



## ***Ta'rikh-e Masīh: Khwāja Ḥasan Nizāmī's "Life of Jesus"***<sup>1</sup>

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The 1920s was the most active decade in the political activism and publishing career of the Indian Muslim activist, Sufi, and literary figure, Khwāja Ḥasan Nizāmī (1879-1955). The text under consideration here, *Ta'rikh-e Masīh* (History of the Messiah) was issued in 1927,<sup>2</sup> but had apparently been under preparation by him for at least four or five years, beginning as early as 1922.<sup>3</sup> This article explores the major elements and perspectives represented in Nizāmī's work on Jesus in order to situate it within broader themes and issues surrounding Muslim-Christian dialogue in South Asia.

### **The Career of Khwāja Ḥasan Nizāmī**

Khwāja Ḥasan Nizāmī grew up among the custodians of one of the major Sufi institutions in India, the Nizāmuddīn shrine in Delhi. Breaking

<sup>1</sup> This article was written during the Coronavirus pandemic of 2020. I wish to acknowledge the invaluable service to knowledge of the websites Rekhta and Internet Archive in making available online versions of many of Nizāmī's books without which the background research could not have been accomplished. The library and librarians at Loyola University Chicago also facilitated access to ebooks and interlibrary sharing of published chapters and articles that were necessary for the project. This article was originally prepared as a chapter in a Festschrift for Christian Troll SJ as "An Indian Muslim 'Life of Jesus': Khwāja Ḥasan Nizāmī's *History of the Messiah*" in *Witness to a Common Hope: Festschrift in Honour of Father Christian Troll SJ*, Victor Edwin and Herman Roborgh (eds.). (Gujarat, India: Jesuit Publishing House, 2022), 252-279.

<sup>2</sup> *Ta'rikh-e masīh* (Delhi: Maṭba'a Ḥamīdiyya, 1927).

<sup>3</sup> Preface to *Ta'rikh-e Masīh*, i.

with his family's hereditary role of being pilgrim guides and professional petitioners,<sup>4</sup> Nizāmī became one of the more successful Urdu journalists and writers of the early 20th century. He is credited with a vast number of works on a wide variety of subjects,<sup>5</sup> many pamphlets or article length, as well as novels. In literary circles, he was especially recognized for his popular semi-autobiographical diaries called *Roznamcha*.

In the early twentieth century Urdu came into its own as a prose language. Khwāja Ḥasan Nizāmī participated in this development as an innovative stylist, particularly in the fields of biography, autobiography, and diary writing. Among the topics addressed within his vast array of publications, Nizāmī had a practice of taking up certain themes and then for a time publishing pamphlets and longer works around these topics. For example, at one, point, ostensibly to encourage a work ethic among his co-religionists, he penned a whole series of tracts on how to successfully engage in various occupations. For a time, he also took up female education and a call for social engagement as themes. In like manner, the work being considered here is one of a series of books treating life studies of the leaders and heroes of other religions. Some of these are termed "biographies" (bītī) by Nizāmī while others are designated as "accounts" or "tales" (kathā). Subjects of these works included Krishna,<sup>6</sup> Guru Nanak,<sup>7</sup> and the founder of Baha'ism.<sup>8</sup>

At the height of his career Nizāmī associated with great figures of Urdu literature such as Shiblī Nu'mānī, Abū'l Kalām Āzād, Akbar

<sup>4</sup> In Urdu, a "Du'ā gū." In the culture of Sufi shrines, the custodians and purported descendants of the saints are believed to have closer access and therefore are often asked and remunerated to supplicate on behalf of pilgrims.

<sup>5</sup> By some accounts, as many as five hundred. Mullā Wāhidī, *Sawanih 'Umri: Khwāja Ḥasan Nizāmī* (Delhi: Munādī Khwāja Number, 1957), 130.

<sup>6</sup> Khwāja Ḥasan Nizāmī, *Krishen Bītī* (Delhi: Delhi Printing Works, 1919); *Krishen bītī bā taṣāwīr* (subtitled "The True and Explained Life Account of India's Famous Avatar, Sri Krishna"). (Delhi: Halqa-i Mashā'ikh, 1917); *Krishen Kathā* (Delhi: Ansari Press, 1941).

<sup>7</sup> The work related to Nanak is less of a biography and more of an explanation of how close Sikhism is to Sufi Islam. See Yoginder Sikand "Building Bridges Between Sikhs and Muslims: The Contribution of Khwaja Hasan Nizami," *Studies in Inter-Religious Dialogue*, 9 (2, 1999): 178-188.

