

“LIVING WITHOUT TRANSCENDENCE”  
SOME OBSERVATIONS ON RELIGIOUS  
AND THEOLOGICAL REDUCTIONISM OF  
SIR SAYYID AHMAD KHAN

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan's engagement with modernity, highlighting his prioritization of social reform, education, and scientific development over metaphysical concerns. While much has been written on Sir Sayyid's religious and theological stances, little attention has been given to his acceptance of a worldview "bereft of Transcendence." This acceptance, rooted in Enlightenment principles such as positivism and reductionism, led him to adopt a modernist lens that subordinated metaphysical and spiritual issues. The article critically examines Sir Sayyid's intellectual milieu, juxtaposing premodern and modern conceptual frameworks, and argues that his reverence for Victorian science constrained his capacity to engage with transcendence. By focusing on the clash of worldviews between modern science and traditional spiritual perspectives, it highlights the broader implications of reductionist thinking in shaping societal values, existential meaning, and the human quest for purpose. Through the lens of thinkers like Robert Bellah and Allama Iqbal, the analysis emphasizes the necessity of integrating transcendence and metaphysics into a balanced worldview to counter modernity's metaphysical shortcomings. Ultimately, it calls for a nuanced synthesis of science and religion to address the spiritual crises that accompany modern secularism and materialism.

“Homo Sapiens have always been homo religiousus.”

“A human existence bereft of transcendence is an impoverished and finally untenable condition.”

—Peter Berger<sup>1</sup>

Much has been written about the religious, theological and metaphysical (if there was anything worth the metaphysical salt in his writings!) views of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan<sup>2</sup> but seldom has the most important and critical question with regard to the rampant “reductionism” in his works been asked:<sup>3</sup> Why did Sir Sayyid accept to live in a condition that was “bereft of Transcendence?; and as a ramification, for a host of historical, intellectual and political reasons, advised his followers/readers to focus on social reform, economic uplift, expansion and development of education, cultivation of modern science, political awareness etc. while relegating the metaphysical issues to a matter of secondary importance and of no immediate consequence and concern. To a straight forward question like this we can begin by giving an equally straight forward and unequivocal answer. Unaware of the *Modernity’s Metaphysical Shortcomings*, Sir Sayyid had unquestioningly accepted the intellectual assumptions underlying the Enlightenment paradigm which Robert Bellah has brilliantly outlined as follows:

The assumptions underlying mainstream social science, can be briefly listed: positivism, reductionism, relativism and determinism. I am not saying that working social scientists could give a good philosophical defence of these assumptions, or even that they are fully conscious of holding them. I mean to refer only to, in the descriptive sense, their prejudices, their pre-judgments about the nature of reality. By positivism I mean no more than the assumption that the methods of natural science are the only approach to valid knowledge, and the corollary that social science differs from natural science only in maturity and that the two will become ever more alike. By reductionism I mean the tendency to explain the complex in terms of the simple and to find behind complex cultural forms biological, psychological or sociological drives, needs and interests. By relativism I mean the assumption that matters of morality and religion, being explicable by particular constellations of psychological and sociological conditions, cannot be judged true or false, valid or invalid, but simply vary with

persons, cultures and societies. By determinism I do not mean any sophisticated philosophical view, but only the tendency to think that human actions are explained in terms of “variables” that will account for them.

Sir Sayyid emerged on the intellectual landscape of the Indian Sub-Continent in the wake of one of the most significant conceptual shifts in history brought about by Modernity. I have detailed these elsewhere<sup>4</sup> but its summary would put the matter in perspective. The conceptual shifts refer to the overarching perspective or the paradigm that governs each conceptual shift. The present audience, I presume, agrees that with regard to the view of Reality we can speak of the entire Premodern world in the singular and simply assume that a common metaphysical “spine” underlies the differences in the worldviews, the theologies of the classical languages of the human soul, the world’s great religions or wisdom traditions. This is coupled with the claims of all the Premodern civilizations, including the pre-renaissance Western civilization, that people need worldviews, that reliable ones are possible, and that they already exist. It is only Modernity that made the totalizing claim for the truth of a single worldview and Postmodernism which categorically denies the existence or the possibility of reliable worldviews!<sup>5</sup>

Secondly, Sir Sayyid wished to address the issue not only in the context of “a South Asian sensibility” but with reference to emerging Western-dominated global reality (which his farsightedness had sensed) because he knew that the problems of social integration that India faced at the time were not confined to its local situations any more but impacted all persons who around the world live out different degrees of accommodation with the local and global reality. This calls for a few remarks about the situation of the modern world, the “global reality” that engulfs us, shapes our worlds and determines our predicament.

In this late stage of secular modernity and its hangover in postmodernism, melancholy has become a collective mood. Melancholy used to afflict individuals who felt rejected and exiled from the significance of the cosmos. By our day it has turned into a cultural malady deriving from a world that has been drained of all meaning and which had come to cast doubt on all traditional sources— theological, metaphysical, and historical. The dominant mood of our time is “**a desperate search for a pattern.**” The search is desperate because it seemed futile to look for a pattern in

reality. In terms of its mindset or worldview the modern world is living in what has been called the *Age of Anxiety*, and if one tries to look beyond symptoms to find the prime cause one comes to realize that there is something wrong with the presiding paradigm or worldview that our age had come to espouse. Something has gone wrong with the world and the Time is again out of joint? East and West both seem to face a predicament! As Iqbal has observed:

من از بلال و چلیپا دگر نیندیشم  
که فتنه دگری در ضمیر ایام است

I am no longer concerned about the crescent and the cross,  
For the womb of time carries an ordeal of a different kind. <sup>6</sup>

