

Pioneers of Introducing Islam to the West — *The Ahmadiyya Anjuman Lahore*

Compiled by Dr Zahid Aziz

“My work was a work of labour. For every rendering or explanation, I had to search Hadith collections, Lexicologies, Commentaries and other important works, and every opinion expressed was substantiated by quoting authorities. Differences there have been in the past, and in future too there will be differences, but wherever I have differed I have given my authority for the difference.”

— **Maulana Muhammad Ali**, on why his English translation of the Quran of 1917 was followed by later Muslim translators.

“And now, looking back upon his [Khwaja Kamal-ud-Din’s] life-work, I think that there is no one living who has done such splendid and enduring service to Islam. The work in England is the least part of it ... wherever there are Muslims in the world his writings penetrated, and have aroused new zeal and energy and hope. It is a wonderful record of work...”

— Marmaduke Pickthall, in his obituary of Khwaja Kamal-ud-Din.

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Making the Quran accessible to the English-speaking world

Today more than thirty English translations of the Quran by Muslims are readily available to anyone wishing to study the scripture of Islam as presented by a Muslim. Till the end of the year 1917, just over a hundred years ago, the only English translations of the Quran available in Western countries were those by non-Muslims. These translations openly presented the Quran as falsely claiming to be a Divine scripture, and they referred to it as a crude forgery, of little merit, by Muhammad who dishonestly proclaimed it as a revelation from God.

Muslims, on the other hand, held the Quran in high reverence, but this was veneration only for the outward form of the Quran, its physical pages and its written form, the sound of its recitation, etc. There was little or no interest in studying or understanding its message directly, let alone delivering its message to the world at large. The reverence for its physical form also gave rise to the idea that it was a forbidden act for a Muslim to translate the Quran into any other language from its Arabic text. It was considered a violation of the sacredness of the Quran, and also unnecessary because all that was required to gain benefit was to air and chant its Arabic words.



It was against this background that the Founder of the Ahmadiyya Movement, Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (photo left), proposed in a book he published in 1891 that it was absolutely essential to prepare a translation and commentary of the Quran in English and send it to the Western people. He wrote:

“It is undoubtedly true that Europe and America have a large

collection of objections against Islam, inculcated through those engaged in [Christian] Mission work, and that their philosophy and natural sciences give rise to another sort of criticism... To meet these objections, a chosen man is needed who should have a river of knowledge flowing in his vast breast and whose knowledge should have been specially broadened and deepened by Divine inspiration. This work cannot be done by those who do not possess comprehensive vision..." (*Izalah Auham*, p. 772)

He adds on the next page:

"If my people help me heart and soul, I wish to prepare a commentary of the Quran which should be sent to them (i.e., to the people of the West) after it has been rendered into the English language. I cannot refrain from stating clearly that this is my work, and that definitely no one else can do it as I can, or as he can who is an offshoot of mine and thus is included in me."

Besides the necessity of replying to Western criticism of Islam, there was another reason he had in mind for taking the message of the Quran to the West. He writes:

"In reality, the Western countries have, up to this time, shown very little aptitude for religious truths, as if spiritual wisdom had in its entirety been granted to Asia, and material wisdom to Europe and America ... now Almighty God intends to cast on them the look of mercy." (*Izalah Auham*, p. 516)

Thus the Divine plan was that when the Western world, having achieved unprecedented progress in the material world, would turn to search for spiritual fulfilment, God would cast the look of mercy on them and make accessible to them the teachings of the Quran and its profound wisdom.

It is clear from the statements made by the Founder of the Ahmadiyya Movement that the translation envisaged by him would have the primary aims of:

- replying to the objections against Islam, whether these arise from Christian criticism of Islam or from the modern criticism of religion as such,
- meeting the spiritual needs of the Western nations, previously not met in their history, and to satisfy their doubts and uncertainties about religion.

To achieve these aims, in particular the second one, the commentary he had in mind would deal with the most fundamental concepts and issues relating to the very basis of religion, such as the existence of God, the need for Divine revelation, proof of the truth of the prophets of God, the attributes of God and His relationship with His creation, etc.

Muslims paid no heed to the call of the Founder, who had addressed them in the above words: "If my people help me heart and soul, I wish to prepare a commentary of the Quran...". He had no means of fulfilling this aim. It so happened that a young man in his early twenties, Muhammad Ali, joined the Ahmadiyya Movement in 1897. Three years later he decided to devote his life to serve the cause of Islam under the tutelage of the Founder.

Shortly thereafter, Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad announced his intention to start a magazine in English, aimed at a Western readership as well as English-educated Muslims in India. Its aim would be to present "the sound arguments in support of the religion of Islam", which he was putting forward in his Urdu and Arabic writings. He appointed Maulana Muhammad Ali as editor of this magazine, and it was launched in January 1902 with the title the *Review of Religions*. It was this work of editorship which equipped Maulana Muhammad Ali with the knowledge and skills to produce, later on, his English translation of the Quran. He developed a considerable ability to write and to translate through the experience of editing this magazine.

So impressive and idiomatic was his English that shortly after the *Review of Religions* began publication, a Christian missionary magazine, *Calcutta Review*, in its issue for April 1902, alleged

that Mirza Ghulam Ahmad was using an Englishman “behind the scenes” to translate his writings. It commented:

“From the evidence of *English idioms* — peculiarly English, and never used by strangers — it is clear as daylight to anyone that his deliverances in this newly started *Review of Religions* are written or concocted by a European — an Englishman (herein again, curiously enough, reproducing exactly Muhammad and his Syrian Christian ‘Archangel Gabriel!’).”

This critic meant that just as, according to the Christian opponents of the Holy Prophet Muhammad, he was actually instructed by a Syrian Christian, while claiming that he was receiving revelation from the angel Gabriel, so too was Mirza Ghulam Ahmad using the services of a hired Englishman to write for him while claiming that it was his follower called Muhammad Ali!

It was not only experience in authorship that Maulana Muhammad Ali was gaining. As he explained many years later, in the Preface to his revised edition of the translation and commentary of the Quran, published in 1951:

“For full nine years before taking up this translation [in 1909] I was engaged in studying every aspect of the European criticism of Islam as well as of Christianity and religion in general, as I had specially to deal with these subjects in the *Review of Religions*, of which I was the first editor. I had thus an occasion to go through both the higher criticism of religion by advanced thinkers and what I may call the narrower criticism of Islam by the Christian missionaries who had no eye for the broader principles of Islam and its cosmopolitan teachings, and the unparalleled transformation wrought by Islam.”