<sup>8</sup> These include *Irānī Dārvīsh* a translation of *Kashfal-Asrār* (on Bahā Ullāh) and *Asrār-e Bābī* (Secrets of the Bāb).

Allāhabādī,<sup>9</sup> and Iqbāl.<sup>10</sup> Niẓāmī also went beyond books and novels as literary vehicles by becoming involved in all kinds of journalistic activities, writing articles for Muslim newspapers as well as starting a number of his own religious magazines, for example, *Pīr Bhā'ī* (Brother Disciple) *Darvīsh* (*Dervish*), and *Munādī* (The Caller). We may observe that printing and publishing were not centralized activities in India at that time. In fact, many vernacular language books in India and Pakistan are still self-published in small runs of 500-1000 copies. It seems that Niẓāmī, due to the sheer volume of his publications, eventually came to constitute his own publishing center.

Niẓāmī also worked to reform Sufi institutions in India and was himself recognized as a prominent Sufi shaykh with many disciples, and, in fact, as a “renewer” of the Chishtī Sufi order. During the 1920's his activities assumed a significant political role as he opposed the Arya Samaj and Swami Shraddhananda for their “Shuddhī” (purification) movement aimed at returning more recently converted Muslim castes in India to the Hindu fold. He, along with a range of Muslim leaders and movements, termed his efforts “tablīgh” and certain of his strategies and goals resembled the goals of the more famous “tablīgh” of the organization, Tablīghī Jam‘at, founded by his contemporary, Maulānā Muḥammad Ilyās (d. 1944). For example, Niẓāmī wrote about and disseminated basic explanations of Islamic beliefs and practice. Unlike the Tablīghī Jama‘at of Ilyās, however, he did not participate in walking tours to villages to teach isolated and marginalized Muslim communities, nor did he avoid becoming involved in political activities, as we shall see.<sup>11</sup>

Niẓāmī was considered to be an important representative of Muslim opinion in India. He had attracted the attention of the British police as early as 1911 and was kept under surveillance due to his writings, travels,

<sup>9</sup>Wāhidī, *Sawānih*, 136-145. Allāhabādī's side of their correspondence was published by Niẓāmī as *Khuṭūt-e Akbar bi-Nām-e Khwāja Ḥasan Niẓāmī* (Delhi: Maḥbūb al-maṭābi', 1953).

<sup>10</sup>Muḥammad Iqbāl and Niẓāmī met and exchanged letters on a number of topics, occasionally disagreeing.

<sup>11</sup> An article treating various Muslim responses to the Arya shuddhi campaigns is Yoginder Sikand, “The Fitna of Irtidad: Muslim Missionary Response to the Shuddhi of the Arya Samaj in Early Twentieth century India”. *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 17, (1, 1997):65-82.

and political organizing.<sup>12</sup> He was initially supportive of the activities of the 'Alī brothers, Muslim leaders of the Khilafat Movement<sup>13</sup> who opposed the elimination of the Turkish Caliphate and British rule generally. Hindus and Muslims found common cause during this period in condemning British colonialism and seeking Home Rule for Indians. Nizāmī was associated with such circles for a time, but ultimately was primarily seen as promoting Muslim communal interests due to his religious activism and strong opposition to the Arya Samaj. At the same time he seems to have had a strong interest in other religions, not only Hinduism, but also Christianity and Sikhism, and he composed works about their main figures and teachings that could be considered positive inter-religious engagements. The idealized image of Muslim Sufis in India, in particular as represented by the Sufis of the Chishti Order, is that of tolerance and openness to spiritual exchange and inter-religious cooperation and such works are consistent with such an orientation.

Nizāmī lived until 1955 although his later years were marked by ill health and loss of vision. Thus, he experienced the trajectory of the struggle for Indian home rule, which he supported, and the creation of Pakistan, toward which he demonstrated some ambivalence. At the time of the turbulent events of the Partition of India he and his family took refuge in the then princely state of Hyderabad for several years.

### ***Ta'rikh-e Masīh***

This work has previously attracted some limited scholarly attention, for example, achieving first a favorable review<sup>14</sup> in the journal *Moslem World* and subsequently a positive mention in the work by the American Protestant missionary and scholar of Islam, Murray T. Titus (d. 1964).

