



THE
ABDULLAH YUSUF ALI
MEMORIAL LECTURE



Circumstance, Inner Light and Human Agency:
Reflections on the Life and Times of Allama Yusuf Ali, 1872-1953
by M.A. Sherif

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Circumstance, Inner Light and Human Agency: Reflections on the life and times of Allama Yusuf Ali, 1872-1953

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Allama Yusuf Ali was a great Indian Muslim man of letters whose English translation and commentary of the Holy Qur'an has served as a comfort and inspiration since its first installment was published in Lahore in 1934.

Yusuf Ali died fifty five years ago in London, alone and neglected. It is a matter of shame and sorrow that care and respect were not forthcoming when he most required it – either from his children or the community. We remember him today to undo this injustice of the past. However if he were to walk into the room he may well disapprove of

such homage and direct us a commentary note in *Surah Al-Imran*, which includes a quote from the poet Henry Longfellow, "All this world's a fleeting show. For men's illusion given."¹ Or, in a forebearing, head masterly fashion he might direct us to his essay, 'The Idea of Salvation in Islam', in which "restless, homeless, friendless" man cries out in self-indictment "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity!"²

The truth is that we need Yusuf Ali's memory more than he needs our memorials. Michael Holroyd, famous chronicler of the life of George Bernard Shaw, has observed that biographical

study brings hidden lives into view and thus serves to humanize history. He notes, "By re-examining the past and pointing it in a new direction, it may now be used to question our understanding of the present, and affect our vision of the future."³

In British schools today, History is compulsory up to Key Stage 3 (ages 11-13), but optional at Key Stage 4. Only a third of students continue with the subject. So the problem of not knowing the past is a worrying trend. There are often blank expressions if one asks students why 1857 is an important date, or makes reference to landmark Twentieth Century events such as the Sykes-Picot Agreement or the Treaty of Versailles that changed the shape of the Muslim world. Holroyd's point of promoting interest in History through biography is one our educationalists should note. History did not begin on 9/11 as many young people seem to think.

Today's remembrance of Yusuf Ali explores some of the factors that shape the trajectories of great lives. Three aspects are considered: first, the notion of a soul's inner orientation; second, the external environment; and finally, the choices one makes of one's own volition. For short, these are subsequently referred to as the 'inner voice', circumstance and human agency respectively.

Our teacher Ustadh Saleem Kayani, translator of the *Taddabur-e-Qur'an* by Amin Ahsan Islahi and his student, suggests that in this portion of the famous 'Light' verse 35 in *Surah al-Nur*,

The parable of His light is, as it were, that of a niche containing a lamp

the lamp [misbah] is [enclosed in a glass]

Misbah is a metaphor for good conscience and the sense of justice embedded in our psyche, which can be either nurtured or snuffed out. Maulana Islahi himself has also written about this 'inner light' – using the term *batini nur*.⁴

It is the 'reproaching soul' in

And I do call to witness the self-reproaching spirit [75:2]

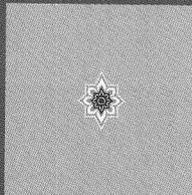
And it is the God-bestowed ability to choose between the 'two highways' in

And shown him the two highways [90:9]

There is clearly something unique and special about men and women who devote themselves to the Qur'an, but what specific examples of this inner voice can be picked out from lives of Yusuf Ali and contemporaries?

What can it be, other than an inner voice that compelled Yusuf Ali's contemporary Marmaduke Pickthall, at the tender age of 19 to seek out the *shaykh* at the Grand Mosque of Damascus in order to declare Islam – to which the wise *alim* responded that the young man should first seek his mother's permission?⁵

There is clearly something unique and special about men and women who devote themselves to the Qur'an, but what specific examples of this inner voice can be picked out from lives of Yusuf Ali and contemporaries?



Or what prompted a twenty-year old Leopold Weiss, descendent of a long line of rabbis, to become upset when he visited Jerusalem in 1920? He became aware of Zionist intentions to ethnically cleanse the land of Arabs and challenged Chaim Weizmann no less. The same young man also describes this experience that took place in Berlin in 1926: "When we returned home, I happened to glance at my desk on which lay open a copy of the Qur'an I had been reading earlier. Mechanically, I picked up the book to put it away, but just as I was about to close it, my eyes fell on the open pages before me." He then quotes from *Surah At-Takathur*, continuing, "For a moment I was speechless. I think that the book shook in my hands ... it was an answer so decisive that all doubt was suddenly to end."⁶ He promptly declared his Islam to the imam of a mosque in Berlin, adopting the name Muhammad Asad.

Or take the example of Professor Hamidullah. In the early 1950s, he helped draft the first Islamic constitution of Pakistan. Years later, he was awarded the highest civil honour of the country, but turned down the accompanying cash award, saying "If I take it here, what would I get there."⁷ By 'there', Dr Hamidullah was referring to the Hereafter. He had the monies sent to the Islamic Research Institute in Islamabad.

Or consider the sentiments of a 25-year old Yusuf Ali, recounting his encounter with the founder of the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College "I had the honour of knowing Sir

Sayyid Ahmed Khan in the latter years of his life. I remember some conversations I had with him – alas too few – on the subject of Muslim regeneration. I was then on the threshold of my career as a public servant, and I placed my educational ideals with the zeal and assurance of youth before this educational veteran.”⁸ Sir Syed died in 1898, and it was only in 1920 that MAO became known as the Aligarh Muslim University. Yusuf Ali’s commitment to act in a practical and selfless manner for Muslim revival was a long-standing one, and one which he was to fulfill in exemplary fashion in years to come.

