Book Reviews

Geaves, R. (2019). *Islam and Britain: Muslim Mission in the Age of Empire*. Bloomsbury.

Review by Taha Husain -University of Law, London

In the late 19th century, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad started the Ahmadiyya movement, eventually declaring himself the promised Messiah, or "Mahdi" in the Islamic tradition. Though Ahmad considered himself a kind of sub-prophet to the Muhmmad, not bringing a new revelation but reinstating the original one, his proclamation would appear to break "The Seal of the Prophets" (that there would be no other messengers after Muhammad) and thus became highly controversial among South Asian Muslims. Ahmad was himself a land-owning elite from Qadian, Punjab, in British India. Though the Ahmadiyya movement was otherwise relatively conservative, following Hanafi orthodoxy, the claim of prophethood was enough to be deemed heterodox. Consequently, in 1974 Pakistan declared Ahmadis "non-Muslims" through a constitutional amendment, and the Ahmadi community faced violent persecution.

The Ahmadiyya movement was also visionary, quick to adopt the printing press, because Ahmad had a vision of spreading Islam to the West. He believed Islam would find renewal in the West—not through Westernization as put forward by contemporary modernists such as Sayyed Ahmad Khan, but through converting Westerners to Islam. From Punjab an English-language paper was printed and shipped abroad, and the Ahmadiyya movement would be the first Islamic movement in the world to dispatch missions to the West. This would include the Woking mission—a site now treasured by British Muslims as the Woking Mosque, one of Britain's earliest masjids and missions in London and Liverpool. This community of Victorian Muslim converts, including figures like Abdullah Quilliam, are the subject of Geaves's *Islam in Britain*. Geaves contributes to growing scholarship on Muslim presence in Britain before the postwar period, where massive migration from former colonies would form the British Muslim diaspora of today.

Geaves positions his work both as scholarship and "community advocacy" (19), an approach he developed with his biography of Abdullah Qulliam, *Islam in Victorian Britain: The Life and Times of Abdullah Quilliam*. Due to the politicized climate around British Muslims regarding the Qulliam biography, and of the Ahmadiyya for Islam and Britain, Geaves states,

> … I set out to cross the boundaries of 'neutral' scholarship into community advocacy. I wrote the book primarily for a Muslim readership. This new work has the potential to generate more controversy. It will be welcomed in some circles but could disorient readers of other Muslim religious groupings. I have found over the years

> that, in all my efforts to present my writings back to both a Muslim and an academic audience, the border between 'neutral' scholarly aims and objectives and my subjective perception of the world has increasingly blurred. I confess that it is my wish that the Ahmadiyya be recognized for their significant role in the history of Islam in Britain. My stance on the Ahmadiyya truth claims is straightforward. Methodologically, I am concerned with the theology that claims divine authority for the founder of the movement, Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmed (1835–1908), only insofar as it impacts the formation of Islam in the period under observation. (20)

Appropriately then, Geaves paints a broad picture, establishing first the conditions in which the Ahmadiyya movement took root before shifting his focus to its Islamic missions in Victorian Britain. Chapter 2 details the collapse of the Mughal empire to British colonialism, the loss of Muslim power, and the sense of "Islam in Danger." This was an existential threat under which Christianity was perceived as an existential threat to Islam in British India. Geaves locates the Ahmadiyya movement with two distinct poles of reaction to this loss of power. On the one hand, the isolationist Deobandi movement informed by the teachings of Islamic scholar Shah Walli Allah (1703–1762), which was anti-British and conservative orthodox, cloistering themselves from society and advocating a return to the time of the Prophet. The other polarity was exemplified by Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817–1898), an Islamic modernist who was pro-British rule and facilitated British-style schools and believed Islam needed to be Westernized, arguing it should be reinterpreted with modern scientific knowledge and empirical observation. Both sides are generally elitist, conservative, and critical of syncretic folk practices popular among the masses, such as worshiping at the graves of Sufi saints. Part of "Islam in danger" is a reaction to a sense of a pure Islam being polluted by external influences, like Hindu and indigenous folk practices.

Some readers may wish Geaves delved further into these theological distinctions, which he is able to summarize in an accessible manner that should satisfy both academic and general readers. However, Geaves's aim here is to present a historical narrative and provide a foundational understanding for the Muslim mission in Britain, rather than to interrogate any one reformist inclination. He locates the Ahmadiyya tradition as an eclectic mix of other reformist movements—on the one hand pro-British rule like Khan, but rather than wanting to emulate the British, he wanted to convert the British to being Muslim: "Ahmad['s goal] was to … invite Queen Victoria to embrace Islam. His two invitations to the empress of India elucidated his approach to the truth of Islam and its superiority over Christianity, but also his conviction that British rule was the best possible option for India" (71).