Khwāja Ḥasan Nizāmī of the Tablighi Mission, Delhi in the year 1927 published a "Life of Christ" called *Ta'rikh-i-Masīh* which he based on the four gospels and the works of leading Christian scholars. This work is free from any controversial comments, and the 'life' is a remarkably true presentation of the Gospel record. His object in writing such a book was the Muslims might come to know exactly what Christians believe about Christ, and, by imparting of such knowledge, to soften the attitude

<sup>12</sup> Wāḥidī, *Ṣawānīh*, 120.

<sup>13</sup> A standard source for this Movement is Gail Minault, *The Khilafat Movement: Religious Symbolism and Political Mobilization in India* (New York: Columbia, 1982).

<sup>14</sup> Murray T. Titus, "Tarīkh-i-Masīh by Hasan Nizami" (Review). *Moslem World* 18, no. 3 (July 1928): 317.

of Muslims toward Christians. The same author has prepared a similar book relating to Hinduism called *Krishan Bīṭī*, which is a 'Life of Krishna.'<sup>15</sup>

In fact, Nizāmī's 1927 preface declares that a major purpose of his composing the work is its potential use for school pupils, even college students and, in particular, Muslim students. He writes, "I love Hazrat 'Īṣā (peace be upon him) because, according to the guidance of the Qur'an he is one of the earlier prophets, because he was a great philosopher, because he was a great guide and reformer, and finally, because he was also a great Sufi."<sup>16</sup> He further notes that, "Despite the fact that Muslims and Christians have been fighting for 13 centuries and the protracted wars between his community and mine, I would never speak ill of 'Īṣā."<sup>17</sup>

In the final section of the introduction, Nizāmī cites for readers the major sources written by Christian authors from where he has derived information for this book on Jesus, explaining that a capable Christian friend who knew English well had assisted him with translating excerpts of relevant passages from these books.<sup>18</sup> He seems to anticipate some critical queries about why he as a Muslim would undertake this project. After affirming that "Muslims should know about Jesus and his book (the Gospels) because these are mentioned in many locations in the Quran," he counsels potential critics of the project that,

Any nation that reads about the correct aspects of any religion will not find themselves misled thereby. If Christians were to read about the true events of Muhammad's life, they would not become Muslim and if Muslims read about Jesus, they will not become Christian due to this. I am a Muslim and I have written this book from that perspective. But any Christians can bear witness that I have not written anything about Jesus that would be hurtful to a Christian.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Murray T. Titus, *Islam in India and Pakistan* (Calcutta: Y.M.C.A. Publications, 1959), 270 fn. The first edition of this book was published in 1930.

<sup>16</sup> *Ta'rikh*, 3.

<sup>17</sup> *Ta'rikh*, 3.

<sup>18</sup> *Ta'rikh*, 4.

<sup>19</sup> *Ta'rikh*, 2.

He then notes that he has avoided giving his own opinions on Jesus and his teachings, possibly reserving that until a later time, if he is able.

Some of these same elements of Nizāmī's preface were briefly alluded to by Mushirul Ḥasan and Nishat Zaidi in *A Voyage to Modernism: Syed Ahmed Khan* in which they suggest some possible resonance, if not direct influence, of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan's project on Nizāmī.

Khwāja Ḥasan Nizāmī (1878-1957) wrote on the life of Jesus to soften his community's attitude toward the Christian. In *Ta'rikh al-Masīh* (1926) he set out to acquaint Muslim children with the Christian creed and the status of Jesus in the Koran, and to understand, especially in the light of ongoing political warfare (siyāsī larā'ī) between the adherents of Islam and Christianity, the prophets and preachers of other religions. He believed that the knowledge this generated will never produce deviants or encourage conversion. His book on Krishna had not led to any Muslim being converted to Hinduism or vice versa. In the end, he affirmed his love for Jesus, as a religious leader, philosopher, reformer and a leading Sufi and stated that, "if necessary, I will be one with my community in its political war against Christianity, but I will not question the piety of Jesus or his sacred teaching."<sup>20</sup>

The authors attribute such an approach as influenced by the legacy of Sir Syed Ahmed Khan upon later Muslim scholars and theologians in North India.<sup>21</sup>

Among the Christian writings that Nizāmī lists as sources in his forward<sup>22</sup> are:

*The Life of Christ* of Dr. Frederic Farrar,<sup>23</sup> a study written in 1874 by an Anglican priest who ministered in Westminster Abbey, was later Dean of Canterbury, and was also a classics scholar. Further sources that he lists

<sup>20</sup> *A Voyage to Modernism: Syed Ahmed Khan*, Trans. and edited Mushirul Ḥasan and Nishat Zaidi (New Delhi: Primus, 2011), 32.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> *Ta'rikh*, 4.

