

## Dr. Abidullah Ghazi: *Mujāhid* or/awr *Mujtahid*

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These brief reflections are based on a presentation originally delivered at a function convened in 2019 by to honor the scholarly, literary, and community service contributions of Dr. Abidullah Ghazi (d. 2021), born at Anbehta, Saharanpur, India, a graduate of AMU (1959), holder of a Ph.D. from the Divinity School of Harvard University (1973), who after a distinguished academic career in 1983 founded IQRA International Foundation based in Chicago with his wife, Dr. Tasneema Ghazi, to develop a curriculum for Muslim children being educated in fulltime or weekend Islamic schools. Abidullah Ghazi, in addition to being a scholar, was a well-known literary figure who made significant contributions to both Urdu prose and poetry.<sup>1</sup>

I was requested to provide an appreciation in the capacity of my being a professor of Islamic Studies at Loyola University Chicago. However, my personal connection to Dr. Ghazi began much earlier in the 1980s since we share a connection to San Diego in that we each taught Islam for a time in the Religion Department at San Diego State University.

This was a challenging assignment for a number of reasons. In terms of the academic posting, this particular department and institution, at least during this period, had a tendency to be inhospitable to Muslims. Furthermore, the small Muslim community in San Diego during the 1970s

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<sup>1</sup> The reader may further be referred to a collection of his poetry: ‘Ābidullāh Ghāzī, *Zikr-e-saman-e-‘adhārān: majmū’a-e-kalām* 1947-2002 (‘Alīgarh: Idāra-e tahdhīb-e-jadīd, 2002) and a volume of tributes entitled *Ahl-e-fikr-o-fann kī nazār mein dākṭar ‘Ābidullāh Ghāzī ‘ālamī shakhṣiyat awr kārhāee’ numāyān* ed. Shahbāz Kanwāl Ghāzī (Chicago/Mumbai: Iqra International, 2017) as well as his prose work *Ṣarīr-e-khāma* (‘Alīgarh: Idāra-e tahdhīb-e-jadīd, 2004) which consists of a compilation of prose essays on topics related to the state of Muslim societies, Muslims in India, education, and social activism.

and early 1980s had a predominantly Arab Salafi orientation. There were only a few South Asian Muslim families and Dr. Ghazi and I shared in our respective times there, a friendship with the Bari family, who used to regale me with stories of the Ghazi family's positive impact on building a Muslim community in the area, and how they had moved to Chicago and set up the Iqra International Foundation. For this reason, I mentioned the Dr. Ghazi and Iqra in an article that I wrote on the "Muslim Community in San Diego".<sup>2</sup> It was only in the 1990s when I moved to Chicago that I established a personal link to the Ghazis and Iqra, even serving for a time on its Board.

Many of us may not remember or may have not been in America long enough to recall the challenges facing Muslim immigrants and other Muslims in the United States in that early period when there were few Islamic institutions or even mosques, and no Islamic schools. The unique qualification of the Ghazis, Abidullah and Tasneema, for their future project of envisioning what Islamic education in America should look like, are unparalleled. Each was steeped in Islamic learning and culture in their respective families and upbringings. Dr. Ghazi, was schooled in both Deobandi traditional approaches to hadith and fiqh and the Aligarhian synthesis of Islamic studies and modern sciences and analysis. Dr. Tasneema Ghazi brought a Ph.D. in Education from Minnesota with specializations in child development, curriculum, and reading to the project along with extensive Islamic knowledge.

Unfortunately, many of the Muslim immigrants to the US at that time were intoxicated with the ideas of political Islam and viewed education primarily as an instrument for the inculcation of what we later came to term "identity" Islam as an isolationist and triumphalist entity.

The project of Iqra was a natural and unique outcome of the challenges personally faced by the Ghazis in raising their children in America with positive and engaged Muslim values in the absence of supportive Muslim institutions—in other words, how do we impart Islamic character and identity without falling into simplistic rubrics of "us and them", good vs. bad, Islam vs. culture, etc. Their pioneering text for schoolchildren *We are Muslims*<sup>3</sup> is a case in point. Engagingly conceived and designed, this gateway to the Iqra curriculum for elementary grades 1-6 presented basic Islamic teachings using frameworks and strategies

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<sup>2</sup> Marcia Hermansen, "The Muslim Community of San Diego" in *Muslim Communities in America*, edited by Yvonne Haddad, (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994), 169-194, 177, 193.

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.iqra.org/We-Are-Muslims-Elementary-Grade-1-Textbook\\_p\\_309.html](https://www.iqra.org/We-Are-Muslims-Elementary-Grade-1-Textbook_p_309.html)

that took into account cognitive development theory, active learning, and visual appeal.

In brief, and this is the core of my remarks—I would characterize the efforts of Dr. Ghazi, both generally and in presenting Islamic Studies to the new generation, as a case of both *ijtihād* and *jihād*. *Ijtihād* applies to his scholarly effort involved in applying the authentic sources of Islam—Qur’an and sunna—in order to develop and articulate a framework for positive and engaged living in the broader society, or in a phrase often invoked by Dr. Ghazi, “the global village”.

Even today one finds all too often materials for Muslim children that promote identity in an “us vs. them” mode rather than inspiring a positive Islamic contribution to humanity. This leads me to mention the theme of one of Dr. Ghazi’s books—*insāniyat*.<sup>4</sup> According to one author—while *insāniyat* in the secular or general sense may be translated as “humanity”, “humaneness”, or “humanism”; in a spiritual or mystical sense the term *insāniyat* evokes the love inherent in the human condition that enables one to transcend the personal ego or identity in order to recognize the shared human condition.

