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The ‘Church of Islam’: esotericism, Orientalism, and religious origin myths in colonial South Asia

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Abstract

This article analyses the construction of religious origin myths for Islam within ‘universal religion’ and esoteric frameworks in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century South Asia and beyond, and sheds light on the role of ‘Western’ and Anglo-Indian converts in this process. At its core is a case study of the elusive Hamid Snow, founder of the so-called ‘Church of Islam’ in 1891 in Sikanderabad, Deccan. On the following pages, I reconstruct Snow’s biography from little-known Urdu and English sources, analyse his writings, and place him within a context of religious modernist, esoteric, and convert networks encompassing South Asia, Europe, the United States, the Philippines, and other parts of the world. By focusing on the nature of the scholarship of religion at the time, and the reconstruction of religious pasts under the influence of esotericism and religious modernism, the article traces the influence of Orientalist and Eurocentric views on perceptions of the Islamic tradition and contributes to larger debates about the role of laypeople, especially those with an interracial background, in interpreting religious history and acting as cultural mediators between different communities during a time of ‘hybrid transnational occultism’.¹

Keywords: Origin myths; universal religion; esotericism; occultism; theosophy; Orientalism; religious conversion; Islamic modernism; Punjab; South Asia; Ahmadiyya

Esotericism and Muslim modernism in Punjab

In 1881, Helena Petrovna (‘Madame’) Blavatsky (1831–1891) visited Lahore, the administrative centre of the Indian province of Punjab, as part of a lecture tour.² Six years earlier, she had established the Theosophical Society in New York together with Henry Steel (‘General’) Olcott (1832–1907), a military officer, lawyer, and journalist. The Society embraced Neoplatonism, Gnosticism, mysticism as well as esoteric religious philosophies inspired by the Vedas, the Kabbalah, and other religious traditions it termed ‘ancient’.³ Its followers practised Spiritualism, were critical of institutionalised Christianity and its doctrines, and espoused civil rights for colonised peoples. Over the course of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Theosophy developed into a global movement with a significant following in Asia, Europe, and the United States, acting as an alternative channel of intellectual exchange to colonial networks. In 1879, Olcott and Blavatsky

¹ Nile Green, ‘The global occult: an introduction’, *History of Religions*, 54.4 (2015), p. 383.

² K. Paul Johnson, *The Masters Revealed: Madame Blavatsky and the Myth of the Great White Lodge* (New York, 1994), p. 159.

³ John Algeo, ‘Theosophical Society’, in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd edn, (ed.) Lindsay Jones (Detroit, 2005), Vol. 13, p. 9142.

moved to India, where they tried to popularise their ideas among a broader public and also attempted to cooperate with select Hindu reformist movements, such as the Arya Samaj, an undertaking that eventually failed.⁴

On the ground, the Theosophists met with both scepticism and enthusiastic interest. Ruchi Ram Sahni (d. 1948), a student at Government College Lahore, who later became a professor of natural sciences at the same institution, described the impact of Blavatsky's visit on the city's educated elites in the following words:

When Madame Blavatsky came, university students flocked to see her. There was something uncanny in her appearance and, in particular, her unusually big eyes had a repelling effect upon me. She talked about thought reading, clairvoyance, ghosts, and many other mystic or psychic phenomena, which I could not bring myself to believe in. In the Government College the planchette had become very popular and not a few students would be seen spending their evenings with it [sic], asking questions of dead persons, known and unknown, and recording their answers on the tablet.⁵

Ram Sahni, who was a supporter of the Brahmo Samaj, a Hindu reform movement that espoused rationalism, was clearly not convinced and called both local and foreign Theosophists 'bumptious' and 'miserable little dupes'.⁶ The general reception was more positive, though, and the movement quickly established a following in Lahore and the wider province, including among Muslims.⁷ Sahni mentions that Blavatsky's book *Isis Unveiled: A Master Key to the Mysteries of Ancient and Modern Science and Theology* (1877) was widely read by college students in Lahore at the time.⁸ In fact, Theosophy became exceptionally popular across colonial South Asia, particularly among the English-educated elites and members of the colonial middle classes. After Blavatsky left for London in 1885, the first Indian branch of the Society was established in 1891, with many more branches following. In 1907, Annie Besant, a well-known Theosophist, political activist, and leading figure of the Indian nationalist movement, became Blavatsky's spiritual successor and international president of the Society.⁹ Ten years later, she was also elected president of the Indian National Congress, the first woman to serve in this role.

Esoteric, occult, and Orientalist influences on the reconstruction of religious traditions and histories related to Hinduism are relatively well-researched.¹⁰ In contrast, much less has been written about the influence of such streams of thought on South Asian Islam during the same period.¹¹ As Nile Green has noted, hybrid exchanges in occultist networks

⁴ Edward C. Moulton, 'The beginnings of the Theosophical Movement in India, 1879–1885: conversion and non-conversion experiences', in *Religious Conversion Movements in South Asia: Continuities and Change, 1800–1990*, (ed.) Geoffrey Oddie (Hoboken, 2013), p. 113.

⁵ Neera Burra, *A Memoir of Pre-Partition Punjab: Ruchi Ram Sahni, 1863–1948* (Oxford, 2017), p. 122.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

⁷ A Kashmiri pandit called Bishan Narain became one of the leading local Theosophists in the city and regularly gave lectures on the topic at the Shikhsha Sabha Hall in Lahore. See Burra, *Memoir*, p. 120. Cf. also the following two Urdu publications on the topic from that period and region: Bishambar Nath, *Khulasah-i Theosophy* (Ambala, 1892) and Sundara Narayana, *Char Chaman-i Theosophy* (Farukhabad, 1892).

⁸ Burra, *Memoir*, p. 120. *Isis Unveiled* was heavily plagiarised, as Moulton points out: Moulton, 'Theosophical Movement in India', p. 111.

⁹ Moulton, 'Theosophical Movement in India', p. 113.

¹⁰ Isaac Lubelsky, *Celestial India: Madame Blavatsky and the Birth of Indian Nationalism* (Oakville, 2012).

¹¹ Annie Besant even gave a lecture on Islam and Theosophy at the annual meeting of the Theosophical Society in Adyar, Madras, in 1901. Cf. Annie Besant, *Islam in the Light of Theosophy: A Lecture* (Madras, 1912). Cf. also Mark J. Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World: Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century* (Oxford, 2004).

‘created new Muslim religious firms as entrepreneurial Sufis from Egypt, the Ottoman Empire, Qajar Persia, and the Dutch East Indies adopted elements of Masonry, Spiritualism, animal magnetism, and other occult innovations to bolster their own claim to “secret knowledge” (*asrar*)’.¹² Patrick Bowen has further argued that ‘Western’ converts to Islam provided an important link in this story, as most of them had a background in Theosophy or ‘were connected to esoteric-Masonic communities’.¹³ Jamal Malik has also pointed to the vital connection between Islamic modernism and Freemasonry in modern Iran, arguing that Muslim voluntary associations, which often had a modernist orientation, were crucial for the spread of masonic thought in the region.¹⁴ However, more in-depth research needs to be done to concretise the nature of these exchanges: who were the main protagonists in this story? Which exact aspects of Islam did they try to merge with esoteric ideas? What was their reading of Islamic history? How did their interaction with Muslims on the ground pan out? In which ways did their goals correspond to the aims of local modernist reformers? What role did figures with a hybrid sense of belonging, such as Anglo-Indians, play in this intellectual exchange?

This article aims to answer those questions by historicising attempts to construct alternative origin myths for Islam by laypeople, especially converts with a background in Esotericism, in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century South Asia. It sheds light on the role of Orientalism and Eurocentrism in this discourse and examines their connection with transcolonial Muslim modernist movements and global convert networks. At its core is a case study of Hamid Snow and the organisation he founded, the so-called ‘Church of Islam’. I situate both within a wider intellectual milieu of convert projects, religious modernism, and efforts at merging ideas from different religious traditions, and analyse in detail the role esotericism and Orientalism played in this, with a particular focus on Islam. While Snow is an intriguing figure, he has not received any attention in the historiography so far, even though he represents a crucial missing link in transcolonial and translocal Muslim networks in this period, encompassing different parts of India and extending from there to North America, to Europe, to the Middle East, and to Southeast Asia.¹⁵ As Green has stated, the ‘investigation of “occult” religious forms opens the way for “hidden” histories of intellectual traffic, cultural hybridity, and trans-colonial networking between what are necessarily distinct cultural zones’.¹⁶ As inherently global enterprises, occult and esoteric networks borrowed from and relied on existing knowledge systems and local networks, including Muslim modernist movements that were particularly interested in merging new scientific discoveries with religious ideas. These developments were not merely prominent in industrial hubs and port cities, they also gained much traction among urban elites in places often painted as colonial ‘hinterlands’, such as Lahore. By highlighting Snow’s story, this article not only places Punjabi Muslims on the map of late nineteenth- and early-twentieth century Esotericism, it also asks: what were the specific circumstances that influenced the reception of new religious ideas and how did this relate to the perception and interpretation of religious traditions by laypeople?

¹² Green, ‘Global occult’, p. 391.

¹³ Patrick Bowen, ‘Abdullah Quilliam and the rise of international esoteric-Masonic Islamophilia’, in *Victorian Muslim: Abdullah Quilliam and Islam in the West*, (eds) Jamie Gilham and Ron Geaves (Oxford, 2017), p. 39.

¹⁴ Jamal Malik, *Islamische Gelehrtenkultur in Nordindien: Entwicklungsgeschichte und Tendenzen am Beispiel von Lucknow* (Leiden, 1997), p. 218.

¹⁵ On Snow, compare the brief remarks by Patrick Bowen, *A History of Conversion to Islam in the United States* (Leiden, 2015), pp. 154–162.

¹⁶ Green, ‘Global occult’, p. 384.