The second theme of interest is the relevance of history. It is tempting for each generation to think it is facing a unique set of challenges, yet there are many similarities in the challenges and situations that were faced by Yusuf Ali and our own dilemmas. For example, consider this scene:

A colonial administrator and his wife are in a grand state procession riding on their *howda*—on top of an elephant. As they file past the Punjab National Bank in Chandni Chowk bazaar, a bomb is thrown and explodes. The high official is wounded and there is an immediate security

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A passage in the Preface of his Commentary on the Qur’an tells us as much about Yusuf Ali as it does of his father, Khan Bahadur Allahbaksh Yusufali: “it was between the ages of four or five that I first learned to read its Arabic words, to revel in its rhythm and music, and wonder at its meaning. I have a dim recollection of the *khatm* ceremony that closed that stage. It was called ‘completion’: it really just began a spiritual awakening that has gone on ever since. My revered father taught me Arabic, but I must have imbibed from him into my innermost being something more, something which told me that all the world’s thoughts, all the world’s most beautiful languages and literatures, are but vehicles for that ineffable message which comes to the heart in rare moments of ecstasy.”

From the perspective of empirical evidence, it is clear there was something intrinsically noble in the character of these personalities. We should not be surprised by their subsequent contributions - their attachment to the Qur’an was a natural step. Pickthall published his translation in 1930; Hamidullah’s *Saint Coran* appeared in 1959 with a preface by Henri Massignon; Muhammad Asad’s great work appeared in 1980 after a troubled start and seventeen years of effort; while Yusuf Ali’s *magnum opus*, *The Holy Qur’an, Text, Translation and Commentary* started coming out in installments from 1934.

clampdown. New technology is deployed to apprehend those responsible. There is talk of a revolutionary conspiracy against the state. A year later there is another bomb blast in a public part. There was intense pressure on Indian civil society to declare whether they stood on the side of the King-Emperor or the terrorists. Many prominent Indian Muslims declared their loyalty.

The colonial administrator is Lord Harding, Viceroy of India and the attack took place in December 1912. The occasion was the inauguration of Delhi as the state capital of India. As you can imagine, the security clamp down was massive and the new technology deployed by the investigators was fingerprinting. In fact fingerprinting as a forensic tool was taken up first in British India rather than the homeland. The explosion a year later was in Lahore’s Lawrence Gardens, the site of the colonial gymkhana.

There was intense pressure on Indian civil society to declare whether they stood on the side of the King-Emperor or the ‘terrorists’. One Indian Muslim declared his loyalty in the leading literary periodical of the day *Nineteenth Century and After* in an article entitled ‘Lord Hardinge’s Viceroyalty’. It contained a moving remembrance of Lady Hardinge’s nobility and other virtues.

The Indian Muslim wrote, “it may appear pathetic that Lord Hardinge should have trusted his own life and Lady Hardinge’s to the care of the Indian people, and yet he should have suffered

more from the cult of the bomb than any other viceroy ... today the political dacoities in Bengal and Punjab are at the expense of the people, and that people know that anarchism is their chief enemy ... No account of Lord Hardinge's success can be complete without a meed of tribute to Lady Hardinge. She shared in his triumphs and sorrows with noble devotion and courage, and the charm of her personality remains enshrined in India's personality. The nerve with which she faced the terrible blow to Lord Hardinge at the State Entry into Delhi stirred the imagination of the



Yusuf Ali, Magistrate and Collector, 1911

people. They sang of her as a heroine comparable to the legendary Savitri, who faced the god of death himself in order to beg back the life of her husband ... Lord Hardinge's watchword has been 'Faith in India'. India's attitude may be summed up in the simple words of an idiom not unknown India: *'La patrie bien reconnaissante'*."⁹

The writer was none other than Abdullah Yusuf Ali - and the circumstances he found himself in,

and the pressures, are not dissimilar to those arising in our own post-modern, post-9/11 world. For example in June 2003, a Muslim intermediary would declare in an emotional manner: "I believe that America is a metaphor for freedom and the promise of human dignity, intellectual progress and prosperity.... I see America's greatness in its pursuit and commitment to knowledge and in the fact that the gap between American values and American realities is far less than the gap between Islam and the Muslim World. America is great also because American values have room to accommodate my values and me. This is metaphor worth fighting for... I see my relationship with America as similar to my relationship with my wife - I share my children with both of them."¹⁰

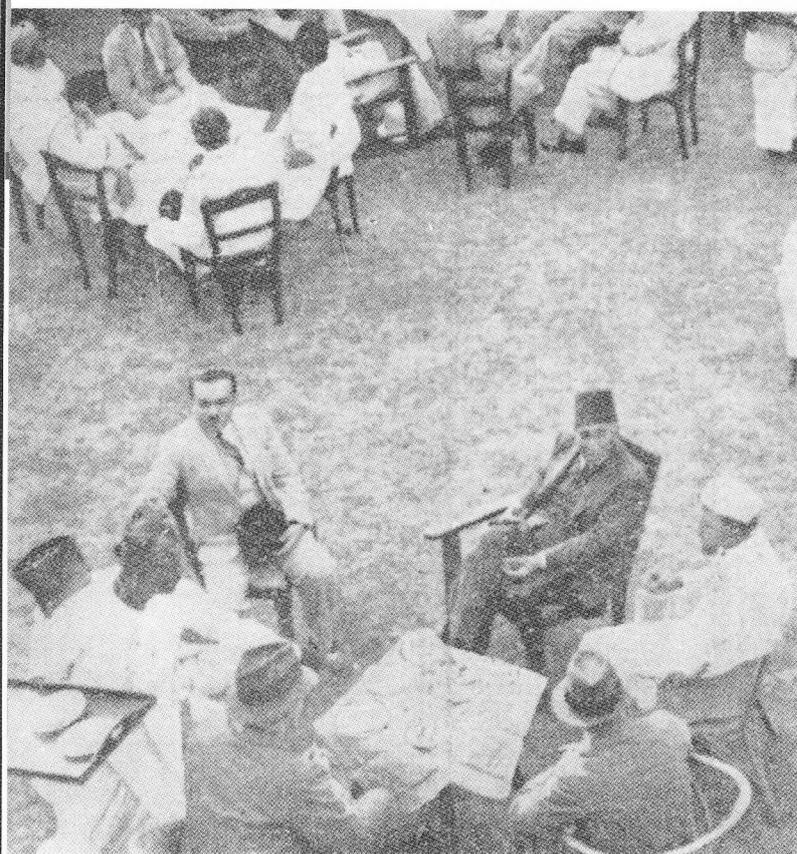
With the benefit of hindsight and access to records that were hidden from him, we can journey with Yusuf Ali along his path of Empire-Loyalism and study its implications. His generation were offered attractive slogans - just as today we are familiar with powerful Western governments and think tanks such as Rand and the Hudson Institute exhorting Muslims to rally around the projects they have crafted to reshape the world. The slogans today are Freedom, Moderation and Progress. In this new world order, the rights of self-determination and political autonomy seem to be the preserve of some but not others. When Muslims talk of crafting their own socio-economic or political order this is regarded as regressive and threatening.

