

# Biography of Hakim al-Umma Mawlana Ashraf 'Ali Thanawi

Mawlana Ashraf 'Ali Thanawi, referred to by many South Asian Muslims as Hakim al-Umma ("Spiritual Physician of the Muslim Umma") and Mujaddid al-Milla ("Reformer of the Nation"), is a towering figure of Islamic revival and reawakening of South Asia in the twentieth century. Mawlana Thanawi was the "most eminent religious figure of his time, a prolific author, and believed to be the greatest Sufi of modern India."

"He led a very active life, teaching, preaching, writing, lecturing, and making occasional journeys" (Naeem 94). The distinguishing mark and guiding principle that led to the vast success of his message was a remarkable sense of balance and straightforwardness in his speeches and writings. Mawlana Thanawi was an exemplar of the Qur'anic verse "And thus have We made you a nation justly balanced, that you might be witnesses over mankind" (Qur'an 2:143). An astounding, comprehensive knowledge of all branches of Islamic learning was evident in his personality, explicated in his lectures, and recorded in his writings. The Indian jurist Qadi Muja-hid al-Islam Qasimi said, "It is hard to think of an area of Islamic sciences left unattended by his writings" (Zayd 11).

His religious approach encompasses all aspects of the subject under discussion, and his viewpoints on different issues reflect a genuine, thorough examination of traditional Islamic thought. His acute intelligence, revolutionary method of training and teaching, love of Allah and His Messenger (Allah bless him and give him peace), organized management of time, broadmindedness, tolerance, and unique and fresh, yet conservative, understanding of religious disciplines has etched him a permanent place in Islamic history.

He will be remembered as a reformer of the masses, an exemplary spiritual guide (shaykh), a prolific author, a spiritual jurist, an intellectual sage, and a fortifier of Islamic tradition who, at a time when Muslims were physically and intellectually attacked by Western colonial powers, supplied them with literary and academic firepower in the form of his speeches, writings, legal verdicts (fatawa), and spiritual training (tarbiya) to battle all irreligious influences of the Modern Age. Describing the great religious services and endeavors of Mawlana Thanawi, Mufti Muhammad Taqi 'Uthmani writes, "The likeness of his accomplishments is not found in many preceding centuries" (Hakim al-Ummat ke siyasi afkar 22).

## Birth and Upbringing

Mawlana Ashraf 'Ali Thanawi, named 'Abd al-Ghani by his paternal family, was born in the village of Thana Bhawan (in the Muzaffarnagar district of the Uttar Pradesh province of India) on the fifth of Rabi' al-Awwal, 1280 ah (August 19, 1863 CE). He was named Ashraf 'Ali by the renowned saint of the times Hafiz Ghulam Murtada Panipati, who was a maternal relative of Mawlana Thanawi.

His family was well-respected and held an eminent position in Thana Bhawan. His father, 'Abd al-Haq, was a wealthy landowner, a devout Muslim, and a respected citizen of Thana Bhawan. 'Abd al-Haq was well versed in the Persian language, and although he had not memorized the Qur'an, he knew the Holy Book so well that he would sometimes correct the recitation of the imam during prayer. Mawlana Ashraf 'Ali Thanawi's lineage can be traced back to the second Caliph of Islam, 'Umar ibn al-Khattab, a glimpse of whose intelligence, wisdom, foresightedness, piety, and sincerity was certainly visible in Mawlana Thanawi.

As a young boy, he was zealous in offering the prayer (salat), and by age twelve, he was constant in offering the night vigil prayer (Tahajjud). He attained his early Arabic and Persian education under his maternal uncle Wajid 'Ali and Mawlana Fath Muhammad in Thana Bhawan and also memorized the Holy Qur'an at a very young age from Hafiz Husayn 'Ali of Meerut.

## **Traditional Islamic Studies at Dar al-'Ulum Deoband**

In 1295 ah, Mawlana Thanawi enrolled at the prestigious Dar al-'Ulum Deoband, from where he graduated in 1301 ah, after studying under some of the most erudite Islamic theologians of his time. Among his teachers were Mawlana Muhammad Qasim Nanotwi, Mawlana Rashid Ahmad Gangohi, Mawlana Muhammad Ya'qub Nanotwi, and Shaykh al-Hind Mawlana Mahmud al-Hasan. Mawlana Thanawi's six years at Deoband were spent under the tutorship and guidance of God-fearing men, many of whom were the spiritual students of Haji Imdadullah Muhajir Makki.