Muslim modernists and 'Western' converts: Hamid Snow and the Anjuman-i Himayat-i Islam Lahore

In July 1894, Hamid Snow arrived in Lahore to take up a position as English lecturer at the newly established Islamia College.¹⁷ The College was founded in 1892 by the Anjuman-i Himayat-i Islam (Society for the Defense of Islam, established in 1884; hereafter AHI), a local voluntary association that developed into one of the most important Muslim organisations of colonial North India in the course of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. By the 1920s, the AHI had become the central meeting point for Muslim intellectuals, writers, politicians, educators, and other literati in the wider region, such as Maulavi Nazir Ahmad, Muhammad Iqbal, Abdullah Yusuf Ali, Fazl-i Husain, Sir Abdul Qadir, and many others. Islamia College, which was modelled on the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College at Aligarh (established in 1875), provided English-language education based on a government curriculum, with the addition of compulsory religious education taught in Urdu (through a subject called *Diniyat*, or Religious Studies), to the sons of Punjab's rising Muslim middle class. Its main target audience was a social milieu consisting of the sons of upwardly mobile traders, shopkeepers, business owners, and government servants who could either not afford missionary or government-sponsored schooling, or objected to the lack of religious education, or to the privileging of Christianity at these academically more prestigious institutions.

In the August 1894 edition of its monthly newsletter, the AHI published an extensive profile of Islamia College's new English lecturer.¹⁸ 'Brother' (*barader*) Shaikh Hamid Snow, as he was respectfully called, was born Urban Snow into a distinguished (*mausuf*) Eurasian family in Madras, the AHI emphasised. At some point in the late 1880s, he converted to Islam after he came into contact with the Anjuman-i Tabligh-i Islam (Society for the Proselytization of Islam) in Hyderabad, Deccan.¹⁹ It appears this Anjuman had been founded to counter the activities of Christian missionaries in Hyderabad state, and it employed Muslim preachers and workers to that end. As Nile Green has pointed out, several of its members were themselves former Christians.²⁰ Bowen claims that Snow was a former Theosophist, though Snow himself frequently used the title 'grand commander' of the 'Lodge of the Holy Kaaba', which points to an affiliation with Freemasonry.²¹ In other writings, Snow revealed an intimate knowledge of Unitarianism, while displaying a hostile attitude towards it.²² Apparently, he drew on all three streams of thought in his attempts to create a synthesis between Islam and new esoteric movements.

While Snow shared the Theosophists' and Unitarians' rejection of organised Christianity and criticism of key Christian doctrines, he borrowed heavily from Christian, especially Anglican, ritual practice and liturgy. In 1891, he founded the 'Church of Islam' in Sikandarabad, Deccan, the main focus of which was the conversion of Christians to Islam, especially Europeans and Anglo-Indians, as well as Anglicised upper-caste Indians.²³ Snow's views aligned with those of Indian Muslim modernists, such as the AHI in Lahore, in many ways, for example in the fact that he proposed to counter and check global Christian influence (in the form of missionary activity) through proselytising for Islam, promoting a 'spiritual' and 'ethical' education inspired by the Islamic

¹⁷ *Tribune*, 11 July 1894.

¹⁸ Anjuman-i Himayat-i Islam, *Mahwari Risalah* (hereafter AHI, *Risalah*), August 1894, p. 13.

¹⁹ Hamid Snow, *The Gospel of Ahmad: The Great Arabian Prince, Prophet, and Philosopher* (Jabalpur, 1897), Epilogue, p. vii.

²⁰ Nile Green, *Terrains of Exchange: Religious Economies of Global Islam* (New York, 2015), p. 143.

²¹ Bowen, *Conversion*, p. 154. Hamid Snow, *The Muslim Art of Hypnotic and Vito-Magnetic Healing: Or 'Self', 'Absent', and 'Personal' Methods for Physical, Mental and Moral Ailments; Without Drugs or Batteries* (Lahore, 1902), p. ii.

²² Hamid Snow, *The Prayer Book for Muslims* (Lahore, 1893), p. 23.

²³ AHI, *Risalah*, August 1894, pp. 14–18.

tradition, and emphasising equality and social activism. In the eyes of Muslim modernists, Snow's project, at least in theory, appeared as a welcome response to a colonial 'civilising mission' which often drew its justification from the supposed superiority of Christianity over 'indigenous' religions.

In Sikandarabad, Snow quickly gathered a small congregation consisting of elite Indians and Europeans, among them lawyers, traders, railway employees, judges, and one alcohol licenser (sic!). Its members came from ethnically and religiously diverse backgrounds, including 47 Europeans (who had apparently been Christians before), 15 Eurasians, 20 former Parsis, and seven former Hindus, and included five children and seven women.²⁴ A major attraction of the Church were 'Islamic' marriage (*nikah*) ceremonies conducted by Snow for interreligious couples, for example between a Hindu Brahman woman and a Parsi man, a union that would have been met with much opposition in other circles.²⁵

The Church of Islam, as the name already suggests, presented a thoroughly Christianised version of Islam that drew heavily on Anglican religious teachings and ritual. Snow's congregation was offered Sunday services in English steeped in an Islamic vocabulary, complete with prayers (*namaz*), church hymns, sermons, and so on.²⁶ Snow served as its 'pastor' (the AHI used the same term transliterated into Urdu in its *Risalah*), with another convert being the 'vice-pastor'. The Church setup included an 'altar' labelled *Bait al-Qur'an*, upon which a copy of the Qur'an was placed, bound in velvet, above which hung a banner bearing the *Kalima* in gold letters in both Arabic and English.²⁷ The positioning of a copy of the Qur'an on the altar as a material object of worship runs counter to established Islamic beliefs that the Qur'an's injunctions should be followed, but the book itself not be venerated or worshipped. Even though copies of the Qur'an are treated with respect by individual believers, to place the Qur'an at the centre of an Islamic prayer ceremony contradicts key doctrines regarding *tawhid* (the unity of God), and rather points to ideas derived from Christian ritual practice. Consequently, the *Bait al-Qur'an* drew much criticism from the wider Muslim community in Sikandarabad and beyond.

The tendency to present Islam in a Christianised garb also becomes obvious in the prayer manual written by Snow for his congregation, titled *The Prayer Book for Muslims*, which was published in 1893 in Lahore, one year before Snow took up his lectureship there. A close analysis reveals that to a large extent the Church of Islam adopted Anglican liturgy and ritual, and filled it with 'Islamic' content. The *Prayer Book for Muslims* followed the *Book of Common Prayer* closely, adding a few words and replacing certain phrases with 'Islamic' formulas. For example, the Confession prayer in Snow's book reads as follows:

O Almighty and most merciful Father, we have erred and strayed from thy way like lost sheep. We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts ... Spare thou us for we confess our faults in a penitent and contrite spirit according to Thy promises declared unto the world through 'Ahmed', Thy servant, Apostle and Ambassador; and grant, O most merciful Father for his sake that we may hereafter live a godly, righteous, and devoted life to the glory of thy holy name and a pattern to our neighbors. Amen.²⁸

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid. For more information on these services, see below.

²⁷ Snow, *The Gospel of Ahmad*, Epilogue, p. ix.

²⁸ Snow, *Prayer Book*, p. 1. Compare this with the Confession formula in the Anglican *Book of Common Prayers*: 'Almighty and most merciful Father; We have erred, and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep. We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts ... Restore thou those who are penitent; according to thy

Snow's prayer book deviates from the Anglican Confession mainly by adding a reference to 'Ahmed', who is called god's servant, apostle, and ambassador. Here 'Ahmed' is used to denote the prophet Muhammad, upon whose reverence the Church of Islam focused its spirituality. The fixation on the person of the Prophet is another characteristic it shared with Muslim modernists at the time. Snow explained that he used 'Ahmed' as an honorific title, or epithet, parallel to how 'Christ' was used for Jesus in Christian liturgy.²⁹ Another example of the Church of Islam's liturgical (and indeed intellectual) proximity to the Anglican Church is the prayer for Thanksgiving in the same publication. Again, it reproduces word for word the Morning Prayer from the *Book of Common Prayer*, which is based on Psalm 95, and adds the following phrase to it:

We sing to Thee, O Lord, we pray to Thee, for continued blessings. As thou didst bless the great Arabian Prophet our Master and Guide, and as Thou blest those of his household and following that they did prosper, so Lord remember us. Glory be to Thee O God, and veneration, not worship, to Thy servants who expounded Thy laws, for as it was in the beginning is now and ever shall be, world without end, thy chosen Faith 'Islam'. Amen.³⁰

Note the rejection of the Divinity of Christ by emphasising that he is to be venerated, but not worshipped, confirming mainstream Islamic beliefs that Jesus was an important prophet, but not god's son. The *Prayer Book for Muslims* reveals other facts. The Church of Islam was politically quietist and loyal to British colonial rule—another feature it shared with many Indian Muslim modernist organisations—as becomes clear by looking at its version of the Prayer for the Queen, which is titled 'The Caliph and the English Queen'. It adds the following sentence to the Anglican prayer:

O Lord, our Heavenly Father, High and Mighty, King of Kings and Lord of lords ... we beseech thee with thy favour to behold our most gracious Caliph, Hamid Khan, Sultan of Turkey, and Ahmed's viceregent on Earth, and also our Sovereign Lady Queen Victoria of England, and all Governors, Magistrates, Imams, Moolahs, Hafeez, Kazees, Huffaz, and Moulvees (sic!) and all our Masters and Superiors etc.³¹

In their everyday lives, members of the Church of Islam at Sikandarabad abstained from alcohol, avoided dancing and other amusements, and practised strict gender segregation. Temperance and certain restrictive social norms were central features of Theosophical, Masonic, but also Christian Dissenting, communities around the world, and they also lent themselves well to an Islamic reformist project. What makes the Church of Islam appear a bit cult-like, though, is the fact that all children were educated within its own Islamic school (*Islamia madrasa*) located in Sikanderabad, and members' health issues were treated by the community's in-house physician. Apparently, social contact outside the community, especially in the crucial areas of education and healthcare, was discouraged. The Church nevertheless had an outward-looking vision when it came to proselytising. It sent missionaries to Basra in Iraq, the presidency cities of Madras and Bombay, as well as Alur in Kerala.³² Unfortunately, no reports of these travels seem to have survived.

promises declared unto mankind in Christ Jesus our Lord. And grant, O most merciful Father, for his sake; that we may hereafter live a godly, righteous, and sober life, to the glory of thy holy name. Amen.'