The crisis that the world found itself in as it swung on the hinge of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was located in something deeper than particular ways of organizing political systems and economies. In different ways, the East and the West were going through a single common crisis whose cause was the spiritual condition of the modern world.<sup>7</sup> That condition was characterized by loss— the loss of religious certainties and of *transcendence* with its larger horizons. The nature of that loss is strange but ultimately quite logical. When, with the inauguration of the scientific worldview, human beings started considering themselves the bearers of the highest meaning in the world and the measure of everything, meaning began to ebb and the stature of humanity to diminish. The world lost its human dimension, and we began to lose control of it. In the words of F. Schuon:<sup>8</sup>

The world is miserable because men live beneath themselves; the error of modern man is that he wants to reform the world without having either the will or the power to reform man, and this flagrant contradiction, this attempt to make a better world on the basis of a worsened humanity, can only end in the very abolition of what is human, and consequently in the abolition of happiness too. Reforming man means binding him again to Heaven, re-establishing the broken link; it means tearing him away from the reign of the passions, from the cult of matter, quantity and cunning, and reintegrating him into the world of the spirit and serenity, we would even say: into the world of sufficient reason.

If anything characterizes the modern era, it is a loss of faith in transcendence, in God as an objective reality. It is the age of eclipse of transcendence. No socio-cultural environment in the pre-

Modern times had turned its back on Transcendence in the systematic way that characterized Modernity.<sup>9</sup>The eclipse of transcendence impacts our way of looking at the world, that is, forming a world view, in a far-reaching manner. According to our perspective, *Transcendence* means that there is another reality that is more real, more powerful, and better than this mundane order. It is an issue of the greatest magnitude. Whatever transpires in other domains of life— politics, living standards, environmental conditions, interpersonal relationships, the arts— is ultimately dependent on our presiding world view. Modern Westerners, forsaking clear thinking, allowed themselves to become so obsessed with life's material underpinnings that they had written science a blank cheque; a blank cheque for science's claims concerning what constituted Reality, knowledge and justified belief. This is the cause of our spiritual crisis. It joined other crises as we entered the new century— the environmental crisis, the population explosion, the widening gulf between the rich and the poor, and the list goes on. But that is the subject for another day.<sup>10</sup>Suffice to say here that the enlightenment project and modernity's worldview had brought in the human thought, the damage that it had done to the academia, and the contemporary discourse created by it is marked by incredulity. Incredulity toward metaphysics. Wouldn't we be better off if we extricate ourselves from the worldview we had unwittingly slipped into and replace it with a more generous and accurate one that shows us deeply connected to the final nature of things?<sup>11</sup> A world ends when its metaphor dies, and modernity's metaphor— endless progress through science-powered technology— is dead. It is only cultural lag— the backward pull of the outgrown good— that keeps us running on it.

Sir Sayyid had also written a blank cheque for science's claims concerning what constituted Reality, knowledge and justified belief. With reference to it and in view of what has just been said, another issue is of the greatest magnitude that comes into focus. That science had changed our world beyond recognition goes without saying, but more importantly, the two worldviews were contending for the mind of the future. The scientific worldview was a wasteland for the human spirit. It could not provide us the where withal for a meaningful life. Did Sir Sayyid realize how much, then, was at stake? That is the fundamental question. The overarching question relates to the view of Reality; of the *Worldviews: The Big Picture*. It is of great consequence to ask as to who was right about

reality: Traditionalists, Modernists, or the Postmoderns? Was Sir Sayyid aware of the Metaphysical Shortcomings of Modernity? I don't think so. Consider this. Modernity was metaphysically sloppy. Ravished by science's accomplishments, it elevated the scientific method to "a sacral mode of knowing"<sup>12</sup> and because that mode registers nothing that is without a material component, immaterial realities at first dropped from view and then (as the position hardened) were denied existence. This was metaphysics reduced to cosmology.<sup>13</sup> Modernity's Big Picture was materialism or (in its more plausible version) **naturalism** which acknowledges that there are immaterial things—thoughts and feelings, for example—while insisting that those things are totally dependent on matter [and that was exactly the title Sir Sayyid ascribed to his position and even went to the extent of calling "God a naturalist"<sup>14</sup> "خدا۔۔۔ تو پکا، چھٹا ہوا نیچری" "ہے، وہ خود اپنے کو نیچری کہتا ہے (God is Himself a confirmed naturalist of the first magnitude, He Himself calls Himself a naturalist). Both versions are stunted when compared with the traditional worldview. It is important to understand that neither materialism nor naturalism is required by anything science has discovered in the way of actual facts. Sir Sayyid never realized that modernity [read modern science] had slid into this smallest of metaphysical positions for **psychological**, not **logical**, reasons. Unaware of what had happened—blind to the way method had vectored metaphysics and epistemology constricted worldview—modernity with a stroke of its methodological pen had all but written off the region of reality that religion up to the last century or so had been riveted to.<sup>15</sup>