The spiritually charged atmosphere of Dar al-'Ulum Deoband, coupled with brilliant teachers and Mawlana Thanawi's own intelligence and piety, together contributed to the excellence of theory and practice that was manifested in his personality. His literary life began at Dar al-'Ulum Deoband, when he wrote *Mathnawi zer-o bam* in Persian at the age of eighteen. He possessed unmatched linguistic skills and mastered the Arabic, Persian, and Urdu languages by the same age.

### **Teacher of the Teachers**

Mawlana Thanawi did not have many opportunities to study under the founder of Dar al-'Ulum Deoband, Mawlana Qasim Nanotwi, whose last year [of life] coincided with Mawlana Thanawi's first year there. However, Mawlana Thanawi mentions that he would occasionally attend the lectures of Mawlana Qasim Nanotwi on *Tafsir al-Jalalayn* (a renowned exegesis of the Holy Qur'an by Jalal al-Din al-Mahalli and his famous student Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti). The two personalities from whom Mawlana Thanawi greatly benefited were Mawlana Rashid Ahmad Gangohi and Mawlana Muhammad Ya'qub Nanotwi.

Mawlana Thanawi said, "Among my teachers, I was spiritually attached to Mawlana Gangohi more than anybody else, with the exception of Haji Imdadullah Muhajir Makki. I have never witnessed such a unique personage, one in whom external and internal goodness merged so cohesively, like Mawlana Rashid Ahmad Gangohi" (Alwi 51). Mawlana Thanawi received much affection and spiritual training from Mawlana Gangohi as well. Upon the arrival of Mawlana Thanawi, Mawlana Gangohi would say, "When you arrive, I become alive" (Alwi 52). Once Mawlana Thanawi came to Gangoh to deliver a lecture. Mawlana Gangohi sent all his visitors to attend this lecture, saying to them, "What are you doing here? Go and listen to the lecture of a truthful scholar." Mawlana Gangohi would also send some of his students to Thana Bhawan to benefit from the ocean of knowledge and spirituality that was Ashraf 'Ali Thanawi.

Mawlana Thanawi was also deeply inspired by Mawlana Muhammad Ya'qub Nanotwi, a devout theologian and a divine mystic. Mawlana Ya'qub had sensed that Ashraf 'Ali was an unusual student, endowed with extraordinary traits. As a result, Mawlana Ya'qub would make sure to include the most intricate discussions while teaching this bright student. Mawlana Thanawi, describing the lectures of Mawlana Ya'qub, said, "His lectures were not ordinary lectures, but sessions in which one's attention turned toward Allah. He would be teaching exegesis of the Holy Qur'an and tears would be flowing down his cheeks" (Alwi 51).

### **Graduation and Future Scope**

Mawlana Thanawi graduated from Dar al-'Ulum Deoband in 1301 ah (1884 CE). When Mawlana Rashid Ahmad Gangohi arrived for the graduation ceremony, Shaykh al-Hind Mahmud al-Hasan in-

formed him that on that day a very bright and intelligent student would be graduating. Mawlana Gangohi wished to test this bright student. Hence, before the actual ceremony, Mawlana Gangohi asked Mawlana Thanawi the most difficult questions he could think of. His answers amazed and pleased Mawlana Gangohi (Quraishi 14).