²⁹ Snow, *The Gospel of Ahmad*, p. 18.

³⁰ Snow, *Prayer Book*, p. 2.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

³² AHI, *Risalah*, August 1894, p. 16.

In addition to its connections with wider South Asia and the Middle East, Snow was also part of a larger network of convert projects in Britain and British colonies in Australia and Southeast Asia, to which the Church of Islam bears many similarities. I will address those connections and Snow's role in them in the following paragraphs.³³

Translocal convert networks and esoteric thought

Snow's appropriation and merging of elements of different Abrahamic religions with esoteric ideas that had originally emerged out of a Christian tradition were part of a wider phenomenon in the late nineteenth century, as we have already seen. People across the globe experimented with esoteric, masonic, and Theosophical beliefs; shared a fascination for the 'supernatural', such as spiritual séances and out-of-body experiences; were dissatisfied with organised religion; and strove to recover 'occult' knowledge from various 'ancient' religions and cultures.³⁴ One could call it a time of religious searching that was replete with religious adventurers, or 'religious entrepreneurs', as Green calls them, 'for steam opened up world travel for prophets, masters, and hucksters who concocted and promoted their varied occult brands'.³⁵

Enthusiasm for and appropriation of Indian religious ideas in this context was widespread in Europe and North America, stimulated by the research of European Orientalists such as William Jones (1746–1794) and Max Müller (1823–1900).³⁶ Vice versa, Indian thinkers such as Rammohan Roy, founder of the Brahmo Samaj, drew on Western Indology, but also Unitarianism, to argue that Vedic Hinduism was the true universal religion, and not Christianity.³⁷ In general, though, interest in the teachings of 'ancient Eastern philosophers' was much more attuned to Hinduism, its scriptures and religious practices, than to Islam, especially in the Indian context. The Theosophists' attempt to establish a collaboration with the Arya Samaj, for example, was not paralleled by a similar effort to reach out to Muslim reform organisations. Similarly, at the time European and American scholarship on religion focused heavily on re-reading and reinterpreting the mythical origins of Hinduism and other 'ancient' Indian traditions and much less on Islam.

Still, attempts at emphasising the shared origins of the Abrahamic faiths, in this case Christianity and Islam, and forging common bonds between the two communities did exist.³⁸ Most often, these were facilitated by Muslim modernists, on the one hand, and

³³ In Snow, *The Gospel of Ahmad*, Epilogue, he mentions a person called Abd al-Haqq in Australia; a certain Uthman Nina Merican (sic) in Penang, Straits Settlements; and Syed Irfan Ali, the proprietor of a newspaper called *Muhammadan* at Triplicane in Madras. The Straits Settlements were a British colony in Southeast Asia, today's Malaysia. Uthman Nina Merican is listed as an officer residing there in N. A., *Blue Book for the Year 1912* (Singapore, 1913), K 176.

³⁴ Countless contemporary novels across the world picked up on themes of mysticism, spiritualism, the reincarnation and transmigration of souls, etc. For example, the main character in Jack London's *The Star Rover* (1915) is a professor who is imprisoned and placed in a straight-jacket in the notorious San Quentin State Prison in the United States, and mentally escapes from his solitary confinement by way of out-of-body experiences. Over the course of the novel, his soul is mystically merged with people who are already dead, and he relives incidents from their lives.

³⁵ Green, 'Global occult', p. 388.

³⁶ Lubelsky, *Celestial India*, p. 2.

³⁷ Mark Bevir, 'Theosophy and the origins of the Indian National Congress', *International Journal of Hindu Studies*, 7.1–3 (2003), p. 105.

³⁸ As did, in the context of late nineteenth and twentieth-century India, individual attempts to merge ideas and practices from Islam and Hinduism in response to communalist and nationalist ideologies. These often drew on a long-standing historical tradition of exchange and cross-fertilisation between Sufism and other religious thought systems in India, expressed, for example, in shared worship at shrines or joint participation in religious festivals. For a prominent and widely published example in the early twentieth century, see the encounter

'Western' converts, on the other, both of whom were part of larger networks that utilised British imperial infrastructure and spanned Europe, South Asia, Southeast Asia, and the United States.³⁹ In 1887, around the same time as Snow, William Henry Quilliam (1856–1932), a British lawyer and Freemason, converted to Islam and changed his name to Abdullah Quilliam, becoming England's first 'Western' Muslim missionary.⁴⁰ He established the Liverpool Muslim Institute in the same year, which offered services that incorporated Islamic elements into Christian worship and religious practice, very similar to Snow's Church of Islam.⁴¹ Prayers in English, Sunday services that included the singing of hymns, readings from the Qur'an, and sermons on the tenets of Islam were standard features.⁴² As Humayun Ansari has pointed out, Quilliam highlighted similarities between the Abrahamic faiths in order to attract converts from a Protestant background.⁴³ Just like Snow, Quilliam conducted 'Islamic' marriages, which were not legally recognised by the state, however.⁴⁴ He also ran an orphanage for Muslim children (which was part of his proselytising venture) and a printing press from Liverpool. As Gilham and Geaves write, Quilliam promoted religious and political activism, education, and social justice, and championed the rights of marginalised groups, similar to the agenda of both the Theosophists and Unitarians.⁴⁵

It is difficult to establish whether Quilliam's Liverpool Institute provided the blueprint for the Church of Islam, or vice versa, given that both emerged at around the same time. Both projects were closely connected, not just organisationally and intellectually, but also personally. The Supplication Prayer in Snow's *Prayer Book* explicitly mentions Quilliam in his title 'Shaikh al-Islam', in addition to other converts in India and South Africa:

Bless and make steadfast our gallant Abdullah Shaikh al-Islam, Quilliam of England, our noble Moulvie Jani Ali of Calcutta, our worthy Hajee Chamberlain of Transvaal, and zealous pioneers, White Snow and Moreston in India.⁴⁶

In 1893, the same year that the *Prayer Book* came out, Quilliam also wrote favourably about Snow in his journal *The Crescent*, which was published from Liverpool.⁴⁷ Snow featured repeatedly in this publication until 1902, when Quilliam endorsed his work for the last

between the Hyderabad prime minister Kishan Parshad and the soldier-turned-Sufi figure Taj al-Din, recounted in Green, *Terrains of Exchange*, Chapter 5 'The invention of a Hindu Sufism', pp. 177–206.

³⁹ For British converts such as Henry Stanley, Abdullah Quilliam, Marmaduke Pickthall, Khalid Sheldrake, and their Indian interlocutors, see especially Jamie Gilham, *Loyal Enemies: British Converts to Islam, 1850–1950* (New York, 2014).

⁴⁰ Gilham and Geaves, *Victorian Muslim*, p. 10.

⁴¹ Bowen, 'Abdullah Quilliam', p. 31.

⁴² Khizar Humayun Ansari, 'The quintessential British Muslim: Abdullah William Henry Quilliam, 1856–1932', *Arches Quarterly*, 2.3 (2008), p. 49.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Gilham and Geaves, *Victorian Muslim*, p. 18.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. xxii.

⁴⁶ Snow, *Prayer Book*, p. 5. No further information is available on the other people mentioned here. White Snow might be one of two people: a person called John White, a district judge from Kurnool, a town in the Madras Presidency, today's Andhra Pradesh. In 1892, he apparently visited Mirza Ghulam Ahmad in Qadian, converted to Islam, and swore an oath of allegiance (*bayat*) to him. See Ron Geaves, *Islam and Britain: Muslim Mission in an Age of Empire* (New York, 2017), p. 84. John White was also friends with Snow, who mentions him in Snow, *The Muslim Art of Hypnotic Healing*, p. v, as 'Brother E. J. S. White (Khan)'. The other person who could be identified as 'White Snow' is William Snow, a man who called in at the Ottoman embassy in London in 1898 and stated that he wanted to convert to Islam. I am thankful to Dr Matthew Sharp for the second reference.

⁴⁷ *Crescent*, 1.24 (1 July 1893).

time.⁴⁸ Quilliam's project proved to be short-lived, though. His Liverpool Muslim Institute faltered in 1908, a few years after Snow disappeared from all records as well. After a brief stint in Europe, Quilliam resettled in London, where he continued to live under the name of Henri de Leon, but remained in contact with the Ahmadiyya community there.⁴⁹

It is very likely that the AHI in Lahore learned about Snow through Quilliam. The AHI's own connection with the Liverpool Muslim Institute dated back to at least 1890, which was only three years after Quilliam publicly professed his new faith and set up his organisation.⁵⁰ Possibly, the AHI got in touch with Quilliam through Indian Muslim students living in England, as many of its members and affiliates studied abroad. In 1891, the AHI published an edition of Quilliam's book *Faith of Islam* in Lahore. It continued to endorse his work until at least 1894.⁵¹ In addition to the AHI, another South Asian modernist organisation participated in these global convert networks, namely the Ahmadiyya. This revivalist Muslim movement emerged in the late 1880s/early 1890s as well. It was centred on and named after its charismatic leader, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, and was connected to both the AHI and Quilliam (as well as to Alexander Russell Webb, a third convert of whom we will hear more later). In its June 1890 *Risalah*, the AHI mentions that a certain Maulavi Rafi' al-Din Ahmad was vice-president of the Liverpool Institute that year.⁵² Ahmad had previously been the vice-president of the Anjuman-i Isha'at-i Islam (Society for the Propagation of Islam) in Bombay, an organisation close to the Ahmadiyya movement.⁵³ It seems warranted to conclude that this network, carried by converts and Indian modernists, strongly facilitated and maybe even initiated the Ahmadiyya's orientation towards proselytising in Europe. Contact with 'Western' converts, and the urge to revive Islam through these connections, might have provided the movement with an impetus to send out missionaries and funds to London, Berlin, Amsterdam, and other centres of European intellectual life, where Indian Ahmadi Muslims were often at the forefront in constructing mosques and promoting translations of the Qur'an into local languages.⁵⁴

In addition to Quilliam and the Liverpool Institute, this network included another 'Western' convert, Alexander Russell Webb (1846–1916), who is often mentioned side by side with Quilliam and has many similarities with both him and Snow. Webb was an American by birth who converted to Islam in 1888, around the same time as Snow and Quilliam, and later became leader of one of the earliest Islamic movements on American soil.⁵⁵ After a career as a jewellery trader and journalist in the American mid-West, Webb was appointed as American consul to the Philippines in 1887, where he embraced Islam a year later.⁵⁶ He was also a Theosophist with a strong interest in spiritualism, who 'looked upon the Orient as the romantic embodiment of the deepest and most lasting religious truths'.⁵⁷

⁴⁸ *Crescent*, 19.482 (9 April 1902).