Even today, when traditional peoples want to know where they are—when they wonder about the ultimate context in which their lives are set and which has the final say over them—they turn to their sacred texts; or in the case of oral, tribal peoples (what comes to the same thing), to the sacred myths that have been handed down to them by their ancestors. *Modernity* was born when a new source of knowledge was discovered, the scientific method. Because its controlled experiment enabled scientists to prove their hypotheses, and because those proven hypotheses demonstrated that they had the power to change the material world dramatically, Westerners turned from revelation to science for the Big Picture.<sup>16</sup> This much is straightforward, but it doesn't explain why Westerners

aren't still modern rather than Postmodern, for science continues to be the main support of the Western mind. By headcount, most Westerners probably still are modern, but I am thinking of frontier thinkers who chart the course that others follow. These thinkers have ceased to be modern because they have seen through the so-called scientific worldview, recognizing it to be not scientific but scientific. They continue to honour science for what it tells us about nature or the natural order/natural world, but as that is not all that exists, science cannot provide us with a worldview— not a valid one. The most it can show us is half of the world, the half where normative and intrinsic values, existential and ultimate meanings, teleologies, qualities, immaterial realities, and beings that are superior to us do not appear. This point is of crucial importance for understanding the Sir Sayyid phenomenon so we shall come back to it in greater detail but for the moment let us turn our attention to the way it relates to the dilemma that Sir Sayyid faced when his intellectual milieu was assailed by the waves of the worldview of high late modernity. It was not enough to exist on the map of modernity. To be a modern, as opposed to simply inhabiting modernity, was, first and foremost, to accept, whether reflectively, or reflexively, the worldview of modernism, a worldview characterized most significantly by the rejection of the *transcendent*. Modernity was predominantly characterized by a “*lack of Transcendence*” but the personal trajectory of Sir Sayyid losing his grip on *Transcendence* displays the undeniable influence of a specific element of this altered worldview epitomized by the post-renaissance, Enlightenment Paradigm. This personal trajectory could be summarized as follows: Sir Sayyid had succumbed to the Victorian worldview [read post-renaissance, Enlightenment Paradigm] that was riddled with *scientism* and, in the words of Wittgenstein, had become the “captive of a picture! “These remarks by Wittgenstein were made in another context but they hold good for Sir Sayyid. Wittgenstein had remarked, “A picture holds them captive”. Hypnotized by the unparalleled predictive and technological successes of modern science, they infer that *scientism* must be true, and that anything that follows from *scientism*— however fantastic or even seemingly incoherent— must also be true.<sup>17</sup> Major writings of Sir Sayyid provide ample evidence that in his zeal, or perhaps reverential awe, of the Victorian science went too far in honouring science and lost sight of the fact that Science did not deal with all of Reality; it cannot handle *Transcendence* as it only deals with a part of Reality or, in the words of Iqbal, “sectional



views of Reality”.<sup>18</sup> It tells us only about nature or the natural order/natural world, but as that is not all that exists, all that *is*, science cannot provide us with a worldview— not a valid one. Once accepting modern science as the Court of Ultimate Appeal for deciding what is real and what is not real, Sir Sayyid then went on a tangent in his religious and theological views making the early doctrinal positions subservient to the dictates of conceptual paradigm of modern science. But to see it clearly we have to begin the tale from the beginning.

The world today is *massively religious*, and it is anything but the secularized world that had been predicted (be joyfully or despondently) by so many analysts of modernity. The religious impulse, the quest for meaning that transcends the restricted space of empirical existence in this world, has been a perennial feature of humanity. *“Homo Sapiens have always been homo religiousus.”* (This assertion is not a theological statement but an anthropological one— an agnostic or even an atheist philosopher may agree with it.) The Sand People of the Kalahari say that there are two categories of “hunger”: the “little hunger” and the “big hunger”— the quest for “Meaning/Purposes” – that lies deeper in the stomach than the “little hunger.” There is within us— in even the blithest, most light-hearted among us— a fundamental dis-ease. It acts like an unquenchable fire that renders the vast majority of us incapable in this life of ever coming to full peace. This desire lies in the marrow of our bones and the deep regions of our souls. All great literature, poetry, art, philosophy, psychology, and religion tries to name and analyse this longing. We are seldom in direct touch with it, and indeed the modern world seems set on preventing us from getting in touch with it by covering it with an unending phantasmagoria of entertainments, obsessions, addictions, and distractions of every sort. But the longing is there, built into us like a jack-in-the-box that presses for release. Whether we realize it or not, simply to be human is to long for release from mundane existence, with its confining walls of finitude and mortality. Release from those walls calls for space outside them, and the traditional world (religious) provides that space in abundance. It has about it the feel of long, open distances and limitless vistas for the human spirit to explore— distances and vistas that are quality-laden throughout. The traditional (read religious) worldview is preferable to the one that now encloses us (the worldview of modernity based on scientism) because it allows for the fulfilment of the basic longing. Authentic religion is the clearest opening through which the inexhaustible

energies of the cosmos can pour into human existence. What then can rival its power to touch and inspire the deepest creative centres of man's being? Revelation has shaped human history more than any other force besides technology. Whether revelation issues from God or from the deepest unconscious of spiritual geniuses can be debated, but its signature is invariably power. The periodic incursions— explosions, we might call them— of this power in history are what created the world's greatest religions, and by extension, the civilizations they have bodied forth. Its dynamite is its news of another world. Revelation invariably tells us of a separate (though not removed) order of existence that simultaneously relativizes and exalts the one we normally know. It relativizes the everyday world by showing it to be less than the "all" that we unthinkingly take it to be, and that demotion turns out to be exhilarating. By placing the quotidian world in a vastly more meaningful context, revelation dignifies it the way a worthy setting enhances the beauty of a precious stone. People respond to this news of life's larger meaning because they hear in it the final warrant for their existence.

Wherever people live, whenever they live, they find themselves faced with three inescapable problems: how to win food and shelter from their natural environment (the problem nature poses), how to get along with one another (the social problem), and how to relate themselves to the total scheme of things, the worldview (the religious problem). If this third issue seems less important than the other two, we should remind ourselves that religious artifacts are the oldest that archaeologists have discovered.