This is what makes it distinct—the outward, Western looking vision and the desire to expand toward Britain, rather than hide away or to adopt British intellectual supremacy. Otherwise, the Ahmadiyya movement is quite orthodox and shares its criticism of syncretic folk practices. What makes the Ahmadiyya heterodox are Ahmad's specific claims to prophethood, (as distinct from

divinely appointed reformers, or Mujaddid, which would not be controversial) and his claims about Jesus—that Jesus survived, traveled, and died in Kashmir.

As to why an otherwise theologically conventional reformer elected to take such an extreme and heterodox position, Geaves summarizes, "Ahmad's solution is radical. He first argues that the crisis [Islam in Danger] is so severe, only a direct intervention by Allah can resolve it. The situation that India finds itself in is part of a divine plan, a backdrop for the return of the expected Mahdi, who will also be the promised messiah expected by other religions" (196).

Chapter 3 is a short biography of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, particularly focusing on his distinct qualities with regard to the other reformers and his highly effective challenge to Christian missionaries. The better educated missionaries were considered a threat to Muslims—who struggled in debating them. Here Ahmad excels at debating Christian missionaries—and it's evident in the book that the Ahmadiyya movement was successful foremost as a literary movement, distributing its material across continents and in multiple languages, and adopting a "munazira" ("quarrelling") style of debate not favored by other reformers (51). Geaves establishes the rhetorical brilliance of Ahmad and his challenges of Christianity, even if they lack theological originality.

It is precisely this message that, once reaching Britain, managed to convert Christians. The following chapters detail this relationship and practices of the mission, which flourished for a time before eventually declining. It also details the split in the Ahmadiyya movement, how this impacted missionary practices in Britain, and the Islamic presence prior to the mission. These converts, usually previously active Christians, were themselves facing a crisis of belief and came to believe in Islam as a "as a religion of reason free from the trappings of superstition" and "not sectarian in the way that Christianity was" (201).

The missions are an example of the types of mutual influence between empire and colony, distinct from the usual focus on empire's transformation of the colonies. More research has been dedicated, for example *The Dawn of Everything* by Graeber and Wengrow,to interrogating the notion of a one-way intellectual enlightenment from the West outward, rather than colonial encounter itself also transmitting ideas back to the empire.

Ahmadiyya Muslims were the primary movement promoting a non-sectarian, revival of universal Islam in Britain until World War II. Today, readers can easily consult numerous online resources, either defending or attacking Ahmadiyya beliefs. However it is useful for British Muslims today to examine the theosophical contributions of this earlier movement, particularly as sectarianism has only multiplied, and British Muslims look to various strategies of survival—with both assimilationist and insular approaches to life in Britain—and a fear among the community of future generations losing the faith all together.

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who will also be the promised messiah expected by other religions (45). Geaves references historian Nile Green, who described the protestant missions as "religious heirs to the Enlightenment" promoting freedom of conscience and access to education and scripture, and reminds us that these missionary societies were the overseers of modern education in India (199). We have seen that the first Ahmadiyya missionaries were the products of such schools and colleges, but far more significantly, it can be argued that promoting Islam as a religion of reason free from the trappings of superstition was akin to a Protestant understanding and reinterpretation of the religion. Quilliam may have used such a reformulation of Islam successfully to gain converts before the Indian missionaries in London and Woking, but although he was bitterly opposed to contemporary Christianity, he was a product of nonconformist Christianity. Ahmad's mission emphasized personal faith and private experience, but it was also messianic. The messianic aspects would attract Westerners who were seeking to move beyond the confines of Christianity, delving into esotericism and theosophical understandings of world messiahs that originated in the East. We have seen that the first Ahmadiyya missionaries were the products of such schools and colleges, but far more significantly, it can be argued that promoting Islam as a religion of reason free from the trappings of superstition was akin to a Protestant understanding and reinterpretation of the religion. Quilliam may have used such a reformulation of Islam successfully to gain converts before the Indian missionaries in London and Woking, but although he was bitterly opposed to contemporary Christianity, he was a product of nonconformist Christianity. Ahmad's mission emphasized personal faith and private experience, but it was also messianic. The messianic aspects would attract Westerners who were seeking to move beyond the confines of Christianity, delving into esotericism and theosophical understandings of world messiahs that originated in the East (95).

Today, both sectarianism and Islamophobia are global, and seemingly intractable. The Woking Mission's vision of a non-sectarian, international Islamic solidarity feels relevant and refreshing. In Britain particularly, hostility and hate crimes towards Muslims have only escalated. The far-right Reform party are currently performing best in the polls, and they are organized around an explicitly xenophobic and anti-Muslim platform. Not only is Islam in Britain an important contribution to the study of *Islam in Britain*, amidst these uncertain and vulnerable times, readers wishing to view an alternative vision of Islam in the diaspora might also benefit from reading Geaves's work.

References

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