim League. This impression, which is neither complete nor correct, has left many important aspects of the modern Muslim Indian politics un-earthed.

Following in the anti-British and nationalist political tradition of the Indian 'ulama' like Shah 'Abd al- 'Aziz, Mahmud Hasan and Ashraf 'Ali Thanawi, the later 'ulama' faced and reacted to contemporary political problems in a manner that was both Islamic and

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1. Despite the key role played by pro-Pakistan 'ulama' in the political mobilisation of the Muslims in favour of All India Muslim League and their substantial contribution to the struggle for Pakistan, even a monographic study on their role in English language is still missing. The present essay is intended to fill that gap.



modern. In brief, it was a broad communal as well as national consciousness that brought the 'ulama' into the political arena far from being the product of any political group.

The experience of the Congress' provincial rule of 1937 proved to be a turning point and caused serious dissension in the rank and file of the Indian 'ulama' under the banner of Jami'yyat 'Ulama'-i Hind. The *murids* of Ashraf 'Ali Thanawi,<sup>2</sup> started to differ from the mainstream leadership of the Jami'yyat on the issues of its concept of *mutahiddah-qawmiyat* and its close co-operation with the Congress.

Mawlana Ashraf Ali Thanawi had never favoured the Jami'yyat 'Ulama'-i Hind's close co-operation with the Congress. In October 1935 when Thanawi he felt that the madrassah was becoming increasingly pro-Congress,<sup>3</sup> he resigned from the post of *Sadr Mohtamim* of Dar al- 'Ulum Deoband. This step of Thanawi led to a large number of 'Ulamas' defection from the Jami'yyat. The splinter group of 'ulamas founded a parallel organisation named Jami'yyat 'Ulama'-i Hind Kanpur to advocate their pro-Muslim League point of view and started a weekly *al-Aman* (Delhi) under the editorship of Mawlana Mazhar al-din.<sup>4</sup>

The issue of Muslim-Hindu co-operation Thanawi viewed it to be meaningless and superficial. In his opinion Hindus were worse than the British in their enmity towards Islam and Muslims. It was this reason why he did not appreciate the logic behind Jami'yyat's advocacy of *tark-i mawalat* with the British and co-operation with Hindus. Objecting strongly to this viewpoint, Thanawi said that:

As both British and Hindu *aqwam* belonged to the same nation of *millat-i kufriya* then a Muslim cannot be anti-British and friendly with the Hindus at the same time. Some people hold the opinion that the country should be freed from the *kuffar*. I agree with it completely. But where is it written that by *kufir* is meant

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2. Mawlana Ashraf Ali Thanawi (1863-1943) a leader of the Deobandi reform movement in the late nineteenth century, was a graduate of Dar al- 'Ulum Deoband. He was a student among others, of Mahmud Hasan and spiritual disciple of Imdad Allah. After teaching at the Kanpur madrassah for a short span of time Thanawi retired to Thana Bhawan, his home-town and settled himself in the *khanqah* (hospice) of his *pir* (mentor), Imdad Allah.
  3. Muhammad Anwar al- Hasan Sherkot, *Anwar-i 'Uthmani* (Karachi:, 1966), 53-6.
  4. Ishtiaq Husain Qureshi, *Ulema in Politics* (Karachi: Ma'arif, 1972), 357.



only one *qawm* [of the *kuffar*]. And where is it written that the other *qawm* [of the *kuffar*] is a nation of staunch Muslims and freedom from them is not necessary. I say that the second nation [Hindu] is stronger in enmity to Islam and Muslims than the first one.<sup>5</sup>

Thanawi held the opinion that Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi in particular and the Hindus in general could not be well-wishers of Muslims.<sup>6</sup> Thus he never favoured any movement based on Muslim-Hindu political alliance. He contended that such an alliance was possible only where both the nations (Muslims and Hindus) were equal. His argument was that in the context of 20th century Indian situation, Muslim-Hindus alliance would mean Muslims' dependence on the Hindus, the enemy of Islam and Muslims.<sup>7</sup> In 1937 Thanawi declared that Muslims' participation in the Congress' activities were unlawful. He stated:

Anyone who fights election from the Congress platform is not a well-wisher of the Muslims. To support it (Congress) or to struggle for its [candidates], in my opinion, is harmful for the Muslims.<sup>8</sup>

Having made all efforts in the direction of stopping Muslims from either joining or supporting the Congress in any form, Thanawi started advising Muslims to join the Muslim League. Through a *fatwa*, issued on 10 February 1938, he advised the Muslim nation to join the Muslim League and support its cause because its objective was "to safeguard Islam and repulse the enemies of Islam who were bent upon destroying Islam after Indian independence."<sup>9</sup> The other front on which Thanawi was working was the reformation of the Muslim League leadership. He believed that since it was a Muslim party its reform was quite possible. With this goal in mind, Thanawi started his mission to

5. Ashraf Ali Thanawi, *Afdhat al-Yawmiyah*, (Deoband: Dar al-Isha'at, 1936), 5:242.

6. *Ibid.*, 1:3-6.

7. *Ibid.*, 3:329-30.

8. Muhammad Shafi, *Afadhat-i Ashrafiyah der Masai'le Siyasiyah* (Deoband: Dar al-Isha'at, 1945/6), 65-6.

9. For complete text of the *fatwa* entitled *Tanzeem al-Muslimeen* see Munshi Abd al-Rahman Khan, *Ta'mir-i Pakistan awr 'Ulama'-i Rabbani* (Lahore: Shaykh Academy, 1975), 116.



reorient the Muslim League leadership, to make it more Islamic. Advising Shabbir Ali, one of his *murids*, he said:

It seems that the Leaguers will be successful and whatever (Muslim) state will be established will be governed by them whom we now call *fasiq awr fajir* (big sinners). If through your efforts these (Muslim Leaguers) become religious and honest, and if they are the ones who govern the state, then it is all right. We are not interested in governing a state. Our sole aim is that whatever (Muslim) state is established that should be in the hands of religious and honest persons so that Allah's *din* (Islam) reigns supreme.<sup>10</sup>

He sent three deputation's, one after the other, consisting of his *murids*, Zafar Ahmad 'Uthmani, Muhammad Shafi' and Shabbir 'Ali to Quaid-i Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah. The message conveyed to the Quaid was that he and all his colleagues should eliminate all the un-Islamic ideals and practices in the Muslim League. Besides, the Leaguers should become practising Muslims and observe five daily prayers.<sup>11</sup>

Thanawi was half way through his mission when he died in 1943. Mawlana Shabbir Ahmad 'Uthmani<sup>12</sup>, one of his *murids*, decided to carry the mission forward and practically joined in the realisation of the Quaid's Pakistan dream. 'Uthmani, who had dissociated himself from the Jami'yyat mainly on the issue of the Jami'yyat's "unconditional" support of Congress policies,<sup>13</sup> soon emerged as the

10. Munshi Abd al-Rahman, *Ta' mir-i Pakistan awr 'Ulama'-i Rabbani*, 64-5.

11. *Ibid.*, 65-6, 70, 73, 76-8; Ashraf Ali Thanawi, *Khatab ba Muslim Lig* (Saharanpur: Majlis Da'wat al-Haq, 1938), 2-16.

12. 'Uthmani, having received his education at Dar al-'Ulum Deoband got first position and distinction in his final examination in 1908. He got a temporary appointment as teacher in the same year he graduated from Dar al-'Ulum Deoband in 1908 where he taught for few months. Then he joined the madrassah Fatehpuri in Delhi as *sadr mudarris*. 'Uthmani returned to Dar al-'Ulum Deoband in 1911 as honorary teacher and served there until 1928 when he got a permanent job at a madrassah in Dabhil, Surat. In 1936 he again returned to Deoband and joined Dar al-'Ulum as *sadr* and served in the same post until 1944. In 1944 he resigned from the Dar al-'Ulum because he did not like student's participation in practical politics and went back to the madrassah at Dabhil. In August 1947 he permanently migrated to Pakistan.