⁴⁹ Bowen, 'Abdullah Quilliam', p. 36. Geaves, *Islam and Britain*, p. 116.

⁵⁰ In AHI, *Risalah*, June 1890, pp. 3–4 and 12–13, the AHI printed a translation of the Liverpool Institute's by-laws and objectives and also lists its office-holders.

⁵¹ AHI, *Risalah*, August 1890, p. 8; AHI, *Risalah*, June 1890, p. 12; AHI, *Risalah*, October 1890, pp. 9–11; AHI, *Risalah*, November 1893, p. 27; AHI, *Risalah*, September 1894, pp. 13–15. See also article in the *Paisa Akhbar*, 17 October 1892.

⁵² AHI, *Risalah*, June 1890, p. 2.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ For the history of the Ahmadiyya mission in Europe, and particularly Berlin, see Gerdien Jonker, *The Ahmadiyya Quest for Religious Progress: Missionizing Europe, 1900–1965* (Leiden, 2016).

⁵⁵ Cf. Umar F. Abd-Allah, *A Muslim in Victorian America: The Life of Alexander Russell Webb* (New York, 2006).

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

While still in America, Webb's spiritual search had somehow brought him into contact with Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, founder of the Ahmadiyya, with whom he exchanged four letters in 1886 and 1887.⁵⁸ It is not entirely clear whether Webb was formally affiliated with the Ahmadiyya, but his image of Islam was entirely shaped by his interactions with Indian Muslims, especially modernists.⁵⁹ While in the Philippines, he discovered the writings of Syed Ahmad Khan and Syed Ameer Ali.⁶⁰ Webb then established contact with Muslim merchants in Bombay who invited him to India for a lecture tour and promised to act as his sponsors. In 1891, he quit his post in Manila and set out for India, where he visited several cities, including Calcutta, Bombay, Hyderabad, Madras, and Agra. In his 2006 biography of Webb, Abd-Allah claims that he also visited Lahore, but there are no records to confirm this.⁶¹ On this trip, probably while in Bombay, Webb also met Snow. Apparently, though, Webb insulted Snow, and the two developed a deep dislike for each other.⁶² The reason for this might have been a sense of competition between the two, which was fuelled by the striking similarities between their respective projects.

Despite their many commonalities, Snow differed in important respects from Abdullah Quilliam, Alexander Russell Webb, Henry Stanley, Marmaduke Pickthall, Khalid Sheldrake, and other contemporary converts. What was different about Snow was his interracial heritage and the fact that he grew up in India and unfolded his religious activities there. He never lived in Europe—in fact, he never left Asia—and even though he at times associated himself with the European community on the ground, his hybrid Anglo-Indian background placed him in a position to cross communal, ethnic, and religious boundaries more easily. In addition, his views on Islam and Muslim life worlds were also informed by first-hand experiences. In contrast, most other converts described in the literature so far were born and raised in Europe and accessed the Muslim world first through Orientalist literature, and later through travel.⁶³ The fact that Snow was simultaneously an 'insider' and 'outsider', both ethnically and culturally, marks him as a hybrid figure with a less clearly defined sense of belonging. This had a bearing on his religious thought as well. On the following pages, I will zoom in on the converts' belief systems and analyse how they understood and interpreted Islam, particularly its spiritual and historical origins, and situate Snow's ideas within this larger story.

The insider/outsider problem: converts' representations of Islam

In 1893, two years after his trip to India, Webb participated in the World's Parliament of Religion in Chicago, where he spoke as the sole representative of Islam. Kambiz GhaneaBassiri has observed that the majority of the Parliament's attendees were Protestants, and the entire event was, in fact, an 'attempt to demonstrate the superiority of White Protestantism over other religions in the world'.⁶⁴ Many of the scholars attending it were also current or former Theosophists, including Webb himself.⁶⁵ Theosophy, as

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 61.

⁵⁹ There is a direct connection with the Lahore Jama'at. As Abd-Allah has pointed out, the 1910 version of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad's *Teachings of Islam* has a preface written by Muhammad Ali, in which he thanks Webb for editorial assistance in the final draft of his English Qur'an translation. See Abd-Allah, *Webb*, p. 19.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 5.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 132.

⁶² Bowen, 'Abdullah Quilliam', p. 154.

⁶³ Cf. the accounts of Stanley et al. in Gilham, *Loyal Enemies*.

⁶⁴ Kambiz GhaneaBassiri, *A History of Islam in America: From the New World to the New World Order* (New York, 2010), p. 110.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 115. Webb kept up his contact with the Theosophical Society throughout his life. In 1892, he also met 'General' Olcott, and in the same year, he established the first American Muslim mission in New York.

GhaneaBassiri argues, wove together science and ‘Eastern religions’ into a new religious discourse that often failed to engage with non-Christian religions on a deeper level. Rather, Theosophists tended to read their own ideas and interpretations into these traditions and then took those to be true representations of what they termed a ‘universal religion’. By doing so, they ‘served as intermediaries between liberal Protestants and the exotic “East”, providing the intellectual means and social networks through which the imagined religious “other” could be culturally and socially encountered in the flesh’.⁶⁶

This also applies to Webb and his relationship with Islam. For several years, Webb studied English translations of works by al-Ghazzali (d. 1111), Rumi (d. 1273), and other Muslim philosophers and thinkers, which convinced him that Islam was a more ‘rational’ religion than Christianity, because it was allegedly ‘outside orthodoxy or priestcraft’, thereby entirely ignoring the role of the ‘*ulama*’ (classically trained scholars of Islam) and other figures of religious authority in Islam.⁶⁷ ‘Esoteric Mohammedanism’ and Theosophy were nearly identical, Webb proclaimed, and Islam encompassed key Christian beliefs:

I am already well satisfied that Mohammed taught the truth, that he pointed out the way to salvation and that those who follow his teachings will attain to a condition of eternal bliss. But did not Jesus Christ also teach the way? Now suppose I should follow the way pointed out by Jesus, would not my salvation be as perfectly assured as if I followed Islam?⁶⁸

Yet, Webb was largely ignorant about the way Muslims had themselves formulated and interpreted Islam’s religious tenets and traditions for centuries. For example, he believed that ‘the universal brotherhood of man’ was Islam’s fourth pillar.⁶⁹ This underlines GhaneaBassiri’s main point, namely that (former) Theosophists projected their own expectations and assumptions regarding a ‘universal religion’ onto the traditions they encountered instead of considering them on their own terms. Similarly, Quilliam portrayed Islam as a more benevolent version of Christianity, saw it as leading to the same path of salvation, and stated that Muhammad proclaimed the same message as Jesus Christ.

However, Snow seems to have been the first of these converts who not only elaborated on this idea, but also tried to historicise it by promoting a concept called ‘Nazarene’ or ‘Primitive’ Christianity. Even though other converts, including Quilliam, honoured Jesus as a prophet as well, reflecting mainstream Islamic beliefs, none of them went so far as to draw actual historical connections between the early Christian community and Islam, and construct a direct religious genealogy between the two. In the proclamation for the Church of Islam in Sikandarabad, Snow stated:

One object of the Church is to prove what all enlightened thinkers must be convinced of—that primitive or Nazarene Christianity and Islam are identical. Christianity considered apart from the dogmas superadded to the teachings of Christ and his Apostles by the Councils of Nicea and Chalcedon, is Islam; and Islam, when the place which Jesus and the Bible occupy in the Koran is recognized as all enlightened Mohammedans now admit it, is Christianity. Nothing can be more childish than the popular supposition that a Christian, by embracing Islam, denies or abandons

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

⁶⁷ Abd-Allah, *Webb*, p. 117.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

Jesus. So far from this being the case, he becomes, by being a Moslem, a true Nazarene or follower of Jesus. The true Jesus, a real and human being who, mortal like ourselves, yet lived our mortal life without stain of sin, is revealed to us. We realize and love the human, the suffering, but pure and holy Master, as we never can realize or love the mythical and impossible God-man. He who has realized the true Jesus is found to be a Unitarian; and a Unitarian is bound to follow Mohammed, the greatest of all Unitarians.⁷⁰

Apart from revealing Snow's intellectual indebtedness to Unitarianism, this quote also puts him squarely in a line of European freethinkers and Orientalists who had already been speculating about the Jewish and Christian roots of Islam since the eighteenth century. The idea of an allegedly existing Jewish (or Judeo-) Christianity was probably formulated in detail for the first time by John Toland (d. 1722), an Irish philosopher, who laid out his claims in a book titled *Nazarenus, or Jewish, Gentile and Mahometan Christianity*, published in 1718.⁷¹ In it, Toland tried to identify the Jewish roots of Christianity but also saw that some of the fundamental doctrines of Islam went back to that religion. Toland based his argument on the Gospel of Barnabas, a fifteenth-century Italian forgery, whose content Guy Stroumsa succinctly summarised as follows: "This text announces the coming of Muhammad and makes reference to the *shahada*, the Muslim profession of faith. According to the Gospel of Barnabas, Jesus is a prophet, and not the son of God, and does not die on the cross. In his stead, it is Judas Iscariot who is crucified."⁷²