It can be seen from this that his translation and commentary took close note of the Western criticism of Islam, both from the opponents of religion as such and the Christian detractors of Islam. The objections raised by this criticism had not only produced revulsion and loathing of Islam in Western minds but had made many Muslims doubt and lose faith in Islam. Some

leading Muslims have admitted that their weakening belief in Islam was strengthened after they read Maulana Muhammad Ali's English translation of the Quran. Maulana Abdul Majid Daryabadi of Lucknow, India (d. 1977), was a recognized leader of orthodox Muslim opinion, and a prolific author who himself wrote a commentary of the Quran. The following statement, taken from a biography of him, is quoted in the Wikipedia entry about him:

“He studied several books of Orientalists and under their influence, became sceptical of religion and called himself a ‘rationalist’. For almost nine years, he remained away from religion but repented and became a devout Muslim.”

Maulana Abdul Majid Daryabadi has himself stated, in an autobiographical work in Urdu entitled *Aap Beti*, that this period of “heresy and apostasy” in his early life lasted for ten years till late 1918. Then he writes:

“I was slowly returning to Islam. In fact, I had become more than fifty percent Muslim when in October 1920 ... my eye fell on the English translation and commentary of the Holy Quran by Muhammad Ali of Lahore, the Ahmadi (Qadiani in common parlance). Feeling restless, I took it from the cupboard and started to read it. As I read through it, praise be to Allah, my faith kept on increasing.
...

When I finished reading this English Quran, on searching my soul I found myself to be a Muslim. Now I was able to recite the *Kalima* unhesitatingly, without deceiving my conscience. May Allah grant this Muhammad Ali paradise in every way! I am not concerned with the question whether his belief about Mirza [Ghulam Ahmad] sahib was right or wrong. Whatever the case, what should I do about my personal experience? He was the one who put the last nail in the coffin of my unbelief and apostasy.”

The Founder of the Ahmadiyya Movement had passed away in May 1908 and Maulana Nur-ud-Din (see photo below) had



become Head of the Movement. He was an illustrious scholar of Islam and held in high esteem on this account by eminent Muslims of the Indian subcontinent (who were not in the Ahmadiyya Movement). He had a particularly deep knowledge of, and love for, the Quran which he had studied for many years. His principle of understanding the Quran was that the interpretation of any passage in the Quran should be

sought, in the first place, from other passages within this scripture itself. Further, the Quran must also be studied in the light of reason and modern knowledge. He believed that the traditional sources for understanding the Quran, which are Hadith books and classical commentaries, are a valuable help, but they cannot be used to overrule and supercede anything established from the Quran.



It was under the guidance of Maulana Nur-ud-Din that Maulana Muhammad Ali started work on translating the Quran into English in 1909 at Qadian where he lived and worked. He adopted the principles mentioned above in interpreting the Quran. Till the death of Maulana Nur-ud-Din on 13 March 1914, Maulana Muhammad Ali used to visit him, often even daily, to read to him the latest from his commentary, seek his advice, and make revisions in line with his guidance. Many years later,

Maulana Muhammad Ali

Maulana Muhammad Ali wrote of this, rather touchingly, as follows:

“It was my good fortune that I had the opportunity to learn the Quran from him even in those days when he was on his death bed. I used to read out to him notes from my English translation of the Holy Quran. He was seriously ill, but even in that state he used to be waiting for when Muhammad Ali would come. And when I came to his presence, that same critically ailing Nur-ud-Din would turn into a young man. The service of the Quran that I have done is just the result of his love for the Holy Quran.” (*Paigham Sulah*, 28 April 1943)

With the death of Maulana Nur-ud-Din came a turning point in the life of Maulana Muhammad Ali and in his literary and missionary activities, changing their course forever. A split and schism took place within the Ahmadiyya Movement. Mirza Bashir-ud-Din Mahmud Ahmad, a son of the Founder, was controversially made head of the Movement by his supporters. He proclaimed that no person can be a Muslim unless he becomes a follower of Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, believing in him as a prophet, and that a Muslim who does not do so is exactly like the non-Muslim who does not accept the Holy Prophet Muhammad. This doctrine was unacceptable to Maulana Muhammad Ali and many others in the Ahmadiyya Movement, and they regarded it as being contrary to the teachings of Islam, and of the Founder of the Ahmadiyya Movement himself.

Consequently, in May 1914 they established at Lahore the Ahmadiyya Anjuman Isha'at Islam. After fifteen years of scholarly, literary and administrative work for the Ahmadiyya Movement at Qadian, Maulana Muhammad Ali left for Lahore, and became Head of an organization which started in a state of the utmost destitution, having no office, funds or staff.

In these extraordinarily difficult conditions, and with many other important matters that required his attention, Maulana Muhammad Ali continued to work on the completion and publication of his English translation of the Holy Quran. The last

four parts, out of the thirty parts of the Quran, yet remained to be completed.

Another factor was now adding urgency to the publication of this work. In 1912, Khwaja Kamal-ud-Din, a prominent figure in the Ahmadiyya Movement, had gone to England, and had founded a Muslim Mission at the Mosque in Woking, Surrey, in 1913. He was presenting the message of Islam to the British people by lectures, correspondence, meetings and articles published in his monthly magazine the *Islamic Review*, launched in February 1913. There was a constant and urgent demand for an English translation of the Holy Quran done by a Muslim, the demand coming both from converts to Islam and others interested in learning about Islam. The existing available English translations were the work of Christians who, in their explanatory comments, sought to show that the Quran was falsely and deceitfully presented by the Prophet Muhammad as a revelation to him from God, and that it was actually a product of his half-baked, second-hand knowledge, based on hearsay.

In April 1916 Maulana Muhammad Ali completed work on his English translation and commentary of the Holy Quran. He announced to his Friday congregation:

“Today is a day of happiness for me. ... I am not happy like a student who, at the end of his examination, feels that now he will have free time and can rest for a few days. I am happy because all the time that I was involved in this work I was worried that life is so fickle and it may be that this work would be left incomplete.”

With the Woking Muslim Mission having been established, it was decided to have this voluminous work printed in England on fine paper. The forthcoming publication had been announced in the *Islamic Review*. But a progress report in the June 1916 issue mentions various circumstances which delayed its appearance. The first of these were the “unavoidable circumstances ... for which the gigantic war is greatly responsible”, making materials expensive and scarce to obtain. Another difficulty mentioned is

that of adding the Arabic text to the printing. This was done, it says, by sending a copy of the pages with the English translation on them to Lahore, getting a calligraphist there to fill in the spaces for the Arabic text, returning these pages to England, photographing the filled-in Arabic text to make metal blocks, and inserting them into the pages of the English translation.