<sup>23</sup> New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., 1874.

are *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* by Dr. Alfred Edersheim<sup>24</sup> and James Stalker's *The Life of Jesus Christ*.<sup>25</sup>

In the prefatory section listing his sources Nizāmī usually mention only the authors' last names and thus the titles of the respective sources and their publication data have given here had to be deduced from other sources. The names of authors cited by Nizāmī are (August) Neander,<sup>26</sup> (Giovanni) Papini,<sup>27</sup> (J.) Patterson Smyth,<sup>28</sup> and (Johannes Heinrich August) Ebrard.<sup>29</sup> A special indication is given that the work of "Dr. Stevens" was a major source for excerpted information on the teachings of Jesus. I conclude that this most likely refers to George Barker Stevens' *The Teaching of Jesus*,<sup>30</sup> although this book was published quite close to the time of Nizāmī's work and features a less historical and a rather more constructive theological tone. We may take a cue from a commentator on another late 19<sup>th</sup> century "Life of Jesus," that of Alexander Patterson,<sup>31</sup> who opines that such an approach to the life of Jesus:

... is a novel take on a genre known well in Patterson's day: "the life of Christ." Many famous theologians published attempts at biographies of Jesus in the second half of the nineteenth century, most of them titled simply *The Life of Christ*. The focus of this genre was to present a kind of narrative gospel harmony and

<sup>24</sup> New York: Longmans, 1883.

<sup>25</sup> Edinburgh, T. and T. Clark, 1880 published in the series *Hand-Books for Bible Classes*, ed. Dods & Whyte. *Stalker was a minister in the Free Church of Scotland and then in the United Free Church of Scotland*.

<sup>26</sup> *The Life of Jesus Christ in Its Historical Connection and Historical Development* (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1837).

<sup>27</sup> *The Story of Christ*. Translated by Mary Prichard Agnetti (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1923).

<sup>28</sup> Most likely *A People's Life of Christ* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1920) although Patterson Smyth wrote other works.

<sup>29</sup> d. 1888. *Biblical Commentary on the New Testament* (New York: Sheldon & Co., 1858).

<sup>30</sup> *George Barker Stevens d. 1906. The Teaching of Jesus*. (London, MacMillan, 1901). This title seems to best match Nizāmī's citation of "ta'limāt al-masīh" although the contents of this book would not lend themselves so well to the "selections" (iqtibāṣāt) that he claims to copiously draw from this source.

<sup>31</sup> *The Greater Life and Work of Christ* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1896). <https://archive.org/details/greaterlifeworko00patt/page/164/mode/2up>

sometimes a more introspective, speculative, or biographical look at how Jesus interacted with people and went about his day. Some popular and typical examples include that of Dawson (1874), F. W. Farrar (1875), James Stalker (1880), Joseph Parker's *Inner Life of Christ* (1883), and Edersheim's *Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (1883).<sup>32</sup>

It is noteworthy that the books cited in the paragraph cited above comprise a good portion of the sources cited in *Ta'rikh-e Masīh*, and thus we may situate Nizāmī as an Indian Muslim who was explicitly influenced by this genre of "history as biography" in treatments of the life of Jesus. This approach was also a good fit for Nizāmī's own literary penchant. One of the strategies of such writers was to weave the disparate Christologies and orientations of the four Gospels into a unified biographical narrative. Therefore, one might imagine Nizāmī as taking this one step further by integrating some Islamic materials into the narration as well.

Two further sources that Nizāmī acknowledges are *Encyclopaedia Biblica: A Critical Dictionary of the Literary, Political and Religion History, the Archeology, Geography and Natural History of the Bible*,<sup>33</sup> and the *Dictionary of the Bible* by James Hastings.<sup>34</sup>

As is the case with some of his other "historical" works,<sup>35</sup> it is not completely clear how much of the work is original to Nizāmī himself as an author, and how much may have been composed of direct summary translations from the Gospels or secondary Christian literature into Urdu by another party such as the Christian friend that he mentioned in the preface, or the extent to which Nizāmī may have consulted another highly relevant source, the *Tabyīn al-Kalām* of Sir Sayyid Ahmed Khān,<sup>36</sup> which

<sup>32</sup> Pioneer Library, <https://olddeadguys.com/tag/alexander-patterson/> Accessed Dec. 19, 2020.

