

Allama Azmi: A Great Religious Leader of the 21st Century

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"All of the great leaders have had one characteristic in common: it was the willingness to confront unequivocally the major anxiety of their people in their time. This, and not much else, is the essence of leadership." [John Kenneth Galbraith]

"Leadership is lifting a person's vision to higher sights, the raising of a person's performance to a higher standard, the building of a personality beyond its normal limitations." [Peter F. Drucker]

"He is greatest whose strength carries up the most hearts by the attraction of his own." [Henry Ward Beecher]

His Eminence Allama Qamaruzzaman Azmi is one of the world's best-known and most widely influential Islamic thinkers, orators and writers. His work has inspired millions of people across India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, the Middle East, South Africa, UK, France, Germany, Belgium, Norway, Holland, America and Canada raising their vision to higher sights and higher standards and the building of a Muslim personality that goes beyond the status quo. Maulana Shahid Raze OBE, Chairman of UK's Mosques and Imams National Advisory Board (MINAB) explains that it is his willingness to confront without fear or favour the major issues and challenges facing Muslims in the 21st century that draws people to him as well as his intellectuality, selflessness, simplicity, purity of heart, integrity and deep convictions. Maulana Shahid Raze OBE states:

"Allama Azmi's primary concern is the revival of Islamic attitude. He believes that the future of the Ummah is in the hands of Muslims themselves rather than in the hands of Western scientific and technological arenas. Poverty and humiliation of Muslims in the contemporary world has always been a prime concern for him, however he considers that Muslims themselves are largely responsible for this downfall due to a lack of education, activism and an aspiring soul".

Allama Azmi is the Khalifaa of His Holiness Mufti-e-Azam-e-Hind Hazrat Maulana Mustafa Raza Khan (May Allah shower his mercy upon him) as well as Sarkar-e-Kalaa'n Hazrat Maulana Sayyid Mohammed Mukhtar Ashraf, Sajjada Nasheen of Kachow-chah Shareef (May Allah shower his mercy upon him).

A lot has already been written about him throughout the world. Saut-ul-Azhar, the Egyptian newspaper recently carried an extensive piece on his life, contributions and scholarly orations. Elsewhere, newspapers and journals in India, Pakistan, Middle East, South Africa, Europe, America and Canada have written hundreds of articles on him.

A collection of his spell-bounding extraordinary scholarly speeches have already been published in three volumes. Volume one was put together by Maulana Mohammed Rehan Raza Misbahi and Maulana Abdullah Azmi in a 376 page book consisting of twelve great speeches entitled Khutbaat-e-Muffakir-e-Islam (Speeches of the Great

Thinker of Islam) published by Maktaba Taiba, Mumbai, India.

Volume two was put together by Maulana Mohammed Sajid Hussain Qadri in a 512 page book consisting of nineteen speeches entitled Khutbaat-e-Muffakir-e-Islam (Speeches of the Great Thinker of Islam) and published by Maktaba Taiba, Hyderabad. This was launched by Tajus-Shari'a Hazrat Maulana Mufti Akhtar Raza Khan and Mohaddith-e-Kabir Hazrat Allama Zia-ul-Mustafa Sahib Qibla (see the Daily Mansaf, 20th February 2004 and, Daily Sayaasat, 20th February 2004). Volume three was put together by Imran Hussain Chaudhary in a 240 page book consisting of eleven speeches entitled Ilmi taqreeray'n (scholarly speeches) and published by the Sunni Foundation in 2008 in Pakistan.

His collection of poetry Khayabaan-e-Midhat volume one was published in 2007 by Maktaba Taiba, Mumbai, India and volume two in 2011 by the Sunni Foundation in Pakistan. These publications have been acclaimed by newspaper critics, scholars and intellectuals all over the world. He has written more than 200 articles which are currently being collated and published in volumes under the title Maqaalat-e-Muffakir-e-Islam. His books like Jamaal-e-Mustafa are already under circulation within India.

To cover the life of such a great world religious personality and leader of the 21st century whose work spans forty-five years requires many volumes. However, for the purpose of this short article I will attempt to highlight few key points from his life to give us a flavour of the diverse and broad ranging work and the huge impact he has made in bringing about tangible change to the lives of many across the world.

