

I. Struggling for the Representation of Muhammad

The main protagonist of this study, Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817-1898), is best known for his educational impulses via his establishment of the Anglo Muhammadan Oriental College, later renamed as Aligarh Muslim University. His main achievement is described as the attempt to reconcile the British and the Muslims after the upheaval of 1857. In the aftermath of this upheaval, Muslims were suspected of being disloyal to the British because of their faith – a thesis Khan tried to refute vehemently. He is further known as a religious reformer who tried to develop a peculiar stance towards the confrontation between science and religion in harmonising Islam with the findings of the natural sciences. Those topics shall be discussed in later chapters. Yet, this summary already implies Khan's discursive localisation in encounters with Europe. The emphasis of these aspects in Khan's thought, combined with an almost general neglect of his background and early writings before 1857, implicitly presupposes that his thoughts are a mere adoption of European ideas. Thus, almost all studies discussing Khan's religious thought or views on educational reform commence with his post-1857 writings.

This said, it cannot be denied that his later writings show a far more developed thought process, while the early texts lack such originality. Thus, it is sometimes noted in secondary literature that, if 1857 had not evoked a radical break in Khan's thought, he perhaps would have remained merely an ordinary scholar among others. But those early texts are interesting insofar as they allow for the localisation of Khan's early background – a background which is frequently, sharply delineated from his later texts. The first aim of this chapter is thus to situate Khan in the context of the first half of the 19th century, which shall provide us with the necessary tools to analyse to what extent Khan's post-1857 texts can be described as a mere adoption of European thought and whether or not there are crucial dependencies on his early thought. In short, can the upheaval of 1857 really be described as a radical turning point in Khan's thought, or is the assumption of a radical break in Khan's thought rather a result of previous studies turning a blind eye towards his early background?

While the second part of this question shall be discussed in Chapter 3, this chapter shall first of all situate Khan in the context of early 19th century reformist thought. In order to do this, I will first describe the historical background of Khan's

religious ideas in his first phase. The main focus will be on three texts: a short biography of Muhammad, *Jilā' al-qulūb* (1842); his *Kalimat al-Ḥaqq* (1849), a discussion of the Sufi practice of *pīrī-murīdī* (teacher-student relationship); and his *Rāh-i sunnat aur radd-i bid'at* (1850), a discussion of the concept of *bid'at*, i.e. the rejection of religious innovations and their inadmissibility. These works shall provide a picture of Khan's situation within the context of early 19th century religious discourse. I will focus on his stance regarding the increasing dispute over positioning the role of Muhammad, as well as his views on historiography relevant to this issue.

1. Early Reformist Tendencies in South Asia

The first reformist tendencies in South Asia are usually associated with Shah Waliullah (1703-62). As son of the founder of the *Madrasah Rahīmīyah*, he was born in a time of steady decay of the Mughal empire. The reign of Aurangzeb (d. 1707), the last influential sovereign of the Mughal empire, was followed by several successive quarrels with only short-lived periods of rule. The sovereigns were incapable of preventing a disintegration of the empire into several *de facto* independent, regional states. Furthermore, the area of Maharashtra was lost to the expanding Marathas. The empire was then struck by Afghan invasion and the Sikhs' increase of power in the Punjab.¹

In this situation of political decay and a loss of power for the Muslim state, Shah Waliullah developed a reformist approach emphasising the responsibility of the individual. Two important facets of his biography influenced this perspective: on the one hand, his and his family's Sufi-orientation and, on the other hand, the influence of his travel to the Hijaz, from which he returned in 1733. After his return, he fundamentally restructured the curriculum of the Madrasah, which had hitherto had a rational focus (*maqūlāt*), that is, an inclination to disciplines significantly influenced by ancient Greek philosophy. Books on logic and theological philosophy were therefore replaced by an emphasis on the study of the Quran and the traditions of the Prophet. The rationalist focus was replaced by a focus on tradition (*manqūlāt*).²

1 Malik: *Islam in South Asia*, 211-5.

2 *Ibid.*, 201.

His reforms are often equated with and reduced to an influence of Wahhabism. Although an impact of his travel to the Hijaz cannot be denied, this assertion appears to be rather a continuation of British nomenclature, as Jamal Malik argues:

[T]he movement was given a religious colour much later and that too in India only. This happened when Europeans began documenting the doctrines of Arabic Wahhabiyya, considering both this and the Indian variety to be pan-Islamic and a political opposition. [...] Subsequently, “Wahhabi” mutated into a religious concept and was transplanted into the Arabian landscape.³

Instead, Malik argues that Shah Waliullah’s project was a conciliatory effort made between the different tendencies within Islam:

[S]hah Wali Allah [...] considered his mission to integrate various fragmented and contradictory articulations of Muslim history of ideas. He looked for a way to bring together the deliberations of philosophers, theologians, and mystics.⁴

Shah Waliullah’s stance towards Sufism was therefore ambivalent. He considered himself a Sufi and was initiated to several Sufi orders. But, at the same time, he denounced what he saw as excesses of Sufi practices. In particular, the “excessive veneration of the saints and the cult at their graves” was a thorn in the side.⁵ The main purpose of his critique was to transfer the responsibility of “Muslim behaviour” to the individual and to deny the necessity of “an intermediary on the path to God and for a life pleasing to Him.”⁶

In a similar vein, his abandonment of rational learning in the curriculum of the Madrasah must also be read as an emphasis on individual behaviour. Shah Waliullah perceived rational knowledge as merely preliminary and auxiliary to the revealed knowledge of the *shariat*. Only the *shariat*’s divine origin could guarantee definitive knowledge. Malik recognises this argument as Shah Waliullah’s demand for more individual responsibility on a religious basis: merely speculative knowledge of God or mystical love, as provided by the rational approach of *ma‘qūlāt*, is replaced by an emphasis on moral behaviour and action. This challenged established authorities and conferred religious responsibility to the individual.⁷

Francis Robinson describes this abandonment of the religious scholars’ monopoly as an effort to create a substitute for the declining Mughal empire, which

3 Ibid., 256.

4 Ibid., 200f.

5 Pernau: *Ashraf into Middle Classes*, 50.

6 Ibid., 50.

7 Malik: *Islam in South Asia*, 201f.

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had hitherto maintained a Muslim identity. When the Mughals increasingly lost power, their weakened state was incapable of preserving this identity:

If Islam could no longer be supported by the swords of Muslim princes, it could now be supported by the enhanced religious understanding of Muslims themselves.⁸

Shah Waliullah and his sons, who continued their father's mission, thus emphasised individual responsibility. Religion experienced a shift from a focus on the hereafter to a focus on this world. The lack of a state capable of preserving Muslim identity had to be overcome by educating the individual. The individual had to be equipped with sufficient knowledge of his faith.⁹ The underlying fear of the religious scholars was a renunciation of Islam:

[W]ithout power they [i.e. the *'ulamā'*] were fearful of Islam. They were apprehensive that the community, the vast majority of whom were converts from Hinduism, might slip back into the maw of Hindu India. [...] They were frightened because there was no legitimate power to put the holy law of Islam, the *sharia*, into operation. Their answer to this was better religious knowledge. Muslims should know, much more clearly and much more certainly than before, how to behave as Muslims.¹⁰

Two factors played a crucial role in executing this mission: translation and print. The former had already been begun by Shah Waliullah, who had prepared a translation of the Quran in Persian. This first step was continued by his sons. His eldest son, Shah Abdul Aziz (1746-1824), who assumed responsibility of the Madrasah Raḥīmīyah after his father's death, prepared a new translation of the Quran in Urdu. Furthermore, in the first half of the 19th century, several compendia, short treatises and pamphlets on religious topics, were penned.