<sup>33</sup> Edited by Thomas Kelly Cheyne and J. Sutherland Black (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1899).

<sup>34</sup> James Hastings, *Dictionary of the Bible* (New York, NY: Scribners, 1909).

<sup>35</sup> That is, at least eight of his works have "history" (ta'rikh) as part of the title, including a *Ta'rikh-e rasūl (Life of the Prophet)* (Hyderabad: Munāfi Office, 1948).

<sup>36</sup> See Christian W. Troll, Charles M. Ramsey, and Mahboob Basharat Mughal, *The Gospel According to Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817-1898): An Annotated Translation of "Tabyīn al-kalām"* (Part 3) Volume 38 (Leiden:



is not mentioned but likely would not have been ignored. Further, the cover notice of the book indicates that Nizami "compiled" (murattab) the material, further pointing out to the reader that he is not claiming to speak exclusively in his own voice as the author, but rather that he is presenting the views of others, in this case Christian scholars of the Bible.

### **Contents and Arrangement of the Work**

It should be noted, that Nizami quite intentionally designated the study under consideration here as a "history" (ta'rikh) of the life of Jesus rather than a biography. From the text itself it is apparent that he viewed the purpose of such a "historical" work to be presenting material in a non-polemical way based on accepted sources, in this case, Christian writings about the figure of Jesus.

Nizami's use of the term "masih" (Messiah) in the title also requires some commentary. The Arabic word "masih" is used 11 times to refer to Jesus in the Qur'an. However, the Qur'anic usage does not entail the Christian messianic interpretation of Jesus' being a savior figure. It rather seems to be employed as an honorific title as in the phrase "al-masih 'Isa ibn Maryam" (Chapter III, 40; IV, 156)— "the Messiah Jesus son of Mary". While, certain hadith reports do suggest that Jesus will return at the end of time to fight against the forces of evil, these hadith do not use the title "masih."<sup>37</sup>

In preparing this study of Nizami's work on Jesus it was decided to focus on the author's broader intentions and framing, as could be ascertained from his prefatory and concluding remarks. A further strategy for situating his project was to consider his organization of material and his treatment of certain elements of Jesus' life and the theology

E.J. Brill, 2020). This is the most relevant volume of the *Tabyin* for the topic of this chapter since it deals with Gospel material.

<sup>37</sup> Classical Arab Muslim exegetes of the Qur'an draw on the meaning of the root "m-s-h" to wipe or anoint. For example, Al-Razi (d. 1210) opines that Jesus earned the title because Jesus would barely touch someone afflicted with disease and that person would be healed. Another source maintained that it was because Jesus had been anointed with a special blessed oil reserved for prophets, and so on. See Asma Afsaruddin, "The Messiah 'Isa, Son of Mary: Jesus in the Islamic Tradition" in *Nicolas of Cusa and Islam*, Ian Christopher Levy, Rita George-Tvrtković, and Donald Duclow (eds.). (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2020), 177–201, 186.

surrounding the figure of Jesus, especially where significant discrepancies between Muslim and Christian views might be expected.

Perusal of the entire text of some 212 pages indicates that most of the content reviews the story of Jesus, chronologically and thematically. This would echo the approach of many Victorian Christian treatments of the life of Jesus as was previously noted. Throughout these topical sections Nizāmī often cites chapter and verse from the Gospels as sources for his accounts. Like many 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century works on Jesus, Nizāmī begins by setting the stage of Jesus' life through discussing the physical geography of Palestine, the political context of Roman rule, before moving on to an overview of the contemporary Jewish movements.<sup>38</sup> For example, he reviews and characterizes the Jewish sectarian movements at the time of Jesus as follows:

- 1) The well-known and influential, but free thinking (āzād khayāl)—in other words “naicharī”<sup>39</sup>—sect who controlled the [Jewish] communal interests were the Saducees (ṣaddūqiyūn). Among this group were found the ruling echelon and influential individuals. These people were not as strict in following religious injunctions as the common Jews, they had faith only in the Torah, but even this was lip service, in their action they were not concerned [with this].
- 2) The second famous sect were the Pharisees (farsīyūn) who were devoted to religious traditions and it was their special task to encourage and hold the public to religiosity, performing acts of worship, and respecting the religious law. Thus, they should be considered the “Sufi” group among the Jews.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>38</sup> *Ta'rikh*, 5-7.