13. 'Uthmani justified his stance on the grounds that co-operation with non-Muslims was lawful only when Muslims held a dominant position and non-Muslims played a secondary role. Referring to his active involvement during the Khilafat



undisputed leader or the pro-Pakistan 'ulama' group. Disclosing reasons for his preference for Muslim League over Jami'yyat 'Ulama'-i Hind, 'Uthmani stated that:

Muslim League is fighting against the *Kuffar-o mushrikin*... They are fighting a constitutional battle against the *kuffar awr mushrikin* for Muslim nation's independence, political power and to make the Muslim nation strong and elevated.<sup>14</sup>

Continuing with the same argument, 'Uthmani said that in view of the present political and constitutional situation "I considered it necessary to help those Muslims who are in favour of the independence of the *millat* and of Muslim's right of self-determination."<sup>15</sup>

Answering the Jami'yyat 'Ulama'-i Hind's argument that the Muslim League represented "irreligious nobles" and that it did not have the support of the 'ulama', 'Uthmani said that:

Muslim League is a party of *kalima* reciting Muslims. There might be thousands of faults in them, it is nevertheless better than non-Muslim party. It is closest to us and the best also. As the number of Muslims is growing in it, its leaders are also trying to act more carefully.<sup>16</sup>

### 'Uthmani on the issue of qawmiyat

'Uthmani's views in this regard were truly in the context of the contemporary Muslim political struggle. In his estimation the Muslims constituted a *mustaqil qawmiyat* (independent nationality) of ten crore Muslims. He ruled out the possibility "that by mixing of the Muslims and non-Muslims a *mutahiddah qawmiyat* could come into being in the real sense".<sup>17</sup> And for this nation of Muslims to live in an Islamic environment, he stressed the need for an independent Muslim state.

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movement, he said that it was because the Hindus were merely the camp followers of Indian Muslims. But soon after the collapse of the Khilafat movement when the Congress assumed dominating role, he opposed Muslim-Hindu joint political effort as it was becoming a menace to the Muslim culture in India.

14. Shabbir Ahmad 'Uthmani, *Khutbah-i Sadarat Muslim Lig Meeruth Kanfrans* (Lahore: Hashmi Book, n.d.), 15.
15. *Makalmat-i Sadrayn* (Lahore: Hashmi Book Depot., n.d.), 42.
16. 'Uthmani, *Pegham*, 10-11; *Khutbah-i Sadarat Muslim Lig Meeruth Kanfrans*, 15.
17. These views were expressed by 'Uthmani in his *Pegham* (read at the founding session of Jami'yyat 'Ulama'-i Islam held on 26-9 October, 1945 at Calcutta).



'Uthmani stressed that the Muslim nation should have an independent centre "call it Pakistan or *hakumat-i Ilahiyah* or whatever". There is no doubt in it that Muslims are a separate nation and they require an independent centre which can in no way be held in a mixed government.<sup>18</sup>

Refuting Jami'yyat 'Ulama'-i Hind's concept of *mutahaddah qawmiyat*, 'Uthmani said that the example of *Mithaq-i Madinah* was irrelevant in regard to Muslim-Hindu political alliance. Explaining his point of view, he said that:

The most important clause of this *mithaq*, which is often ignored while referring to it as a proof, was that in case of a dispute between the parties (Muslims and Jews) the final decision shall be of Allah and of His Messenger, Muhammad. Are the standard bearers of united nationality ready to accept any such condition or even to acknowledge it.<sup>19</sup>

### 'Uthmani on Jinnah and Pakistan Movement

'Uthmani, who had thrown himself fully into the Muslim League's campaign for Pakistan, devoted most of his speeches and statements in supporting Jinnah, Muslim League and the campaign for Pakistan against the attacks of the Jami'yyat 'Ulama'-i Hind leaders. The major thrust of his speeches was to emphasise the integrity of the League leader besides highlighting the importance of the Muslim League to achieve the legitimate ideal of Pakistan.