By 1925 Yusuf Ali was more subdued in his enthusiasm for Empire. In his introduction to 'India and Europe' he notes, "The Great War is supposed to have killed Imperialism, Militarism and Racism. Our descendents three generations hence will be better judge of that than we are!"¹¹

Yusuf Ali's formative years were in an era when the British Empire was at its most confident. He was educated in missionary institutions in Bombay, and it was sheer talent and dint of hard work, rather than aristocratic connections, that propelled him forward. He obtained a first-class BA from Bombay University in January 1891 while not yet 19 years old. He won the Latin prize and was awarded a fellowship in Greek History. He was then awarded a Presidency of Bombay scholarship to Cambridge, completing the Law tripos in 1895. He then worked for admission to Lincoln's Inn and sat the exams for the Indian Civil Service, the prized career of

the period. He did brilliantly in these exams as well, securing top marks. He was then posted to Sahranpur in the United Provinces as Assistant Magistrate and Collector in January 1896.

Yusuf Ali's abilities were soon spotted by James Meston, Financial Secretary of the UP and subsequently the province's Governor. When Meston moved from the UP provincial government to the finance department of the Government of India as Finance Secretary in 1907, his Muslim protégé also made a similar transfer. Yusuf Ali was for a time acting under-secretary and the deputy secretary in the Department of Finance, in effect one of the most senior civil servants to India's 'Chancellor



1906. They first lived in Tunbridge Wells and later St Albans.

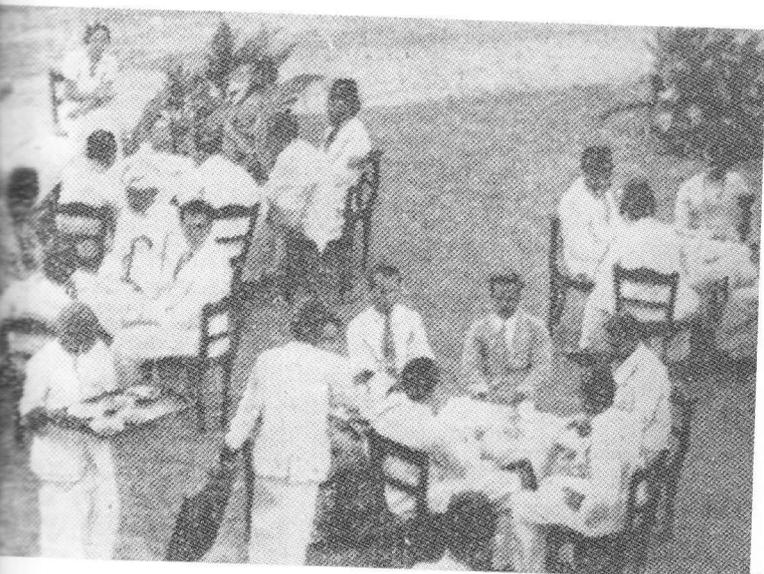
Yusuf Ali's lecture at the Royal Society in London in December 1906 captures those heady days of achievement and acclaim. The talk was entitled 'The Indian Muhammedans: their past, present and future' and included lantern slides – the PowerPoint of its day – depicting prominent Muslim personalities – the Nizam of Hyderabad, the Aga Khan, the Begum of Bhopal, Miss Attiya Fyzee, Badruddin Tayebji and Sir Syed Ahmed Khan.

Lord Ampthill, a former Governor of Madras and acting Viceroy of India in 1904, chaired the meeting. In the best of imperial style, Ampthill hoped the audience would realise 'what an amount of character, energy and enterprise it meant for a young man of India to come over to this country, pursue his studies here and enter into competition with Englishmen in order to get into the Indian Civil Service'. He welcomed an Indian who 'should come to England and of his own free will endeavour to give information about his fellow subjects'. At the end of the talk, the condescending chairman congratulated the speaker for his excellent command of English!

This then was the mood of the time – the military superiority established after 1857 conferred the colonial elite with a sense of invincibility and cultural superiority. Yusuf Ali willingly allowed himself to be co-opted into this scheme of things in more ways than one. He had slipped into the Indian Civil Service's cherished image of itself, the enlightened public servant, administrator-cum-scholar, under whose paternalistic and patronising gaze India would gradually emerge from its slumbers.

of the Exchequer'. The same year, aged 35, Yusuf Ali was awarded the Royal Society's Silver Medal and he saw the publication of his first book, *Life and Labour of the People of India*.

Within this period Yusuf Ali also married the daughter of a Norfolk resident, Mary Teresa Shalders, in a church ceremony in Bournemouth in 1900. They had three sons and a daughter in rapid succession – three boys, Edris, born in 1901; Asghar Bloy, in 1902 and Alban Hyder in 1904 – and one girl, Leila Teresa, born on Boxing Day,



revealing letter to the Viceroy's Council member responsible for Home affairs:

"I am sorry indeed for Yusuf Ali. He is a man of the most brilliant ability and the best intentions, and his literary work is of a very high quality...although I used to regard him as terribly academic in his views, I must confess that he has made a very good district officer in a small district, but I am afraid to try him in a big district especially where there is a military society; and not to put too fine a point on it, his future career is a decided anxiety to us all...".