At the graduation, the turban-tying ceremony (Dastar bandi) was carried out by Mawlana Rashid Ahmad Gangohi. The graduation ceremony of that year stood out from the past and was celebrated with great enthusiasm and joy by the teachers of Deoband. At this occasion, Mawlana Thanawi, with some classmates, said to his teacher Mawlana Ya 'qub, "We are not deserving of such a celebration and our graduation might bring derision to Dar al- 'Ulum Deoband." Upon hearing this concern from Mawlana Thanawi, Mawlana Ya 'qub became incensed and said, "This thinking of yours is completely wrong! At Dar al- 'Ulum Deoband, you perceive of your personality as very meek and insignificant because of your teachers, and in fact, this is how you should feel. But once you graduate and step out of this institution, you will realize your worth and importance. I swear by Allah, you will prevail and become dominant wherever you go; the field is open and empty [before you]" (Alwi 53). After graduating from Deoband, Mawlana Thanawi accompanied his father to the holy cities of Makka and Madina. After performing his first pilgrimage (hajj), Mawlana Thanawi mastered the art of Qur'anic recitation under Qari Muhammad 'Abdullah Muhajir Makki. In Makka he also had the opportunity to stay in the companionship of Haji Imdadullah Muhajir Makki, whose spiritual attention, luminous personality, brilliant teachings, and excellent methodology of training prepared Mawlana Thanawi for the great reform movement he was destined to lead.

### **Spiritual Training under Haji Imdadullah**

The Messenger of Allah (Allah bless him and give him peace) said, "Make the company of 'ulama' compulsory upon yourselves and listen to the words of the wise, for Allah Most Exalted restores life to dead hearts by the light of wisdom just as He makes alive the dead earth by rain" ('Asqalani 25). Companionship of a pious, God-fearing shaykh is necessary for each and every Muslim. Through the knowledge of books, one's external self is reformed, and through the companionship of a shaykh, one's internal condition is purified. Mawlana Thanawi was greatly concerned about focusing on his internal rectification. During his studies at Dar al- 'Ulum Deoband, he asked that Mawlana Rashid Ahmad Gangohi train him in the spiritual sciences as well. However, Mawlana Gangohi advised him to wait until the completion of his traditional studies.

Mawlana Thanawi remained restless and sought a way to ask Haji Imdadullah, the spiritual guide of Mawlana Gangohi, to recommend him to Mawlana Gangohi. When Mawlana Gangohi went on hajj, Mawlana Thanawi sent a letter with him to Haji Imdadullah, requesting the great mentor to persuade Mawlana Gangohi to initiate him in his spiritual order. Haji Imdadullah put in a good word for Mawlana Thanawi and then said, "All right, I shall initiate him myself," and wrote to Mawlana Thanawi, "Do not worry. I have taken you under my own mentorship." When Mawlana Thanawi read the letter his heart became full of joy. Mawlana Gangohi used to say to Mawlana Thanawi, "Brother, you have eaten of the ripe fruits of Haji Imdadullah, whereas we ate his unripe fruits" (Alwi 52). Fruits refer to knowledge. Mawlana Gangohi and his peers received the spiritual guidance of Haji Imdadullah when he was still in the Indian Subcontinent, and Mawlana Thanawi benefited from him in his last years. Hence, the training of Haji Imdadullah in the later years of his life is compared to ripe fruits and his earlier training to unripe fruits.

Mawlana Thanawi visited Haji Imdadullah during his first hajj in 1301 ah (1884 CE) but could not remain in his company for long. In 1310 ah (1893 CE), Mawlana Thanawi left for the pilgrimage a second time and, after performing the hajj, stayed with his shaykh for six months.

### **Strengthening Knowledge through Teaching**

Fourteen years after graduation were spent teaching religious sciences in the city of Kanpur. Over a very short period of time, Mawlana Thanawi acquired a reputable position as a sound religious scholar. His teaching attracted many students, and his research and publications enhanced Islamic academia. In these fourteen years, he traveled to many cities and villages, delivering lectures in hope of reforming people. Printed versions of his lectures and discourses would usually become available shortly after these tours. Until then, very few scholars in the history of Islam had their lectures printed and widely circulated in their own lifetimes. The desire to reform the masses intensified in his heart during his stay at Kanpur.

Eventually, in 1315 ah, he retired from teaching and devoted himself to reestablishing the spiritual center (khanqah) of his shaykh in Thana Bhawan. Upon this transition, Haji Imdadullah remarked, “It is good that you came to Thana Bhawan. It is hoped that the masses will benefit from you spiritually and physically. You should engage yourself in revitalizing our school (madrassa) and spiritual center (khanqah) once more in Thana Bhawan. As for myself, I am always praying for you and attentive toward you” (Alwi 58).