As man of faith from the Islamic Tradition, as a leader of the community with a social responsibility, Sir Sayyid tried to come to grips to all three inescapable problems. What he did for the resolution of the first two according to the lights of his Tradition is beyond the scope of our present paper. We would only focus on the third where he parted ways with his Tradition and accepted modern science as the Court of Ultimate Appeal for deciding what is real and what is not real and, by the same token, assigned the role of providing us with a valid worldview to modern science hence becoming a typical example of the metaphysical muddle of our times— the Vectored Metaphysics and the Constricted Worldview of Epistemology. With both of these forces, science and religion, as permanent fixtures in history, the obvious question was how they were to get along. Alfred North Whitehead was of the opinion that, more than on any other single factor, the future of humanity

depended on the way these two most powerful forces in history settle into relationship with each other.<sup>19</sup> Ever since the rise of modern science various settlements have been suggested and it has come a long way from Warfare to Dialogue. Religious triumphalism died a century or two ago, and its scientific counterpart seems now to be following suit.<sup>20</sup> It seemed clear to Sir Sayyid that both science and religion were there to stay.<sup>21</sup> But the settlement Sir Sayyid suggested was no less than a hegemonic sway of modern [now obsolete] science, typical of the colonial mind, and the closure which he proposed, as we shall see in the next section, was not only untenable for its flimsy and unconvincing intellectual foundations but was, in due course, rejected by both the religious and the scientific camps!

I would end like to end this section on Iqbal who not only completely disagreed from the closure which Sir Sayyid had proposed but presaged the next conceptual shift, that of Postmodernism, of which Sir Sayyid could not even have an inkling. Iqbal agrees that there is a Big Picture and his writings give us to understand that the Postmodern view of the self and its world is in no way nobler than the ones that the world's religions proclaim. Postmoderns yield to their dilapidated views, not because they like them, but because they think that reason and human historicity now force them upon us. Iqbal would argue that it is not necessarily the case and the present predicament is the result of a tunnel vision, similar to what Sir Sayyid had accepted in his days, that the Postmoderns have adopted but which really is not the only option for us. Here is Iqbal's depiction of the conceptual shift that the enlightenment project and modernity's world view had brought in the human thought, the damage that it had done to the academia. Cultures and their worldviews are ruled by their mandarins, like Sir Sayyid, the intellectuals and they, as well as their institutions that shape the minds that rule the modern world are unreservedly secular. The poem is addressed to our present day intellectual mandarins, the leaders of the academia.

شیخ مکتب سے

شیخ مکتب ہے اک عمارت گر  
جس کی صنعت ہے رُوحِ انسانی

نکتہ دلپذیر تیرے لیے  
کہ گیا ہے حکیم قاآنی  
”پیش خورشید بر مکش دیوار  
خواہی ار صحنِ خانہ نورانی“

### To the Schoolman

The Schoolman is an architect  
The artefact he shapes and moulds is the human soul;  
Something remarkable for you to ponder  
Has been left by the Sage, Qā`ānī;  
“Do not raise a wall in the face of the illuminating Sun  
If you wish the courtyard of your house to be filled with light.”<sup>22</sup>

Also from Iqbal is the following poem<sup>23</sup> which, without naming him, appears to be a direct rebuttal of Sir Sayyid and his proposed closure:

### مذہب

تضمین بر شعر میرزا بیدل

تعلیم پیرِ فلسفہ مغربی ہے یہ  
ناداں ہیں جن کو ہستی غائب کی ہے تلاش  
پیکر اگر نظر سے نہ ہو آشنا تو کیا  
ہے شیخ بھی مثالِ برہمن صنم تراش  
محسوس پر بنا ہے علومِ جدید کی  
اس دور میں ہے شیشہ عقائد کا پاش پاش  
مذہب ہے جس کا نام، وہ ہے اک جنونِ خام  
ہے جس سے آدمی کے تخیل کو انتعاش  
کہتا مگر ہے فلسفہ زندگی کچھ اور  
مجھ پر کیا یہ مُرشدِ کامل نے راز فاش

”باہر کمال اندکے آشفنگی خوش است  
ہر چند عقل کُل شدہ ای بے جنوں مباح“

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### **Does Science deal with all of Reality or part of Reality?**

Where, then, do we now turn for an inclusive worldview? Postmodernism hasn't a clue. And this is its deepest definition.<sup>24</sup> The generally accepted definition of Postmodernism now that Jean-Francois Lyotard fixed in place decades ago in *The Postmodern Condition* is, "incredulity toward metanarratives".<sup>25</sup> Having deserted revelation for science, the West has now abandoned the scientific worldview as well, leaving it without replacement. In this it mirrors the current stage of Western science which leaves *nature* unimaged. Before modern science, Westerners accepted Aristotle's model of the earth as surrounded by concentric, crystalline spheres. Newton replaced that model with his image of a clockwork universe, but Postmodern, quantum-and-relativity science gives us not a third model of nature but no model at all. Alan Wallace's *Choosing Reality* delineates eight different interpretations of quantum physics, all of which can claim the support of physics' proven facts.<sup>26</sup> A contemporary philosopher described the situation as "*the Reality Market Place*"— you can have as many versions of reality as you like.