The letter sheds light on the discomfiture with which native Indians in the ICS were regarded by their English colleagues, notwithstanding how

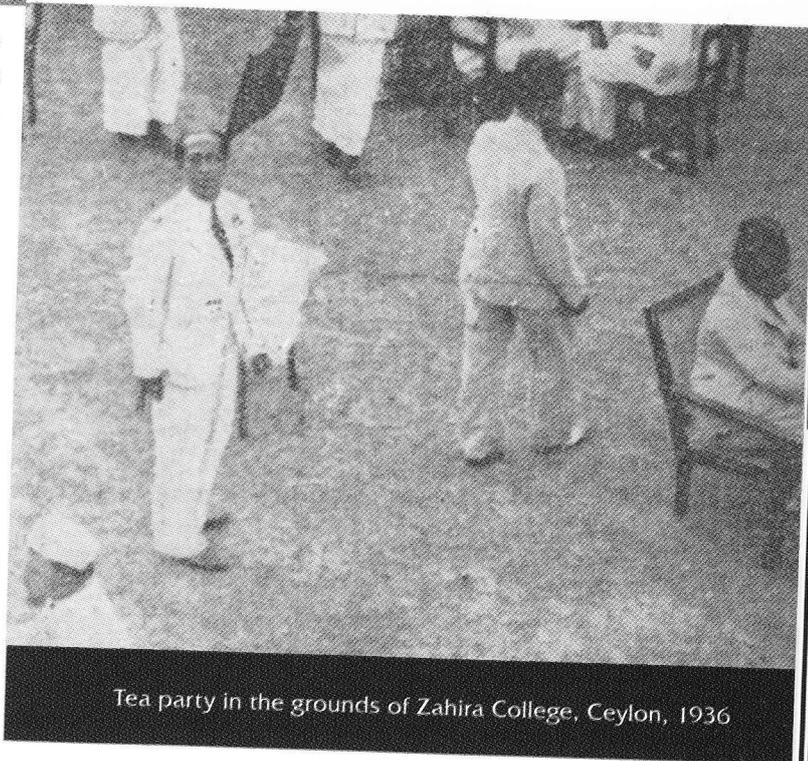
His marriage to Mary Teresa Shalders also point to other inroads into his psyche. It seems an impulsive gesture of the heart, particularly as the Church selected for the marriage was where the poet Shelley's heart is literally buried. Mary's father, Isaac Noah Shalders, is listed in the 1901 Census as a resident of Norwich, by profession an accountant. The marriage witnesses were the bride's mother and one W. Scott Evans.

After settling his young and growing family in St Albans around 1907, Yusuf Ali returned to India. The marriage was not long-lasting. News of Mary Teresa's infidelity reached him and the hurt was deep. He spent a large part of 1908 on medical leave. The trauma of that year was still in evidence when Yusuf Ali wrote the preface to the Qur'anic commentary in 1934: 'A man's life is subject to inner storms far more devastating than those in the physical world around him....such a storm, in the bitter anguish of personal sorrow which nearly unseated my reason and made life seem meaningless'.

He was compelled to take out divorce proceedings on the grounds of his wife's adultery after an illegitimate child was born in September 1910. Yusuf Ali took his own four children into custody and left them in care of an English governess.

Teresa action's also remain difficult to grasp. The co-respondent in the case, one Obed Thorne was a much older man who had described himself in the 1891 Census as a butcher, and in the 1901 Census as a 'bottle collector'.

In February 1914 Yusuf Ali decided to leave the ICS because the governess had died and there was no one to care for the children. Meston was happy to oblige the quick exit of his protégé, writing a



Tea party in the grounds of Zahira College, Ceylon, 1936

much they demonstrated their loyalty.

Like Gandhi, who volunteered to support the British side during the Great War of 1914-1918, Yusuf Ali was soon co-opted into war-time propaganda work and his skills were deployed in various committees responsible for imports from India.

Marmaduke Pickthall – who had still not yet declared his Islam – was openly and boldly pro-Ottoman through out this period, and the authorities regarded him as a 'security risk'. He became active in the Anglo-Ottoman Society and challenged the prevailing attitudes towards Turkey. Pickthall believed that *The Times* was being censored by the Foreign Office to shape

public opinion, so that it published news with “a tone of hostile menace thinly veiled by the pretence of giving good advice to forward children”.¹² A month later, when Britain declared

had an interest in stoking Serbian nationalism in 1916, because a strong Slav state would act as a barrier against German advances. In his pamphlet Yusuf Ali dismissed the Muslim population of

Serbia as a troublesome lot whose “temperament is naturally one which protests against the established order”. He also stated that “Serbian independence was extinguished in the onrush of Osmanli Empire from the East”.

Interestingly this propaganda unit was a precursor to the UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office’s Information & Research Department during the Cold War. Its present-day reincarnation is RICU – the Research, Information & Communications Unit - which is in the forefront of the ‘Battle for Muslim Hearts and Minds’.

Yusuf Ali was prepared to put his life on the line. He went by gunboat from England to the Scandinavian countries on a lecture tour in 1918. His

theme was to dwell on the good feeling of Indians towards the Empire – much along the sentiments he had expressed towards Lord Hardinge a few years earlier. Virendranath Chattoropadhyaya of the Indian National Committee – brother of Sarojini Naidu, the ‘Nightingale of India’ - happened to be in exile in Stockholm at the time and he issued a tough statement challenging Yusuf Ali’s portrayal. The feeling of contempt was mutual and on his return to London, Yusuf Ali wrote to the British press referring to the ‘enemy’ he had had to contend with in Scandinavia.¹⁴

The tragedy is that Yusuf Ali’s faith in Empire was not reciprocated. For example, while planning his Scandinavian journey, the Foreign and Colonial Office mandarins were not even sure whether he was Hindu or Muslim! When the officials discussed the need to send him a formal letter of appreciation, they found that his file was ‘lost’. The Empire used his goodwill and talents, but once their own objectives had been achieved, coldly cast him aside. This too ought to be a salutary lesson for present-day Muslim



Yusuf Ali at supper party held in the office of Dr Arthur Beauchesne, Clerk of the House of Commons, Ottawa, January 1939.

war against German’s ally Turkey in November 1914 he said he was “heartbroken at the turn of events have taken”.

