

FAITH TURNED INTO VOCATION

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Khurshid Ahmad: Faith Turned Into Vocation

PROFILE

An institution maker, a protégé of Maulana Abu Ala Maududi and an expert in Islamic economics, Khurshid Ahmad is also reputed to be a man of sharp intellect. But has his commitment to the ideals of a single party, Jamaat-e-Islami of Pakistan, truncated his universal vision?

OUTSIDE observers have always marveled at the absence of clergy and institutionalised church in Islam. Without a regulating authoritative body and a corps of moral guardians, how does the Islamic society maintain its 'orthodoxy', they have often wondered. Or, more perceptively, the questioner is led to probe the way "making Islam a vocation - in addition to practicing it as a religious faith - transforms a believer's whole life. The forms this vocation assumes are also characteristic of Muslim piety - a consciousness nourished on the study of the Qur'an and the sunnah of the Noble Prophet. In Khurshid Ahmad's calling one discovers not only the traces of a life fully dedicated to the service of the faith but also some indication as to what is the nature of Islamic commitment and righteousness. It is a life lived in action, in intellectual jihad, in service, in dedication. In short, a life of obedience and submission to the will and purpose of God. It is a life of intense activity, zest and energy. Of philosophical skepticism, spiritual inertia and pious recluse there is not a trace. It is a life of faith lived as will.

Khurshid Ahmad was born in Delhi on 23rd of March, 1932. His family, as many middle-class, educated ones then, had clear leanings toward The Muslim League - the political party that convincingly articulated the Muslim aspirations of that time through its vision of an autonomous Pakistan. It was in those days of intense utopian frenzy that young Khurshid started his formal education in the Arabic Secondary School of the Indian capital. At that impressionable age - the most decisive event of his life which determined the entire course of his public and private life ever after had not taken place; nevertheless, the seeds of Khurshid's passionate and unflinching loyalty to the idea and vision of Pakistan must have been sown in his early childhood.

Like everyone else whose attachment to the new Muslim homeland was firm and devotional, Khurshid's family felt obliged to migrate to Pakistan. On the 28th of February, 1948, it reached Karachi and made it its home for good. Khurshid Ahmad resumed his education this time at the collegiate and university level, and proved out to be a brilliant student, in fact, he took one degree after another, in economics, law and Islamic studies' — in that order. His formal training in these disciplines was to have decisive influence on his later, public, life. Through the study of economics and law not only did he develop a propensity for empirical and sociological analysis (something that is very rare among active Muslim workers) but he also acquired that uniquely "practical* bent of his personality, the ability to give concrete, institutional, form to vague dreams and visions, by which his later achievements in life must be judged.

The period immediately following the partition was still one of unrest and uncertainty for the promising but unfledged Khurshid. Intellectually, he was still rootless, something of a vagabond, dabbling in poetry and Marxism - two of the most common plagues that seemed to infect almost every youth of that age. Fortunately for him, however, he had one very fateful encounter with a truly remarkable man that metamorphosed his entire personality. The man was Abu Ala Al-Maududi, the founder of Jamaat-i-Islami and the architect of that revivalist movement which has shaped the Islamic intellectual landscape not only in the sub-continent but beyond as well. In Maududi, Khurshid found the model of everything worth emulating; intellectual acumen, personal piety and righteousness, political activism, devotion to a moral - transcendent - cause and a touch of all too human humility coupled with a robust sense of humour. It was also at this time that Khurshid had read Mohammad Asad's now classic volume *Islam at the Crossroads* and he became convinced, thanks to Maududi and Asad, that Islam offered a coherent worldview which could answer every problem of the restless, contemporary man. With this 'Conversion', followed a life of intense public activity for the 'new born' Khurshid.

Today we can only be thankful that this fateful moment of moral and intellectual certainty came so early in Khurshid's life. He was not destined to be a late bloomer but a child prodigy, a person to whom the taste - and distaste - of leadership came early in life. He joined Jamaat-Tulab-i-Islami, the student wing of Maududl's party and the only organised student movement of Pakistan ever, and was soon elected to responsible positions. From 1949 onwards, he was the chief of the Karachi-Sindh section of the Jamaat, a post that proved to be the stepping-stone to his presidency of the national organisation from 1953 to 1955. In the student body, he met all those colleagues like Khurram J Murad (currently the Director-General of The Islamic Foundation Leicester) Z.L. Ansari and others with whom he developed life-long fellowship and rapport. Student politics soon taught the inexperienced Khurshid a few lessons which were to prove useful in his later life.