Early life and work in India

Allama Azmi was born on 23rd March 1946 in the district of Azamgarh in the State of Uttar Pradesh, India to a deeply religious and educated family. He was given the name Mohammad Qamaruzzaman Khan Azmi. His illustrious father was Molvi Abdul Hameed Khan who was the son of Molvi Abdul Samad Khan (May Allah shower his mercy upon them). He learnt Persian and Urdu from his father and grandfather and obtained initial Islamic education from a local institution called Anwar-ul-Uloom.

Allama Azmi became known for his piety and the great intellectual and scholarly abilities from an early age. No wonder he was admitted into one of India's best Islamic Institutes, Ashrafia, Azamgarh at the age of twelve. From there he went onto to the famous Nadwat-ul-Ulema University at the age of eighteen where he completed his Aalim degree and then returned to Ashrafia University where he was awarded the Dastar-e-Fazilat (Turban of Honour) and the Sanad (Islamic degree) by the hands of the very founder of that University, His Holiness Hafiz-e-Millat Hazrat Maulana Abdul Aziz Muhaddith-e-Muradabadi (May Allah shower his mercy upon him).

He was then commissioned in 1966 at the age of eighteen by His Holiness Hafiz-e-Millat Hazrat Maulana Abdul Aziz Muhaddith-e-Muradabadi (May Allah shower his mercy upon him) to go to Faizabad (near Lucknow) to start his missionary work. There at that tender age of eighteen years he established the Islamiya University which is now

recognised as one of India's top Islamic Universities. Several thousand scholars have obtained their degrees from this highly respected institution and are working all over India as well as in the UK, USA, Holland and Canada.

Whilst in Faizabad his powerful writings, orations and contemporary thinking spread across India like wildfire. His speaking schedules began filling up so much so that people had to book him six months to a year in advance for their major conferences. Millions of Indians began benefitting from his intellectually powerful lectures. He became a distinctive brand name and people would travel for miles just to hear his lectures. Each speech could attract a crowd of 150,000 - 250,000 people. Along with religious topics he made it a point to include in his speeches contemporary issues that the Muslim Ummah, especially the poor Muslims of India faced. He would speak without notes yet his two-three hour long lectures are always full of quotes, credible sources and intellectual depth. Listeners include professionals, academics and political personalities as well as the general public who are all captivated by his style of oration and his heartfelt concerns about the religious-political issues that Muslims face.

It would be appropriate to mention that audio cassettes and CDs containing his spell-binding extraordinary scholarly speeches are being circulated by the millions all over the world and a collection of some of these, as mentioned earlier, have recently been published in Pakistan and India.

Migration and work in the UK

1973 witnessed the creation of the first Sunni global organisation in the Holy City of Makkah, The World Islamic Mission. One of the key founders, Ra'ees-ut-Tahrir Hazrat Allama Arshad-ul-Qadri felt that the organisation needed an exceptionally top heavyweight scholar with not only integrity, sincerity and a track record of successful leadership skills but the intellectual depth and breadth of the religious-political landscape across Europe & America. Hazrat Allama Azmi was chosen from amongst many across the world and in 1974 he joined the World Islamic Mission as its Joint-Secretary-General and moved to Bradford, UK. By doing so, he became one of the first to begin missionary work in Europe, America and Canada.

The letter of His Holiness Hafiz-e-Millat to Allama Azmi is worth quoting:

"No doubt that Islam is a global religion and that is why there has always been a need for an international organisation. Al-Jamiatul Ashrafia with all its staff and influence fully supports the World Islamic Mission" (see letter, 1974).

However, within a short period of his presence in the UK India felt a huge gap of this great intellectual personality. This became particularly acute following the departure from this world of His Holiness Hafiz-e-Millat (May Allah shower his mercy upon him) who was overseeing the prestigious Ashrafia University. The pressure on Hazrat Allama Azmi to return to India grew and it is worth quoting a letter amongst many, of Haji Abdus-sattar Sahib, Chairman of the Ashrafia University Board who wrote to Allama on 15th October 1980 requesting him to return and oversee the prestigious University as

His Holiness did:

"Your departure to the UK has left India with a major gap that can not be filled. You are no doubt playing a significant and important role in the UK but we the mainstream Sunni majority Muslims are deeply missing your presence here in India".