### **Mastership in Islamic Spirituality (Tasawwuf)**

A master of Islamic spirituality, Mawlana Thanawi was “widely considered the preeminent Sufi of modern India” (Metcalf 157). His approach to tasawwuf was in complete harmony with the Qur’an and hadith. Accurately summarizing the approach of the scholars associated with Dar al-‘Ulum Deoband, regarding Sufism, Kenneth W. Jones writes:

Deobandis conceived of Islam as having two points of focus, Shari‘a (the law, based on scriptures and religious knowledge), and the Tariqa (path, derived from religious experience). Thus they accepted Sufism with its form of discipline and the role of the ‘ulama’ in interpreting the four schools of Islamic law. The Qur’an, the hadith, qiyas (analogical reasoning), and ijma’ (consensus) provided the foundation of religious knowledge, but understanding them required the ‘ulama’ as guides. Uneducated Muslims could not make judgments on belief or practice. The Deobandis, while accepting Sufism, rejected numerous ceremonies and the authority of pirs who claimed sanctity by their descent rather than by their learning. Knowledge granted authority and not inheritance. Pilgrimages to saints’ tombs, and the annual death rites of a particular saint (the urs) also lay outside acceptable Islamic practice. Among the types of behavior seen as erroneous innovations was any social or religious practice that appeared to come from Hindu culture (Jones 60).

The scholars of Deoband purified Islamic mysticism in the Indian subcontinent from all un-Islamic elements and practiced a tasawwuf that earlier Muslims, such as Hasan al-Basri, Junayd al-Baghdadi, and ‘Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani would advocate if they were living in the twentieth century. Pure, unadulterated Sufism is an important part of the Islamic faith. Dar al-‘Ulum Deoband trained individuals to become rational scholars as well as sound practitioners of tasawwuf. Through the Deoband movement, Islamic history once more witnessed the combination of the jurist and the mystic into a well-rounded Islamic scholar. In choosing “Muftis and Shaykhs” as the title of a chapter in her well-researched monograph *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860–1900*, Barbara Daly Metcalf emphasizes this beautiful combination.

## Effectiveness of Spiritual Efforts

Imam Shafi 'i said, "Knowledge is not what is memorized; knowledge is what benefits" (Nawawi 43). Mawlana Thanawi's knowledge was such that it not only benefited its contemplator, but continues to benefit Muslims all over the world. The words of Mawlana Thanawi would flow into the ears of the attendants of his discourses and then would strike their hearts, scraping away their spiritual rust. Mufti Muhammad Shafi ', former head mufti of Dar al- 'Ulum Deoband and later the Grand Mufti of Pakistan, after the partition of India, would sit in front of Mawlana Thanawi as a student of traditional Islamic studies sits before his teacher. "He would closely observe Mawlana Thanawi, and each move of his showed that he had left this world and whatever was in it while engaging in the study of his shaykh's appearance. When Mawlana Thanawi would say something remarkable, Mufti Muhammad Shafi ', who seemed totally absorbed in his shaykh while unconscious of everything else, would leap forward in excitement" ('Uthmani, Akabir-e Deoband kya the? 30).

Mufti Muhammad Taqi 'Uthmani says,

Hakim al-Umma laid great stress on prescribing proper remedies for the spiritual ailments of people. This cure was not to give them some sort of medicinal syrup or to engage in some formulas (wazifas), but his prescribed remedy comprised action (Irshadat-e akabir 25).