The idea of the Jewish and Christian origins of Islam was further developed by prominent European Orientalists starting from the mid-nineteenth century, such as Abraham Geiger (d. 1874), Ernest Renan (d. 1892), Daniel Chwolson (d. 1911), Adolf von Harnack (d. 1930), and Theodor Nöldeke (d. 1930). While Geiger focused on Muhammad's Jewish sources, Renan and Chwolson detected Elchasaite, Mandaeen, and Manichaeen elements in Islam.⁷³ For Nöldeke, Islam represented the Arabic form of Christianity.⁷⁴ Von Harnack followed Nöldeke in arguing that Islam was a form of 'Gnostic Jewish Christianity' that had been transformed in an Arab environment.⁷⁵

While this debate reflects popular academic trends in Europe at the time, it reveals, among other things, the indebtedness of Islamic and Religious Studies to Christian theology. Discussions about apocryphal Christian writings and their relevance for Islam acquired a new role in mid-nineteenth century polemical encounters in India. In 1854, a public debate about the textual integrity of Christian and Muslim scriptures took place at Agra between the German missionary Karl Pfander and the Indian Muslim Rahmatullah Kairanawi, in which Kairanawi used the Gospel of Barnabas to refute Pfander's book *Mizan al-Haq* and argue that the accusation of *tahrif* (corruption of scriptures) actually held true for Christianity instead of Islam.⁷⁶ In the course of this exchange,

⁷⁰ H. Snow, 'Islam as the Religion of Peace', *Literary Digest*, 11.18 (1895), p. 531.

⁷¹ Guy G. Stroumsa, 'Jewish Christianity and Islamic origins', in *Islamic Cultures, Islamic Contexts: Essays in Honor of Professor Patricia Crone*, (eds) Asad Q. Ahmed, Robert G. Hoyland, Behnam Sadeghi and Adam J. Silverstein (Leiden, 2015), p. 72.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 73. On the Gospel of Barnabas, see also Jan Slomp, *Pseudo-Barnabas in the Context of Muslim-Christian Apologetics* (Rawalpindi, 1974).

⁷³ Stroumsa, 'Jewish Christianity', p. 83.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ Cf. Avril A. Powell, *Muslims and Missionaries in Pre-Mutiny India* (Surrey, 1993) and Oddbjorn Leirvik, 'History as a literary weapon: the Gospel of Barnabas in Muslim-Christian polemics', *Studia Theologica*, 56.1 (2002), p. 10. In his book *Jesus in India* (published in 1899), Mirza Ghulam Ahmad referred to the Gospel of Barnabas as well, but Muslim interest in the text only took off on a much larger scale after an English translation was published in

Kairanawi employed writings by European theologians and historians, especially historical-critical readings of biblical scriptures, some of which he had shipped from Europe, in order to counter Pfander's claims about Islam. The former argued that the historical-critical method developed by European scholars, which proved the biblical text to be a literary composition showing the mark of different authors instead of a divinely inspired text, confirmed the Islamic position that the biblical text had been altered to erase its Islamic contents.⁷⁷ The Agra debate is just one example among many in which Indian Muslims engaged with European theological and Orientalist thought and applied it to local discourses about Islam and Christianity. Indeed, Orientalist scholarship, which began to take off in South Asia in the second half of the eighteenth century, strongly influenced debates about Islamic religious thought and practice within modernist circles and beyond. One group that facilitated the spread of this type of scholarship, because it used it as a lens through which to view Indian Islam, consisted of 'Western' converts to Islam such as Quilliam, Webb, and Snow.

Let us take a look at Snow's most popular work, *The Gospel of Ahmad: The Great Arabian Prince, Prophet, and Philosopher*, published in 1893 by the Anjuman-i Islamiyyah (Islamic Association) at Jabalpur, very likely another modernist venture, in order to scrutinise those claims. The book came out in the same year in which the World's Parliament of Religion took place in Chicago. Webb was at the height of his missionary activity in the United States, Theosophy was firmly established as a local esoteric movement in India, and Snow would move to Lahore the following year to teach at Islamia College. The relationship between new esoteric movements and Islam seems to have reached a culminating point. Even though the *Gospel of Ahmad* makes for a challenging read, because much of its content seems obscure and not easily relatable to a local Indian audience, it achieved quite a wide circulation, which is indicated by the fact that it already went into a second edition of 1,000 copies in 1897.⁷⁸ This might have been due to the fact that its audience consisted mostly of Anglo- and English-educated Indians, who could not only grasp the language and concepts presented in the *Gospel of Ahmed* more easily, but perhaps had also previously come into contact with such ideas as part of their upbringing and educational trajectory.

In the introduction of the *Gospel*, Snow quotes from a number of works by European theologians, historians, and Orientalists, such as Edward Gibbon (d. 1794) and his magnum opus *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776), Frederic Farrar's (d. 1903) *The Early Days of Christianity* (1882), and unnamed works by Max Müller (d. 1900). Following them and other Orientalist 'authorities', Snow claims that the first Christians were crypto-Jews who merged the law of Moses with Christian and Muslim teachings.⁷⁹ He does not explain how he dates Islamic teachings back to the first century CE, nor does he quote any Islamic scholarship supporting that claim. The outcome of this merger was the Church of the Nazarenes, he states, which was subsequently suppressed by the Roman Catholic

London in 1907. An Arabic translation followed in 1908 in Egypt and an Urdu translation in 1916: Muhammad Inshaullah, *Injil-i Barnabas ka Urdu tarjamah* (Lahore, 1916).

⁷⁷ Powell, *Muslims and Missionaries*.

⁷⁸ See Snow, *The Gospel of Ahmad*, 'Preface to First Edition'. Other books and pamphlets by Snow include *Merits of Islam*, *What is Islam*, *Guide to Namaz*, *History of Ahmed*, *Articles of our Faith*, *A Catechism of Islam*, *What is Christianity*, *Was Christ Crucified?*, *Is there a God, and Who is He?*, *An Address to Eurasians on Social Regeneration through Islam Alone*, and *The Church of Islam Liturgy*. In addition, he published a hymn book and handbook for new converts explaining 'Islamic' ritual to them, written in English and Roman Arabic with translations. Many of these titles were published by the Muhammadan Tract and Book Depot in Lahore, which also published the writings of Quilliam and Webb. A history of the Book Depot, which was a centre of Muslim modernist activity in North India, still remains to be written.

⁷⁹ Snow, *The Gospel of Ahmad*, p. i.

Church. For that reason, the Nazarenes had to go into hiding and masquerade as Christians in order to escape persecution. However, their ideas were preserved in Eastern religious communities, such as the Nestorian and Syriac churches, which then, through the Nestorian monk Baheira, reached the Arabian peninsula and ‘produced the prophet Mahomed, himself a Nazarene, the great founder of the faith of Islam, whose followers to this day accept Jesus as the Messiah, and follow the law of Moses’.⁸⁰ The modern successors of this Nazarene community were the Unitarians, and their faith was identical to Judaism and Islam, Snow stated. The introduction closed with the words: ‘In reviving primitive Nazarene Islam, I do not seek to make (nominal?) proselytes. God alone can do that, but my mission is to prove that Mahomed was a prophet, and that Islam is but a true continuation of Nazarene Judaism as taught by the Christ (Jesus), and the Messenger (Ahmed).’⁸¹ With this, and by including them all in the same spiritual genealogy, Snow established a direct historical link between the first Christian community, Islam, and modern-day esoteric religious movements. It is also fascinating that he claimed Muslims accepted Jesus as ‘the Messiah’, bypassing major Islamic concepts of salvation (but coming very close to the depiction of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad as *Masih al-Mau‘ud*, the promised Messiah, and the second coming of Christ).

Following the introduction, the *Gospel of Ahmad* then presented adaptations of various apocryphal Christian texts and narratives centred on key Islamic figures, all clad in the language of the Biblical gospels. Snow claimed these were authentic texts, assembled by leaders of the Nazarene Church, which he had allegedly ‘rediscovered’ on his travels, with the help of a ‘Nazarene’ abbot or priest:

Being naturally eager to understand the difficulties presented in the Christian Bible—a mass of contradictions—so as to be of help to my soul-hungry brethren, in my travels, I ransacked with this object, every theological library I came across, for writings such as those of the early Nazarenes, until by the aid of the Armenian Nestorian Archimandrite of the Isawi Muslims I obtained a loan of the writings of the Nazarene bishops etc., and with the help of an interpreter, I have been able to compile this little book, which entitles itself to be called a resume or essence of the Bible and the Koran.⁸²

The Armenian Nestorian Archimandrite mentioned in the text, or head of a monastery of Nestorian ‘Christian Muslims’ (‘Isawi Muslims, from ‘Isa, the Arabic term used for Jesus), as well as those archives, textual sources, and the ‘interpreter’ are, I argue, a complete fabrication. So are Snow’s visits to ‘theological libraries’, whose exact location he deliberately left vague. Rather, as becomes clear after a close reading, the first part of *The Gospel of Ahmad* is entirely plagiarised from the final chapter of the English translation of the Gospel of Barnabas by Lonsdale and Laura Raggs, titled ‘The Transformation of Judas’, uncredited by Snow.⁸³ In a short preview to the text, Snow claims that the Gospel is an authentic text, even though the introduction to the Raggs’ translation clearly pointed out that it was a later forgery. To the Gospel of Barnabas, Snow added various other ‘gospels’ of his own making that he alleged were written by Zayd ibn Harithah, al-Harith ibn Kalada (d. 634–5), ‘Abd Allah ibn Abbas (d. 686–8), Anas ibn Malik, and Salman the Persian, all early companions of Muhammad, as well as Muhammad’s wife ‘A’isha, the Nestorian priest Waraqah ibn Nawfal (who was the cousin of Muhammad’s first wife Khadijah), and

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. iii.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. iv.

⁸² Snow, *The Gospel of Ahmad*, Introduction to the second edition.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, pp. 1–4.