The following year this much-awaited book was out of the press by September. It was announced in the September 1917 issue of the *Islamic Review* under the heading:

The First English Translation and commentary of the Holy Quran by a Muslim Theologian

We quote below from this:

“The Maulvi Muhammad Ali, M.A., LL.B., has prepared, after a labour of about nine years, an English translation, with necessary notes and commentary, of the Holy Quran, which has been printed in England and has just come out after unavoidable delays caused by the war. Each copy contains about 1,400 pages, and includes a comprehensive preface showing the special features of Islam as preached in the Holy Book, and an exhaustive discussion of the authenticity of the Holy Book, its original purity and incorruptibility... [It can] be had of the Islamic Review Office, The Mosque, Woking, Surrey. ...

To those who know the learned translator his very name would be a guarantee to them that the translation is scholarly, and the commentary is based on the authentic traditions of the Great Prophet as interpreted by the authentic Muslim savants.”

The “first” English translation of the Quran by a Muslim

Before this translation, three English translations of the Quran by Muslims had been published. These were by Abdul Hakim Khan (1905), Mirza Abul Fazl (1911), and Mirza Hairat of Delhi (1912), and were all done and published in India. They were, however, of limited circulation and little known. In later years, one Muslim researcher who surveyed various English transla-

tions of the Quran, and listed them chronologically in his book, expresses the following view when he comes to Maulana Muhammad Ali's translation:

“The first work published by any Muslim with the thoroughness worthy of Quranic scholarship and achieving the standards of modern publications.”¹

Another reviewer of Quran translations, writing in 1999, sets out certain criteria, on the basis of which he excluded certain translations from his review. He eliminates the English translation attempts by Muslims before Maulana Muhammad Ali as being “of just historical interest” and “inconsequential translations”.² In the list that this leaves him for review, which he arranges chronologically, “Maulana Muhammad Ali 1917” is the fourth translation of all, and the first by a Muslim.

The description in the *Islamic Review* announcement quoted above, that Maulana Muhammad Ali's work is the “*first ... by a Muslim theologian*”, is also accurate as the three preceding Muslim translators were not Islamic scholars or theologians. Moreover, it is a fact that the Maulana's English translation of the Quran was the first by a Muslim to be published in the West, as it was printed at the famous Gresham Press of Unwin Brothers Ltd. in Woking, England, and published in 1917 from the Islamic Review Office at the Woking Mosque in a quantity of 5000 copies. It was the first by a Muslim to be available in the world generally.

Reviews of this translation appeared immediately in the British press. *The Westminster Gazette* was an influential Liberal newspaper, described by some as “the most powerful paper in Britain” at that time. It carried a review of Maulana Muhammad Ali's work in November 1917 in which the author stated:

“I have always found a fascination in looking through occasional chapters of the Koran ... and have often felt

¹ Hashim Amir Ali, *The Student's Quran*, India, 1961, p. iv.

² Dr. A. Nihamathullah, *Translating the Holy Quran: Is There An Ultimate Translation Of The Quran?* at www.scribd.com

that there was something lacking in editions prepared by Christian editors. The lack is removed by the issue of a very fine edition, 'The Holy Qur-án,' by a distinguished Muslim, Maulvi Muhammad Ali, of Lahore, who has devoted seven years to its preparation, which comes to me from the 'Islamic Review' office, in the Muslim settlement at Woking. It gives the Arabic text (which, I am sorry to say, is of no use to me) in parallel with the translation; the commentary is remarkably full and interesting; the preface is both a summary of Islamic teaching and practice and a history of 'the Book'; and — even in war time — the thinnest of thin India paper, gilt edges, beautiful type, and a limp green morocco binding make the volume an unusually sumptuous one."

The Quest was a quarterly review published from London. It is described as a "thoughtful, scholarly" publication, and its editor, G.R.S. Mead, is said to have produced writings which attracted "the cream of British intellectual thought in the first quarter of the twentieth century". It published a lengthy review of Maulana Muhammad Ali's work in its April 1918 issue, from which we quote below:

"On the whole then we may say that we have before us a version that is not only faithful but dignified; and that is high praise. It is certainly a work of which any scholar might legitimately be proud, and especially an Oriental scholar; it has further been completed in a remarkably short time for so difficult an undertaking. Eight years only have gone to its making, years therefore of such unremitting devotion and strenuous toil as legitimately to compel our admiration and praise.

Maulvi Muhammad Ali, as we have been told by one who knows him intimately, is a man of rare intellectual gifts, who could easily have distinguished himself in any profession and made a very large income. He has preferred to devote himself to the service of religion and to live a life of poverty in that service. The translation is his alone; it has not been done by various hands and simply edited by him. As to the commentaries and the rest of the

matter, though he has had the great advantage of being able to consult on all points many living Muslim scholars and theologians of the highest repute, as well as innumerable written and printed sources and authorities, the labour is still all his own, and the skilful presentation of the results of his researches show further that he has been an apt scholar in the school of Western methodology. Moreover, whenever in his version he departs from a generally accepted rendering, he tells us why he has done so frankly in the notes and sets before us the evidence for and against his new interpretation."

One of the most famous Muslim nationalist leaders in India before independence was **Maulana Muhammad Ali Jauhar** (d. 1931), who was also founder of an English and an Urdu newspaper (entitled *The Comrade* and *Hamdard*, respectively). He is one of the national heroes of Pakistan. In his autobiographical English book, *My Life — A Fragment*, he describes, while in political internment by the British government of India in 1918, receiving a gift from a friend of a copy of Maulana Muhammad Ali's English translation of the Quran. He writes:

"This was the work of my learned namesake, Maulvi Muhammad Ali of Lahore, leader of a fairly numerous religious community, some of whose members were doing missionary work in England. ... The translation and the notes ... supplied the antidote so greatly needed for the poison squirted in the footnotes of English translators of the Quran like Sale, Rodwell and Palmer, ... I wrote back to my friend who had sent these copies of the Quran that nothing would please me better than to go to Europe as soon as I could get out of the 'bounds' prescribed by my internment and preach to these war maniacs from every park and at every street corner..." (*My Life — A Fragment*, 1966 edition, p. 115)

The friend who sent him the gift was Dr Mirza Yaqub Beg, a leading Lahore Ahmadiyya figure. Jauhar wrote him a letter of thanks which was published in the *Islamic Review* in those days in its December 1919 issue. We quote some parts of it below:

“Need I assure you that you could not have sent to us anything more acceptable than the beautiful copies of the Holy Quran rendered into English by my learned and revered namesake, Maulana Mohammad Ali Saheb. I had read the specimen pages in the Islamic Review, that welcome reminder of our dear brave Khwaja’s mission in Europe, and I was anxiously awaiting the announcement that copies could be had in India, or even in England. ...

As for the English rendering, I am impressed so far as I have read with the simplicity and precision and the adherence to the text which indicate the reverence due to God’s own Word from a true believer. ...

