

In Memoriam:

Dr. Zafar Ishaq Ansari (1932-2016): Humble Muslim, Brilliant Academic

Eminent academic, author, and educationist Professor Zafar Ishaq Ansari passed away on April 24, 2016, in Islamabad, Pakistan.

He was the son of the late Mawlana Zafar Ahmad Ansari, a well-known scholar and close friend and confidante of the late Mawlana Abu al-Ala Mawdudi. From his early years, Ansari was actively involved in the Jam'iyat al-Talabah, the student wing of Jama'at-e Islami, Pakistan, eventually serving as president of the organization. His close colleagues included Professor Khurshid Ahmad and the late Khurram Murad. The trio enjoyed a life-long friendship and collaborated on a number of scholarly projects.

Ansari had robust training in both the Eastern and Western Islamic intellectual traditions. He received his early education under his father and earned his first degree in Economics from the University of Karachi; he later went on to earn his Masters and Ph.D. from McGill University in Montreal, Canada.

He was one of the early products of the Institute of Islamic Studies of McGill University founded by the late Dr. Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1916-2000), a scholar of comparative religion and the celebrated author of *Meaning and End of Religion*. Smith worked as a missionary in India and his exposure to Islam and Muslims led him to take up a specialized study of Islam — through which he revised his inherited ideas of Islam. He opposed the prevailing method of studying Islam, which was based on the premise of Western cultural superiority and the so-called white burden of world domination. Smith proposed a new approach as he recognized the need for a world of cultural pluralism, one open to the diversity of faith traditions. With this view in mind, he founded the Institute of Islamic Studies at McGill University. He concluded that no study of Islam or any religion for that matter is objective or fair unless the practitioner of that particular religion recognizes it.

Smith was the director of the Institute when Ansari enrolled at the Institute, and it was upon his suggestion that he chose to focus his research on the development of Islamic jurisprudence.

Ironically, Ansari's advisor at the Institute was none other than the late Dr. Fazlur Rahman, who was forced to leave Pakistan — after serving as the head of Central Institute of Islamic Research in Karachi — in the face of mounting opposition to his reformist ideas on Islam. Mawdudi, in spite of his strong aversion against the conservative Ulama, played a role in the campaign against Rahman. He was highly critical of the latter's modernist views on Hadith and some of his allegorical interpretations of the Qur'an à la Mu'tazilites. Rahman left Pakistan with a heavy

heart, and his parting words were: “It is quite clear that any form of research on Islam which inevitably leads to new interpretations has no chance of acceptance in this priest-ridden and ignorant society. These people will not allow Islam to become a vehicle of progress. What will be the future of such an Islam in the age of reason and science is not difficult to predict.” Rahman found a home in the world of academia in North America where he started the most productive phase of his life. He served as a professor at the Institute (McGill), and later at the University of Chicago (from 1969 until his death in 1988). He mentored a generation of academics, specializing in various aspects of the Islamic tradition, who were instrumental in reshaping both the style and content of Western scholarship on Islam.

Ansari’s academic work, under the supervision of Rahman, focused on the Early Development of Fiqh in Kufah. This was at the time when the twin ‘*shaikhs*’ of Orientalism, namely Goldziher and Joseph Schacht, dominated the scholarly studies of Islam in the West. Goldziher and Schacht sought to undermine the fundamental sources of Islam by their controversial theories about hadith and the origins of Islamic law. The former considered all but a small percentage of reports from the Prophet (peace be upon him) as back-projections and therefore spurious; the latter rejected the entire hadith corpus as spurious and argued that Shafi was the man who enthroned Hadith as the second source of law.

Ansari’s research on the topic was intended to investigate the theories of Goldziher and Schacht on the development of Fiqh and thus, indirectly, explore questions regarding the authenticity of Hadith. In order to ensure that he had the right tools for such scholarly research, he took courses on historical methodology. He also met Schacht to familiarize himself with his ideas and exchanged letters with him to ensure his firm grasp of his approach. He also made sure to enhance his understanding of the traditional approach by visiting and learning from eminent scholars like the late Shaikh Muhamad Abu Zahrah.