"The unanimous decision of our Board is that we can not think of another person in the Ahle Sunnah wal Jamaah as great as you to lead this prestigious institution. We implore to you to accept and hope that you will not disappoint us".

However, within a year of his arrival to the UK Allama Azmi had developed the work so much so that it became a 'point of no return'.

By 1975 he had accomplished the following which is an example of his selflessness, tirelessness, resilience and dynamic leadership:

1. Establishment of the Headquarters of the World Islamic Mission (WIM)

Whilst the decision to establish the World Islamic Mission took place in Holy Makkah no developmental work was done. Therefore, Allama Azmi together with Allama Arshad-ul-Qadri worked tirelessly to establish quickly the support required to enable the headquarters of the organisation as well as the delivery of its work programme.

2. Establishment of the Islamic Missionary College (IMC)

This was the first Islamic college in the UK that was established. The idea was that entrance exams would be held in different parts of the world to select the 'cream' of the newly qualified ulema each year. The top high calibre selected ulema would be funded to come to the UK for further training in English language, Western culture and values, democracy, engaging with communities, building effective media and institutional relations etc so that they could then serve effectively their and the wider communities in Europe.

Allama Azmi worked to gain recognition of this important institution which was eventually given by the Government. This marked a watershed in the history of minority ethnic communities as no other minority ethnic religious institution had received such type of recognition from the Government at that time. This not only reflects the high standards of work being carried out by Allama Azmi but his foresightedness, broad mindedness and great strategic leadership.

The IMC was an institution that promoted inclusivity by involving people of different ethnic groups and nationalities at all levels. The Chair of the IMC Governing Body was Dr H. Fatmi, Professor at University of Kuwait. (Note: Dr H. Fatmi is one of the first to translate the Quran (Kanz-ul-Imaan) in English with Professor Mohammad John Patrick, an American Professor who accepted Islam at his hands).

The IMC student community was also inclusive with Pakistanis, Indians, White, and Dutch scholars applying for the entrance exam and if successful, enrolling at the IMC. Adverts for the entrance exam for a fully funded scholarship at the IMC were placed in

national newspapers in different countries. For example the advert in Pakistan stated:

"If you are aged between 18-25 years and have completed your Dras-e-Nizami or Dars-e-Ali'a you may qualify for a fully funded scholarship in English language Course at the Islamic Missionary College, UK (to work in Europe, America and Canada). You will need to apply and if shortlisted attend an assessment. If successful then you will be eligible for scholarship to join the Islamic Missionary College. To apply please contact Hazrat Maulana Qari Raza-ul-Mustafa, Convenor of the World Islamic Mission Pakistan, New Maimon Masjid, Bolton Market, Karachi 2" (see Daily Sa'aadat 7th August 1974).

3. Establishment of an international Dar-ul-Iftaa (Centre for Islamic Decrees)

Allama Azmi recognised the critical need to establish a centre that could translate Islamic shari'a (laws) to new settings and contexts in order to avoid confusions, myths and potential conflicts. Allama Azmi realised that the post-World War Two economic climate had created labour shortages that made the British Government encourage migrants from the commonwealth to Britain. This was because under the Commonwealth rules, Commonwealth citizens had free entry to Britain. And, although Enoch Powell had made his "Rivers of Blood" speech in 1968 criticizing Commonwealth immigration and successive Governments were implementing restrictive measures, immigration through blood relations, family re-unions and marriages were continuing. There was a similar phenomenon taking place elsewhere in Holland, Germany, Belgium, France, Norway, America and Canada and what was needed was an international centre to help integrate the growing Muslim population in these countries by finding solutions, interpreting and re-defining rules within the context of the Shari'a. Therefore, the International Dar-ul-Iftaa was established which included a Board made up of leading scholars from around the world.

4. Establishment of the World Islamic Mission Press

George Bernard Shaw said that 'the single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place'.

In other words, to assume that the immigrant communities understood their religion, knew their responsibilities in the new environment and were familiar with how to deal with everyday challenges would be to assume wrong. And that is why a Publication House was necessary to encourage continuous research and dissemination. The World Islamic Mission Press published a number of books and was seen as the main centre for publication and dissemination at that time.