... the great thing is that the great task has been accomplished, and there now exists in at least one European language a rendering of the holy Quran done by a true believer and not by a scoffer, by one who believes every word of the Book to be God’s own, ...

If you see Maulvi Mohammad Ali thank him for me as a Moslem who feels proud of his devoted and fruitful labours, and shares with him the privilege of at least the most beloved of names in the entire world.

If you write to my stalwart Khwaja send him my kisses for his shaggy old beard.”

Later translations by Muslims

For some twelve years after the first edition was published, Maulana Muhammad Ali’s English translation of the Quran remained the only English translation by a Muslim available in the West. Its second edition of 11,000 copies was published as a reprint in 1920 from the same press. A handy version which did not include the Arabic text, and with the footnotes much condensed, was published in 1928, again from the same press in Woking. Turning now to the best-known translations by Muslims which appeared after all these editions, we see that in many respects they followed Maulana Muhammad Ali’s lead, and we may go further and say that the translators owe their very motivation for translating the Quran to the Maulana’s work.

Marmaduke Pickthall — His translation was first published in December 1930. He has written an account of the difficulties he faced when, after completing his manuscript, he took it to Egypt, as he says: “to submit it to the Ulama of Egypt and revise the whole work under their direction, that there might be no avoidable mistakes and no unorthodoxy”. But upon arrival, he says: “I learnt that all translation of the Quran, however faithful, was held to be unlawful by a powerful section of the Ulama.” Pickthall along with those Ulama in Egypt who supported the view that the Quran may be translated had to overcome this opposition. He also mentions that, a few years previously, when Maulana Muhammad Ali’s translation reached Egypt the same Ulama condemned it and had its copies burnt and banned. Their *fatwa* in regard to anyone who translates the Quran was as follows:

“The translator and all who read his translation, or abetted it, or showed approval of it, were condemned to everlasting perdition ... and I was solemnly advised to give up my nefarious work...”

Pickthall says in his account that “the hue-and-cry against Muhammad Ali’s translation” that had taken place in Egypt was *not* because it was an Ahmadiyya translation that had “some flavour of heresy” but because a group of powerful Ulama regarded *any translation* of the Quran to be forbidden in Islam. He describes this attitude as a “cell erected by the schoolmen of the middle ages of Islam”. In the end, Pickthall’s pleas were accepted and, as he writes, “the position that all translation of the Quran is sinful has been quite abandoned.”³

This shows that the early efforts of the Lahore Ahmadiyya under Maulana Muhammad Ali to produce translations of the Quran, and propagate these widely, led the way in breaking the taboo in the Muslim world that the Quran should not be translated into a non-Arabic language. With that bar removed, we see

³ These quotations are taken Pickthall’s account in the book *Loyal Enemy* by Anne Fremantle, pages 408–419.

a hundred years later that there are scores of translations of the Quran by Muslims all over the world, there being more than thirty such publications so far in English alone.

Shortly after Pickthall's translation was published, an article appeared in a famous Christian missionary journal, *The Moslem World*, in its July 1931 issue, in which the author compared Christian and Muslim English translations of the Quran. He came to the following conclusions:

“Mr. Pickthall's translation, in all that part of his work which we have examined, resembles very closely the version of Muhammad Ali... We think it will now be evident to the reader how much Mr. Pickthall is indebted to the version of Maulvi Muhammad Ali, not only for his footnotes, but also for the translation itself. ... In the passages which we have examined carefully ... the translation of Pickthall follows MA [Muhammad Ali] so closely that one finds very few evidences of original work.”

Pickthall was well familiar with the Lahore Ahmadiyya Movement. He worked for a while at the Woking Muslim Mission around 1922 and is seen in a group photograph of the Woking Muslim Mission staff with Khwaja Kamal-ud-Din in the *Islamic Review*, December 1922. At the death of Khwaja Kamal-ud-Din in December 1932, Pickthall wrote a letter of condolences to his son Khwaja Nazir Ahmad, which was published in the *Islamic Review*, April–May 1933 issue. He wrote:

“...looking back upon his life-work, I think that there is no one living who has done such splendid and enduring service to Islam. The work in England is the least part of it. Not until I came to India did I realise the immense good that his writings have done in spreading knowledge of religion and reviving the Islamic spirit in lethargic Muslims; not only here, but wherever there are Muslims in the world his writings penetrated, and have aroused new zeal and energy and hope. It is a wonderful record of work, which could have been planned and carried out

only by a man of high intelligence inspired by faith and great sincerity of purpose. Allah will reward him!”

Shortly before Pickthall died in 1936, he wrote a review of Maulana Muhammad Ali's book *The Religion of Islam* which had just that year been published. The review was published soon after his death in the quarterly *Islamic Culture* from Hyderabad Deccan, India, of which Pickthall had been editor. In it he wrote:

“Probably no man living has done longer or more valuable service for the cause of Islamic revival than Maulana Muhammad Ali of Lahore. His literary works, with those of the late Khwaja Kamal-ud-Din, have given fame and distinction to the Ahmadiyya Movement. In our opinion the present volume is his finest work... Such a book is greatly needed at the present day when in many Muslim countries we see persons eager for the reformation and revival of Islam making mistakes through lack of just this knowledge.... We do not always agree with Maulana Muhammad Ali's conclusions upon minor points ... but his premises are always sound, we are always conscious of his deep sincerity; and his reverence for the holy Quran is sufficient in itself to guarantee his work in all essentials.” (October 1936 issue, pages 659–660)

It is, therefore, perfectly reasonable to conclude that Pickthall was influenced by the Lahore Ahmadiyya missionary and literary work, and thus his production of an English translation of the Quran is indebted to that work.

Abdullah Yusuf Ali — Another very popular translation and commentary is that by Abdullah Yusuf Ali, first published as a complete volume in 1938. Yusuf Ali knew well the leading figures of the Lahore Ahmadiyya Movement. In England, he attended functions organised by the Woking Muslim Mission, and delivered speeches at some of them. Articles by him can be read in the Woking Muslim Mission's magazine the *Islamic Review* over a long period of years, and he also appears in one or two group photos published in this magazine. Usually resident in England, he was in Lahore during 1934–37 to finalise his translation, and

during this period he held the post of Principal of Islamia College, Lahore. This college was just across the road from Ahmadiyya Buildings, where the Lahore Ahmadiyya centre was located, and where Maulana Muhammad Ali lived and worked at that time. Some senior members of the Lahore Ahmadiyya Anjuman have reported that Abdullah Yusuf Ali used to send his translation of verses of the Quran to Ahmadiyya Buildings to seek advice on whether his translation, with its poetic style, was sufficiently close to the original Arabic text of the Quran, and Maulana Muhammad Ali had appointed a committee of three persons to look over the extracts which Yusuf Ali sent.