But all this would not have come to fruition if printing technology had not been utilised. Only print permitted the authors to reach a wider audience. Printing had already been known since the 15th century in the Islamic world and had also been made applicable to the Arabic script. This innovation, however, presented the printer with difficulties: in its cursive script, Arabic letters have different forms depending on their position. Still, the Quran had been printed in the 15th century in Italy and Christians in Syria had by this time used print for Arabic texts. Robinson ascribes this reluctance of Muslim scholars to print to the traditionally oral trans-

8 Francis Robinson: *Islam and Muslim History in South Asia* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), 77.

9 Pernau: *Ashraf into Middle Classes*, 60; Robinson: *Islam and Muslim History*, 77, 105.

10 Robinson: *Islam and Muslim History*, 76.

mission of the Quran, which came to be perceived as divinely ordered: many Muslims associated printing with *kuf̄r*. Robinson mentions the example of one “printing press operated by Muslims in Istanbul in the 1730s and 1740s [which] aroused so much opposition that it had to be closed down.”¹¹

According to Robinson, the tradition of oral transmission also significantly affected the entire educational system. As with the first texts of the Quran, which were a mere aid to memory, books taught in *madrasas* were often written in rhyming prose to also aid the memory. The reading of books was always supervised by a teacher, who would eventually give his authorisation (*ijāzah*) to the pupil:

The completion of the study of the book would involve a reading back of the text with an explanation. If this was done to the teacher’s satisfaction, the pupil would then be given an *ijaza*, a licence to teach the text.¹²

Education and the transmission of texts were controlled by religious scholars, and only with their authorisation was one allowed access to the texts. With this in mind, Muslim scholars’ reluctance over printing becomes more reasonable, as the multiplication of texts and uncontrolled access to them radically opposed the established system of education.¹³

However, in the early 19th century, the situation changed significantly. The Mughals as well as the princely states of Avadh etc. remained only nominally sovereign. In fact, the East India Company had firmly established its power in North India. Muslims had to face the loss of their former elitist position and were confronted with a competition with Hindus under a foreign rule. Furthermore, confrontation with Christian missionaries gradually increased.

The ‘*ulamā*’ realised that the loss of a Muslim state, which maintained the Muslim character of society, could only be answered with a general transmission of religious knowledge. While this knowledge had formerly been controlled by the ‘*ulamā*’ themselves, the new state of affairs required a general transfer of responsibility to the individual. Although the ‘*ulamā*’ had to face a significant loss of influence, as virtually any “Ahmad, Mahmud or Muhammad” was now able to read the Quran in Urdu and several other regional languages, this abandonment of their monopoly for the sake of the individual prepared in religious matters was the lesser of the two evils.¹⁴ Otherwise, an entire loss of control was threatening:¹⁵

11 Ibid., 69.

12 Ibid., 71.

13 Ibid., 73.

14 Ibid., 80.

15 Ibid., 75-77.

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But, ironically, while print enabled the *ulema* to extend their influence greatly in public affairs, it also seriously damaged the roots of their authority. By printing the Islamic classics [...] and by translating them into the vernaculars they undermined their authority; they were no longer necessarily around when the book was read [...]; their monopoly over the transmission of knowledge was broken.¹⁶

The importance of the Prophet Muhammad increased extensively in this context as the perfect symbol for an exemplary Muslim life. Already, Shah Waliullah and his sons had called for a return to authentic Islam. History was perceived as a continuous distancing from the time of the Prophet, thus increasing the threat of deviation from the perfect model and *bid'at*, the innovation of practices or doctrines in opposition to the Quran and the tradition of the Prophet. There were many such issues in the view of these early reformers. Thus, they propagated the study of the Quran and *ḥadīṣ* as a crucial means to restoring original Islam.

This restoration is often described, with reference to Shah Waliullah, as a purgation of Hindu influences in Islam. However, as Pernau argues, such communal distinctions were not the core issue. The early reformers, rather, challenged the excesses of Sufism and the veneration of saints. Instead, their admonition of Muslims to adhere to the prescriptions of their faith or the refutation of Shiites was at the forefront.¹⁷

Muhammad obtained a crucial role in this project, as he was demythologised and humanised. An entire genre of biographies of Muhammad flourished. While earlier biographies had focused on his miracles and the supernatural aspects of his life, early 19th century biographies emphasised his human character. Aspects of how to live the life of a good Muslim came to the forefront and human virtues were consistently pointed out. Muhammad's biography appears to be utilised to "project unto him [an] image of a perfect human self – a perfect, twentieth century, educated Muslim middle class self."¹⁸

In the following section, I will examine Khan's early writings and attempt to read them in the context of early reformist approaches in South Asia. For this purpose, three texts written in the time between 1842 and 1850 shall be considered in order to excavate Khan's intellectual background.

16 Ibid., 80.

17 Pernau: *Ashraf into Middle Classes*, 48-51.

18 Robinson: *Islam and Muslim History*, 96.

2. Restoration – Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan and his Early Writings

In his comprehensive study, *Sayyid Ahmad Khan: A Reinterpretation of Muslim Theology*, Troll distinguishes four major phases in Khan's work. These phases have been referred to in the present study – however, Troll's third phase shall be termed a transitional phase. Troll's study provides a well-researched perspective on the development of Khan's thought, given that most studies discussing Khan and his texts reduce him merely to his last and most influential phase from the 1870s onwards – the period after his return from England, whereupon he initiated the publication of the journal *Tahzīb al-Aḥlāq* that would become his and his companions' platform for circulating their reformist ideas. In this period, the relation between science and religion became Khan's main concern. The texts penned in this phase had perhaps the most lasting impact and discussed the burning issues of his time, which still have not been concluded and remain under discussion today.¹⁹

Nevertheless, it is absolutely vital to trace the gradual development of Khan's thought if one wants to thoroughly study him, as his last phase cannot be understood without the preceding phases. The most sophisticated thought from his last phase must not be imagined as a sudden break or novel inspiration, but seen as a gradual and tedious development of earlier conclusions. Although Troll is aware of this need and aims to depict the steps of this development, he gives an emphasis to Khan's post-Mutiny development, which he seems to perceive as an incisive turning point. Khan's reviews of some of his early writings from 1878 and 1880, which suggest a renunciation of his early convictions, seem to reinforce Troll's assertion. He then merely lists and concisely summarizes the texts Khan penned before 1857.²⁰

Even though the drastic changes in the aftermath of 1857 cannot be denied, one must not forget that Khan lived half of his life before the *Mutiny*. Although 1857 compelled Muslims to eventually realise the decline of the Mughal empire and obliged them to come to terms with British rule, Khan's thought must not be misunderstood as a radical break from earlier conclusions, but rather as a rethinking and adaption of his convictions.

19 Significantly, many of the topics Khan discussed appear also in contemporary discourse. Frequently, even much reminiscent responses are posed in contexts wherein a reference to Khan may not be acknowledged, as he would be perceived as standing outside of "orthodox" Islam. However, this assertion would require much scrutiny of a vast amount of contemporary material, which cannot be accomplished within the scope of this project. Cf. Chapter 3 for concrete examples.

20 Troll: *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 37.

Without doubt, Khan breaks with several ideas he had supported in the past. But can this be perceived as a total break? Are his early writings irrelevant to understanding the post-1857 Khan, as Troll seems to suggest in only marginally mentioning them? In this chapter and in Chapter 3, I will aim to refute the assertion of a total break and the reduction of Khan to his later texts. I will instead evince crucial continuities in Khan's thought, including a discussion of his pre-Mutiny writings.