Sir Sayyid advocated the acceptance of, or acquiescence in, an Enlightenment naturalism or materialism with respect to what it recognizes as "real". It had, in the main, isolated the intellectual, and rational from the poetic and the religious and worked on the assumption that the former deal with what is "really real", by which is meant the phenomenal world of sense data. This excludes a priori the possibility of a numinous or transcendent dimension as a "given" in the "real" world. For more secular historians, such a precommitment seems not only natural but wholly justified, any alternative to which would take one at once outside of the domains of objectivity and rationality. There are unfortunately, a number of problems implicit in such a stance, to be explored further below. The foremost among these and the most fundamental of all problems is the overarching question, "Does Science deal with all of Reality or part of Reality?" Sir Sayyid had acquiesced that Science dealt with all of Reality. Let us examine the position.

### **There are Six Things Science Cannot Get its Hands on.**

Despite its power in limited regions, six things slip through its

controlled experiments in the way sea slips through the nets of fishermen:

1. Values. Science can deal with descriptive and instrumental values, but not with intrinsic and normative ones.
2. Meanings. Science can work with cognitive meanings, but not with existential meanings or ultimate ones (What is the meaning of life?).
3. Purposes. Science can handle teleonomy— purposiveness in organisms— but not teleology, final causes.
4. Qualities. Quantities science is good at, but not qualities.
5. The invisible and the immaterial. It can work with invisibles that are rigorously entailed by matter's behaviour (the movements of iron filings that require magnetic fields to account for them, e.g.) but not with others.
6. Our superiors, if such exist. This limitation does not prove that beings greater than ourselves exist, but it does leave the question open, for "absence of evidence is not evidence of absence".

1. ***Values in their final and proper sense.*** Close friends at the start, Bertrand Russell and Ludwig Wittgenstein ended at opposite ends of the philosophical spectrum, but on one point they remained in full agreement: science cannot deal with values. Russell proposed one exception—except insofar as science consists in the pursuit of knowledge—but that is not really an exception, for although that value is assumed by scientists, it is not itself scientifically derived. Science can deal with *instrumental* values, but not *intrinsic* ones. *If* health is valued over immediate somatic gratification, smoking is bad, but the intrinsic values that conflict (health versus pleasure) science cannot weigh. Again, science can deal with *descriptive* values (what people *do* like) but not *normative* ones (what they *should* like). Market research and opinion polls are sciences; indeed, when the margins for error are factored in, they come close to being exact sciences. As such, they can tell us whether people prefer Cheerios to Raisin Bran and who is likely to win an election. Who *should* win is a different story. There will never be a science of the *sum-mum bonum*, the supreme good.

2. ***Existential and global meanings.*** Science itself is meaningful throughout, but on existential and global meanings it is silent. *Existential* meanings are ones that concern us; they relate to what we find meaning-full. Scientists can spread before us their richest wares; but if the viewer is depressed and buries his head in his arms, scientists cannot compel his interest. *Global* meanings are of the sort, *What is the meaning of life?* or *What is the meaning of it all?* As human beings, scientists can invest themselves in these

questions, but their science will not help them find answers to them.

3. **Final causes.** For science to get on with its job, Aristotle's final causes— the *why* of things— to be banished and the field left to explanations by way of efficient causes only. Except in biology, we must add. Living creatures seek food and sex to satisfy their hunger and libidinal drives, and their satisfactions are the final cause of their hunting. So *teleonomy*, yes, but *teleology* (final causes outside the animate world), no. Whether the case be that of Galileo's falling rocks or Kepler's light, the shift from classical to modern mechanics was brought about by the separation of primary from secondary qualities— which is to say, the separation of nature's *quantitative* from its *qualitatively experienced* features. Talk of volition and the why of things was removed to let impersonal laws of motion take over.<sup>27</sup>

4. **Invisibles.** Here too a qualification must be inserted. Science can deal with invisibles that can be logically inferred from observable effects. In the early 1800s, Michael Faraday discovered magnetic fields in this way by placing iron filings on a piece of paper and a magnet underneath. When he vibrated the paper slightly, lines of magnetic force appeared. The randomly scattered filings fell into lines as if ordered by a drill sergeant, revealing the pattern of the magnetic field. But if there are invisibles that do not impact matter thus demonstrably, science gets no wind of them.

5. **Quality.** Unlike the preceding four, this fifth exclusion does not need to be qualified. And it is basic to the lot, for it is the qualitative ingredient in values, meanings, purposes, and non-inferable invisibles that gives them their power. Certain qualities (such as colours) are connected to quantitative substrates (light waves of given lengths), but the quality itself is not measurable.

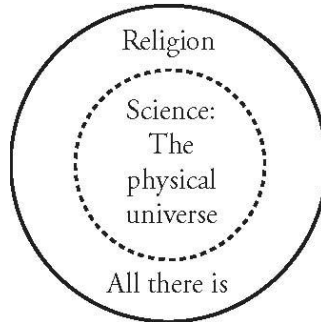
6. **Our superiors.** This was covered in the initial six-point argument.

### **Division of Labour**

When we put together the six things science cannot deal with—simplified to help us keep them in mind, they are values, meanings, final causes, invisibles, qualities, and our superiors— we see that science leaves much of the world untouched. With this caveat in place it is impossible to agree with Sir Sayyid for accepting modern science as the Court of Ultimate Appeal for deciding what is real and what is not real! A division of labour suggests itself which,

understandably, was not in sharp focus given the numerous historical, intellectual and political factors impacting the milieu Sir Sayyid worked with. Science deals with the natural world and religion with the whole of things, as this diagram suggests:

Figure 1.