In the introduction of his translation, Abdullah Yusuf Ali has briefly reviewed various existing translations. Under Muslim translations he writes:

“The Ahmadiyya Sect has also been active in the field. ... Its Lahore Anjuman has published Maulvi Muhammad Ali’s translation (first edition in 1917), which has passed through more than one edition. It is a scholarly work, and is equipped with adequate explanatory matter in the notes and the Preface, and a fairly full Index. But the English of the Text is decidedly weak, and is not likely to appeal to those who know no Arabic.”

Whatever he may mean by the translation being “decidedly weak”, he has considered it “a scholarly work” with “adequate explanatory matter”. Moreover, he has called the Ahmadiyya as a “sect”, i.e., a sect of Islam, and included Maulana Muhammad Ali’s translation in the category of Muslim translations, and not non-Muslim translations which he also mentions. So clearly had he included the Ahmadiyya as Muslims that the editors of some later editions, revised long after his death, felt it necessary to add a footnote at this point to say that the “Muslim *Ummah* is agreed” that all those who consider Mirza Ghulam Ahmad as their religious leader are outside the fold of Islam. This is quite contrary to the view held and expressed by Abdullah Yusuf Ali!

M.H. Shakir — There was the interesting case of an English translation of the Quran, without Arabic text or footnotes, being

widely circulated since the 1970s, under a translator's name M.H. Shakir. In the early days of the Internet, three English translations were available online: Pickthall's, Yusuf Ali's, and the so-called Shakir translation. However, it was noticed that there was a remarkable similarity between this translation and Maulana Muhammad Ali's 1917 edition. By this time, Maulana Muhammad Ali's revised 1951 edition and its later reprints, in which he had made considerable changes, were in current circulation. As his 1917 edition and its reprints were out of print and out of general view, it meant that this similarity was not spotted sooner. It was observed eventually that in this Shakir translation only a few words here and there differed from Maulana Muhammad Ali's 1917 edition, and those changes had only been done to make it comply in certain places with traditional interpretations. For example, the Maulana has translated the abbreviations such as *Alif, Lam, Mim* (in this case as: "I, Allah, am the best Knower"). In the Shakir version these are shown untranslated, since it is traditionally held that no one can know their meanings. Otherwise, the Shakir translation is an exact copy of Maulana Muhammad Ali's 1917 edition.

Eventually it was discovered that this was the production of a well-known member of a Pakistani banking dynasty, Mohammedali Habib (d. 1959), hence the 'MH'. He had supervised a group of people to go through Maulana Muhammad Ali's 1917 edition and make these changes. This book was first published by Habib Bank, Karachi, in 1968, but in the 1980s it was taken up by a publisher in the US, giving it a mass circulation. Its language was highly praised by many readers, but unknown to them they were praising Maulana Muhammad Ali's work.

A further interesting fact which came to light was that near the end of Maulana Muhammad Ali's life, most probably in late 1949, the same Mohammedali Habib 'Shakir' had donated a large sum of money to the Lahore Ahmadiyya Anjuman in response to appeals by Maulana Muhammad Ali to the general Muslim community to fund the free distribution of his books to Western countries, including his translation of the Quran.

Muhammad Asad — *The Message of the Quran* by Muhammad Asad is a very well-known and popular translation and commentary of the Quran. A convert to Islam of Austrian origin, Asad (d. 1992) lived in India and Pakistan for a period before and after the time of independence. According to Mr Masud Beg Mirza, writing in 1982 as General-Secretary of the Ahmadiyya Anjuman Lahore:

“Asad lived in Lahore for a number of years and frequently called on the late Maulana Muhammad Ali, who had advised and inspired him to translate the *Sahih al-Bukhari* into English.”⁴

Maulana Muhammad Ali himself has mentioned in the preface to his book, *A Manual of Hadith*, published in 1944, that Asad has undertaken to translate *Sahih Bukhari* into English and published a small part of it.

Asad’s English translation of the Quran was first published in full in 1980. One volume, consisting of the first nine chapters of the Quran, had been published in 1964 with the name of the publisher Muslim World League, Mecca on the title page (this body is known in Arabic as *Rabita al-‘Alam al-Islami*). However, shortly after publication, these publishers discovered that Asad had given interpretations on certain points which they found unacceptable. So they withdrew their sponsorship, and destroyed the copies that they had already acquired. Then Asad went on to complete his work and publish it in full in 1980.

The so-called “controversial” interpretations of Asad, to which they had strong objection, related to verses which he had interpreted in more or less the same way as Maulana Muhammad Ali and had disagreed with the traditional explanations of those verses. In my book entitled *Centenary of Maulana Muhammad Ali’s English Translation of the Quran*, published in 2017, I (Zahid Aziz) have given details of the main such cases. These relate to the issues of: the death of Jesus, concubinage (or

⁴ *The Light*, Lahore, October 24, 1982, p. 3. Mr Masud Beg Mirza was in a position to know of this fact personally.

sexual relations with slave women), angels, miracles (such as Abraham being saved from the fire, the *miraj* of the Holy Prophet Muhammad, miracles of Jesus), concept of hell, what are *jinn*, and abrogation or not of verses in the Quran.

Of course, Muhammad Asad was himself a great scholar of Islam and the Arabic language and he reached these conclusions, in which he concurs with Maulana Muhammad Ali, by his own direct study and research. He frequently cites the Egyptian reformers and scholars Shaikh Muhammad Abduhu and Rashid Rida as his sources who led him to accept these conclusions. The fact that a scholar of the stature of Asad arrived at the same interpretations as Maulana Muhammad Ali is a further argument of the soundness of the Maulana's explanations.

In an obituary of Asad published in the British Muslim magazine *Impact International* it is stated:

“Asad is not alone in taking such a ‘rationalistic’ view while reading the Qur’ān. What he seems to have done is to put together a number of individual ‘rationalizations’ under one cover.”

This is, in fact, what Maulana Muhammad Ali had also done, although both he and Asad defended their “rationalizations” on the basis of the Quran itself.

Asad's commentary is very popular with the enlightened sections of Muslims. The well-known American Muslim organization, CAIR (Council on American-Islamic Relations), has for some time been appealing for donations to “Sponsor a Quran”, and it has selected Asad's *The Message of the Quran* as the translation which it sponsors for distribution from these funds. Thus Maulana Muhammad Ali's views on the teachings of the Quran on many important issues are reaching a wide readership who may otherwise be disinclined to study his work and may regard it as unorthodox due to its Ahmadiyya connections.

In this article, we have established that it was Maulana Muhammad Ali who opened the door for Muslims to the work

of translating the Quran and he was among Muslims the pioneer in bringing the Quran before the modern world. He trod entirely new ground, and other Muslims followed his lead. The well-known English translations that appeared in later years were all influenced by his work. Many translators passed through the door which he opened and continue to do so till today.