Yusuf Ali in November 1914 was in different frame of mind. He made a jingoistic declaration of loyalty at a meeting in Caxton Hall in London chaired by the former Commander in Chief of the Indian Army. He enthused, “the King-Emperor calls. India salutes and falls in, ready to die for country, Padishah, flag and Empire ... Your King-Emperor has told you that he has drawn sword for a righteous purpose ... I have myself had the privilege of appearing at certain recruitment meetings in this country and have invariably been received with great courtesy and attention”.¹³

A further example of Yusuf Ali’s services for Empire in this stage of his life was his booklet on a Serbian sculptor exhibiting in London in November 1916. The subject and style suggest that it could have been commissioned by a Department of Information that had been established to convey black propaganda against the Ottomans. The British propaganda machine

intellectuals drawn into the web of Western think tanks and their agendas of manipulation and social engineering.

All this is said not to belittle Yusuf Ali but to learn the lesson of the consequences of misplaced trust. The 'inner voice' and good judgement can ebb and flow depending on circumstance and our own volition.

It brings to mind the story Abu Rib'i Hanzala, who came to the Prophet in a distressed state, declaring, "Hanzala is a hypocrite, Messenger of Allah!" He then went on to explain that when in the presence of the Prophet, his *iman* was strong, but then, "when we leave your presence, we attend to our wives, children and estates in a state of great heedlessness." In his reply, the Prophet was assuring. He explained that this ebb and flow was in the human condition – if Hanzala always felt the same level of belief, then the "the angels would shake hands with you on your bed and in the street".¹⁵

Pickthall, the well-connected Englishman, could afford to display his true feelings towards the Ottomans. Yusuf Ali, dependent on his ICS pension and with four children to support, was in different circumstances.

However these political differences did not prevent them sharing a platform at the Muslim Literary Society in London. In January 1917 Yusuf Ali was invited to chair a meeting at which Marmaduke Pickthall – who still had not formally declared his Islam – spoke on the life of the Prophet. In his own remarks, Yusuf Ali invited the audience to reflect "in sober earnestness on the gifts of the Prophet's personality and the Muslims' good fortune to be heirs of his teachings."¹⁶

Both were later to freely choose to be of practical service to Islam: Pickthall took up the headmastership of the Chadarghat High School for Boys in Hyderabad Deccan, then an independent Muslim principality within British India. Yusuf Ali was to serve two tenures as Principal of Islamia College, Lahore, an institution established by a community association, the Anjuman Himayat Islam, to lift Muslims out of poverty after a period of Sikh and Hindu dominance. The great poet-philosopher Sir Muhammad Iqbal sought him out for the post and later described him as '*mubassar-i-zamana*' – a man with insight of the times.

As the years passed, Yusuf Ali's children grew estranged and resentful of their father. They would harass his second wife Masuma – born Gertrude Mawbey, the daughter of a Derby printer – whom

he married around 1920. In his will, Yusuf Ali singled out his second son Bloy, who "has gone so far as to abuse, insult, vilify and persecute me from time to time".¹⁷ In order to spare Masuma of these traumas Yusuf Ali took up a post in the Court of the Nizam of Hyderabad.

It was at this time of personal turmoil that the Qur'an came to Yusuf Ali's rescue. He writes in the Preface how "many violent settlements of the spirit are but heralds of the refreshing showers of spiritual understanding that come in their wake. They purify our souls and produce spiritual life where there was a parched desert before". Thus he began the project for which we remember him today.

A fellow minister in the *diwan-e-khas* was Sir Akber Hydari, from the same Dawudi Bohra circles of Bombay as Yusuf Ali. Masuma give birth to a son Rashid around 1922 or 1923. Though Yusuf Ali soon resigned from the Nizam's service, the family ties with the Hydari family were to continue, with Rashid in later life marrying Sir Akber's grand-daughter, Ameena.

The tragedy is that Yusuf Ali's faith in Empire was not reciprocated. The Empire used his goodwill and talents, but once their own objectives had been achieved, coldly cast him aside. This too ought to be a salutary lesson for present-day Muslim intellectuals drawn into the web of Western think tanks and their agendas of manipulation and social engineering.

In 1925 Yusuf Ali returned for a short while to England, settling Masuma and Rashid near a home in Wimbledon. This was a favoured location for old ICS hands, because there were stables on Wimbledon Common and they could keep up their daily routine of horse-riding.



The leisurely pace of the numerous ocean liner journeys he would take in the next decade years gave him time to work on his Qur'anic commentary. He refers to this itinerant work in progress, "I guarded it like a secret treasure. Wanderer that I am, I carried it about, thousands of miles".

Professor Hamidullah remembers encountering Yusuf Ali on one of these voyages: "I met him on a ship, returning from France to Bombay. He was very kind to me. He told me that he was translating the Qur'an, and we discussed certain points...By chance there was a group of Moroccans, I think, in the same boat, going apparently for Hajj. I had the honour of serving as translator, and the late Yusuf Ali told me that he understood Arabic well when he hears that, but himself is unable to reply, to talk."¹⁸

When Yusuf Ali's work on the Qur'an commenced appearing from 1934, there were enthusiastic endorsements from scholars. Pickthall was gracious but there was a sting in the tail: "it goes without saying that his translation of the Qur'an is in better English than any previous English translation by an Indian".¹⁹ A fluent Arabic speaker himself, it is reported that Pickthall regarded the translation was 'too free'.²⁰ Sayyid Sulaiman Nadwi was unequivocal, "the Muslim litterateurs have with unanimity spoken very highly of the beauty, eloquence and grandeur of the Translation".