As representative texts of his early phase, I will refer primarily to his biography of Muhammad, *Jilā' al-qulūb*, and to his discussion on *pīrī-murīdī*, *Kalimat al-ḥaqq*, as well as his discussion on *bid'at*, *Rāh-i sunnat aur radd-i bid'at*. In Chapter 3, I will contrast these texts with his second and far more influential biography of Muhammad: *Al-Huṭbāt al-Aḥmadīyah*.

2.1 *Jilā' al-qulūb*

Khan had penned several texts in his early phase, taking on mostly historical but also scientific topics. His most famous books are perhaps the voluminous *Āṣār aṣ-ṣanādīd* (1846), a study of historical sites of Delhi, and his edition of the *Ā'in-i Akbarī* (1855).²¹ *Jilā' al-qulūb* (1842) is Khan's first work with explicitly religious aspirations. In his review of this text, Khan mentions that it was written for *maulūd*-gatherings, which were held on the twelfth day of any month to remember the Prophet Muhammad. According to the review, numerous pamphlets on the life of Muhammad were published in this time. Unsatisfied by these and critical of their use of unreliable sources and myths, Khan thus aimed to present a biography of Muhammad that was based on only reliable traditions.²²

The *Jilā' al-qulūb* is divided into several sections on different aspects of the life of Muhammad. After a short introduction with poems of praise, Khan very concisely describes the most important stages of Muhammad's life. With great fervour, he describes events which accompanied and announced Muhammad's birth: the palace of the King of Persia shook and the holy flame of the Zoroastrians, which had been constantly burning for a thousand years, was extinguished.²³ He then concisely lists the most important events in Muhammad's life, among them being the revelation of the Quran, the *mi'rāj*, Muhammad's travel to heaven, and

21 Ibid., 36, 40.

22 Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan: *Maqālāt-i Sar Sayyid*, ed. Muḥammad Ismā'īl Pānīpatī (Lāhaur: *Majlis-i Taraqqi-i Adab*, 1962), Vol. VII, 31. Cf. also Tauqīr 'Ālam Falāḥī: *Sar Sayyid kā dīnī šu'ūr* ('Alīgarḥ: 'Alīgarḥ Muslim Yūnīvarsitī Pres, 2005), 98f.

23 Ibid., 7.

the *hijrat* from Mecca to Medina. Significantly, Khan gives only a very abridged description of Muhammad's life, which rather resembles a mere enumeration, without discussing the context or implications of the separate events.²⁴

Furthermore, in a later section, Khan describes various aspects of Muhammad's conduct and behaviour: he describes the beauty of his appearance and style of clothing. His behaviour with friends and foreigners is depicted. An entire section is dedicated to the miracles accomplished by Muhammad: in the first place, Khan mentions the Quran as the most important miracle, but also the splitting of the moon (*šaaqq al-qamar*) and other smaller miracles. Khan closes the biography with a lengthy description of Muhammad's farewell-pilgrimage (*ḥujjat al-vidā*) and a final poem. The *ḥajj* is described in some detail, as Khan ends with Muhammad's death.²⁵

It shall suffice here to merely list the topics addressed by Khan in this very short biography. He himself does not discuss any details which would have stood out in the time of publication. I am more interested, rather, in localising Khan in the context of his time. In a time when Persian was still the language of the learned – despite its removal as the official language by the British in 1835 – Khan's choice of Urdu as the language of his biography, in addition to its unadorned style, suggest Khan's assertion that the *Jilā' al-qulūb* be read in the context of an increasing emphasis on Muhammad as the role model of a pious Muslim life.

It is uncertain, however, if Khan's biography of Muhammad, the first of his religious writings, can already be assigned to the reformist sphere around Shah Waliullah and his sons, as seen with his subsequent works. In his review of the *Jilā' al-qulūb*, Khan's view on his positions in the biography suggests a further differentiation from his early phase's writings:

When I became stricter [*zīyādah-tar puḥtagī*] in terms of religious matters [*mazhabī masā'il*] and leaned more towards those doctrines which are called Wahhabism [*vahhābīyat*]²⁶, I began to perceive *maulūd*-gatherings as *bid'at*.²⁷

24 Ibid., 22f.

25 Ibid., 23-29.

26 Interestingly, Khan designates himself here as Wahhabi, a highly problematic term in the South Asian context. As has been remarked with reference to Malik, this category has been applied by the British without discrimination for South Asia as well as for the Arabian Peninsula, assuming their equity. This notion seems to have entered South Asian Muslim discourse, as Khan adopts the category of Wahhabi and applies it to himself from the retrospective perspective of his reviews of the late 1870s.

27 Ibid., 32.

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In the time after the publication of the *Jilā' al-qulūb*, Khan began to more thoroughly study Islam and also to perceive the *maulūd*-gatherings as inappropriate gatherings not in conformity with Islam. He does not elucidate whether he only refrained from such gatherings or if he also renounced the views on Muhammad's life described in his *Jilā' al-qulūb*. Although he disavows the statements of this early biography in his review, this departure seems to be a later opinion, reflecting his perspective at the time when he wrote his second biography. Despite his initial intention of presenting a biography based only on reliable sources, he subsequently realised that his own biography was equally based on unreliable material.²⁸ During his pre-Mutiny phase, Khan apparently did not have this view. Thus, strictly speaking, even his early phase cannot be described as a homogeneous phase, but can already be divided into internal gradations.

Still, it cannot be determined with certainty whether he wrote his *Jilā' al-qulūb* in support of the reformist sphere or whether these writings are merely an expression of the societal context that increasingly emphasised the role of Muhammad as exemplary for Muslim life. In any case, Khan here engaged his at-first-glance unspectacular biography in the increasing debate on the role of Muhammad and tried to detach excessive attributions from his persona. Muhammad is described in the work as a rather humanised individual, although Khan does not deny his ability to work miracles. Khan's conception of reliability here has to be distinguished from his later stance towards miracles: while his critical perspective in *Jilā'* seems to be restricted to the denial of unreliable sources – specifically regarding their status in *ḥadīṣ*-criticism – his later view was instead directed by his effort to exclude any supernatural tradition. Thus, his early perspective did not disregard miracles in general, but only those which were based on untrustworthy traditions. Thus, the most striking point of his *Jilā'* is not its stance towards miracles. This short biography has to be read rather in the context of the 18th and early 19th century instead of taking science as a point of reference, which acquired a prevalent position only in the second half of the 19th century in northern South Asia. By contrast, Khan seems to refer here to perceptions of Muhammad which conferred him a superhuman status.