‘Saint Ali’, by whom he means ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib.’⁸⁴ In these textual fragments, Snow tells the story of Muhammad’s life and message in an imitation of the style of the biblical gospels, the only difference being that he presents Muhammad as a follower of Jesus whom the Islamic prophet recognised as the Messiah. Muhammad is quoted as saying: ‘And I proclaim unto you the Messiah Jesus, the Christ spirit proceeding from God, born of His word, which He conveyed into blessed Mary.’⁸⁵

Further, the *Gospel of Ahmad* also includes Snow’s rendering, or interpretive reading, in a stylistic form and language that evokes the Psalms, Proverbs, Song of Songs, and other books from the Hebrew Bible, of writings by medieval Muslim philosophers, scholars, and poets, many of them famous mystics, such as al-Ghazzali (d. 1111), al-Kindi (d. c. 873), al-Farabi (d. 951), al-Biruni (d. 1050), Sa’adi (d. c. 1292), ‘Umar Khayyam (d. 1143), and Jalal al-Din Rumi (d. 1273).⁸⁶ Snow argued that he adapted these original ‘Islamic’ writings to ‘Western thought’ in order to show ‘the spirit of the teachings of Islam’. The phrase is reminiscent of Syed Ameer Ali’s modernist classic *The Spirit of Islam*, which was only published two years earlier, in 1891.

In those texts, Snow attempted to make what he perceived to be Islam more palatable to Christians and align it with Christian theological and spiritual sensitivities by expressing ethical ideas taken from Islam in biblical language. However, his ‘interpretation’ is instead a collection of aphorisms loosely inspired by works of those Muslim thinkers, without any deeper level of engagement nor consistent connection with these texts themselves, which confirms GhaneaBassiri’s point. It seems likely that Snow never read any of the writings of al-Farabi or al-Biruni, either in the original or in an English translation. Take, for example, his rendering of al-Ghazzali (Snow did not provide a reference to the original), which might as well have been taken from any Christian devotional pamphlet: ‘I preach and pray in sufficient quantities, but where do I practise peace, love, and charity? In vain have I searched for a plan that would make this earth an Eden, and the life of man a glory unto Thee, and a joy unto himself.’⁸⁷ Or: ‘The state is rotten, so the politician feedeth thereon; society is rotten so the lawyer has amassed riches, the flesh is rotten so the physician findeth a harvest.’⁸⁸

Snow’s fundamental indifference towards, and even disregard of, the actual content of major texts connected with the Islamic tradition, as well as the history of their interpretation, also becomes obvious in other parts of this publication. In the last part of the *Gospel of Ahmad*, which is titled ‘A Moral and Scientific Textbook for independent Muslim Madrasahs’ and was probably used for teaching at the Islamia School in Sikandarabad and Islamia College Lahore, Snow writes:⁸⁹

Something more than mere reading or repeating by rote of the Koran is needed. For the discovery in it of much scientific truth, experiment is needed. The chemist acquires little knowledge, if not engaged in tests and analysis. The religion of the Koran cannot be known except by experience which is the crucible in the laboratory of knowledge.⁹⁰

⁸⁴ Ibid., pp. 18–32.

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 20.

⁸⁶ Compare the chapters ‘Post-Solomonic Proverbs of the Islamic Bible’ and ‘Song of Solomon of Islamic Sufis’, in *ibid.*, pp. 107–111 and 116–125, respectively.

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 33.

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 34.

⁸⁹ Ibid., pp. 126f.

⁹⁰ Ibid., pp. 134f.

The depiction of Islamic scholarship as based on mere rote memorisation, which presents somewhat of a caricature of classical Islamic learning, aligns with widespread stereotypes held at the time by Christian missionaries, European Orientalists, and Muslim modernists alike. Hand in hand with this disregard and suspicion towards the Islamic tradition goes a rejection of its established interpreters, the *'ulama'*. Snow writes about them:

A natural faith delights in a plain and simple fundamental principle, clear as a pike staff. If it was intended to be a secret remedy for the few elite, it would have been recondite; but it is meant for the illiterate as well, and therefore it is simplicity itself. It does not lend itself to quackery. To hear the so-called Moulvies talk, one might suppose Islam to be an exclusive and aristocratic system for their Islamic excellencies to amuse themselves with, whenever they might condescend to develop it a little further! We are glad to find the Islam of the Koran is a perfect doctrine, which has saved its millions, is saving millions at this moment, and will save its myriads when all its superfine quibblers are mouldering in their graves.⁹¹

This portrayal of the *'ulama'* as blind, unquestioning, inflexible, dogmatic, and exclusive is very similar to sentiments expressed by Webb, who had this to say about classically trained Muslim scholars:

And let me assure you that in seeking for the truths I have found, I have had to overturn a vast deal of rubbish in the shape of false history, false opinions, and false reasoning, before I caught the faint gleam of the priceless jewel which has been preserved to man through all the ages, although the bigots and Pharisees of orthodoxy have striven most earnestly to destroy it.⁹²

That Islamic learning was allegedly nothing more but 'quackery', a tradition throttled and distorted by an aristocratic, exclusivist elite focused on hair-splitting, pedantic matters of ritual, was a common complaint uttered by many Muslim modernists as well. While not every Muslim intellectual who can be counted among the modernists promoted a wholesale rejection of traditional Islamic learning, many, particularly among the later modernists, vociferously challenged the authority of the *'ulama'* and declared them to be unfit to lead the community. However, in the case of Snow, the rejection of Islamic learning and scholarship seemed not to be based on any (at least loosely defined) acquaintance or familiarity with that tradition, as was the case with most Indian modernists. This is quite surprising, given Snow's upbringing in an environment in which he could have easily accessed this knowledge, in addition to his close contacts with Muslims on the ground. Similarly to some other converts, this ignorance also seemed to have been informed by (unconscious) racist and Eurocentric attitudes reflecting the Orientalist and Eurocentrist roots of converts' knowledge of other religious traditions, a theme that will be explored in the following section.

Racism and Eurocentrism among 'Western' converts

To quote Kambiz GhaneaBassiri once more, the organisers of the World's Parliament of Religion 'deduced what was universally religious and went out to affirm empirically their definition of religion by showcasing adherents of other religions who could confirm their view'.⁹³ Further 'neither Webb nor the Parliament took other religions very seriously

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 141.

⁹² Ibid., p. 67.

⁹³ GhaneaBassiri, *Islam in America*, p. 117.

as alternative ethical worldviews that related dynamically to their historical contexts to shape communal and individual lives'.⁹⁴ Rather, once those converts went out to meet the religious 'other' 'in the flesh', they encountered phenomena that deviated from their stereotypes and left them disappointed about Islam's perceived deficiencies. Or, as Green has put it, 'even progressive occultisms were involved in co-opting the cultural heritage of the colonial world'.⁹⁵ A common reaction was to believe that, over time, an allegedly 'ancient' and 'pure' Islam had become distorted by a 'caste' of self-proclaimed authorities and that the great mass of Muslim believers who had been misled in such ways were now too ignorant to resuscitate the religion by their own efforts. Webb, and indeed other converts, often believed that they understood Islam better than Muslims themselves, and they promoted their own metaphysical interpretation as superior to indigenous and local interpretations of Islam. During one of Webb's lectures in India, he told his Muslim audience:

I certainly cannot hope to tell anyone here anything which he does not already know of Islam as an exoteric religious system ... Now I am fully aware of the fact that there are many professed Mussulmans who do not know that there is a philosophic side to their religion; and perhaps it is just as well that they do not, for such knowledge might, possibly, lead them away from the plain, safe and simple truths already within their grasp, and out into the broad and dangerous ocean of metaphysical speculation where their frail mental barks would be wrecked upon the rocks of doubt and despair.⁹⁶

The diary entries from Webb's visit to India two years prior to the Chicago Parliament also bear witness to a deep-seated prejudice towards his collaborators and a stereotyped perception of Indian life. In typical Orientalist fashion, Webb was first enamoured of the 'otherness' of the 'exotic' East, but quickly became disillusioned when realities did not live up to his preconceived notions. Describing his arrival at Hyderabad, Deccan, in his diary, he wrote:

The old walls, turreted buildings among the trees, narrow streets, little shops, arches over the street, elephants, plodding along with bells on their sides and half a dozen people on their backs, gaily colored dresses and turbans, odd-looking bullock carts and gharries gave the place a novel and attractive appearance.⁹⁷

When an audience with the nawab, the ruler of this princely state, was not granted quickly enough, however, Webb noted haughtily: 'These little six-penny monarchs are very difficult to approach except by good-looking actresses'.⁹⁸ After he had finally been able to meet the nawab, Webb stated: 'Found the Nawab to be a monkey dressed up uncomfortably in European clothes and most disgustingly Anglicised'.⁹⁹ Not only did Webb speak disparagingly about Indian princely rulers, whom he wanted to win as sponsors after all, but also about his own travel companions. Over the course of the trip, he called his Indian collaborators 'black fraud', 'slick nigger', 'lazy', and 'no good generally'. The kindness and generosity of Indian Muslim intellectuals (such as Khuda Bakhsh, founder of the

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Green, 'Global occult', p. 389.

⁹⁶ Quoted in GhaneaBassiri, *Islam in America*, p. 118.