## Students and Disciples

Mawlana Thanawi's students and disciples constitute a generation of leading scholars of South Asia. His disciples settled in all parts of South Asia and served humanity in many different ways. Among his famous disciples are Qari Muhammad Tayyib Qasimi (grandson of the founder of Dar al- 'Ulum Deoband, Mawlana Muhammad Qasim Nanotwi, and head principal of Dar al- 'Ulum Deoband for over fifty years, from the early 1930s to the early 1980s), Mawlana Muhammad Masihullah Khan (founder of Madrasa Miftah al- 'Ulum in Jalalabad, India, and a leading spiritual figure of the past century), Mufti Muhammad Shafi ' (head mufti of Dar al- 'Ulum Deoband before partition and, after migrating to Pakistan, founder of Dar al- 'Ulum Karachi, one of the largest academies of religious sciences today in Pakistan, and, also the former Grand Mufti of Pakistan), Mufti Muhammad Hasan of Amritsar (founder of Jami 'a Ashrafiyya, Lahore, Pakistan), Mawlana Khayr Muhammad Jalandhary (founder of Jami 'a Khayr al-Madaris, Multan, Pakistan), Mawlana 'Abd al-Bari Nadwi (renowned theologian and philosopher in India who taught modern philosophy at Osmania University in Hyderabad and translated the books of Western philosophers, such as Descartes, into Urdu and left behind many valuable literary tracts), Sayyid Sulayman Nadwi (great researcher and the outstanding student of Shibli Nu 'mani who turned to Mawlana Thanawi for spiritual reformation), Mawlana Muhammad Ilyas (founder of the Tabligh Movement), Mawlana 'Abd al-Majid Daryabadi, Mawlana Athar 'Ali of Silhet, Mawlana Shams al-Haqq Faridpuri, Mawlana Muhammad 'Abd al-Ghani Phulpuri, Mawlana Shah Muhammad Abrar al- Haqq of Hardoi, Khwaja 'Aziz al-Hasan Majdhub (great poet and mystic, author of Ashraf al-sawanih, a four volume biography of Mawlana Thanawi), Mawlana Muhammad Idris Kandhlawi (author of Ma'arif al-Qur'an, a commentary of the Qur'an, and Al-Ta'liq al- sabih, a commentary of Tabrizi's hadith collection Mishkat al-Masabih), Mawlana Zafar Ahmad 'Uthmani (author of the twenty-two volume compendium in Hanafi Law, I'la' al-Sunan), Mufti Jamil Ahmad Thanawi, Mawlana Shabbir 'Ali Thanawi, Dr. 'Abd al- Hayy 'Arifi, Mawlana Muhammad 'Isa of Allahabad, Mawlana 'Abd al-Hamid of North Waziristan, Mawlana 'Abd al-Salam of Nawshehra, Mawlana Muhammad Sa 'id of Madras, Mawlana Wasi'ullah of Fatehpur, Mawlana 'Abd al-Rahman Kamilpuri, Mawlana Jalil Ahmad of Aligarh, Maw-

lana Murtada Hasan of Chandpur, Mawlana Asadullah of Rampur (head principal of Madrasa Mazahir 'Ulum in Saharanpur for many years), Mawlana Faqir Muhammad of Peshawar, Mawlana Muhammad Yusuf Binnori (author of Ma'arif al-Sunan, a commentary on the Sunan of Imam Tirmidhi), Mawlana Muhammad Na'im of Kabul, and Mufti 'Abd al-Karim of Gamthla.

### **Literary Contributions**

Mawlana Thanawi was a prolific author. His literary contributions “range from 800 to 1000 in the shape of sermons, discussions, discourses, treatises, and books of high standard and quality” (Khwaja vii). Sayyid Sulayman Nadwi said, “Mawlana Thanawi was a translator and exegete (mufassir) of the Qur'an. He explained its injunctions and wisdoms. He removed doubts and answered questions pertaining to the Qur'an. Mawlana Thanawi was a scholar of hadith (muhaddith) and expounded its intricacies and subtleties. He was a jurist (faqih) who issued thousands of legal rulings (fatawa). He solved many legal problems in contemporary issues in Islamic jurisprudence and answered them with the utmost caution and credible research. He was a moving orator (khatib) whose speech was infused with all skills of oration. He was an excellent admonisher (wa'iz) and hundreds of his speeches have been published and widely circulated.

Mawlana Thanawi was a mystic (Sufi) who revealed the secrets and subtleties of Islamic mysticism. His personality put an end to the battle that had been going on for some time between Shari'a and tasawwuf by unifying these two essential parts of Islam” (Alwi 293). His books answered the objections raised against Islam by Orientalists and Modernists. “[His] analysis and refutation of the principles of modernism is not a merely theoretical exercise, but is meant to remove the obstacles to intellectual and spiritual understanding and growth for the pious and practicing Muslim” (Naeem 81).

His Arabic writings include Sabq al-ghayat fi nasaq al-ayat, Anwar al-Wujud, Al-Tajalli wa 'l-azim, Hawashi Tafsir Bayan al-Qur'an, Taswir al-muqatta'at, Al-Talkhisat al-'ashar, Mi'at durus, Al-Khutab alma'thura, Wujud al-Mathani, Ziyadat, Jami' al-Athar, and Ta'yid al-Haqiqah.