In Sufi traditions, Muhammad acquired a superhuman status and is ascribed a pre-eternal existence as light (*nūr Muḥammadīyah* or *nūr-i Muḥammadī*).²⁹ Anne-

28 Ibid.

29 Khan himself mentions that “through Muhammad's perfect beauty, the world became enlightened/illuminated [*munavvar*]” (Ibid., 7). Yet, he does not further elaborate nor base his biography on this assertion as a fundamental doctrine.

marie Schimmel traces these ideas back to presumably “Hellenistic gnostic speculations.”³⁰ Schimmel describes Ibn Arabi (1165-1240), perhaps the most influential Sufi writer, as the first to give these ideas a philosophical and consistent framework:

These theories on the *nur Muhammad* were, like so many early trends in Sufism, elaborated and systematized by Ibn al-‘Aarabi, who states in his probably spurious profession of faith that ‘the first light appears out of the veil of the Unseen and from knowledge to concrete existence and is the light of our prophet Muhammad.’ He then goes on to compare Muhammad, the *siraj munir*, to the sun and infers that the heavenly intelligences, the spirits, the intuitions, and the essences are nourished by the luminous essence of (Muhammad) Mustafa, the Elect, ‘who is the sun of existence.’ In philosophical terms, with Muhammad, the first self-determination of the Absolute, the Divine begins to manifest itself gradually to the world, and the primordial light, which has permeated all prophets from the beginning, reaches its full development in the Perfect Man, the historical Muhammad.³¹

Ibn al-Arabi’s writings were followed by most Sufis of South Asia during the Mughal reign. But these ideas were also widely received in less elaborated versions in folk traditions. In its more philosophical manifestation, however, the concept of *nūr-i Muḥammadī* showed dependencies on (Neo-)Platonism in its assertion of a hierarchy of Divine knowledge descending from God via the light of Muhammad towards various gradations of *auliya* (pl. of *valī*, i.e. a friend of God, roughly translatable as saint). In order to reach God, an ordinary man had to ascend this hierarchy in reverse through the intercession of spiritual masters (*pīr*), saints, and finally Muhammad. Muhammad was therefore conceived of as an inevitable mediator between God and man, a relation which was frequently further split with the emphasis on a *valī* as a mediator between man and Muhammad.³²

Taking this into account, Khan’s statement about abstaining from unreliable attributions to Muhammad attains a rather different meaning than that of his later stance. This view is perhaps indebted to Shah Muhammad Ismail’s *Taqwīyat al-īmān*, which evoked an increase of biographies on Muhammad. The text’s author aims to make “clear the importance of the Prophet as a human model rather than as a source of miracles or a mere conduit of revelation.” Khan likewise attempts to present a rather human view on Muhammad – without entirely denying the Prophet’s miracles.³³

30 Annemarie Schimmel, *Rhine to Indus: Collection of A. Schimmel’s Rare Writings* (Lahore: Pakistan Writers Cooperative Society, 2012), 76.

31 Ibid.

32 Robinson: *The ‘Ulama of Farangi Mahall*, 15; Schimmel, *Rhine to Indus*, 119.

33 Metcalf: “The Taqwīyat-al-Iman”, 201.

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Troll recognises Shah Waliullah's texts and the continuation of his teaching, as carried on by the Tariqah-i Muhammadiyah (*tarīqah-i Muhammadīyah*), as a crucial influence on Khan's early writings. Shah Waliullah's thought can be characterised by a "fundamentalist" approach, which proposes "only the Qur'ān and the *sunnah* as the sole significant sources of the Islamic Sharī'a."³⁴ Later, the Tariqah around Sayyid Ahmad Barelwi and his disciple, Shah Muhammad Ismail, grandson of Shah Waliullah, radicalises Shah Waliullah's "fundamentalism" and advocates *jihād* against the Sikhs in Punjab.³⁵ The Tariqa was founded by the "mystical and charismatic figure" of Sayyid Ahmad Barelwi and initially focused on preaching against "the cult of Muslim saints, against rites and customs borrowed from the Hindus, and all kinds of customs they deemed contrary to the pure monotheism of the Holy Prophet and his Companions."³⁶ The Tariqa proposed a radical return to the Islam of the time of Muhammad and emphasised the Quran and Sunna, the conduct of Muhammad, as the sole sources of Islam. Any change to this *sunnat* was condemned as a deviation from the true path.³⁷

The Tariqah had heretofore produced a significant "corpus of doctrinal and missionary literature and established a network of missionaries all over India."³⁸ In particular, Shah Muhammad Ismail assumed the role as ideologist of the movement and penned several influential texts. In 1826, however, they abandoned preaching in favour of *jihād*. When, in 1831, Sayyid Ahmad Barelwi and Shah Muhammad Ismail were defeated and killed by the Sikhs, some of the members decided to continue their armed struggle. Others, however, devoted themselves to the initially missionary intent of the movement. Still others can be described as both scholars and silent supporters, participating in disseminating the "fundamentalist" thought of the Tariqah without being members. Gaborieau also counts Khan as a supporter of the Tariqah in his early phase, stating:

Before elaborating his modernist theology, he [Khan] wrote several tracts between 1841 and 1852, inspired by Wahhabi teachings.³⁹

34 Troll: *Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 33.

35 Ibid.

36 Marc Gaborieau: "Late Persian, Early Urdu: The Case of 'Wahhabi' Literature," in *Confluence of Cultures: French Contributions to Indo-Persian Studies*, ed. Françoise Delvoye (New Delhi: Manohar [et al.], 1995), 173f.

37 Troll: *Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 35.

38 Gaborieau: "Late Persian, Early Urdu," 174.

39 Ibid.

Gaborieau thus includes the *Jilā' al-qulūb*, as it was published only in 1842. Thus, even though Khan's convictions when penning this biography cannot be definitively clarified, a proximity of intent can be identified.

With their intention to reach a wider audience, the supporters of the Tariqah were some of the first to compose religious texts in Urdu, texts so far having been written only in Persian or Arabic. Likewise, Khan wrote his biography in Urdu. The structure and focus of the text emphasised the conduct of Muhammad in daily life rather than his actual biography. This further reinforced the assertion of proximity, as Khan equally aimed to implement an uncorrupted picture of Muhammad and his behaviour in the daily routine of Muslims. His unadorned style as well as his choice of Urdu affirm this suggestion.⁴⁰

Thus, Khan was in several respects part of the crucial changes of the early 19th century: on the one hand, he was part of the utter boom of biographies on Muhammad aimed at positioning him as exemplary for a pious Muslim life.⁴¹ On the other hand, Khan was part of the tendency to disseminate Islamic knowledge in order to enable the common Muslim to become a self-responsible Muslim. Furthermore, Khan was himself a product of this opening of the '*ulamā*'s monopoly on Islamic knowledge. He himself frequently emphasised his lack of any formal education as a religious scholar.⁴²

40 Khan: *Maqālāt*, Vol. VII, 32.

41 This humanisation of Muhammad while simultaneously sacralising his everyday conduct is paralleled by the humanisation of Krishna in Hindu reformism, as Hans Harder argues with reference to Bankim Chandra Chattopadyay (1838-94), a prominent author of Bengali literature who is credited for having introduced the Bengali novel. In his later years, the author turned to essay writing, with religion and Hinduism becoming his central topics. Among his essays, he penned his *Kṛṣṇacaritra* (1886/1892), a study of Krishna: "its aim is to establish Kṛṣṇa as a historical figure and the ideal of mankind by extrapolation from mythology" (Hans Harder: *Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay's Śrīmadbhagavadgītā* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2001), 14. Very reminiscent of Muhammad since the early reformist tendencies in South Asian Islam, Krishna is here presented as "the ideal man." Harder identifies the confrontation with Christianity as a stimulus for this account. Krishna was modelled as the Hindu equivalent of Jesus, a historical person and the ideal point of reference for Christianity. Even though it appears highly questionable to trace back the emphasis of Muhammad as the ideal man to an influence of Christianity, as this approach has been proposed at least since the 18th century and thus precedes the period of extensive encounter with the Christian mission, the parallels in both approaches are striking. Perhaps the entanglement is even more complex, given that one could also envisage the Muslim approach as a stimulus for Hindu reform. Cf. Harder: *Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay's Śrīmadbhagavadgītā*, 1f., 14, 174.