However the best testimony lies in the continuing use of the translation and commentary throughout the English-speaking world. It allowed the majesty and message of the Qur'an to be made widely accessible. Even today, when there are numerous translations and explanations available, it remains highly regarded and the doorway through which many have entered to discover and appreciate the message of Islam.

It seems that at times Yusuf Ali is barely able to contain his love for the Qur'an and the Prophet. For example, in *Surah al-Ma'idah* he offers this observation on a verse that describes the Qur'an as *kitab-un mubin* – which he translates as "a perspicuous Book". He then states, "I wish I could

The proposals of the Peel Commission to partition Palestine and create a Jewish state in the more fertile areas touched a raw nerve in Yusuf Ali. Palestine was under British mandate and he felt let down. It was not the fair play expected from the Government of the King-Emperor.

translate by a simpler word than 'perspicuous'. But 'plain' may mean unadorned, the opposite of beautiful, and this Book is among the most beautiful that is the privilege of man to read".²¹

In a commentary note on a verse in *Surah Al-Furqan* Yusuf Ali writes, "All Arabic speaking or Arabic understanding people have considered the Qur'an as a treasury

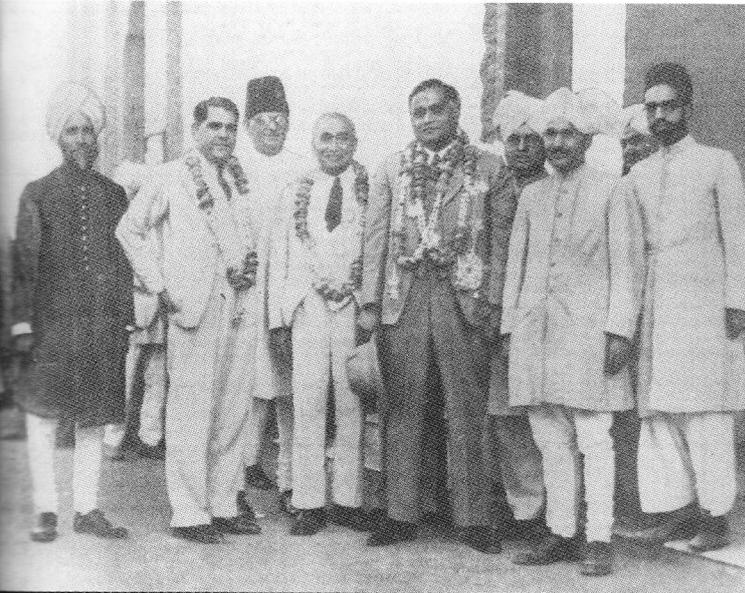
of Truths expressed in the most beautiful possible language with a meaning that grows deeper with research".²²

In *Surah al-An'am* there is a similar heartfelt evocation when he comments on a verse that instructs the Prophet on how to cope psychologically with the disbelieving Quraish. Yusuf Ali observes, "If in the Prophet's eagerness to get all to accept his Message he was hurt at their callousness, active opposition, and persecution of him, he is told that a full knowledge of the working of God's plan would convince him that impatience was misplaced. This was in the days of persecution before the *Hijrat*. The history of Madinah and after shows how God's truth was ultimately and triumphantly vindicated. Who among the sincere devotees of Muhammad can fail to read vi.33-35 without tears in his eyes?".²³

His Qur'anic scholarship made a deep impression where Yusuf Ali most desired – amongst the English-speaking young generation of Indian Muslims who needed to regain confidence in religion and spiritual values in an age of scepticism and materialism. It did not contain any coded messages referring to the indignities of colonialism or the possibilities for asserting a socio-political order based on Islam.

For this we have to turn to Muhammad Asad, who had a different set of life experiences which prompted him to seek out different points of emphasis from his readings of the Qur'an. Hence it remains important for students of the Qur'an to seek out more than one commentary. The differences between Yusuf Ali's emphasis on the other-worldly, and Asad's insight into the socio-political are illustrated in their respective commentary notes for verse 86 in *Surah Al-Kahf*, that refers to the journey of *Dhu al Qarnain*:

Until, when he reached the setting of the sun, he found it set in a spring of murky water: Near it he found a People: We said: "O Dhu al-Qarnain! (thou hast authority,) either to punish them, or to treat them with kindness [18:86]



Yusuf Ali (centre) with Abdul Haye (holding hat), Education minister of Punjab, 1937.

Yusuf Ali provides a commentary note on the verse stating "He [Dhu al Qarnain] had great power and great opportunity. He got authority over a turbulent and unruly people. Was he going to be severe with them and chastise them, or was he going to seek peace at any price i.e. to wink at violence and injustice so long as it did not affect his power? He chose the better course, as is described in the next verse. To protect the weak and the innocent, he punished the guilty and the headstrong, but he remembered always that the true punishment would come always in the Hereafter – the true and final justice before the throne of Allah".²⁴

Contrast this with what Muhammad Asad has to say: "This divine permission to choose between two possible courses of action ... establishes also the important legal principle of *istihsan* (social or moral preference) open to a ruler or government in deciding as to what might be conducive to the greatest good (*maslahah*) of the community as a whole: and this is the first 'lesson' of the parable of Dhu'l Qarnain."²⁵

Asad is even more explicit when he refers to "the concept of the Islamic state as an ideological

organisation".²⁶ This is not to say that Muhammad Asad lacked a spiritual antenna. For example, in the same *surah* there is a description of Prophet Musa's journey

And Lo! [In the course of his wanderings,] Moses said to his servant: "I shall not give up until I reach the junction of the two seas, even if I [have to] spend untold years [in my quest]!" [18:60, Asad's translation]