Thus having spent years training himself for the research, he wrote his dissertation where he traced the beginnings of the development of the Kufan Fiqh. He demonstrated how the Prophetic Sunnah had been accepted as normative all along and how it had formed the basis of Fiqh before Shafi. And he concluded that the latter’s work was a crystallization and systematization of the earlier trends rather than inventing the myth of Hadith as a source.

Ansari’s work, at the time, set a standard for all Muslim researchers and scholars on how they should prepare themselves to meet the challenges of Islamic revival. Today, it should continue to serve as a reminder that there is no question of Muslims running away from the intellectual challenges facing Islam and Muslims. Sad to say, when confronted with such challenges, oftentimes our reactions and responses have been mostly knee-jerked and devoid of any scholarly depth. Dr. Ansari set an example for other researchers to follow.

I first met Ansari in the late seventies during my years of PhD study at McGill University. He was visiting his alma mater. The day after his arrival in the city, he came knocking at my flat in Montreal. Though he was a senior scholar and esteemed academic and professor, I found him to be an incredibly humble and jovial person who was always inquisitive. He was supportive of students and researchers and was especially close to the Muslim students who were working on projects related to Islam.

He attended a seminar course I was taking when it was my turn to make a presentation on Mawdudi's vision of Islam. During my presentation, I raised some critical questions on Mawdudi's ideas of Islamic reform. Even though he was a staunch supporter of Maududi and Jamaate Islami, to my surprise, he did not intervene to defend. It showed me that while being committed to his own views, he was respectful of opposing views.

Professor Ansari's professional career was extensive: He served as a professor of Islamic studies at various universities, including North America, Australia, and Saudi Arabia (King Abdulaziz University, Jeddah (1967–70), University of Petroleum and Minerals, Dhahran, Saudi Arabia (1970–86). Later, he returned to Pakistan, serving in various capacities at the International Islamic University — as vice-president, Professor and Dean of the Faculty of Shari'ah and Director General, Islamic Research Institute (1988 until his death).

He authored a number of books, and dozens of scholarly articles. Among his latest work was *Muslims and the West: Encounter* (edited jointly by him and Professor Esposito); it is a collection of twelve papers presented at a conference held in Islamabad in early October 1997. The work traces the roots of Islamophobia in the West and stresses the need for a dialogue of civilizations.

Earlier, Ansari (conjointly with Professor Khurshid Ahmad) edited another important work, *Islamic Perspectives: Studies in Honor of Sayyid Abul A'la Mawdudi*. It is considered one of the best works on the life and thought of Mawdudi. It contains contributions of eminent scholars and writers dealing with the context as well as the life and vision of Mawdudi. It also includes the most extensive bibliography of works and studies on Mawdudi. Ansari and Khurshid wrote the piece, *Mawlana Sayyid Abu A'la Mawdudi: An Introduction to His Vision of Islam and Islamic Revival*, in which they carefully analyzed the life and work of Mawdudi and his contribution to the Islamic revival.

Ansari's most significant contribution, however, was the translation of Mawlana Mawdudi's magnum opus: *Tafheem al-Qur'an*. It was a project he undertook by the insistence of his close friend Khurshid Ahmad, as per the wish of Mawdudi himself. The purpose was to render this masterpiece of Mawdudi into fresh English while conforming to the highest standards of scholarship. Ansari was considered the man uniquely qualified to undertake this stupendous

task. He continued to work on it until the end of his life. So far ten volumes of the work plus the last Juz' have been published under the title, *Towards Understanding the Qur'an*. Earlier, an abridged version of the Tafheem was edited and translated by him with the title, *Towards Understanding the Qur'an: Abridged Version*.

From a brief meeting with him in Toronto a few years ago, I learned that Ansari never remained an academic living in an ivory tower; rather, he used to work closely with others to ensure that the institutions of his home country were run with transparency and integrity. He confided to me how one of his timely interventions prevented a prominent figure with questionable moral integrity from being promoted to one of the highest positions of the nation.

Ansari's death is a loss for Islamic scholarship. He will be remembered fondly by his colleagues, friends, and scholars. I pray that Allah rewards him for the best of his efforts and forgives him for his mistakes and grants him a place in *Jannatul Firdows*.