⁹⁷ Abd-Allah, *Webb*, p. 129.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 139.

famous Oriental Library at Patna, one of the largest repositories of Arabic, Persian, and other Islamic manuscripts in India, and the Aligarh supporter and well-known religious scholar Chiragh Ali), who took the time to show him around and share their knowledge, Webb repaid with sweeping and arrogant statements about Indian culture, such as ‘procrastination and utter unreliability are the curses of the people of this country—after laziness, hypocrisy and a few other curses’.¹⁰⁰

We find similar attitudes in Snow’s Church of Islam, which are reflected, for example, by the fact that members with a ‘Western’ background were given more prominence than Indian members. In August 1893, Snow opened a branch of the Church of Islam in Bombay, which gained 22 new members in six months, all of them converts, including 13 Europeans, five Eurasians, three Hindus, and one Parsi.¹⁰¹ The Bombay branch conducted funerals and weddings as well, indicating that it provided a refuge for interreligious couples.¹⁰² The report mentions an internal split within the first months, but we hear nothing further about it. Two English-language Indian newspapers, *The Pioneer* (whose editor was a Theosophist as well) and *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, reported the founding of the Bombay branch in October 1893, describing the Church of Islam as ‘an ideal religion based on Mahomedanism’ which targeted Europeans, English-speaking Jews, Hindus and Parsis especially, but ‘without offending the feelings of members of any other sect or creed already in existence’.¹⁰³ The AHI printed a report in its *Risalah* (newsletter) describing the composition of the Church of Islam at Bombay in the following terms: 15 members had been Christians before embracing Islam, three atheists, three others *mushriks* (lit. polytheists, by which it meant the three Hindus), and one a *kafir* (lit. non-believer, this being the Parsi). The usage of the term *mushrik* for Hindu, *kafir* for Parsi, and atheist for non-believers with a somewhat ‘European’ background suggests a hierarchy in terms of unbelief, with Hindu (*mushrik*, i.e. one who commits *shirk*, associating God with other entities) at the bottom of the list, Parsi (*kafir*) somewhere in the middle, and Eurasian (atheist) at the top of this ‘list of the misguided’. I interpret this as an expression of an inherent Eurocentrism within the Church of Islam, which valued converts with a European or Eurasian background above Indian converts. This confirms the fact that the Bombay branch was ethnically diverse, but only the backgrounds of its European members were provided in the report, which mentions five Portuguese, four Eurasians, two French, one Russian, and one Scottish person.¹⁰⁴

In addition, the textbook section of the *Gospel of Ahmad* mentioned above also reveals Snow’s deep-seated racism, Eurocentrism, and disdain for the Indian Islam he saw around him, an Islam he regarded as inherently deficient and merely a poor reflection of the ‘true’ religion he envisioned. To rectify this, Snow proposed an Islamic civilising mission led by ‘Western’ or Eurasian Muslims, who were capable of merging ‘Orient’ with ‘Occident’ and could rescue the ‘true’ spirit of Islam by enlightening it in the ways of European culture:

The Islam of India is not the Islam of the Eurasian Moors of Spain, but when it gets reborn in Europe, will attain to it, through the ordained instruments—the Eurasian race in Asia. These Mominin [believers] will not be like the fanatical rioters of Calcutta, or the bigoted ghazis of Lahore, nor yet like the voluptuaries of Hyderabad, or the money-worshippers of Bombay—but the vanguard of the many

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ AHI, *Risalah*, August 1894, p. 16.

¹⁰² Ibid., p. 17.

¹⁰³ *Pioneer*, 12 October 1893 and *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 15 October 1893.

¹⁰⁴ AHI, *Risalah*, August 1894, p. 16.

battalions of Islam's sons, combining the civilization of the Occident with the religious fervor of the Orient, true to God, his Prophet, the Kaliph, and the British Crown.¹⁰⁵

In sweeping strokes, Snow categorised all of India's Muslim population as 'fanatical', prone to violence, 'bigoted', self-involved, and avaricious. The quote also demonstrates that Snow felt just as superior to local Indian Muslims regarding the interpretation of Islam as Webb did. Or, to quote Green again: 'Not every occultism was antiestablishment. Some reified existing hierarchies or promoted heinous new ones', as is confirmed by Snow's promotion of European and 'Western' supremacy with regard to interpreting Islam. Racialised ideas about civilisational supremacy and its relation to religious history, as expressed by Webb, Snow, and others were, of course, part and parcel of larger debates at the time, such as the 'Aryan myth' promoted by Orientalist and Indologist research, but also localised Indian debates on hierarchies between different races, Darwinism, and eugenics.¹⁰⁶ In that sense, Snow was also a child of his time, but the fact that other religious projects reaching out for a collaboration with Indian organisations, such as Theosophy, rejected imperialism and emphasised anti-colonial struggles, while Snow did not despite his interracial heritage, is remarkable in itself. We will hear more about Snow's attitudes towards Indian Muslim culture and traditions later, but for now, I will continue the story of his collaboration with Muslim modernists in Punjab.

The story continues: Hamid Snow and the AHI Lahore

If Snow valued Indian religious and cultural traditions so little, and also expressed his disdain quite openly, why did local Muslims associate with him? GhaneaBassiri has argued that elite Indians hoped that the 'conversion of white Anglophones to Islam would contribute to an Islamic revival in India', and that they saw them as a kind of 'white hope' who could help rouse Islam from its 'long slumber'.¹⁰⁷ There might also have been commercial motives, because the acquaintance of Webb, Snow, and the like facilitated business interactions for Indian Muslims. At the same time, the presence of somebody like Snow among their ranks boosted the standing of one reformist group vis-à-vis other Muslim organisations and underlined the fierce internal competition for community representation on the ground.¹⁰⁸ 'Western' converts were often regarded an asset that demonstrated the 'progressiveness' and wider appeal of the respective reform organisations even beyond India. This is also reflected in the writings of Christian missionaries such as Elwood Morris Wherry, a graduate of the Princeton Theological Seminary and lecturer at the theological seminary in Saharanpur, United Provinces (today's Uttar Pradesh), who commented that Snow was 'paraded as a champion in the bazaars of Lahore and Ludhiana'.¹⁰⁹ After all, he was not only an apostate from Christianity whose mere presence demonstrated the superiority of Islam as a creed, but his critique of the '*ulama*' and classical Islamic learning also gave legitimacy to local lay reformers and their interpretation of Islam. Finally, the decision to hire Snow might have been simply motivated by pragmatic concerns: English lecturers were hard to come by and the presence of a native speaker on Islamia College's faculty increased its prestige in respect of other institutions,

¹⁰⁵ Snow, *Gospel of Ahmad*.

¹⁰⁶ Cf. Thomas R. Trautmann, *Aryans and British India* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1997) and Luzia Savary, *Race and Public Spheres in India: Vernacular Concepts and Sciences, 1860-1930* (Oxford, 2019).

¹⁰⁷ GhaneaBassiri, *Islam in America*, p. 123.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ Elwood Morris Wherry, *Islam and Christianity in India and the Far East* (New York, 1907), p. 189.

such as Forman Christian College, which boasted a number of native speakers among its staff in the form of American, Scottish, and British missionaries.

When Snow moved to Lahore in 1894, his relationship with the AHI was quite promising to begin with. At the time, the Anjuman planned to get an English newspaper off the ground and proposed that its editors would be both its long-standing member Mahbub ‘Alam, proprietor of the *Paisa Akhbar*, Punjab’s most popular newspaper at the time, together with Hamid Snow.¹¹⁰ On 24 August 1894, just one month after he took up his position at Islamia College, Snow also established a third branch of the Church of Islam in Lahore.¹¹¹ In addition to three European converts to Islam, we find members from Lahore’s Muslim modernist elites from both the AHI and the Ahmadiyya. Munshi ‘Abd al-‘Aziz, the AHI’s general secretary, and Mir ‘Abd al-Wahid, professor of philosophy at Islamia College, were both honorary members, as were Khwaja Kamal al-Din and Mirza Muhammad Yaqub Baig, two prominent Ahmadiis who later joined the Lahore Jama‘at.¹¹² The direct connection with the Ahmadiyya is particularly interesting, given that the movement was still in its formative phase at the time and ideas from Theosophy and ‘universal religion’ frameworks might have influenced the formation of Ahmadi thought as well. But this is mere speculation. In any case, Lahore’s modernist Muslim elites were eager to be connected with a cosmopolitan culture of socio-religious activism. In February of the same year, Annie Besant had visited the city, among other places in Punjab, to give lectures on ‘Theosophy and Modern Progress’. She spoke almost everywhere—at the Lahore town hall, the Arya Samaj *mandir*, the headquarters of the Sanatan Dharma Sabha—but did not visit a single Muslim organisation.¹¹³ In contrast, here was Snow, a former Theosophist who was decidedly interested in Islam and who appeared prepared to engage with local Muslims.

However, by late September 1894, the relationship between the AHI and Snow had already deteriorated. The AHI’s meeting minutes reveal the reason: earlier that month, Snow had requested a loan of Rs 50 from the association, which he promised to pay back in monthly instalments of Rs 10 to be deducted from his salary.¹¹⁴ Snow was apparently in debt, but the AHI also struggled for money, as its records reveal, and constantly requested its benefactors to send more funds in order to keep its schools, orphanages, printing press, preachers, and many other charitable, religious, and educational strands of work afloat. Nonetheless, the members of the AHI’s Managing Committee, which at that time also included the Ahmadi Muhammad Ali, granted Snow’s request, but stated explicitly that this was a special arrangement for the *Shaikh sahib*, which would not be extended to other employees.¹¹⁵ They apparently never saw their money again, because by October, Snow had already left Lahore for Ludhiana to become the editor of a newly established English-language newspaper called *The Philanthropist*.¹¹⁶ With that, the AHI’s plans for an English newspaper in Lahore faltered, never to be revived. After that, an embarrassed silence envelops Snow in the AHI’s records, while Quilliam and his work are still quoted repeatedly until at least 1901. The distinguished *barader* and *Shaikh sahib* stealing money from the orphans of Lahore was not a story the AHI wished to spread far and wide. Interestingly, neither before Snow’s brief stint at Lahore nor afterwards did any of the learned religious authorities in the AHI’s circles, of which there were many,

¹¹⁰ AHI, *Ijlas Jalsah-i ‘Amm*, session of 19 August 1894.

¹¹¹ AHI, *Risalah*, August 1894, p. 18.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ Timothy S. Dobe, *Hindu Christian Faqir: Modern Monks, Global Christianity, and Indian Sainthood* (New York, 2015), p. 70.

¹¹⁴ AHI, *Register Ijlas Managing Committee*, session of 2 September 1894.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ *Tribune*, 20 October 1894.

comment on Snow's writings about Islam. They did not seem to have taken his religious musings seriously, or they were too involved in debates with other local Muslim and Hindu opponents to show any interest.