Among his Persian books are Mathnawi zer-o bam, Ta'liqat-e Farsi, 'Aqa'id baniy-e kalij.

The rest of his books were written in the Urdu language, the most famous of which is Behishti Zewar [Heavenly Ornaments], which has become a handbook for leading an Islamic life in the Muslim household. Although Mawlana Thanawi was the most prolific author of his times, he did not use any of his books as a source of income.

### **Qur'an: The Special Interest of Mawlana Thanawi**

During his teaching career at Kanpur, Mawlana Thanawi is reported to have seen 'Abdullah Ibn 'Abbas—the cousin of the Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace) and the leading commentator on the Qur'an among the Companions—in a dream that indicated to him that Qur'anic exegesis should become his primary task (Alwi 297). Sayyid Sulayman Nadwi said, “He not only memorized the words of the Qur'an but also memorized the deeper significance of these words” (Alwi 297). He further said, “He was an exceptional reciter (qari) of the Qur'an who had mastered the art of recitation.... The uniqueness of Mawlana Thanawi's recitation of the Qur'an was such that each letter was uttered from its proper place of pronunciation ( makhraj). There was no imitation or overly exertive effort to make his voice melodious. He would rather recite in his normal voice, which was full of inspiration and absorbed

in reflection” (Alwi 297).

Mawlana Thanawi was also an expert in the various recitations of the Qur’an. In fact, he compiled the famous narrations of the different recitations in his book *Wujuh al-Mathani* and the rare narrations in his book *Ziyadat ‘Ala kutub al-riwayat*. Mawlana Thanawi’s books on recitation of the Qur’an also included *Jamal al-Qur’an*, *Tajwid al-Qur’an*, *Raf’ al-khilaf fi hukm al-awqaf*, *Tanshit al-tab’ fi ijra’ al-sab’*, *Yadgar-e haqq-e Qur’an*, *Mutasha-bi-hat al-Qur’an li ‘l-Tarawih*, and *Adab al-Qur’an*. Mawlana Thanawi’s profound knowledge and insight in the Qur’an is reflected in his Urdu translation of the meanings of the Qur’an. His twelve volume exegesis, *Bayan al-Qur’an*, can only be appreciated by a scholar who studies it after having read more than twenty commentaries on the Qur’an (Alwi 323). Sayyid Sulayman Nadwi said, “His commentary relies heavily on *Ruh al-Ma’ani* of ‘Allama Alusi al-Baghdadi, and because it was written in the mid-thirteenth century ah, it encompasses all previous explanations of the Qur’an” (Alwi 299).

Like Jassas and other scholars, Mawlana Thanawi also wished to collect legal rulings from the Qur’an in support of the Hanafi school. However, his increasingly frail health in the last years of his life did not allow for him to directly author this work, which he wished to name *Dala’il al-Qur’an ‘ala madhhab al-Nu‘man*. Instead, this academic desire of Mawlana Thanawi was fulfilled by three of his outstanding students and disciples who noted down his explanations of legal rulings and their extractions from the Qur’an. This Arabic work of Qur’anic jurisprudence, entitled *Ahkam al-Qur’an li ‘l-Thanawi*, is available in five volumes and is co-authored by Mufti Muhammad Shafi’, Mawlana Muhammad Idris Kandhlawi, and Mawlana Zafar Ahmad ‘Uthmani. Mawlana ‘Abd al-Bari Nadwi said,

When Mawlana Thanawi extracted Hanafi legal matters from the Qur’an, we would be astonished that this point was always in this verse but our knowledge could not grasp it. His explanations would remove the clouds [of confusion], allowing us to fully benefit from the brilliant rays [of knowledge]” (Alwi 303).