42 Cf. Khan: *Safar-nāmah-i Panjāb* ('Alīgarh: 'Alīgarh Insṭīṭyūt Pres, 1884), 187-213; translated by Troll: *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 307-331. Yet, he was by no means ignorant of religious knowledge, as his edition of the *Ā'in-i Akbarī* already suggests. The *Ā'in* contained among other things varying explanations of these debates. Likewise, his upbringing was

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Interestingly, however, Gaborieau as well as Khan himself describe the influence of the Tariqah as “Wahhabi” thought. As has been discussed earlier, this categorisation can be traced back to a generalisation by the British, assuming a commonality between the Wahhabi thought of the Arabian peninsula and the tradition of Shah Waliullah and the Tariqah. This denomination lacks an important differentiation between the two and thus culminated in a misconception of the latter. While the Wahhabi thought of the Arabic pen-insula was characterised by a pronounced hostility to any kind of mysticism, Shah Waliullah and likewise the Tariqah approved of Sufi practices, however much they abandoned any excesses of venerating graves or saints. As Hermansen writes:

The so-called “Wahhabi movement” in India was said to trace back the *jihād* of Sayyid Ahmad Shahid and Shah Isma‘il Shahid on the frontier. However, this was clearly a movement which was not anti-Sufic in the way which the Arabian ‘Abd al-Wahhab’s doctrine had stressed. While sharing an aversion to the interpolation of local practices into the Muslim cult of the saints, the Indian Mujahidin clearly persisted in many features of Sufi belief and organisation such as taking allegiance to a spiritual guide, believing in his charismatic and even miraculous powers, and tracing spiritual genealogy through the existing Sufi *tariqas*, alongside membership in the all-embracing *Tariqa Muhammadiyya*.⁴³

The denomination of Shah Waliullah and the Tariqah as Wahhabi is therefore misleading, as it veils the crucial aspect of Sufism in their thought. As we will see, Khan’s self-description as Wahhabi is equally misleading and perhaps based on his adoption of the British usage.

Two later religious texts which Khan wrote after more openly engaging with the context of Shah Muhammad Ismail’s writings remain on this track and discuss Khan’s self-description as Wahhabi. In the following section, I therefore question the extent to which those Sufi tendencies of the Tariqah can be traced in Khan’s texts.

modelled on the traditional Mughal model, which included religious subjects to a certain extent. Altaf Husain Hali mentions in his biography, *Ḥayāt-i jāved*, several personal teachers who taught Khan Persian, Arabic, the Quran, medicine, etc. Thus, even though Khan might not have received a formal education as a religious scholar, it can be reasonably assumed that he was well acquainted with the discourse through his upbringing and personal study; cf. Altaf Husain Hali: *Ḥayāt-i javīd* (Lāhaur: *Ā‘īnah-i Adab*, 1966).

43 Marcia Hermansen, “Wahhabis, Fakirs and Others: Reciprocal Classifications and the Transformation of Intellectual Categories,” in *Perspectives of Mutual Encounters in South Asian History 1760-1860*, ed. Jamal Malik (Leiden, Boston, Köln: Brill, 2000), 32.

2.2 *Kalimat al-ḥaqq*

The preceding analysis of Khan’s biography of Muhammad already suggests a “fundamentalist” understanding of Islam in its most literal terms: the early period of Islam is glorified and transfigured as a shelter of pure and unadulterated Islam. This point of reference centers on Muhammad, which clarifies the boom of biographies on his life. While Khan’s biography may only point to this tendency, his later texts are explicitly based on this perspective.

The *Kalimat al-ḥaqq* (1849) is a significant text in this regard. Khan herein discusses the Sufi concept of *pīrī-murīdī*, the spiritual initiation of the disciple (*murīd*) by his spiritual mentor (*pīr*). It was a common practice for a pious Muslim in South Asia to undertake an initiation (*bai‘at*) into any Sufi order and with a particular mentor within this order. Khan argues in this small tract against this practice, describing it as completely contrary to the *sunnat* of Muhammad and without any proof in the Quran and *ḥadīṣ*.⁴⁴

Khan introduces this tract with a short *du‘ā*:

God, grant [us] love for you and your beloved Muhammad, the Prophet of Allah (peace be upon him) and let us follow his *sunnat* and let us die according to his *sunnat*, *āmin*, oh Lord of the Worlds.⁴⁵

Already, this introduction points to the subsequent line of argument: namely that the practice of Muhammad as transmitted in his *sunnat* is declared as the highest goal. In the following passage, Khan describes the position of the Sufis who perceive themselves as being elevated from the merely external (*zāhirī*) *shariat*. Khan describes an abuse of *pīrs* through their position and bemoans that they are not judged on their actions:

If someone says: ‘Dear [*miyān*], he is acting in contradiction to *ṣar‘*,’ then he would answer: ‘Oh, you do not know. This does not apply for Sufism [*ṭarīqat*] [...]. *Shariat* applies only for the external [*zāhir*].’⁴⁶

Khan proceeds to emphasise the general applicability of the *shariat* without any exception. In fact, a real beloved of God (*valī-Allāh*, at the same time also a common denomination for a Sufi – Khan seems to imply both notions as a pun) fully adheres to *shariat* rather than denying its application:

44 Khan: *Maqālāt*, Vol. V, 267.

45 Ibid., 269.

46 Ibid., 270.

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The one who has deviated only minimally from the way of *shariat*, has lost his way. [...] Being *Valī* or *Abdāl*, *Ġauṣ* or *Quṭb*⁴⁷ does not require any miracles and charms [*kariṣmah aur karāmāt*]; ghosts and evil spirits, demons and *jinns* [...] can also show a spectacle and act hocus-pocus. *Valī* and *Abdāl*, *Ġauṣ* and *Quṭb* is the one who acts entirely in accordance with *shariat*.⁴⁸

Thus, only the one who follows the *shariat* can be a true beloved of God. In presenting several quotes from the Quran and *ḥadīṣ*, Khan affirms his argument and concludes that the one and only *pīr* is Muhammad:

Only in the *sunnat* of Muhammad lies blessing [*ni‘mat*] and, by God, in no one else, in no one else, in no one else. Thus, one is obliged to follow solely the path of Muhammad’s *sunnat* and try to comply with the *shariat*; and recognise only him as *Valī* and *Abdāl* and *Ġauṣ* and *Quṭb* who follows his *sunnat*, and whoever leaves his *sunnat*, shall be recognised as even worse than the devil.⁴⁹

Any deviation from the path of Muhammad is therefore to be condemned. In reference to a *ḥadīṣ*, Khan even refuses any innovation or adjustment of his *sunnat*:

[I]n the *shariat* of Islam it is stated that the companions [of Muhammad, *ṣahābah*] despised and disregarded the one who innovated anything or introduced a new custom which had not existed in the time of Muhammad, be it of minor or great extent, be it with respect to mundane [*duniyā ke mu‘āmlon men*] or religious [*dīn ke*] matters or in the way of remembering God.⁵⁰

Khan then proceeded to transfer this position onto Sufis who claim to be in contact with God and, thus, can act as a mediator between the ordinary Muslim and God:

Now imagine if the companions despised even any innovation in the way of worship and remembrance of God, then anyone who invents anything new in contradiction with the *sunnat* of God’s Prophet, calls them religious service [*‘ibādat*] and even claims that God meets him is a complete liar [*jhūtā*] and impostor [*makkār*]. There is no other way to meet God except the *sunnat* of His Prophet.⁵¹

Muhammad is therefore recognised as the solely valid *pīr* and his *sunnat* as the only way to God. Khan thus challenges established elites and refutes mediatory

47 Various titles for Sufis.

48 Ibid., 270.

49 Ibid., 273.

50 Ibid., 273f.

51 Ibid. 274.

claims by Sufis and scholars. Instead, he emphasises the responsibility of the individual:

You must put right your book of [good] works (nāmah-i a'māl). That will come in useful [when you are] in your grave as well as on the Day of Resurrection. On that day God will do you justice.... Only this one question will be asked: "Speak up, what you brought goodness or badness? Have you practised the following of the Messenger of God or not? Through God's grace alone, then, is there salvation of both pīr and murid.⁵²

Instead of resting one's responsibility on mediators, the individual must fulfil his own responsibilities. In order to abandon such deviations from the original *sunnat*, Khan calls for a return to the original sources of Islam, the Quran and *ḥadīṣ*. This point is also reflected in the structure of his *Kalimat al-ḥaqq*: the entire tract is organised in successive quotes from these sources. His complete line of argumentation is based on these successive quotes.