That religion is represented by the larger of the two circles seems to give it the advantage, but that impression is corrected when we note that science works more effectively with its part than does religion with its. Science houses precise calculations, knockdown proofs, and technological wonders, whereas religion speaks in generalities, such as “*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth,*” (Christianity) or “*The heavens declare the glory of God,*” (Islam) or “*All things are the Buddha-nature,*” (Buddhism) or “*The world is maya,*” (Hinduism) or “*Only heaven is great*” (Taoism/Confucianism). Oliver Wendell Holmes’s way of establishing parity is appealing: “**Science gives us major answers to minor questions, while religion gives us minor answers to major questions.**”<sup>28</sup> If this way of slicing the pie is accepted, it follows that both parties should respect the other’s sphere of competence. It would be unrealistic not to expect border disputes to erupt; but they should be negotiated in good faith without losing sight of the terms of agreement. When scientists who are convinced materialists deny the existence of things other than those they can train their instruments on, they should make it clear that they are expressing their personal opinions like everybody else and not claim the authority of science for what they say. From the other side, religionists should keep their hands off science as long as it is genuine science and not embellished with philosophical opinions to which everyone has rights. All responsible citizens have a right to oppose harmful outcomes that some scientific research could lead to— germ warfare, cloning, and the like— but that is an ethical



matter, not one that relates to science proper. This division of labour is not widely accepted as yet but I believe, however, that it points in the right direction. What is most right about it is that it allots religion an ontological domain of its own. It proposes respect for religion's concern to posit and work with things that exist objectively in the world but which science cannot detect. An analysis of the works of Sir Sayyid betrays that this is underplayed in his (muddled) thinking on science-religion splice while a strong bias in favour of the other hegemonic position courses through the veins of his works where he too often accept science's inventory of the world as exhaustive and contents himself with discerning the meaning and significance of what science reports.

### Notes and References

- <sup>1</sup> Peter L. Berger, "Secularism in Retreat", *The National Interest*, 1996/1997; 46, pp. 3-12. Also see Berger, "Sociology A Disinvitation?", *Sociology*, November-December 1992, and Berger, "Crisis of Secularity", in Mary Douglas & Steven M. Tipton (Eds.) *Religion & America, Spirituality in a Secular Age*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1983.
- <sup>2</sup> See, Dr. Saeeda Iqbal, "Sir Syed Ahmad Khan", in *Islamic Rationalism in the Subcontinent*, Lahore, 1984, pp. 135-215; Bashir Ahmad Dar, "Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan as a Religio-Philosophical Thinker", in M. M. Sharif, (Ed.) *A History of Muslim Philosophy*, Vol. II, Karachi, 1983, Wiesbaden, 1966, pp. 1598-1614; Abdul Khaliq, "Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan's Concept of Islam as the Natural Religion", in *Journal of Research*, Lahore, XV/2, July, 1980, pp. 19-38; Christian W. Troll, "A Nineteenth Century Indian Muslim Restatement of Islam", in Dietmar Rothermund (Ed.), *Islam in Southern Asia, A Survey of Current Research*, Steiner, Wiesbaden, 1975, pp. 43-45; Mazheruddin Siddiqi, "Religious Thought of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan", in *Islamic Studies*, VI/3, Sept. 1967, pp. 290-308; Abdul Khaliq, "Syed Ahmad Khan's Concept of God", in *Iqbal Review*, April 1980, pp. 27-46; Christian W. Troll, "Syed Ahmad Khan", in Christian W. Troll, *Sayyid Ahmad Khan, A Reinterpretation of Muslim Theology*, Vikas, New Delhi, 1978, chapter 5 and 6, pp. 144-194; Hafeez Malik, "The Religious Liberalism of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan", in *The Muslim World*, Vol. LIV, No. 3, (July, 1964), pp. 160-169; Aziz Ahmad and G. E. Von Grunebaum (Eds.) *Muslim Self-Statement in India and Pakistan, 1857-1968*, Otto Harrasowitz, Wiesbaden, 1970, pp. 25-48. For a convenient ready reckoner also see M. Ikram Chaghatai, *Herald of Nineteenth Century Muslim Thought: Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, Sang e Meel, Lahore, Pakistan, 2005 and *Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan (A Prominent Muslim Politician and Educationist)* Sang e Meel, Lahore, Pakistan, 2005;
- <sup>3</sup> An outstanding exception, however, deserves mention here; Dr. Zafar Hasan, *Sir Sayyid awr Hali ka nazariyya i Fitrat*, Idāra Thaqāfat i Islāmiyya, Lahore, 1990, which not only raises this critical question but delves into the deeper conceptual underpinnings of reductionism found in the works of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan that had created the debate and contextualizes it in the larger issue of Science-Religion conflict.
- <sup>4</sup> Muhammad Suheyl Umar, *Iqbal Review*, 48: 2, Iqbal Academy Pakistan, 2007, pp. 57-67.