If anyone considers that our evidence, regarding Maulana Muhammad Ali's influence upon the later Muslim translators, is not definite or conclusive, but only circumstantial, we would put forward the following point. **Four people** (Pickthall, Yusuf Ali, 'Shakir', and Asad) who produced English translations of the Quran, independently at different times and in different countries, each with his own ideas and approach, each one of the translations being well known and widespread, all of them had some connection with Maulana Muhammad Ali, and in the first two cases with Khwaja Kamal-ud-Din as well. Can this be a mere coincidence, and only a matter of chance?

Maulana Muhammad Ali was not only a translator of the Quran but also the head of a religious community, the Lahore Ahmadiyya, and he constantly urged and motivated that community to the service of the Quran, i.e., to study it in depth, to teach its meanings to people, to do research on it, and to have it translated into other languages and publish those translations.

It only remains to add that towards the end of his life, Maulana Muhammad Ali carried out a thorough revision of his first edition of 1917, making the language of the translation simpler and updating his footnotes. "Conditions have changed so rapidly since I first took this work in hand in 1909", he writes in the preface, that there arose a demand for a revised edition, a need which he himself also felt. He also refers to the numerous writings on Islam that he had produced after the publication of the 1917 edition and writes:

"Owing to the extensive study which I had to make for these writings I myself felt that I had received more light and was bound to give the English-reading public, which

extends over a vast part of the world, a deeper insight into the Holy Quran than I had given in my younger days.”

That revised edition, which first appeared in 1951, has been re-published again and again, in various formats, and with improved design, also incorporating corrections of typographical and other errors found over the years. ■

The Woking Muslim Mission

In the article above, a statement by Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad was quoted which begins as follows: “In reality, the Western countries have, up to this time, shown very little aptitude for religious truths”. Just prior to this, he referred to a prophecy of the Holy Prophet Muhammad, that a sign of the latter days is that the sun would rise from the west, and he wrote:

“...what has been shown to me in a vision is this — that the rising of the sun from the west signifies that the Western world which has been involved of old in the darkness of unbelief and error shall be made to shine with the sun of Truth, and those people shall have their share of Islam. I saw that I was standing on a pulpit in the city of London and explaining the truth of Islam in a strongly-argued speech in the English language; and, after this, I caught a large number of birds that were sitting on small trees, and in colour they were white, and their size was probably the size of the partridge. So I interpreted this dream as meaning that, though I may not personally go there, yet my writings would spread among those people and many righteous Englishmen would accept the truth.” (*Izalah Auham*, p. 515–516)

It was due to their belief in the truth of this vision, about the interpretation of the “rising of the sun from the west”, that the Lahore Ahmadiyya founders exerted themselves to fulfill it by spreading Islamic literature in the West and by creating and supporting the Woking Muslim Mission in England. Just as producing the English translation of the Quran was the premier work of Maulana Muhammad Ali, the establishment of the

Woking Muslim Mission at the Woking Mosque, Surrey, England, was the premier work of Khwaja Kamal-ud-Din. He first went to England in September 1912, and established his mission in 1913. From the very beginning he regarded this mission as a fulfilment of the vision of Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad related above, of “catching birds” in London after making a speech on Islam.

Shortly after his arrival, he came to visit the Mosque at Woking. It had been built in 1889 by Dr G.W. Leitner, a European scholar and linguist who had worked in the field of education in India and played an important part in the establishment of the University of the Punjab at Lahore. The Mosque was part of his proposed Oriental Institute, which never came to fruition. The cost of the construction of the Mosque was largely donated by Begum Shah Jehan, the Muslim lady ruler of the state of Bhopal in India, and the cost of the land by the ruler of the Muslim state of Hyderabad Deccan.

The Mosque was opened only on special occasions and was



Khwaja Kamal-ud-Din

generally derelict and disused. In the summer of 1913, with the help of two prominent Indian Muslims who held high official positions (Sir Abbas Ali Baig and the Right Honourable Syed Ameer Ali), Khwaja Kamal-ud-Din had a trust created to take charge of the property and had its status declared as a Mosque open for the use of all Muslims. He moved to the Mosque as Imam in mid-August 1913 during the month of Ramadan, and opened it for regular

use for the first time. In the house next to the Mosque in its large grounds, he established the Woking Muslim Mission.

He was not merely opening a prayer venue for Muslims in Britain. Khwaja Kamal-ud-Din considered his most important work to be the presentation of an accurate image of Islam before the British people, as the religion which best fulfilled the needs of all nations of the modern times. Leading Muslims in the Indian subcontinent ridiculed this as an utterly mad and foolhardy venture, doomed to failure. After all, Britain ruled over the country that he came from, and European civilization was considered as vastly superior to Islam because it was dominant over the whole world, not only politically, but in all intellectual fields. Yet Khwaja Kamal-ud-Din had an unshakeable faith in the vision of the Founder of the Ahmadiyya Movement, that if the real and true Islam was presented to the West, people there would succumb to its appeal and attraction. Just as he arrived in England, an article in the Ahmadiyya community newspaper *Badr* referred to the Founder's vision and connected it with his arrival:

“This vision was first published 22 years ago. God from Himself created the means for the Khwaja sahib to go to London... he may attain the blessing that this vision be fulfilled in its apparent sense and be a sign to the world. It can happen sometimes that the master sees a vision and it is fulfilled by the hand of his follower.”⁵

Khwaja Kamal-ud-Din himself referred to this vision when the first British person, by the name of Mrs. Violet Ebrahim, accepted Islam at his hand. He wrote:

“This should not be considered as a complete fulfilment of the prophecy. God the Most High will, shortly, fulfil that dream of the late Hazrat [Mirza Ghulam Ahmad].”

He did consider it a “good omen”. The Head of the Ahmadiyya Movement, Maulana Nur-ud-Din, wrote back, congratulating him that, just as it was a woman who was the first person to accept Islam at the Holy Prophet Muhammad's hand, likewise:

⁵ *Badr*, 31 October 1912, p. 5.

“On your hand too, in London, it is a woman who is the first to accept Islam. This is tremendous good news. You must prostrate before Allah the Most High, and I do so too.”⁶

As the scale of his work increased, Khwaja Kamal-ud-Din wrote in a letter to *Badr*:

“The time is approaching that the vision of the late Imam be fulfilled. The seed is being sown. It is necessary to water it.”⁷

Khwaja Kamal-ud-Din launched the monthly *Islamic Review* in February 1913, which remained in publication till 1971. Besides containing articles on religious issues, it published news and features relating to Muslims internationally and in Britain. Its archives are a unique source of the history of Islam and Muslims in Britain during those years.