Asad provides the following commentary note, "the 'two seas' represent the two sources or streams of knowledge – the one obtainable through the observation and intellectual coordination of outward phenomena (*'ilm az-zahir*), and the other through intuitive, mystic insight (*'ilm al-batin*) – the meeting of which is the real goal of Moses's quest."²⁷

Similarly one should not hasten to conclude that Yusuf Ali lacked a conception of Islam as a basis for the governance of society. Commenting on a verse in *Surah Yunus*,

But I worship Allah - Who will take your souls (at death): I am commanded to be (in the ranks) of the Believers [10:104]

he notes, "Individual faith is good, but it is completed and strengthened by joining or forming a Righteous Society, in which the individual can develop and expand..."²⁸

The tension between Muhammad Asad's forthright advocacy of an Islamic socio-political order and Yusuf Ali's emphasis on change through moral reformation remains palpable even today, seventy years later. Muhammad Asad's commentary was shaped by his own intense engagement in the struggle to establish Pakistan as an Islamic state - he became a Pakistani citizen, though severing his links around 1954. Yusuf Ali's circumstances were different – he belonged to the age where literally, the sun never set over the Empire and it was difficult to conceive of an alternative viable world order. For one, change could be brought about top-down; for the other it required change at the grass-roots. Nevertheless it is important to note that their respective standpoints reflect differences of nuance and emphasis, not rupture and contradiction. Given that the message of the Qur'an is consistent and whole, it is inevitable that those students who delve into it deeply will also emerge broadly consistent.

There is an amusing but sad side to the way in which a *mufasssir's* personal circumstances can colour his commentary. In one note, Asad

refers to “the all-time companionship of man and dog symbolised in the legend of the Men of the Cave”.²⁹ In his own life, his fourth wife Pola Hamida was very keen on her Alsatians, and it is said that she even brought them to the cemetery for Asad’s funeral!

One wonders too if Yusuf Ali had Teresa in mind when he wrote, “it costs a woman much labour and skill to spin good strong yarn. She would be foolish indeed, after she has spun such yarn, to untwist its constituents and break them into flimsy pieces.”³⁰



The installments of the Qur’an were published while Yusuf Ali had taken up the second of his tenures as Principal of Islamia College, Lahore. The last installment was published in December 1937. Though there was political tension in the air, the message of upright moral and ethical conduct he was able to express in print also found a voice in the lessons he gave to the students. The speech he made at the final annual prize giving ceremony remains incredibly moving:

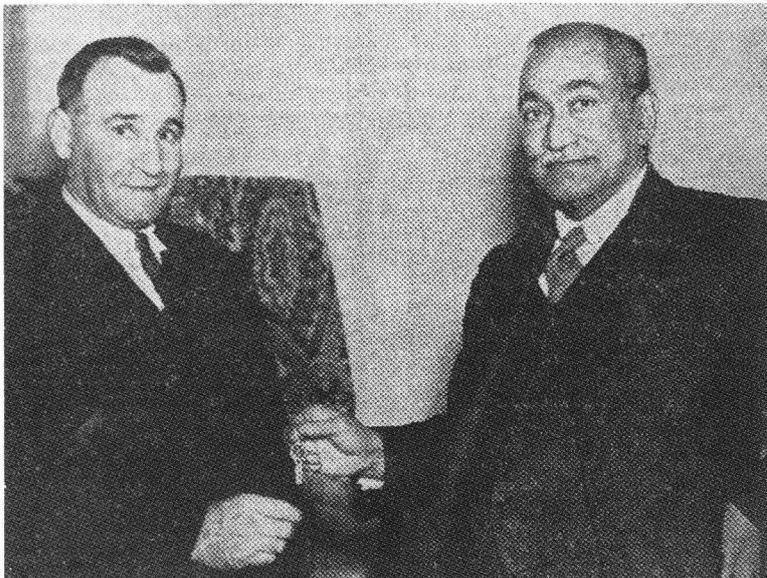
“My dear, dear students! You are all dear to me, whether brilliant or stupid, dull or average, good or below the standards of goodness which I want and expect. In many ways, known

and unknown to you, I have tried to shape your character and hopes. Try to take a more cultivated intellect, a large heart, a fuller hope, a stronger will, and truer instincts as the legacies of your College life.”

Throughout the 1920s Yusuf Ali had spoken in defense of the League of Nations as the pre-eminent institution for achieving international cooperation and world harmony. It was one of the few contemporary institutions referred to in the Qur’anic commentary.³¹ However the League’s inability to take steps against Italy for her aggression in Abyssinia caused some soul-searching. In a subsequent note in the commentary published in July 1937, he would refer to the League as a ‘failure’.³² However it was the situation in Palestine that caused him most disquiet. Attending the Paris World Exhibition around September 1937, he was thunderstruck to find the Palestine Pavilion with the banner ‘The Land of the Jews’. It was a moment of revelation. He lost no time in speaking out in London on the Palestine issue. From October 1937 to the end of the year he attended numerous meetings to express the Muslim point of view. The proposals of the Peel Commission to partition Palestine and create a Jewish state in the more fertile areas touched a raw nerve in Yusuf Ali. Palestine was under British mandate and he felt let down. It was not the fair play expected from the Government of the King-Emperor.