- <sup>5</sup> I have referred to the three periods of traditional, modern and Postmodern with regard to their respective conceptual shifts and also the word Modernity. For the rest of my presentation I would use Modernism in place of Modernity. In the wake of its Traditional and Modern periods, the Western world is now generally regarded as having become Postmodern. Both Modernity and Postmodernity refer to a life-style. Modernism and Postmodernism, by contrast, suggest an outlook, a worldview: the basic sense of things that gave rise to Modernity and Postmodernity in the first place and now reflects its way of life.
- <sup>6</sup> **I am... kind.** By “the crescent and the cross” is meant the historic confrontation between Islam and Christianity that took the form of the Crusades in the Middle Ages. Iqbal is saying that, unlike many other Muslims, who remain mentally imprisoned in the past, allowing their thought and action to be determined by certain crucial events of former times, he is more concerned about the momentous developments taking place in the present age. Iqbal does not specify what he means by “an ordeal of a different kind” (*fitnah-i digar*)—whether he means a particular major development, like communism, or whether he uses the singular “ordeal” in a generic sense to refer to several major and decisive developments taking place on the world stage. The main point of the verse, in any case, is that the issues of the present and the future have greater claim on one’s attention than issues belonging to a past that may have no more than historical or academic importance. In the second hemistich, “the womb of time” is a translation of *damir-i ayyām*, which literally means “in the insides of time.” See M. Mir, (ed.), *Iqbal-Namah*, Vol. 5, No. 3-4, Summer and Fall, 2005, p. 3-6.
- <sup>7</sup> *Zubūr i ‘Ajam*, in *Kulliyāt i Iqbal*, (Persian), Iqbal Academy Pakistan, Lahore, 1994, p. 376.
- فکر فرنگ پیش مجاز آورد سجود      بینای کور و مست تماشای رنگوبوست  
مشرق خراب و مغرب از آن بیشتر خراب      عالم تمام مرده و بی ذوق جستجوست
- <sup>8</sup> F. Schuon, *Understanding Islam*, reprinted, Suhail Academy, Lahore, 2004, pp. 26.
- <sup>9</sup> Dr. Martin Lings had once remarked, “No socio-cultural environment in the pre-Modern times had turned its back on Transcendence in the systematic way that characterized Modernity. Martin Lings, *Mecca, from Before Genesis until Now*, Archetype, Cambridge, UK, 2004.
- <sup>10</sup> That science had changed our world beyond recognition went without saying, but it was the way that it had changed our worldview that concerns us here. More importantly, the two worldviews are contending for the mind of the future. The scientific worldview is a wasteland for the human spirit. It cannot provide us the where withal for a meaningful life. How much, then, is at stake? That is the fundamental question. The overarching question relates to the view of Reality; of the *WORLDVIEWS: THE BIG PICTURE*. It is of great consequence to ask as to WHO WAS RIGHT ABOUT REALITY: TRADITIONALISTS, MODERNISTS, OR THE POSTMODERNS? The problem, according to our lights, is that somewhere, during the course of its historical development, western thought took a sharp turn in a different direction. It branched off as a tangent from the collective heritage of all humanity and claimed the autonomy of reason. It chose to follow reason alone, unguided by revelation and cut off from its transcendent root. Political and social realms quickly followed suit. Autonomous statecraft and excessive

individualism in the social order were the elements that shaped a dominant paradigm that did not prove successful. There are five places where these contradict each other.

- According to the traditional, religious view spirit is fundamental and matter derivative. The scientific worldview turns this picture on its head.
- In the religious worldview human beings are the less who have derived from the more. Science reverses this etiology, positioning humanity as the more that has derived from the less; devoid of intelligence at its start, evolving and advancing to the elevated stature that we human beings now enjoy.
- The traditional worldview points toward a happy ending; the scientific worldview does not. As for the scientific worldview, there is no way that a happy ending can be worked into it. Death is the grim reaper of individual lives, and whether things as a whole will end in a freeze or a fry, with a bang or a whimper is anybody's guess.
- This fourth contrast between the competing worldviews concerns meaning. Having been intentionally created by omnipotent Perfection— or flowing from it "like a fountain ever on,"— the traditional world is meaningful throughout. In the scientific worldview, meaning is minimal if not absent. "Our modern understanding of evolution implies that ultimate meaning in life is non-existent." Science acknowledges that "the more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it seems pointless."
- In the traditional world people feel at home. Nothing like this sense of belonging can be derived from the scientific worldview which is the dawning of "the age of homelessness."

An age comes to a close when people discover they can no longer understand themselves by the theory their age professes. For a while its denizens will continue to think that they believe it, but they feel otherwise and cannot understand their feelings. This has now happened to our world. Current worldview is not *scientific* but *scientistic*. It continues to honour science for what it tells us about nature or the natural order/natural world, but as that is not all that exists, science cannot provide us with a worldview— not a valid one. The most it can show us is half of the world, the half where normative and intrinsic values, existential and ultimate meanings, teleologies, qualities, immaterial realities, and beings that are superior to us do not appear. This important point is not generally recognized, so I shall spell it out. The death-knell to modernity, which had science as its source and hope, was sounded with the realization that despite its power in limited regions, six things slip through its controlled experiments in the way sea slips through the nets of fishermen:

1. *Values*. Science can deal with descriptive and instrumental values, but not with intrinsic and normative ones.
2. *Meanings*. Science can work with cognitive meanings, but not with existential meanings (Is X meaningful?), or ultimate ones (What is the meaning of life?).
3. *Purposes*. Science can handle teleonomy— purposiveness in organisms— but not teleology, final causes.
4. *Qualities*. Quantities science is good at, but not qualities.
5. *The invisible and the immaterial*. It can work with invisibles that are rigorously entailed by matter's behaviour (the movements of iron filings that require magnetic fields to account for them, e.g.) but not with others.