I am sure that of all the Muslims, Mr. Jinnah is the one who understands the intricacies of today's politics very well. He can neither be bought on any price and nor will he bow before anybody.<sup>20</sup>

In one of his statements made during the election campaign on 12 November 1945, 'Uthmani declared:

The principle on which the Muslim League is fighting the elections is undoubtedly *Shara'iy* and rational. If the Muslim League does not win the elections then a true principle will be

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18. *Ibid.*

19. *Ibid.*

20. *Makalimat al-Sadrayn*, 45.



buried for ever. The aim of Islam is to form a nation that is above geographical boundaries, race, colour and profession.<sup>21</sup>

During a debate between the leaders of the Jami'yyat 'Ulama'-i Hind and the Jami'yyat 'Ulama'-i Islam, 'Uthmani expressed his support of the Pakistan movement in these words:

The opinion I have formed about Pakistan is based on absolute sincerity. Whether Jami'yyat 'Ulama'-i Islam stays or not, my opinion will still be that Pakistan is beneficial for Muslims. This opinion is based on honesty that Muslims must have a centre or a platform and the 'Ulama'-i Ummah must back it and should make reformative efforts.<sup>22</sup>

Speaking on why an independent Muslim state was necessary for Indian Muslims, 'Uthmani maintained that it were the *Shuddhi* and the *Sangathan* movements, Nehru Report, Wardha Education Scheme, and finally the *Widya Mandir* Scheme that made Muslims conscious of the dangers involved in staying in united India. "Therefore Muslims decided to make one part of Hindustan as Pakistan."<sup>23</sup> Having argued in favour of a separate Muslim state, 'Uthmani compared the position of Indian Muslims with the Muslims who lived in Makkah before Muhammad al-Rasul Allah's migration to Madinah. He contended that city of Makkah, dominated by the infidels, did not provide the Muslims with an opportunity to establish an Islamic state. But it was their migration to Madinah that enabled them to make the city of Madinah "a sort of Pakistan."<sup>24</sup>

Foreseeing a very bright future for the proposed Pakistan, 'Uthmani expressed the hope that:

Just like the people of Madinah conquered Makkah and a little later made the entire Island of 'Arabia as Pakistan, this Indian Pakistan will also become larger and larger. It is also possible that Pakistan's system of government and its judicious and generous behaviour might attract India to express the wish the Pakistani system of government for India herself.<sup>25</sup>

21. *Khutbah-i Sadarat*, Lahore Kanfrans, (Lahore: Hashmi Book, n.d), 10.

22. *Ibid.*, 15.

23. *Ibid.*, 16.

24. *Ibid.*

25. *Makalmat al-Sadrayn*, 44-47.



In regard to the much debated and sensitive issue of the position of a small Muslim minority that would be left in India after Pakistan's creation, 'Uthmani said that:

We are worried as to what will happen to two or two and half crore Muslims who will be dependent on Hindu majority. What do you think the Hindus would not be concerned about the safeguard of three crore Hindus residing in Pakistan. The kind of attention we will give to non-Muslims living in Pakistan with an open heart the same kind of attention would be expected for Muslims in Hindustan. Our cutting off from Hindustan is not our cutting off from the Hindi Muslims. Geographical boundaries are nothing in the way of mutual relationship of Muslims.<sup>26</sup>

Referring to the Jami'yyat 'Ulama'-i Hind's argument that the creation of Pakistan would entail abandonment of the religious institutions, graves of Muslims, *Masajid* and centres of Muslim culture, 'Uthmani cited the example of the Messenger of Allah and his companions. He affirmed that the Muslims of Makkah,

did not carry with them Makkah's house of worship when they migrated to Madinah. They also had to leave the helpless, friendless and the weak there (back in Makkah). The Messenger of Allah, Muhammad, did not relinquish the idea of turning Madinah into Pakistan.<sup>27</sup>

Among the questions raised by the Jami'yyat 'Ulama'-i Hind that Muslim Leaguers who were not devout Muslims themselves will make laws like the 'Civil Marriage' law in their Pakistan, 'Uthmani said:

It is astonishing to say that the government of Pakistan will be in the hands of those who have nothing to do with religion. Their government will make laws like the Civil Marriage Act. My answer is that why do you let Pakistan's government go in such hands. It is your fault. All the 'ulama' and *Zu'ma* would join the League and get hundreds of thousands of right-minded Muslim who have sound beliefs to become its members. Then majority will be yours and with the help of the *jambhur* you will be able to achieve all kinds of reforms.<sup>28</sup>

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26. *Ibid.*

27. *Ibid.*

28. *Ibid.*, 65-66.