At an early stage of his public career, Khurshid came to grasp the significance of the written word for the propagation of one's ideas and programmes. Whilst still with the provincial section of the student body, Khurshid launched a humble, cyclostyled pamphlet, *Student Voice*, that introduced him to the joys and frustrations of writing, publishing and opinion-making. He showed considerable talent in journalism and organisation and the humble newsletter was followed by the respectable weekly, *New Era* (starting 1955), the monthly *Voice of Islam* (1957) and the Urdu *Chiragh-i-Rah* (*The Lamp-post*, 1958). Khurshid Ahmad's reputation as a serious writer and ideologue was firmly established by these journalistic activities. He was also now mature and old enough to leave the student body and join the Party: in 1956 he was granted full membership almost at once - something that normally calls for much screening.

His party career was no less active and eventful. He found time to help party leadership frame policies (he was soon elected to the decision-making body, of the Party, *Majlis-i-Mushawarat*),

carry out other routine political activities and write. At this time he translated into English the two most important books written by his teacher and guide Al-Maududi, *Islamic Law and Constitution* and *Towards Understanding Islam* that have also become standard texts even for non-Urdu knowing Muslims. (Later, when the oil boom improved Jama'at's own fortunes beyond measure, these books could be brought out in other European languages as well). This must have been, by all indications, the busiest period of Khurshid's life as he had, besides these hectic political and literary activities, started his academic career at the University of Karachi. He taught economics, listened to his students and sharpened his own perception of the discipline which was to retain lifelong fascination for him.

These were - as ever - turbulent times for Pakistani politics and the Jamaat which had been clamouring for an 'Islamic state' was not popular with the then military rulers. Khurshid Ahmad too had that inevitable experience which every political personality fears - but perhaps unconsciously long for: in 1964, he was imprisoned by the Ayyub regime. Khurshid spent nine months in jail and wrote the mandatory prison diary under the name of *Tadhkirah-i-Zindan* (Prison Remembrances) which lets us share his prison reflections and anxieties.

In 1968, Khurshid Ahmad came to Britain and created that sterling institution (The Islamic Foundation) which must be regarded as the crown of his glory. When one realizes that the Foundation, which today is under the very able guidance of Khurram Murad and is carrying out such momentous activities in the field of education and the protection of 'proper' Islamic image, had such humble beginnings, one is forced to acknowledge the organisational genius of the practical Khurshid Ahmad. In Britain, Khurshid developed good international contacts with influential Muslims and he made them to good use. It was anyhow the age of 'easy' oil money and facile 'Islamic conferences*' and everyone had his own proposals for 'the propagation of Islam in the West' and Khurshid could not have remained unaffected: he became a celebrity at these gala gatherings. Whatever one's personal judgment of these official 'commemorations' and 'celebrations' one must emphasize that Khurshid's personal contribution even there was always serious and noteworthy. He had also shown the ability to understand the underlying deeper currents of western society with remarkable perspicacity. His opinions were always listened to if not accepted.

Islamic Foundation and the Islamic Council of Europe developed close affinities during the time Khurshid was in charge of the Foundation and the Council hadn't had experienced the turbulence which plagued it later. Out of this collaboration, the most earnest, if not the most influential, partner of which no doubt was Khurshid Ahmad, came some first rate Islamic publications. *Islam, Its Meaning and Message* (Leicester 1975), a collection of essays edited by Khurshid, presented various aspects of Islam in a vigorously unapologetic and authentic manner. It has since then become a standard text in the West, used at many institutions as a statement by the proponents of contemporary Islam - though the tenor and tone of the work is highly traditional and makes no pretense to originality. There were many other earnest efforts, less ambitious of course, that equally captured the West's attention.