There is an article in the *Islamic Review* in its July 1930 issue in which the writer has reported an account given to friends by Khwaja Kamal-ud-Din of his first visit to the Woking Mosque. He told them that the Mosque was locked up and inside it was full of all manner of rubbish. He found in it an old copy of the Quran and opened it. It so happened that it opened at the page where the first line was the verse: “Most surely the first house appointed for men is the one at Bekka [i.e., Mecca], blessed and a guidance for the nations” (3:95). The author of the article says:

“These words touched the Khwaja’s heart and he fell on the bare cold floor of the Mosque, prostrating himself before the Lord with tears in his eyes. He wept like a child and the following prayer was on his lips, if my memory does not fail me:

‘O Creator of Nations and All-Powerful God, Thou madest Mecca the holiest place in the East, and didst bring nations in multitudes to that city. Make this

⁶ *Badr*, 13 March 1913, p. 2.

⁷ *Badr*, 19 June 1913, p. 3.

Mosque, I pray Thee, in like manner the Mecca in the West.’

The words welled up from a true heart. They were heard by the Lord, and the answer was not long in coming.”

And what was that answer? The writer, in this article from 1930, explains it as below:

“Eid-ul-Azha at the Woking Mosque presents a spectacle that can be matched only in Mecca itself. Almost all Muslim nations in the world are represented in the gardens of the Mosque, prostrating themselves before their God and magnifying the Most High, even as they magnify Him at Mecca on this sacred occasion. Woking is the only town in the world which becomes on such days a replica in miniature of the Ancient House of God in Arabia.”

The Woking Mosque and Mission became the national centre of Islamic activity in Britain. Its Imam was regarded by the government as, de facto, the head of the Muslim community of the UK. The Eid prayers at Woking were, till the mid-1960s, a national event for Muslims of Britain. They were covered in the newspapers and even newsreel films, and later on television news. It became commonplace for visiting dignitaries of international fame from the Muslim world to call at the Woking Mosque. Kings, princes, presidents, generals, statesmen, politicians, diplomats, high government officials, writers, students and intellectuals from Muslim countries, came to Woking to visit the Mosque and attend functions organized by the Mission.

Today the past activities carried out from the Woking Mosque during the period of the Woking Muslim Mission, and the personalities connected to those events, are recognized as *Britain's Muslim heritage*. The heritage from the Mosque only exists because of the work and the sacrifices of Khwaja Kamal-ud-Din and the other imams and staff of the Woking Muslim Mission. Most of them were members of the Lahore Ahmadiyya community and their work at Woking was supported by finance, resources and encouragement from the centre of the Lahore

Ahmadiyya community in Lahore. Without that work and support, there would be **no such Muslim heritage** of international stature in Britain, with its extensive collection of documentary, photographic and film material as its record.

Horsell Muslim Burial Ground

Another place now recognised as part of Britain's Muslim heritage is the nearby Horsell Muslim Burial Ground, now designated as the Muslim Peace Garden. It was established during the First World War for the burial of Muslim soldiers of the British Indian army who died in England's military hospitals after being brought wounded from France and Belgium. Some soldiers were buried there during 1915 and 1916 (and a few added during the Second World War). Previously the burials took place in Brookwood cemetery, some distance from Woking, in the Muslim cemetery section set up by Dr Leitner in the 1880s for Muslim burials. In 1968, the graves at Horsell were also transferred to Brookwood, so none are at Horsell now.

This burial ground was set up by the British government due to the intensive efforts and campaigning of Maulana Sadr-ud-Din, Imam of the Woking Mosque at the time. Later he was builder of the Mosque in Berlin, Germany, in the 1920s, and later still he was Head of the Lahore Ahmadiyya community at Lahore from 1951 to 1981. His sustained efforts in this regard have recently been highlighted by history researchers.

In a 2015 book, *For King and Another Country*, by Shrabani Basu, about Indian soldiers of the First World War, it is written:

“Sadr-ud-Din had been requested by the government to bury the Muslim soldiers who died in the hospitals in England. ... Initially the burial ground at Netley Hospital was offered to him, but the Maulvi felt that it was not right ... He had therefore requested that the Muslim soldiers be buried in grounds near the mosque at Woking. It caused a great controversy but ultimately a plot of land was procured. However, the Maulvi, was not satisfied.”

At this point the author quotes extracts from a “scathing” letter of complaint by Maulana Sadr-ud-Din to the British government about the inadequacies of the arrangements and for not showing sufficient respect for the deceased. In that letter, after listing his criticisms the Maulana wrote:

“I desire to point out to the government the very grave danger of allowing the impression to gain ground in India that England is not showing sufficient respect to the memories of her Indian heroes.”

The author of the book then adds:

“The Maulvi’s scathing letter was not received well... The Maulvi’s letter nevertheless had the desired effect. Efforts were made to ensure that the bodies of the Muslim soldiers were taken to Woking from hospitals in Brighton, Bournemouth and Netley in a convoy, with the body in a hearse and forty to fifty mourners in lorries.”

In her 2016 paper, *Remembrance and Forgetting: The Muslim Burial Ground, Horsell Common, Woking and other Great War Memorials to the Indian Army in England*, Rachel Hasted writes as follows about Maulana Sadr-ud-Din’s efforts to improve the initial arrangements at Horsell:

“Dissatisfied with this crude arrangement, Maulvi Sadr-ud-Din started a campaign to get a dignified permanent enclosure created which would also be a lasting memorial to the Muslim war dead. He contacted leading Muslim converts such as Lord Headley, wrote to Lord Kitchener at the War Office and also got the Agha Khan to visit Woking. He pushed the India Office to come up with plans for a permanent enclosure with ‘some oriental decoration including a gateway’...

The Maulvi makes a succinct case to the War Office: ‘It is not much if in response to the sacrifices that the Indians are making a little consideration were shown to give a decent look to the place where their bodies are laid and which is visited by the Convalescent Soldiers as well as those Indians that are resident in England.’

The India Office and War Office chafed at the criticism but could not ignore it.”