After he himself had attended the Paris Peace Conference after World War I – as an advisor to the Indian delegation – and he knew full well that the League of Nations had not given the country holding the mandates – Britain in the case of Palestine – any proprietary rights. He took on himself to speak out against the injustice. With the skill of the barrister that he was, he spoke out at numerous venues in Brighton, Cambridge and London:

“Palestine was held under an ‘A’ mandate, which had been especially framed with the idea that the people in the mandated country were equally civilised, but being in this case a broken-off section of the Turkish Empire, they were in need of governmental experience. But this was only until they could stand on their own legs. The mandatory’s duty was to advise and prepare for self-administration. They were an independent people. Both Iraq and Syria, held under similar mandates, had their independence recognised so why not Palestine? Lord Balfour went out of his way to say that England would use her influence



Yusuf Ali holding the keys of Rashid Mosque, Edmonton, Canada, December 1938, pictured with a Muslim community leader, D.M. Taha.

to enable the Jewish people to have a home in Palestine provided that the rights of the non-Jewish people were in no way affected".³³

Yusuf Ali, having acquired the British art of the understatement, noted, "The Imperial Government's acceptance of the principle of partition [of Palestine] had surprised and pained Muslims".³⁴

It seems that around 1940 Yusuf Ali became estranged from his second wife as well, and started living in rooms of the National Liberal Club in Pall Mall. It is poignant that it is in this period of loneliness he composed this poem in memory of the Muslim youth of Islamia College:

*How can I ever forget you,
Dear young men of Lahore!
My dreams were entwined in your future;
Yours was my love evermore!*

*Did you not lend me your heart-throbs?
Was not your happiness mine?
Shared we not, working and playing,
A joy like a breeze from the brine?*

*When youth, in its freshness and glory,
Can be comrade to age that has faced
The chastening rod of experience
Life yields of its most precious taste.*

*Through books and through nature we
wandered;
We laboured together, with zest;
Together we laughed when we captured
A truth that was wrapped in a jest.*

*Then here's to the days we look back to!
Truly a rich varied store!
Oh, how can I ever forget you,
Dear young men of Lahore!.*³⁵

Yusuf Ali drew up his will in September 1940. It was not generous to any of his children, including Rashid. It is a paradox of human nature that one can become so emotionally close to other's children, but remain distant from one's own. The children from the first marriage were specifically ruled out: "their continued ill-will towards me have alienated my affection for them, so much so that I confer no benefit on them by this my will". He then singled out Asghar Bloy for particular opprobrium: "Indeed my son Bloy has gone so far as to abuse, insult, vilify and prosecute me from time to time".³⁶

He then directed that the bulk of his estate went not to Masuma or Rashid but to a fund to be set up in his name by the Court of the University of London for the benefit of Indian students. The Ministry of Information must have dusted some old files, because they called on him again to help out in war-time propaganda work. He also remained engaged in Muslim activities, contributing to activities of the Shah Jahan Mosque in Woking, the mosque on Commercial Road in East London as well as the Islamic Cultural Centre in Regent's Park that had been opened in November 1944 by King George VI. Yusuf Ali was invited to take up the position of director of the East London mosque, but it seems he declined the offer. On 26th February 1945 he delivered the inaugural lecture at the Regent's Park Mosque on the theme of 'International Brotherhood of Islam'.

Yusuf Ali's twilight years were soon to begin. In November 1947 Masuma sold their home in Wimbledon. Records indicate that Rashid, while still serving as an officer in the 7th Rajput Regiment of the British Indian Army visited Britain in May 1948, accompanied by his wife Ameena. It is not known whether father and son were reconciled. In his diminishing circle of friends was Dr Ali Hassan Abdel Kader, first director of the Islamic Cultural Centre, to whom he may have presented his last possession, the scrapbook of articles and newspaper cuttings chronicling happier times. Perchance this scrap book was found in the semi-demolished library of the Centre in 1974, thus providing the impetus for *Searching for Solace*.

Yusuf Ali died alone on a cold day in December 1953 and was buried in the Brookwood Cemetery near Woking Mosque, in a grave not far from that of Marmaduke Pickthall. Staff at the Pakistan High Commission arranged the funeral. Dr Abdel Kader spoke for many in this eulogy: "This is a great loss for English speaking Muslims and Islam generally. There is no doubt he was the greatest translator of the Holy Qur'an in modern times. I consider his English version the authoritative one".³⁷

Yusuf Ali's first wife, Mary Teresa, died in Bournemouth in 1956. Their first born, Edris Yusuf Ali, was to enter Sandhurst in 1921 and pursue a career in the military. He died in 1992 in Tunbridge Wells, Kent. His sibling, Alban Ali, studied at Oxford and, following their father's footsteps, joined the ICS. He was posted to Assam as a magistrate in 1932. Alban was a keen airman and an adventurer, flying solo from Calcutta to London in 1932 only three years after obtaining

a pilot's licence.³⁸ His photographs of that period indicate an amazing likeness to Yusuf Ali at that age. Alban's last known address was Wealdstone House in Harrow.

Masuma Gertrude Elizabeth, Yusuf Ali's much younger second wife, died in Chichester in 1984. Their son, Rashid, had an eventful army career, serving in a unit responsible for interrogating fighters of the Indian National Army captured in Assam and Burma.³⁹ History seems to have turned a full circle: the father confronted the revolutionaries of the Indian National Committee, while the son had to deal with the INA. After army service, Rashid is believed to have served in the police force of Hyderabad. Later he became ADC to the Governor of Assam, where he settled and remarried. At some point he then moved to Delhi, where he was still residing in 2008. Little is known of the fates that befell the troublesome Asghar Bloy or Yusuf Ali's only daughter, Leila Teresa.

One day, inevitably, there will be some one from amongst Abdullah Yusuf Ali's descendents who would have inherited his talents and brilliance, and will emerge to make his or her mark.

M. A. Sherif,
December 2008

THE SPEAKER

Dr M A Sherif, the biographer of Abdullah Yusuf Ali, was born in Geneva and had his early education in Karachi, Pakistan. He arrived in Britain for further studies in 1964, where he has resided ever since.

A systems analyst by profession, Sherif has been active in British Muslim affairs, serving as General Secretary of the Federation of the Students Islamic Societies (FOSIS), editor of its magazine *The Muslim*, as well as a member of the managing committee of the Islamia Primary School when it was founded by Yusuf Islam in 1983.

He helped in launching the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) in 1997, and later coordinated its successful campaign that led to the UK Census collecting information on religious affiliation. He is chair of the MCB's Research and Documentation Committee.

Following his well-received work on Abdullah Yusuf Ali, he is currently researching the history of London-based Muslim social and political activism. He is an editor of the British Muslim internet portal, www.salaam.co.uk.

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