In the preface to the book *Insāniyat* the noted literary figure Khālīq Anjum wrote with reference to Dr. Ghazi:

Every individual lives in a particular age, however, some people are such that they can inhabit multiple temporalities simultaneously. These are the people who are able to make a new message reach the next generation while at the same time they preserve and transmit the exalted virtuous standards of the previous generations.<sup>5</sup>

Is this not the very definition of *ijtihād*?

In his reflections on the Aligarh days of the 1950s in a work entitled: *Juhd-e musalsal*, (continuous effort or struggle) Dr. Ghazi reflects on his intellectual formation, mentioning how he imbibed the heritage of Deoband from his paternal forebears and the Sufi influence from the maternal side—then he further needed to harmonize and integrate this heritage with the new intellectual elements represented by Sir Sayyid Ahmed Khan and Aligarh.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> ‘Ābidullāh Ghāzī, *Insāniyyat*. (New Delhi: Anjumān-e taraqqī Urdu, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> Khālīq Anjum, preface (peish lafz) to *Insāniyyat*. (New Delhi: Anjumān-e taraqqī Urdu, 2010), 7.

<sup>6</sup> ‘Ābidullāh Ghāzī. *Juhd-e musalsal ‘Alīgarh see ‘Alīgarh tak* (1951-1959). (Chicago: Iqra International, 2017), 11. This book was reviewed by Afzal Usmani [http://www.aligarhmovement.com/aligarians/abidullah\\_ghazi/juhd-e-musalsal](http://www.aligarhmovement.com/aligarians/abidullah_ghazi/juhd-e-musalsal)

This was further enhanced by his doctoral studies at the Harvard Center for the Study of World Religions with the prominent scholar of Islam and Religious Studies Wilfred Cantwell Smith that further exposed Dr. Ghazi to interfaith understanding. It is noteworthy that in 2011 he returned to this doctoral research to publish *Raja Rammohun Roy: encounter with Islam and Christianity and the articulation of Hindu self-consciousness*.<sup>7</sup>

This leads me to two further brief observations about Dr. Ghazi's career: one is his exemplary commitment to life-long learning and scholarship, the second, his continuous intellectual and practical engagement with the betterment of the situation of Muslims in India. This engagement spans multiple spheres: literary, intellectual, political, and humanitarian. Dr. Ghazi is recognized as a significant Urdu poet and literary figure, his intellectual and, by extension, political work involves both original scholarship and the editing of Urdu and English works on relevant themes while his institutional and charitable activities are manifest in setting up branches of Iqra in several locations in India.

Dr. Ghazi himself frames the projects of working for global interfaith harmony and delivering the message of Islam in a manner consistent with the needs of a new era, as continuing goals of his life work, stating with characteristic humility:

Kab puree hu'ee *Ābid* joo kām thee karnee kee  
Kuch kar bhī diyā ṣāhib, kuch rah bhī gayā, ṣāhib  
When will this work of my mission be fulfilled O 'Ābid?

I have accomplished some things, while others still remain incomplete.

In summary, the translation and embodiment of diverse intellectual and spiritual currents into an ongoing and evolving curriculum of knowledge that simultaneously imparts traditional Islamic sources, concepts, and moral formation, while moving away from rote learning through adopting and implementing contemporary and creative pedagogy inspires students to make the tradition their own, regardless of place or time. This is an enduring contribution of Dr. Abidullah Ghazi (and of course Dr. Tasneema) through the materials and mission of the Iqra Foundation.

If Dr. Ghāzi is indeed to be characterized as a *mujāhid*, it is the *jihād* of the spirit and the pen—as he retorted in a notable couplet responding to the literary figure and Pakistani diplomat, Karāmat Ghaurī:

Ghaurī ho to kartā hai mazā'il peh baroosā

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<sup>7</sup> Abidullah Ghazi, *Raja Rammohun Roy: encounter with Islam and Christianity and the articulation of Hindu self-consciousness*. (Bloomington, Indiana: Exlibris, 2010).

Ghāzī ho to bē teigh bhī laRtā hai sepāhī

If you are a Ghaurī<sup>8</sup> then you will put your confidence in missiles

If you are a Ghāzī then even without a sword the soldier fights on.

In conclusion, I reprise the theme of the multi-dimensional efforts of Dr. Ghāzī whom we are honoring today, in presenting Islam while instilling virtues and selfless service, a work both of *ijtihād* and *jihād*—an ongoing struggle to maintain the authenticity of tradition and identity while being dedicated to the service of broader humanity. Citing the words of Iqbal from *Bāl-e Jibrīl*:

الفاظ و معانی میں تفاوت نہیں لیکن ملا کی اذیاں اور، مجاہد کی اذیاں اور  
پرواز ہے دونوں کی اسی ایک فضا میں کرگس کا جہاں اور ہے، شاہین کا جہاں اور  
(حال و مقام، بال جبریل)

*There is no discrepancy in terminology or meaning*

*Yet the call to prayer of the Mulla is distinct from that of the mujāhid*

*Although they fly in the same space*

*The world of the vulture is other than the world of the falcon.*

This poem recalls for me the wise adage of the late scholar of Christianity, Jaroslav Pelikan: “Tradition is the living faith of the dead, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living. And . . . it is traditionalism that gives tradition such a bad name.”<sup>9</sup>

Surely this is the meaning of *ijtihād*, that tradition should live and bestow life through a principle of movement and dynamism, the *jihād e-akbar* (greater struggle) that requires *juhd-e musalsal* (continuous and ongoing efforts).

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<sup>8</sup> Ghaurī also being the name given to a missile developed in Pakistan in the 1990s with reference to the historical figure, Sulṭān Muḥammad Ghaurī (d. 1206).

<sup>9</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Vindication of Tradition: 1983 Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 65.