5. Establishment of Al-Falah, UK's first organisation for young people

Immigration brings with it huge challenges in not only gaining a foothold in the new country but adjusting to the new environment, making friends and raising a family. Such problems are further compounded if you're a young person because you find yourself trapped between two cultures, living with two identities, facing racism and discrimination in the wider society and, not having anyone to help you make sense of everything. Al-Falaah was established by Allama Azmi to do just that - to help young people feel confident in their identities; understand the dangers of drugs, guns or gangs; and, the importance of good citizenship, morality and religion. Al-Falaah became one of

the most important and influential organizations for young people in Bradford with its own building and employees.

6. A Monthly Journal, Al-Dawat-ul-Islamia

Allama Azmi established a monthly journal, Al-Dawat-ul-Islamia as its chief editor which became a highly respected and hugely popular monthly journal for Muslims living in Europe, America and Canada. This was one of the very few journals available at the time. Al-Dawa-ul-Islamia contained articles on contemporary issues and allowed a safe space for academics and scholars to debate pertinent issues.

Witnessing such outstanding accomplishments within a year the World Islamic Mission Executive Council unanimously appointed Allama Azmi as its Secretary-General, a position which he still holds today.

In 1979 Allama Azmi moved from Bradford to Manchester. Within a very short period of time he built a huge Mosque with capacity to hold 2,500 worshippers with the cost of £1.5 million. Another project costing £1 million established the College of Islamic Studies. He also established another monthly journal as its chief editor, Hijaz London which became a very popular monthly journal. Under his leadership and contributions the World Islamic Mission has gone from strength to strength and till this day continues to spread the message of Islam all over the world. It has built many large institutions (Mosques and Islamic Institutes) in the UK, USA, Canada, Holland, Norway, Germany, France, Belgium, Surinam, India, Pakistan and Mauritius.

In the words of Khalid Athar, the famous Pakistani journalist of the Pakistan Press Association (PPA) Allama Azmi is the "soul" of the World Islamic Mission.

It would not be controversial or unfair to say that the flourishing Muslim institutions that we see today in Europe, America and Canada; the increased awareness of people about their faith; and the increasingly mature community that is being realised in these countries is due to the tireless work of selfless key figures like Allama Azmi. This was also achieved through the organisation of several major international conferences. These included:

- World Islamic Mission Conference, Bradford 1974
- World Islamic Mission Conference, St Georges Hall 1978
- World Islamic Mission Conference Holland, 1980
- World Islamic Mission Hijaz Conference, Wembley, 1985

Each conference was significant for two reasons. Firstly, it brought together key religious figures under one platform attracting audience in their thousands. Secondly, it debated key issues of the day and passed agreed resolutions which helped shape the national and international policy framework. For example, the 1974 conference debated issues like:

- The need to establish Mosques particularly, in UK, Europe, America and Canada
- The need to establish Madaaris and Islamic institutes particularly in UK, Europe, America and Canada
- The need for local authorities to consider Muslim grave yards in towns and cities
- The need for schools, hospitals and public institutions to cater halal food
- The need to work towards the elimination of discrimination against Muslims

- The need to establish a Muslim Shari'a Council (to settle disputes and divorce cases)
- The need to create self-regulating halal authorities

These conferences were attended by key local Muslim leaders from Holland, Belgium, Germany, France, Norway, and UK. Speakers would be renowned figures from the world. For example the 1978 conferences speakers included: Professor Ghulam Nabi Saaqib, King Abdul Aziz University, Jeddah; Professor Sajjad Hussain, former Vice-Chancellor Dhaka University; Professor Saffa Al-Khulusi, Baghdad; Dr Mustafa Mabrook, Libya; Sheikh Basillia of the Embassy of Libya; and, Mufti Mustafa Riffat, Mufti of Cyprus.