Without doubt, Khurshid Ahmad's major contribution is to the emerging discipline of 'Islamic economics'. Though he has not written as extensively as many others, whatever he has said in this regard is solid as a rock and reflects the maturity of his intellect. It is practicable - the 'pragmatic' strand of Khurshid's personality is always an asset - and, despite the novelty and boldness of approach, never quite severed from the tradition. Besides making his personal contribution to the still immature discipline, Khurshid has monitored, even tutored, much that is noteworthy in the field. He helped organize The First International Conference on Islamic Economics and later edited the proceedings in the well-known Studies in Islamic Economics (Leicester 1980) that has brought the exciting subject to the attention of many a serious student later. For instance, not only did he inspire such seminal works as N.H.Naqvi's Ethics and Economics – an Islamic Synthesis (Leicester, 1982), in the presentation of the same work, Khurshid made a very pithy statement as to the practicability of many of Naqvi's prescriptions. In addition to these, he has been a permanent feature of every serious discussion of Islamic Economics and is currently acting as the founding-father or trustee of many institutions from Jeddah to Kuala Lumpur; He has expounded his ideas at many international gatherings where the audience was not even predominantly Muslim - for instance at UNESCO - and has gained many enthusiastic adherents to the new discipline.

In February 1978, Khurshid Ahmad joined the Pakistani cabinet under (General Zia-ul-Haq as the Federal Minister for Planning and Development. In retrospect, many have come to question the wisdom of that act. Khurshid, however, excuses himself by saying that it was the Party's decision and as a loyal soldier, he had but to accept it. One; must await the full judgment of history on the Jama'at as well as its ministers, though it is highly unlikely that posterity will fully exonerate them. Anyhow, Khurshid's affiliation with power was short-lived and not without difficulties. Despite this, he did manage to propose some measures of administrative reform. He also emphasised the need for research and succeeded in appointing his own staff for these crucial activities. There was also the 12 Rubi-ul-Awwal social package, a document for educational reforms and the much-publicised measures on zakat and the elimination of riba'.

Whilst still a minister, Khurshid Ahmad was planning something that he is really good at: the creation of serious institutions of scholarship and public service. Despite the paucity of means he was soon able to concretise another worthwhile idea into The Institute of Policy Studies, Islamabad. Not only was the Institute's role envisaged as a watch dog' of governmental policies, it was also to act as a futurist 'think-tank - something unprecedented in Pakistan. That it was to be a non-governmental institution was also quite significant for a country where institutions are almost always state-run and controlled. The Institute has published many interesting studies, though it is too early to say whether it had made any lasting contribution to the national intellectual scene. What is undoubtedly evident is that Khurshid Ahmad as the chairman is encouraging many young and upcoming scholars to wrestle seriously with the problems bedeviling Pakistan and the Ummah in a spirit of concerned inquiry.

Khurshid Ahmad's principal unfulfilled dream is the establishment of a truly Islamic university. Together with A.K. Brohi he was instrumental in setting up the Islamic University of Islamabad. But his vision longs for a more august and comprehensive version. He has already chalked out the syllabus for the university, which in his view ought to be both 'traditional' and modern'. Beside the compulsory Arabic language, Shari'a and Fiqh, he wants to include current disciplines such as 'Islamic Economics'.

Talking to Khurshid Ahmad brings one to feel his overwhelming 'presence'; one meets a man who is obviously used to being treated with respect. He insists, however, that he is not, can never be, a man for the masses. Perhaps he is right. He is after all too intellectual for the general taste. Yet, how should one appraise him and his long life of intense, almost frenzied, zest for work and accomplishment? Clearly his whole life has been shaped by the guidance provided by a greater personality and his loyalty to the movement initiated by his teacher has been total; nevertheless, one must wonder at times whether his loyalty has not been too partisan and narrow; whether, in fact, his unflinching obedience to the vision of one man engulfed greater and more universal vision? Whether, spelling it out clearly, his projection of Islam has not been too rigid, too traditional; yes, too mechanical? This, at any rate, has been the judgment of well-meaning outsiders which must at any rate, be clearly noted.

Khurshid Ahmad has lived his faith uncompromisingly as will. It has undoubtedly inspired a lot of noble and righteous action. Yet, even he must wonder if all this action has not exacted a heavy toll upon him. Has there been too little time for concerted thought and reflection and too much for first-drafts and ad hoc solutions? His intellectual acumen is formidable and well-documented (he has produced over 114 scholarly papers), but no coherent, comprehensive theme has clearly emerged out of his numerous desultory insights. Has this something to do with his being a celebrity or not, even he must sometimes wonder. There is no doubt that the Ummah expects more from its first-rate brains and Khurshid Ahmad will ultimately be judged on that score. His enemies condemn him of the cardinal sin of vanity. Perhaps it is unfair and his natural reclusiveness gives rise to such charges. For all his human failings, however, Khurshid Ahmad will forever remain a true son of Islam, an indefatigable worker and a morally righteous person. In this both his friends and foes will undoubtedly agree.