The second part of the tract is devoted to an analysis of the concept of *bai'at*, the initiation of the *murīd* and its validity from the perspective of the Quran and *ḥadīṣ*. Khan argues that the form of initiation in Sufi orders, as has become common practice, lacks any evidence from the Quran and tradition. Yet, he does not dismiss initiation entirely, but rather links it to the condition of adherence to Muhammad's *sunnat*. The *pīr* is thus judged on his conformity to the *shariat* and explicitly not on his affiliation with a Sufi order or his power to work miracles (*karīmah*). In Khan's view, the *pīr* instead comes to function as the conveyor of Muhammad's *sunnat*.⁵³

The analysis of the first part of the tract reveals Khan's view on history as well as his reformist approach: in resemblance to the wider reformist context of the early 19th century, Khan recognises a deviation from original Islam in his time. He thus distinguishes between the lived Islam of his contemporaries and an essentialised form of Islam. This pure and unadulterated Islam is, according to Khan's line of argument, found in the days of Muhammad. Hence, Khan calls for a return to the *sunnat* of Muhammad as the perfect set of guidelines for a pious Muslim's life. He calls for the unaltered restoration of the Islam of Muhammad's days, for any innovation or adjustment would imply deviation from the original, unaltered path of the Prophet.

On the other hand, in contrast to his self-denomination as "Wahhabi," Khan clearly maintains Sufi aspects in his thinking. Even though he criticises the attach-

52 Troll: *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 47 / Khan: *Maqālāt*, Vol. V, 284.

53 Khan: *Maqālāt*, Vol. V, 275, 283.

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ment to a *pīr*, he does not abandon this category, but (as mentioned above) describes Muhammad as the only true *pīr*. Khan thus merges the mystical sphere of Sufism with the juridical sphere of the *shariat* and claims Muhammad as the necessary role model for the ideal manifestation of both. Muhammad obtains the position of a spiritual master guiding the individual on his mystical way but at the same time serves as the ideal for mundane life, too. “In this sense,” as Soheb Niazi writes, “the spiritual mystical path (*ṭarīqah*) was identical with Shariah law.”⁵⁴ Khan thus bypasses the mediation of saints and *pīrs*, and aims to relate Sufi practice as well as worldly conduct to Muhammad. The conflict between contemporary Sufi practice and *shariat*, which Khan describes in the beginning of his *Kalimat*, is therefore refuted. Sufism is integrated into the legal sphere of *shariat*, combined under the umbrella of Muhammad. Khan argues that any need to exceed Muhammad’s *sunnat* for mystical insights is to disregard the Prophet, for his *sunnat* is the sole path to God – to which no addition is deemed possible or necessary. True Sufism is based solely on Muhammad’s teaching.

This struggle for the representation of Muhammad gains even more severity in the second half of the 19th century with the institutionalisation of varying reformist approaches in South Asian Islam. As Barbara Metcalf writes, “All the movements of this period focused on the importance of the Prophet, but there were subtle differences in the extent to which emphasis rested on him as object of devotion, or intermediary with God, or model of human personality.”⁵⁵ The most opposing stances were represented by the Ahl-i Sunnat wa al-Jamaat, commonly known as Bareilwis, and the Ahl-i Hadis. The former movement aimed at largely maintaining a mystical conception of Muhammad as *nūr* as well as insisting on his knowledge of the Unseen (*‘ilm-i ḡaib*) to deny tendencies to degrade Muhammad as a mere human being:

Muhammad Isma’il’s prophet was a perfect but essentially human model for behaviour, while the Ahl-e Sunnat’s prophet was – and is – not. Muhammad Isma’il spoke of the prophets, imams, pirs, and martyrs as ‘brothers’ who ought to be honoured as ‘human beings, not as God’. In the same vein, he wrote that the Prophet had discouraged his followers from seeing him as more than a ‘servant’ of Allah who ‘one day ... would die, and return to the dust; and [who] could not therefore be

54 Soheb Niazi: “Revisiting Sir Syed’s Early Religious Writings,”

(<https://cafedissensus.com/2017/11/04/revisiting-sir-syeds-early-religious-writings/>).

55 Barbara Daly Metcalf: *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband 1860-1900* (Princeton: University Press, 1982), 272.

worthy of worship'. [...] this egalitarian portrayal of the prophet and other purveyors of religious authority was at odds with the Ahl-e Sunnat view. Whatever Muhammad was, he was not an 'elder brother', not an ordinary person [...].⁵⁶

The Ahl-i Sunnat, as the Barelwis are also called, emphasised the necessary mediatory role of Muhammad and thus sustained the idea of a hierarchy which the ordinary believer had to ascend in order to reach God. Still, the Barelwis evinced distinctive features of a reform movement in their abstention from excesses of saint veneration and folk traditions, and at the same time from Hinduism, as Sufism was often accused of syncretistic adoptions from Hinduism.⁵⁷

The Ahl-i Hadis can be localised at the other end of the spectrum. In his extensive study, Martin Riexinger states that we can locate the earliest representatives of this movement in the sphere of the Tariqah and, therefore, they were not entirely dismissive of Sufi tendencies and were oftentimes initiated in the Naqshbandiya order. Yet, their critical stance exceeded the Tariqah, not only in disregarding the concept of *nūr-i Muhammadī* but also in turning against the idea of the inner imagination of the disciple's spiritual master in order to control his soul – a concept Khan also discusses and denies in his *Namīqah dar bayān-i mas'alah-i taṣavvur-i šaiḥ* (1854). Still, they did not deny the reversed spiritual hierarchy that a disciple had to ascend, the master being maintained as the first mediator on the spiritual journey to God.⁵⁸ Nonetheless, they vehemently discounted several claims of the Barelwis, such as Muhammad's knowledge of the Unseen, an attribute they saw as belonging solely to God. Likewise, they denied the assertion of a spiritual presence of prophets and *auliyā* in their graves. While later generations of the Ahl-i Hadis accepted some Sufi dependencies, they directed their critique first and foremost at contemporary Sufis. Yet, not all adherents of the Ahl-i Hadis consented to this allowance, and strictly denied any Sufi impact. In general, the Sufi impact declined to a merely marginal aspect, whereas early Ahl-i Hadis still based their thought fundamentally on Sufi concepts.⁵⁹

The Deobandi school takes up an interim position through their claim for, as per Metcalf:

[A] synthesis of the two main streams of the Islamic tradition, that of intellectual learning and that of spiritual experience. They themselves understood this unity of *shari'at* (the Law) and *tariqat* (the Path) to be firmly within the bonds of Islamic

56 Usha Sanyal: *Devotional Islam and Politics in British India: Ahmed Riza Khan Barelwi and his Movement 1870-1920* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996), 255.