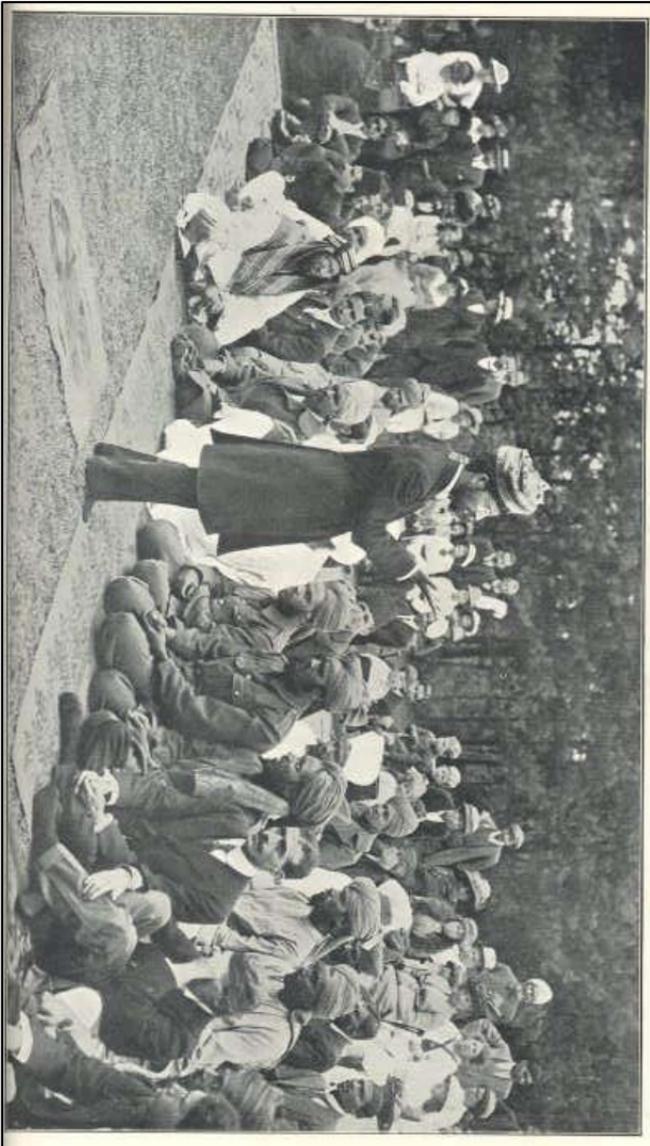
In 2015 the Horsell Muslim Burial Ground was restored as The Peace Garden, and since 2017 a commemoration service is held there in July. It was the pioneering work of Maulana Sadrud-Din, who was sent to England in the summer of 1914 as Imam of the Woking Mosque by the Ahmadiyya Anjuman Lahore from British India (now Pakistan), which led to the establishment of this site that is now a part of the Muslim heritage of Britain.

The legacy

The Woking Muslim Mission is not only of historical significance but it has also left an ideological legacy for the future of Muslims in this country, and more broadly in the West. That Mission tried to have Islam recognized as one of the religions of the UK, to be practised by those belonging to the UK, which anyone could join. It showed that the message of Islam is not meant only for the Muslim community but that it must be presented to the general society. It presented Islam as a broadminded and rational faith which accepts religious differences with others, and seeks to establish communication and dialogue with them to explore shared values. It emphasized that Islam is not tied to the local culture and traditions of any Muslim country but can flourish in any society and environment, including that of the UK.

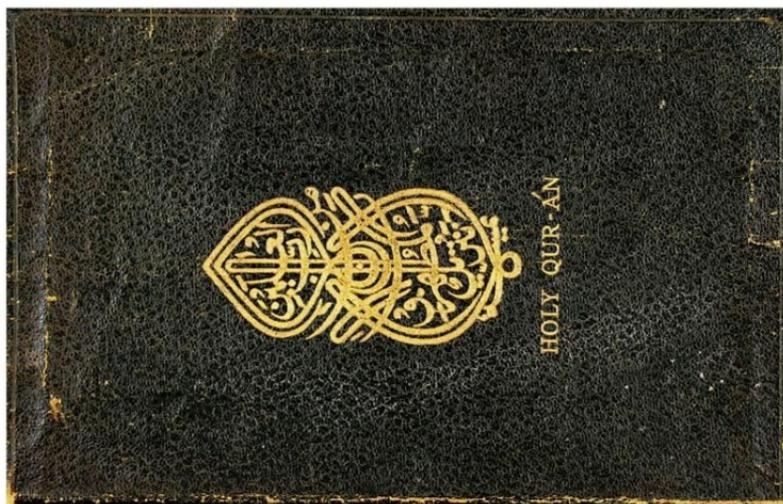
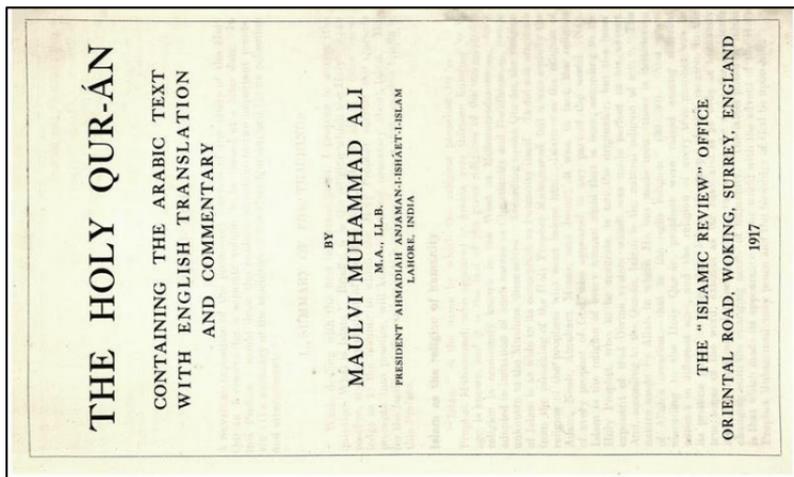
Islam as preached from the Woking Muslim Mission was *the very opposite* of the religious extremism, isolation and separatism from general society, and wholesale rejection of all modern ideas, which are the attitudes, rightly or wrongly, associated with Muslims living in the UK today. The Woking Muslim Mission showed how Muslims could be true to Islam and yet fit into and contribute to British society and life, living peacefully and harmoniously with the rest of the population.

For a comprehensive archive of the Woking Muslim Mission, with articles, documents, analysis, photos and newsreel film clips please visit: www.wokingmuslim.org. You are welcome to contact us at this website (info@wokingmuslim.org).



Eid-ul-Fitr, 13th August 1915: The Imam, Maulana Sadr-ud-Din, delivering the sermon in the grounds of the Woking Mosque. Three Muslim soldiers of the British Indian army in the First World War are in the front row.

A report of this with photos appeared in the 'Graphic' newspaper of London, 20th August 1915. It was also reported in the 'Daily Mirror', 14th August. Some fifty Muslim soldiers were said to be present.



*Found in the belongings of a British soldier of the First World War,
A copy of the first (1917) edition of the English translation of the Quran
by Maulana Muhammad Ali*

*The copy is inscribed: 'B.W. Addison' of Freckleton, Lancashire.
Shown above are photos of the cover and the title page from this copy.*

(Courtesy: Exploring Surrey's Past website: www.exploringsurreypast.org.uk)