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6. *Our superiors, if such exist.* This limitation does not prove that beings greater than ourselves exist, but it does leave the question open, for “absence of evidence is not evidence of absence”.
- <sup>11</sup> There is no consensual worldview. The incredulity takes many forms and the discourse grew increasingly shrill. Minimally, it contented itself with pointing out that “we have no maps and don’t know how to make them.” Hardliners added, “and never again will we have a consensual worldview! In short, our contemporary discourse is filled with voices critiquing the truncated worldview of the Enlightenment, but from that reasonable beginning it plunges on to argue unreasonably that world-views (or grand narratives) are misguided in principle. Already at the opening of the last century, when Postmodernism had not yet emerged on the scene, Yeats was warning that things were falling apart, that the centre didn’t hold. Gertrude Stein followed him by noting that “in the twentieth century nothing is in agreement with anything else,” and Ezra Pound saw man as “hurling himself at indomitable chaos”—the most durable line from the play *Green Pastures* has been, “Everything that’s tied down is coming loose.” T. S. Eliot found “The Wasteland” and “The Hollow Men” as appropriate metaphors for the outward and the inward aspects of our predicament. It is not surprising, therefore, that when in her last interview Rebecca West was asked to name the dominant mood of our time, she replied, “A desperate search for a pattern.” The search is desperate because it seems futile to look for a pattern when reality has become, in Roland Barth’s vivid image, kaleidoscopic. With every tick of the clock the pieces of experience come down in new array. The views about the prevailing human predicament converge. Fresh “infusions” are needed. The opinions about the nature and origin of these fresh “infusions” that could rectify or change it for the better are, however, divergent. Some of our cotemporaries try to find an alternative from within the dominant paradigm. Others suggest the possibility of a search for these fresh “infusions” in a different direction: different cultures, other civilizations, religious doctrines, sapiential traditions.
- <sup>12</sup> This is a remark by Alex Comfort. I do not remember the context at the moment.
- <sup>13</sup> When Carl Sagan opened his television series, *Cosmos*, by announcing that “the Cosmos is all that is or ever was or ever will be,” he presented that unargued assumption as if it were a scientific fact.
- <sup>14</sup> Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan, *Maqālat i Sir Sayyid*, Ed. S. M. Ismā‘īl Pānīpatī, Majlis i Taraqqi i Adab, Lahore, 1964, Vol. VI, pp. 146-7.
- <sup>15</sup> As E. F. Schumacher reflected toward the close of his life: *most of the things that most of humanity has most believed in did not appear on the map of reality his Oxford education handed him as it launched him on life’s adventure.*
- <sup>16</sup> Intellectual historians tell us that by the nineteenth century Westerners were already more certain that atoms exist than they were confident of any of the distinctive things the Bible speaks of.
- <sup>17</sup> Edward Feser, *Scholastic Metaphysics*, Editiones Scholasticae, Germany, 2014, p. 23.
- <sup>18</sup> There is no doubt that the theories of science constitute trustworthy knowledge, because they are verifiable and enable us to predict and control the events of Nature. But we must not forget that what is called science is not a single systematic view of Reality. It is a mass of sectional views of Reality—fragments of a total experience which do not seem to fit together. Natural Science deals with matter, with life, and with mind; but the moment you ask

the question how matter, life, and mind are mutually related, you begin to see the sectional character of the various sciences that deal with them and the inability of these sciences, taken singly, to furnish a complete answer to your question. In fact, the various natural sciences are like so many vultures falling on the dead body of Nature, and each running away with a piece of its flesh. Nature as the subject of science is a highly artificial affair, and this artificiality is the result of that selective process to which science must subject her in the interests of precision. The moment you put the subject of science in the total of human experience it begins to disclose a different character. Thus religion, which demands the whole of Reality and for this reason must occupy a central place in any synthesis of all the data of human experience, has no reason to be afraid of any sectional views of Reality. Natural Science is by nature sectional; it cannot, if it is true to its own nature and function, set up its theory as a complete view of Reality. Muhammad Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, Iqbal Academy Pakistan/Institute of Islamic Culture, Lahore, 1989, p. 26.

- <sup>19</sup> And their interface is being addressed today with a zeal that has not been seen since modern science arose.
- <sup>20</sup> Here and there diehards turn up— Richard Dawkins, who likens belief in God to belief in fairies, and Daniel Dennett, with his claim that John Locke's belief that mind must precede matter was born of the kind of conceptual paralysis that is now as obsolete as the quill pen! But these echoes of Julian Huxley's pronouncement around mid-century that "it will soon be as impossible for an intelligent or educated man or woman to believe in god as it is now to believe that the earth is flat" are now pretty much recognized as polemical bluster.
- <sup>21</sup> His critics may like to add here that, perhaps, he also believed that the standard bearers of modern science, the British, were also there to stay!
- <sup>22</sup> Iqbal, "Shaykh i Maktab", *Kulliyat i Iqbal*, Urdu, Iqbal Academy Pakistan, Lahore, 1994, p. 494.
- <sup>23</sup> Iqbal, *Kulliyat i Iqbal*, Urdu, Iqbal Academy Pakistan, Lahore, 1994, p. 275.
- <sup>24</sup> Ernest Gellner defines Postmodernism as relativism—"relativismus über Alles" (Postmodernism, Reason and Religion)— but relativism is not an easy position to defend, so Postmoderns do everything they can to avoid that label; Clifford Geertz's "anti-antirelativism" is a case in point. The T-shirts that blossomed on the final day of a six-week, 1987 NEH Institute probably tell the story. Superimposed on a slashed circle, their logo read, "No cheap relativism". By squirming, Postmoderns can parry crude relativisms, but sophisticated relativism is still relativism. Postmoderns resist that conclusion, however, so I shall stay with their own self-characterization.
- <sup>25</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, Minneapolis, Minnesota University Press, 1984, pp. xxiv, 3ff.
- <sup>26</sup> Alan Wallace, *Choosing Reality*, Boston and Shaftsbury, Shambala, 1989.
- <sup>27</sup> Near the start of modern science, Francis Bacon stated this with characteristic vividness. He likened teleological explanations in science to virgins dedicated to God: "barren of empirical fruit for the good of man."
- <sup>28</sup> The famous Justice Holmes has also this to say on science-religion splice: "Science Makes Major Contributions to Minor Needs."