'Uthmani visualised Pakistan as an Islamic state incorporating al-Qur'an and al-Sunnah as the guiding principles of its government. Encouraged by the speeches and statements of Jinnah, Liaquat 'Ali Khan and others 'Uthmani declared that:

In Pakistan the government will be based on the political principles of al-Qur'an and al-Sunnah and that all the minorities will be treated not only justly but in a generous way.<sup>29</sup>

Besides, 'Uthmani made it clear to his Muslim audience that they should keep in mind that this noble aim of making Pakistan a real Islamic state might not be achieved immediately and that it might gradually be realised. Even during the Muslim League campaign for 1945-46 elections, 'Uthmani thought it wise to announce before hand that the Muslim League must have an awareness of what they were actually fighting for in the form of Pakistan movement, lest their dream of an Islamic state was shattered. This shows that 'Uthmani himself was aware of the fact that Pakistan was not going to be an Islamic state as it should ideally be. He warned the Muslims that Pakistan may not become an Islamic state immediately because:

Pakistan is an *istalahi* (reformative) term. No one should misunderstand it to mean that without any delay a *khilafat-i rashidah* or a pure Qur'anic or Islamic government would be established on this land. Pakistan may be considered a first step which can result in the establishment of a government based on the principles of al-Qur'an. After all the supreme Pakistan of Madinah itself reached its zenith gradually.<sup>30</sup>

'Uthmani had joined the Pakistan movement in accordance with the Islamic principles. He kept on doing *tabligh* to the Muslim League leaders. In his Meerut speech, in a reformative tone, addressing both the leaders of the Muslim League and the masses, 'Uthmani said:

The transitional period till the attainment of Pakistan is a period of great trial. For the post-Pakistan period we have to train ourselves as Muslims now. You might be knowing the purposes and aims of the Islamic government. In al-Qur'an Allah says (in Surat al-Hajj verse 41) 'Those who would be firm in devotion, give zakat, and enjoin what is good and forbid what is wrong, if we give them authority in the land. But the resultance of things

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29. *Ibid.*

30. *Ibid.*, 71-72.



rests with Allah'. If we do not make ourselves habitual of these things then how will we correct the system then. If we do not willingly submit to the commands of Allah and his Messenger, then how can we expect to invite others to the same commands and how the others would listen to us.<sup>31</sup>

The other prominent 'Ulama' to join hands with 'Uthmani were Mufti Muhammad Shafi' and Mawlana Zafar Ahmad Thanawi. They fully endorsed Muslim League's policies. In order to realise Pakistan Mufti Shafi' started *fatawa* campaign to mobilise Muslim masses in favour of the Muslim League's solution of the Indian Muslim crisis. His tract entitled *Congress awr Muslim League ke Muta'liq Sharai'y Fesla*, written in 1945, attempted to counter the Jami'yyat 'Ulama'-i Hind on intellectual and *fighi* grounds. In this tract Mufti Shafi' declared Muslim participation in Congress as (*na ja'iz*) unlawful. This he said for the following reasons:

Firstly, the Hindus were dominant and the Muslims were dominated in the Congress. In this situation even if the Hindus treat the Muslims with approbation and abstain from working against Islam, it was not allowed to join them.

Secondly, in the present situation the Muslims would have to obey the Hindus.

Thirdly, this kind of obedience or joining hands with the Hindus, the *exegetics* (*mufasssirin*) and the jurists (*fuqaha*) and also Mahmud Hassan, meant (*mawalat*) friendship with the *kuffars*.<sup>32</sup>

The message Mufti Shafi' tried to convey to the Muslims through his *fatwa* was that in the present circumstances the support of the Congress will mean the support of the *kufr*. The *fatwa* also attempted to counter anti-Jinnah and anti-partition *fatawa* of the Jami'yyat 'Ulama'-i Hind.

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31. Uthmani, *Khutbah-i Sadarat*, 25.

32. Muhammad Shafi, *Afadhlat-i Ashrafiyah der Masa'il-i Siyasiyah: Kangras awr Muslim lig ke muta'aliq Sharai'y Feslah* (Deoband: Dar al-Isha'at, 1945).