The impact of these conferences were huge in raising awareness of Muslims, inspiring positive action and bringing about change for the better. For example, following the 1974 Conference Allama Azmi pursued the key resolutions such as:

"The conference demands a personal consideration from the Prime Minister that Muslim girls should be provided the facilities of education in an all girls school retaining the present such schools" (see letter to the Prime Minister and the Minister of Education, 1974)

On the issue of eliminating discrimination against Muslims Allama Azmi engaged the Government of the day. The Conservative and Unionist Central Office Letter dated 4th December 1978 to Allama Azmi states:

"Ian Percival MP has asked me to put forward a request for specific details of cases where people have suffered whilst trying to practice their religion in schools, employment etc., and he would be grateful if you would bring such information along to the meeting [which will take place in Interview Room W6 in the House of Commons, commencing at 7.30 p.m." (see Letter by Mervyn Kohler to Allama Sahib dated 4th December 1978).

Similarly, the British Epilepsy Association published an article in which it falsely claimed that the Prophet Muhammad's (Peace Be Upon Him) behaviour during the receiving of 'Wahee' was not due to 'Wahee' itself but that he was suffering from epilepsy and used to have regular epileptic attacks. Allama Azmi took up this issue and on 17th December 1976 a letter from the Rt. Hon. Lord Cohen of Birkenhead stated:

"We are, of course, very sorry to have caused distress to the many Muslims" (see letter dated 17th December 1976). In 1979 the Associated Television Network screened a programme which insulted the Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him). Allama Azmi's constructive engagement with them resulted in the following reply to Allama Azmi by A.R. Lucas, Group Legal adviser and copied to Sir Lew Grade:

"In a recent episode of this Series entitled 'The Quick One' one of the characters made derogatory remarks concerning the Holy Prophet of Islam. It is much regretted by ATV Network that those remarks have apparently been considered blasphemous, even within a work of fiction, and have accordingly caused offence in certain quarters. For this we

apologise and would like to make clear that neither the script writer nor ATV Network had any intention of insulting Muslims."

In addition, the 1985 Hejaz Conference at the Wembley Conference Centre marked a watershed for Sunni Muslims. It brought together key religious leaders from around the world with an audience that filled the Wembley Conference Centre to discuss the barbaric treatment of Wahabi police and officials of the mainstream sunni pilgrims when visiting the Holy places in Saudi Arabia as well as the ban on Kanzul Imaan the translation of the Holy Quran by Imam Ahmed Raza.

This conference made a huge global impact and the Guardian ran a story on Tuesday 7th May 1985 in which it stated: "King Fahd of Saudi Arabia is to meet an international delegation of Islamic Scholars who claim that hundreds of Muslim pilgrims on the way to Mecca have been tortured and harassed by his government because they were carrying an Urdu translation of the Quran. The meeting announced yesterday in London by the World Islamic Mission will bring to a head a 70-year old theological dispute. On Sunday 3000 people attended a conference in London where a number of international scholars claimed that their traditional collegiate authority had effectively been hijacked by Saudi Arabia through the influence of the minority Wahabi sect.

This is said to represent fewer than 2 per cent of the world's 700 million Muslims but its influence is detected behind many current grievances. These include allegations that pilgrims have had their Quran and other holy books confiscated by the Saudi authorities", (see the Guardian Tuesday May 7th 1985, page 4).

Two years later the Dawn newspapers, amongst many others, reported the result of this meeting and the Hejaz Conference:

"King Fad of Saudi Arabia is reported to have agreed to allow the Muslims of all sects to perform the religious rituals in Makkah and Medina, according to their respective beliefs" (see Dawn Karachi, Sunday March 20, 1987; also, The Nation, Lahore, 29th March 1987, and Pukaar, Islamabad, 29th March 1987; and Daily Jang, Lahore, 29th March 1987).

Another international matter where Allama Azmi played a key role was the bloody war between Iran-Iraq. Allama Azmi was invited to visit Iraq in 1983, 1985, 1988 and May 1990 and Iran in 1983 at their Governmental conferences held to negotiate peace and bring end to the conflict between the two countries. In 1983 Allama Azmi put the resolution forward calling for an end to the Iran-Iraq war before the month of Ramadaan and if this fails, then for all key delegates to pressurise their respective Governments to intervene to help bring an end to this bloody war.