### **Mawlana Thanawi: A Caller to Allah**

Preaching Islam and calling people to the way of Allah Almighty was an essential part of Mawlana Thanawi’s life. He would be highly organized and plan his lecture tours well in advance. Thousands used to attend these lectures, which usually lasted two to three hours and some even up to five hours. Mawlana Thanawi also undertook a visit to the area of Mewat, where Muslims were at the verge of disbelief. His first visit to this area was in 1922, when he visited Alwar. Mawlana Thanawi also paid a visit to Gajner, a village in the Kanpur district (U.P.), when the Arya Samaj started to preach Hinduism among the Muslims of that area. Using wisdom and tolerance, Mawlana Thanawi was able to take a pledge from the people there “that they would not commit apostasy” (Masud lv). To prevent the spread of apostasy, he wrote the treatise *Al-Insidad li fitnat al-irtidad* [The eradication of the evils of apostasy] (Masud liv).

### **Rooting Out Irreligious Practices**

Every true Islamic reformer roots out the irreligious practices people perform in the name of religion. Through his speeches and writings, Mawlana Thanawi battled against all evil innovations in religion and presented Islam as it stood in light of the Qur’an and *h ad i th*. Mawlana Thanawi was deeply concerned about the ignorance of those Muslims who performed many unnecessary acts perceiving them to be righteous acts of religion. Hence, he wrote many books that dealt with this subject. His book *Hifz al-iman* clearly explains the evils in acts such as grave worshipping, beseeching other than Allah, believing in

the omnipresence of the Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace) and pious people, and so on. Another work entitled *Aghlat al-'awam* is an earnest effort to root out all un-Islamic rituals prevalent among people. Innovations in belief, worship, and transactions are condemned in this book. Mawlana Thanawi's balanced approach places all religious injunctions in their proper place without excess (ifrat) or shortcoming (tafrit).

### **Embodiment of Humility and Simplicity**

Mufti Muhammad Taqi 'Uthmani says that Hakim al-Umma Mawlana Ashraf 'Ali Thanawi used to say, "I consider myself inferior to every Muslim at the present time and possibly inferior to every non-Muslim with respect to the future" (*Irshadate akabir* 25). He meant that at this time, I am inferior to every Muslim, and inferior to every non-Muslim with respect to the future, because a non-Muslim may accept Islam in the future and become more advanced than myself. Mawlana Thanawi was more concerned with rectifying his own self than correcting others. Once, when he had to deliver many lectures, he said, "Whenever I find the need of reforming myself, I speak on that specific shortcoming of mine. This method is very beneficial. My speech entitled *Ghadab (Anger)* is an example of this" (Alwi 131). Once, after praising Allah, Mawlana Thanawi said, "I am never unmindful of reckoning with my own self. Whenever I admonish a disciple of mine, I also inspect my own self and continuously seek Allah's protection from His reckoning" (Alwi 131).

### **Mawlana Thanawi and Politics**

Mawlana Thanawi was not a politician, Mufti Muhammad Taqi 'Uthmani explains, "nor was politics his subject of interest" (*Hakim al-Ummat ke siyasi afkar* 22). However, Islam is a lifestyle that encompasses all human activities and provides clear and complete guidelines for all aspects of life. Thus, at appropriate places in his speeches and writings, Mawlana Thanawi does comment on politics and provides his useful explanation in that field. While battling secularism, many contemporary Muslims perceived Islam as a branch of government and politics. Mawlana Thanawi proved, mainly using Qur'anic verses, that political rule is only a means of instituting Islam in our lives and not the purpose of life itself. All modern political notions in contradiction with the Qur'an and Hadith would have to be forsaken, and the pure, untainted political thought reflected in the Qur'an and Hadith should guide the Muslims in organizing and structuring their governments (see *Hakim al-Ummat ke siyasi afkar*).

### **Death of a Great Sage**

Mawlana Thanawi toiled to reform the masses and trained a large number of disciples who spread all over the South Asian Subcontinent. None can deny that his efforts brought a large number of Muslims back to the true teachings of Islam. Mawlana Thanawi passed away in his hometown of Thana Bhawan on Rajab 2, 1362 ah (July 4, 1943 CE). His funeral prayer was led by his nephew, the great scholar of hadith Mawlana Zafar Ahmad 'Uthmani, and he was buried in the 'Ishq-e Bazan graveyard. Mawlana Thanawi will be remembered for his inspiring, lucid, and rational writing, balanced approach, and reformative teachings. These still serve many Muslims today in helping them understand the Qur'an and the Sunna.

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