However, things did not go well for Snow at Ludhiana, either. In February 1895, the *Tribune* of Lahore reported:

Sheikh Hamid Snow (a Eurasian Mussulman), editor of the *Philanthropist*, fired a pistol at Khwaja Ahmad Shah, the proprietor of the journal, at about 11 am. Fortunately, a person was standing near who, on seeing Snow level his weapon, rushed in front of the Khwaja and received the bullet in his hand.¹¹⁷

Snow was arrested, his house searched, and 14 cartridges were found. A letter printed in the *Tribune* (maybe written by Snow himself) presented one version of the story: it claimed that Snow had acted in self-defence because Ahmad Shah and three other people had entered his house without permission.¹¹⁸ An article from the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* in March 1895 provides another version, claiming that both Snow and his former employer shot at each other after a quarrel: 'Mr. Snow declares that his proprietor got angry, because his attacks on the government and the Hindus were not sufficiently virulent.' The *Amrita Bazar Patrika* read the incident through a sectarian lens and claimed that the proprietor of *The Philanthropist* was a Kashmiri and violently anti-Hindu.¹¹⁹ Snow gradually seems to have come to subscribe to this interpretation himself and soon relinquished any positive feelings towards his co-religionists. In June 1895, he wrote in the *Tribune*:

Permit me through the medium of your valuable journal to express my gratitude towards the government for their merciful respite, towards the chief court for their just admission of my appeal, towards my Christian and Hindu brethren for their tangible sympathy, and towards the officials and subordinates of the Ludhiana prison and the deputy commissioner last, but not least, for their considerate treatment of me during my late misfortunes, the handiwork of my ungrateful fanatical and unfeeling co-religionists.¹²⁰

Here the trope of the 'fanatic' Muslim comes up again, mirroring my previous analysis of the *Gospel of Ahmad*. Snow's appeal to the government did not impress the judge, though, who sentenced him to six months in prison. Snow appealed against the verdict and he was released on bail on grounds of ill-health. Still, his appeal failed and his conviction was upheld by a higher court. In July 1895, Snow was at his lowest point, with direct consequences for his faith. The *Tribune* reported: 'Mr. Urban Snow, lately known as Hamid Snow, has, we are informed, been released by order of H. H. the Lieutenant-Governor ... The return to his original cognomen, we are further informed, means that Mr. Snow has abjured Islam.'¹²¹ In another twist of events, the legal fight then turned into a libel case, with Snow suing his former employer, Ahmad Shah of the *Philanthropist*.¹²² Surprisingly, Shah lost the case and was sentenced to paying Rs 400 as a 'damage fee' and to writing an apology to Snow. At the time, Snow seems to have been seriously ill,

¹¹⁷ *Tribune*, 23 February 1895.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 11 March 1895.

¹²⁰ *Tribune*, 26 June 1895.

¹²¹ *Tribune*, 24 July 1895.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 14 August 1895.

which prompted him to publicly forgive Shah. The *Tribune* commended Snow's noble attitude and called him the 'misjudged Hamid Snow'.¹²³ It seems he also converted back to Islam again and resumed both his former name and mission.

After the settlement of the court matters, Snow left Punjab and began a life of peregrination through India and Southeast Asia. His travels first led him to Hyderabad, Deccan, from where he wrote books that were still published and advertised by the Muhammadan Tract and Book Depot at Lahore, then in 1896 to Ooty, a hill station in Tamil Nadu, and in 1897 to Calcutta, where he was again fighting a serious illness.¹²⁴ Not all Indian modernists were done with him, though. In the same year, Syed Ameer Ali endorsed Snow's *Gospel of Ahmad*, although he seemed to restrict its usefulness to Europeans:

I congratulate you on the successful manner in which you have adapted the teachings of Islam to the minds and sympathies of races not cognate to the Arabs or purely Asiatic in their development. I have always considered some such endeavour necessary to promote the diffusion of Islamic theism. I felt that for English-speaking converts to Islam, there ought to be an Anglican Islamic Church.¹²⁵

During his student days in England in the 1870s, Ameer Ali had joined the Unitarians, and later in his life, he would refer to Unitarianism as 'Islam without the rules'.¹²⁶ Intellectually, and in terms of his spiritual genealogy, Ameer Ali seemed to have found a companion in Snow.

In 1900, Snow set up another branch of the Church of Islam in Bangalore and established a colony of converts for those members who had been disinherited and rejected by their families.¹²⁷ In December that year, the *Crescent*, Quilliam's journal published in Liverpool, published a request by Snow to send funds in support of this newly established colony and its inhabitants. One year later, we find Snow on a mission to promote Islam in Manila, but he seems to have returned to India, because in 1902, he is mentioned as a resident of Lang's Garden in Pudupet, near Egmore, at the coast of Chennai. Incidentally (or maybe not so incidentally), Pudupet is very close to Adyar, where the Theosophical Society maintains its headquarter to this day.¹²⁸ There, Snow also wrote what appears to have been his last book, bearing the title *The Muslim Art of Hypnotic and Vito-Magnetic Healing: Or 'Self', 'Absent', and 'Personal' Methods for Physical, Mental and Moral Ailments; Without Drugs or Batteries*, published in 1902, again in Lahore. Having failed as a college lecturer and journalist, Snow now tried his luck as a spiritual healer in the manner of the Theosophists and other 'religious entrepreneurs', combining magical rituals with recent scientific discoveries. The book proposed to initiate readers into diverse esoteric secrets, such as mind reading, 'Muslim clairvoyance, telepathy, psychometry, mesmerism, physiognomy, phrenology, palmistry, astrology', hypnosis, magnetism, and natural medicine, none of which had much to do with Islam. Snow even handed out diplomas and conducted exams for healers, for a small fee. His commitment to racial theories in connection with religious community is even more pronounced in the book, while any reference to Islam except in name only is again conspicuously absent. Snow stated:

¹²³ *Tribune*, 14 August 1895.

¹²⁴ Wherry, *Islam and Christianity*, p. 189; *Crescent*, 22 January 1896; Snow, *The Gospel of Ahmad*, Publisher's note.

¹²⁵ Snow, *The Gospel of Ahmad*, Epilogue, p. III.

¹²⁶ Avril A. Powell, 'Islamic modernism and women's status: the influence of Syed Ameer Ali', in *Rhetoric and Reality: Gender and the Colonial Experience in South Asia*, (eds) Avril A. Powell and Siobhan Lambert-Hurley (New Delhi, 2006), p. 286.

¹²⁷ *Crescent*, 5 December 1900.

¹²⁸ Lubelsky, *Celestial India*, p. xiii.

[The purpose of the book is] to found on earth, among all races and religionists, a practical 'Nazarene-Isa-Salaamic' brotherhood with the peculiar powers of the cult, and produce thus an order of mankind organically generated from which prosperity shall come forth, physically strong and handsome, free from taint, sin and disease, with a clear knowledge of the purpose and destiny of the human soul and its relations to other souls and the Great Soul, so that Socialists, Anarchists, Fenians, 'Jihadists' etc. will be unknown; government will enjoy permanent peace; and poverty, crime and suffering will cease, and our descendants will so live that a heritage of righteousness shall be transmitted to coming generations as a birth-right.

Social Darwinist ideas about the 'improvement of human breed', which Snow backs up with pseudo-science, abound in the book, as does casual racism, demonstrated by statements such as the following: 'the weakness of the modern Indian brain is due to lack of independent judgment'.¹²⁹ Either his own methods failed him and Snow eventually succumbed to his many ailments, or he simply abandoned his Nazarene Muslim movement, because after 1902, Hamid Snow vanishes without a trace from all records, and we know nothing about his fate or that of his Church of Islam.¹³⁰

Conclusion

This article analysed attempts at creating and constructing alternative origin myths for Islam in the writings of 'Western' converts who were active in colonial South Asia and who made an effort to systematise shared intellectual and religious spaces in the quest for a 'universal religion'. These efforts reveal a larger trend in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century South Asia and beyond towards the interpretation of religious pasts by laypeople without a formal religious training. The person at the centre of this case study, the convert Hamid Snow, constructed an origin myth for Islam using a variety of sources, among them scholarly writings authored by European Orientalists. The attempt to forge a connection between Islam, Christianity, and modern-day esoteric religious movements through a 'universal religion' framework was also made by converts like Webb and Quilliam, among others. However, Snow was the first to systematically historicise this connection and construct a (more or less) consistent narrative of *Heilsgeschichte*, or salvation history. The shared commonalities he imagined between the world's monotheistic religions aligned to a certain extent with the views propagated by Indian Muslim modernists, who were deeply influenced by Orientalist scholarship as well. However, their reception of Orientalism and esotericism differed significantly from that of many converts. In the case of Snow, Indian modernists never seemed to have been sold on the idea that Islam was merely a form of Crypto-Christianity, for example, nor did they frame Islamic ritual or textual traditions in a Christian idiom. Snow's following consisted overwhelmingly of Anglo-Indians and Europeans residing in India, most of whom were converts from Christianity. One reason for Snow's and other converts' failure to forge lasting connections with Indian Muslims on the ground might have been unreflecting racist and stereotypical attitudes about Indian culture and religions which were also a result of larger debates at the time. While in their reading of 'universal religion', 'Western' converts reconfirmed the centrality and (cultural as well as religious) superiority of a Christian religious idiom, Muslim modernists employed the same framework to propose Islam's superiority as a global force capable of incorporating other religious traditions. By participating in those debates, though, both converts and Muslim modernists directly or indirectly espoused and popularised Orientalist, esoteric, and Eurocentric readings of

¹²⁹ Snow, *The Muslim Art of Hypnotic Healing*, p. 184.

¹³⁰ Bowen, *Conversion*, p. 161.

the Islamic tradition in their wider intellectual circles, which often set the terms of the debate with other proponents of religious reform both in South Asia and beyond, such as the Ahmadiyya, and determined the course of future interactions between Muslim movements at home and abroad.

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