57 Martin Riexinger: *Šanā'ullāh Amritsarī (1868-1948) und die Ahl-i Ḥadīṣ im Punjab unter britischer Herrschaft* (Würzburg: Ergon, 2004), 252.

58 Ibid., 246f.

59 Ibid., 244-246, 258-60.

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orthodoxy, for they took the Law and the Path to be not opposed but complementary.⁶⁰

With this understanding, the Deobandis saw themselves in the tradition of Shah Waliullah. In relation to the aforementioned reform movements, they set themselves apart by adhering to the four legal schools of Islam, while the Ahl-i Hadis positioned themselves strictly against *taqlīd*. The Deobandis viewed the Ahl-i Hadis' emphasis on individual responsibility as exceeding the capability of an ordinary Muslim and thus their approach was restricted merely to a small elite. On the other hand, they distanced themselves from the Barelwis in restricting the latter's devotion to Muhammad with attributes reserved for God only, namely the knowledge of the Unseen.⁶¹ Furthermore, they opposed the celebration of Muhammad's birthday "on the grounds that it encouraged the belief that a dead person was actually present."⁶²

The Aligarh Movement, which Khan would establish in his later career, is usually viewed as outside of this spectrum and degraded as a mere adoption of European ideas.⁶³ The crucial aim of the preceding discussion of Khan's Sufi back-

60 Metcalf: *Islamic Revival*, 139.

61 Ibid., 140f, 150.

62 Ibid., 150, 265.

63 Khan's religious thought is frequently dismissed on two grounds which can only be discussed concisely here. First, his religious reforms were dedicated merely to mundane benefit: "Sir Syed's main interest was not in religion but in culture and education. But he realized that religion, in this case Islam, was basic to the issue and no significant questions could be posed and answered without looking at things from the religious point of view" (A. A. Suroor: "Sir Syed's View of Islam," in *Reason and Tradition in Islamic Thought*, ed. Mahmudul Haq (Aligarh: Institute of Islamic Studies, Aligarh Muslim University, 1992), 171f.; cf. also Zafar Hasan: *Sir Saiyid aur Hālī kā nazārīyah-i fitrat* (Lāhaur: *Idārah-i Ṣaḳāfat-i Islāmīyah*, 1990), 114). This approach rejects Khan's entire religious thought as motivated solely by the desire to improve the education of Muslims in British India. Here-with, his authority as a serious religious thinker is contested and his influence is reduced to his position as a social reformer.

The second commonplace point disclaims his thought as "Westernised": "The only contemporary documentation of this stay states that while in India Afghānī associated chiefly with modernizing reformists, especially followers of the westernized Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khān" (Nikki R. Keddie: *An Islamic Response to Imperialism: Political and Religious Writings of Sayyid Jamāl ad-Dīn 'al-Afghānī'* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 21; Italics added by the author). Irfan Habib describes Khan's approach even as aping the West: "Syed Ahmad was a reconstructionist who tried to reinterpret the Quran to assimilate modern scientific knowledge. Afghani, on the other hand, was a pragmatist. Though he [i.e. Afghani] stood for the cultivation of modern sciences, he did not approve of the aping of the West [like Khan]" (S. Irfan Habib: "Reconciling Science with Islam in 19th century

ground, which shall be returned to in the following chapters, is thus meant to re-integrate Khan and the Aligarh Movement within this spectrum and question the extent of the impact of European ideas on his thought.

In order to further consolidate this argument, I conclude this short excursus here and will now return to the discussion of the last of Khan's early texts wherein he examines the concept of *bid'at*.

2.3 *Rāh-i sunnat aur radd-i bid'at*

In his *Rāh-i sunnat aur radd-i bid'at* (1850), Khan aims to present a sophisticated description of different types of innovation. He bases his description of *bid'at* on Shah Muhammad Ismail's Persian *Īzāh al-ḥaqq aṣ-ṣarīḥ fī aḥkām al-mayyit wa az-zarīḥ* (*Elucidation of the Plain Truth Concerning the Rules About the Dead and the Tombs*).⁶⁴ In his review of the *Rāh-i sunnat*, Khan describes the

immediate cause for writing this tract [as] an interesting exchange of views Sayyid Ahmad Khan had (in one of the meetings at the house of Ṣadr al-sudūr Maulānā Muḥammad Ṣadr al-dīn Āzurdah), over the licitness of eating mangoes. Sir Sayyid

India," *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 34, no. 1 (2000): 53). On this basis, Khan is excluded from the realm of "orthodox" Islam: "His [i.e. Khan's] demythologizing [*sic*] attitude and his naturalistic appropriations of the supernatural realm were justifiably rejected by the orthodox" (Muhammad Maroof Shah: *Muslim Modernism and the Problem of Modern Science* (Delhi: Indian Publ, 2007), 7).

Even though the few studies focusing on a thorough analysis of Khan's religious thought do not ascribe Khan's thought to a mere adoption of European ideas, they fail to illustrate a continuation of Khan's early background in his later writings and rather subscribe to the assertion of a radical break in his thought (cf. Johannes Marinus Simon Baljon: *The Reforms and Religious Ideas of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khān* (Lahore: Ashraf, 1964); Bashir Ahmad Dar: *Religious Thought of Sayyid Ahmad Khan* (Lahore: Institute of Islamic Culture, 1957)). Those emphasise a Mutazili affiliation for Khan, calling him a Neo-Mutazili. This assertion is, according to M. Reza Pirbhai, "based on the close relationship between Ahmad Khan's 15 *usul* and the Mu'tazila's 5 *usul*, sharing in particular an understanding of Reason, and the conception of God as uncompromisingly 'transcendent'." (M. Reza Pirbhai: *Reconsidering Islam in a South Asian Context* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2009), 240f.) Yet, as Pirbhai further states, Khan does not indicate any references to the Mutazila.

Solely, Troll refers in a footnote to the possibility that Khan maintained some of his Sufi background in his later writings, while, however, his general perspective reinforces the assertion of a rupture: "In view of Sayyid Ahmad Khan's intensive contact with Sufism in his early life, it is remarkable to note how little he refers to Sufi thought in his writings after 1857" (Troll: *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 220).

⁶⁴ Khan: *Maqālāt*, Vol. V, 427; Troll: *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 40f.

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had defended his views, saying that to eat mangoes – though not a blameworthy action – was a matter of doubt, since the Prophet had not decided upon it explicitly, having himself never eaten them.⁶⁵

With this in mind, Khan felt the necessity to write a tract on *bid'at*.

In his introduction, Khan bemoans the wide spread of customs and practices in conflict with the *sunnat*, while the defender of *sunnat* is pejoratively called Wahhabi or Mutazili:

What a pity, what time was it when once people gave everything [*jān dete the*] to follow the *sunnat* of the Messenger of God; and if one nowadays follows the *sunnat*, he is called [a Wahhabi].⁶⁶

Khan proceeds to cite the tradition of Muhammad presenting a gradation of his followers, beginning with his nearest companions, and followed by their followers, etc. With every step, the distance to Muhammad increases, the respective status decreasing. Thus, Khan concludes that a pious Muslim must make an effort to increase his proximity to Muhammad as much as possible, by emulating his and his companions' conduct.⁶⁷ As stated above, Muhammad acquires the position of an exemplary symbol of Muslim life. History, however, is perceived as a gradual distancing from this purity of Islam, as symbolised by Muhammad. Khan experiences his own time, with both its innovations and neglect of Muhammad's *sunnat*, as an entire deviation from pure Islam as was present only in Muhammad's days.⁶⁸

Thus, he concludes that “only those customs, habits [*ḥaṣḥāṭen aur 'ādāten*] and religious services which were prevalent among them [i.e. Muhammad's companions and their followers] are meritorious and the remaining futile.”⁶⁹ Hence, only the *sunnat* of Muhammad and the habits of his companions are valid.