At a domestic level, Allama Azmi continued to contribute to both the self-development of communities at the grassroots levels as well as the development of key policy and legislative frameworks. For example, the creation of the Central Milaad Committee established the first national Milaad procession from Hyde Park to Trafalgar Square bringing 20,000 people from all parts of the country to London to celebrate peace and

unity by marking the birth of the Prophet. This national annual procession set the trend for towns and cities to hold their own processions which we now witness each year during the holy month of Rabi-ul-Awaal.

In terms of policy and legislative frameworks, in 1999 the UK Government established a Royal Commission on the Reform of the House of Lords following The Queen's Speech on 24th November 1998 under the Chairmanship of the Right Honourable Lord Wakeham. The terms of the Royal Commission were:

" to consider and make recommendations on the role and functions of a second chamber;
" to make recommendations on the methods or combination of methods of composition required to constitute a second chamber fit for that role and those functions.

Allama Azmi was invited by the Right Honourable Lord Wakeham to give oral evidence to the Royal Commission. Allama Azmi in his oral evidence argued:

"The existing structures of the House of Lords can be termed as unrepresentative of the changes that have occurred within our society over the last half a century. The current form of representation in the House of Lords based on selection and hereditary peers differs quite dramatically from the House of Commons and shows a double standard approach which is not suitable for a democratic society. If the future of the House of Lords is to be as an elected body it will be open to all people providing an opportunity to be involved through the democratic processes. If the futures to be as a body based on selection then it is important to ensure that the House reflects the diversity of the country, which it serves".

"Whatever changes the Royal Commission is to propose I believe it should also take account of representation of faiths other than the Church of England. Appropriate mechanisms should be developed to ensure that the diversity of faiths in our country are not marginalised or ignored. This is not only a pre-requisite for any democracy but also important in ensuring that rules of democracy are not abused, side-stepped or religious and moral issues are not swept under the carpet".

More recently, following 9/11 and 7/7, Allama Azmi has passionately and powerfully argued against violent extremism and terrorism and has influenced millions across the world. As a result, the Times of India called him "The Pacemaker" and captured his views on 2nd November 2010:

"What about the Muslims who claim to have grown up amid Islamic traditions but in the name of Islam create terror and sanction suicide bombings Azmi whose followers have given him the honorific Allama explains: Those who use the name of Islam to terrorise are enemies of Allah and Islam. No injustice or assault real or imagined can be an excuse for resorting to violence and maiming innocents."

Activities abroad

Allama Azmi's tireless work has helped develop great Islamic institutions such as Islamic University Faizabad (India); Madinat-ul-Islam College, Holland; Taibah Mosque,

Amsterdam, Holland; Jamia Mosque, Oslo, Norway; Al-Noor Mosque, Houston, USA; Noor-ul-Haram Mosque, Toronto, Canada.

Jim Karygiannis M.P., House of Commons, Canada on 13th July 2002 awarded a certificate of commendation to Allama Azmi for his services and wrote: "In my capacity as Member of Parliament it gives me great pleasure to commend the renowned Islamic scholar Maulana Qamaruzzaman Azmi".

In Holland where the immigrant community is mainly from Surinam Allama Sahib's work is commendable. The Surinami Muslims immigrated to Holland following independence on 25th November 1975. This is because as a plantation colony Suriname was dependent on manual labour and to make up for the shortfall, the Dutch post-1667 brought in contract labourers from the Dutch East Indies (modern Indonesia) and India (through an arrangement with the British). The Surinami community in Holland themselves describe how life on the plantation colony over generations diminished their religious, cultural and ethnic identities but Allama Sahib's work linked them to their roots, religion and culture.

Holland now has not just a thriving Muslim community of Surinami-Indian ethnic origin but has established the largest and most beautiful Mosque, Taibah Masjid, several Mosques in different cities, two Muslim schools and a large Madinat-ul-Islam College for Islamic studies. Many scholars have studied and graduating from this University to serve communities in Holland as well as Europe. In conclusion, who better to end than a quote from no other than the great Ra'ees-ut-Tahrir Hazrat Allama Arshad-ul-Qardi (May Allah shower his mercy upon him) who in a letter to Allama Azmi wrote: "You are an incomparable personality and your work and achievements are also incomparable" (see letter dated 7th December 1997)