With reference to the famous tradition that the Muslim community (*ummat*) will be split into 73 sects, of which only one is on the right path, Khan reinforces his view on history as one of continuous decline. He identifies adherence to the *sunnat* as the one right path and calls on Muslims to adopt the *sunnat* and abandon

65 Troll: *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 41; Khan: *Maqālāt*, Vol. V, 427.

66 Khan: *Maqālāt*, Vol. V, 359.

67 This line of argument bears some resemblance to the reversed hierarchy of mediation in Sufi thought that one has to ascend to reach God. It will not be possible, however, to discuss this assertion within this project's scope, as this would require a careful diachronic investigation of this call to return to the *sunnat* of Muhammad, which can by no means be called an innovation by Khan.

68 *Ibid.*, 360.

69 *Ibid.*, 360.

bid'at. In the following paragraphs, Khan aims to distinguish three types of *bid'at*.⁷⁰

In describing the first type, Khan simply defines *bid'at* as the introduction of anything new (*na'ī cīz*). But he hastens to add a qualification for what exactly can be described as new – for a new hat or a new pan cannot be described as *bid'at*, as those things had existed already in Muhammad's days, if perhaps in different shapes.⁷¹ Hence, Khan defines *sunnat* as anything “which either Muhammad did himself, or ordered to do, or anything, done by someone else, which he did not prohibit, when he heard about it.”⁷² Khan defines any religious service, custom, or habit which did not conform to the conditions described in the time of Muhammad, his companions, or their followers as pure (*theṭ*) *bid'at*.⁷³

The second type of *bid'at* refers to a quantitative change of the *shariat*: even though a practice is in itself praiseworthy in front of God, if its prescribed limit is increased or decreased with the intention of gaining special merit, then this is defined as *bid'at* as well.⁷⁴ The third type of *bid'at* refers again to practices which are themselves believed to be meritorious: when this act is fixed on a particular day or occasion and perceived as a religious service, it is equally described as *bid'at*.⁷⁵ In his discussion of both the second and third types of *bid'at*, Khan criticises the innovation of practices which are subsequently performed as if they were prescribed and contained in the *shariat*.

Does Khan, consequently, condemn any kind of innovation? Is innovation perceived as negative *per se*? Can good innovation also exist? Khan asks in return, how can we know of any innovation whether it is good or bad? Man does not have any faculty to determine the character of an innovation, for the only potential faculty would be ratio (*'aql*). But Khan unequivocally denies the reliability of ratio:

According to the fundamental doctrines of Islam [*uṣūl*], it has been laid down that the people of truth evaluate the merit of any act only on the basis of *ṣar'*. By means of ratio, this cannot be measured. Thus, anything which has been ordered in the *ṣar'* is meritorious and which has been prohibited in the *ṣar'* is vicious.⁷⁶

Likewise, Khan denies the categorisation of experience (*tajribah*) as a licit criterion, as experience cannot determine the merit of any act of a man that does not stand before God. Thus, the only lawful criterion can be the *shariat* because of its

70 Ibid., 361f.

71 Ibid., 364f.

72 Ibid., 365.

73 Ibid., 371f.

74 Ibid., 378ff.

75 Ibid., 382, 385.

76 Ibid., 408.

divine origin. Khan perceives the *shariat* and *sunnat* (i.e. the former's lived realisation) as complete guidelines. He defines anything not comprised in them as innovation, being in itself negative, as he views the *sunnat* and *shariat* as perfect, not requiring any innovation. Still, he states that scholars are qualified to "establish practices to be implicitly contained in the *shar'*, [...] by critically employing analogical reasoning to Qur'ān and Tradition."⁷⁷

Conclusion

Early in his career, Khan had already developed an interest in history. In his pre-Mutiny writings, he penned two eminent historical studies, his *Āṣār aṣ-ṣanadīd* and his edition of the *Ā'in-i Akbarī*. In his revision of the former in particular, his sense for critical historiography became increasingly obvious, as Troll states.⁷⁸ But his early religious writings also prove a certain sense for critical historiography: in his biography of Muhammad, *Jilā' al-qulūb*, Khan aimed to present Muhammad's life as bereft of the various myths and legends that had spread because of the use of unreliable sources. He acknowledged the necessity of reviewing traditional sayings about Muhammad and aimed to present a biography relying only on affirmed sources. Although Khan had here already shown an uncommonly critical awareness, considering his context and time, he had not yet developed any methodology.

The three religious tracts of his early period discussed in this chapter allow us to draw crucial conclusions about Khan's conception of history. *Bid'at* can perhaps be described as the most significant and frequently recurring concept of Khan's early religious writings. In fact, he dedicates his entire *Rāh-i sunnat va radd-i bid'at* to the elucidation of *bid'at*. In these tracts, Muhammad and his conduct become the central points of reference for original Islam. The past and in particular the days of Muhammad are perceived as the guarantor of authenticity. Muhammad becomes the perfect example for a pious Muslim life in any regard, which the ordinary Muslim should aim to emulate. This emphasis on individual responsibility is an essential feature of early reformist approaches in South Asian Islam, which can be traced back to Shah Waliullah. These tendencies gained greater impact with the increased utilisation of print. Religious elites abandoned

⁷⁷ Troll: *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 55.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 40. Yet, Troll does not specify the differences between the two editions (1. edition 1846; 2. 1852).

their monopoly on the access to knowledge by translating and printing religious texts that enabled the individual to fulfil this newly enjoined responsibility. Khan was a product as well as a supporter of this process, and argued equally for a return to original Islam – one bereft of its erroneous adulteration.

History, furthermore, is viewed as a continuous distancing from the days of Muhammad. The link to original Islam moves steadily into the past. Thus, in Khan's view, history implies an inevitable decline, a deviation from Islam which can be stopped only by restoring Muhammad's *sunnat* and applying it in contemporary life. This restoration is of a verbatim character, disregarding any adaption or adjustment as *bid'at*. The example of Muhammad is to be transferred into contemporary times without alteration. Khan thus sees Islam as a constant which does not require any adjustment. Its divine origin provides its universal applicability.

This preservative stance has frequently been termed Wahhabism. As I have demonstrated, this denomination can be traced back to a generalisation of the British, conflating Arabian as well as South Asian tendencies under the same term. This generalisation was even adopted by Khan, who later describes his own early writings as "Wahhabi." The preceding analysis of Khan's early religious writings has shown that this denomination is misleading, as it veils the Sufi aspects of the South Asian thought described as "Wahhabism." From Shah Waliullah to the Tariqah, Sufi inclinations do not disrupt or conflict with this preservative approach. Khan does not see this conflict either and presents Muhammad not only as the ideal of conduct and mundane life, but also as the single valid *pīr*. Khan thus positions himself in two respects: first, he criticises a mediation via *auliyā* and cuts the spiritual hierarchy, thus allowing an unmediated relationship with Muhammad as mediator to God; second, he merges the spheres of *sharia* and *tariqa* in the ideal of Muhammad. Sufi practice is, therefore, equated with Islamic law.

In this chapter, I have examined Khan's intellectual background in order to lay the foundation for questioning the frequently presented or implied assertion of a total break with his earlier thought framework. This question will be discussed in further detail in Chapter 3. For the moment however, the following chapter will discuss the next step in the development of Khan's thought wherein he engages in a Muslim commentary of the Bible. The philosophical thought framework he develops herein will be the foundation for all of his later periods.