<sup>39</sup> *Naicharī*. This designation emerged because Sir Sayyid used the English term “nature” transliterated into Urdu as “naichar” beginning in the 1860s in his various writings about religion and philosophy. The label “naicharī” began to be used in a disparaging way among his opponents and Jamāluddīn Afghānī then applied the term Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan and his followers, whose interpretations Afghānī considered to be inimical to religious faith. See David Lelyveld, “Naichari Nature: Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan and the Reconciliation of Science, Technology, and Religion.” In Y. Saikia & M. Rahman (Eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Sayyid Ahmad Khan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 69-86.

<sup>40</sup> *Ta'rikh*, 6-7. Sir Sayyid likewise begins his interpretation of Matthew with a discussion of the condition of Judaism at the time of Jesus' birth and its

The passage above may suggest to us that Nizāmī deliberately did not associate himself with the biblical project of Sir Sayyid, whom he symbolically links here to the Sadducees by invoking the somewhat disparaging term “naicharī” in their regard. One wonders if there is a further indication that the Sadducees’ currying favor with the Roman ruling authorities is being paralleled to Sir Sayyid’s friendship with the British Raj. At the same time Nizāmī’s rather odd positioning of the Pharisees as “Sufis” does not seem to be derived on the basis of what he would have read about them in the Christian sources.

The Pharisees of the Bible actually seem more to correlate with a third sect that Nizāmī terms “the legalists” (faqīhūn)<sup>41</sup> and equates with “Maulvis” among the Jews. These would have been the group, usually referred to in the King James Bible as the “scribes” who were designated by the term “faqīh” in the Hindustani version of the Bible. The fourth sect are the “political extremists”<sup>42</sup> who strove to instigate the common people against Roman rule and constantly worked to foment a revolution that would do away with Roman domination and usher in self-rule (swarāj).<sup>43</sup>

Finally, “Besides these were the Essene sect who bore no connection to the Jews in terms of communal identity, and for this reason the Jews regarded them with hatred and suspicion and legally forbade associating with them.”<sup>44</sup>

Nizāmī continues to paint a rather bleak picture of the conditions of the Jews at that period explaining that, “centuries of servitude had completely eliminated their sense of generosity, enlightened thinking, magnanimity and equality, liberty, and progress.”<sup>45</sup> In addition, he writes that the Jews preferred to live apart from other peoples, while they thought that they were superior to all other nations, perceiving themselves as the

various sects. The Pharisees, according to him, were those who “ascribed to both the exoteric (zāhirī) and the esoteric (bāṭinī) meanings of the Torah.” *Tabyīn*, 3. Perhaps this element inspired Nizāmī to associate them with Sufism.

<sup>41</sup> See, for example, John 8:3, *Kitāb i Muqaddas, ya 'ne, Purānā aur Nayā Ahd-namā* [The Holy Bible in Urdu (Latin script version)] (London: British and Foreign Bible Society, 1887), 129.

<sup>42</sup> Presumably the “Zealots” although Nizāmī does not employ this term.

<sup>43</sup> *Ta'rikh*, 7.

<sup>44</sup> *Ta'rikh*, 7.

<sup>45</sup> *Ta'rikh*, 7.

only ones entitled to and deserving of Paradise. Nizāmī here mentions that the Qur'an as the source for this observation, citing verses II:111,<sup>46</sup> and V:18.<sup>47</sup>

At the same time Nizāmī describes the high level of religious education among the Jews: "Josephus, a Jewish historian and near contemporary of Christ, observed that religious devotion was the motivation for everything that the Jews did. Such that if any Jewish child were asked about the laws of Judaism, "he will more readily tell them all than he will tell his own name."<sup>48</sup> Yet he opines that, "From a moral perspective their condition was very depraved such that in the Qu'ran there is repeated mention of their "hard heartedness" (qaṣāwat). Haughtiness and pride, pomp and showing off, had deeply taken root in their hearts, and they had strayed far from the essence of the Mosaic law."<sup>49</sup> Meanwhile, he notes that the Jews at that time believed in certain Messianic prophecies regarding a descendant of David, a special Prophet, who would arise in Bethlehem and lead them back to political victory and domination.<sup>50</sup>

Once this contextual background has been sketched, Nizāmī proceeds to the story of the life of Jesus, starting from the background of Mary, then the Annunciation, and the Nativity. Some details about Mary that are given include that she came from the Levite tribe and the names of her ancestors, who were descendants of Aaron and also of David.<sup>51</sup> Nizāmī next cites the Qur'anic verses III: 35-37 and then quotes Muḥammad 'Alī 's tafsir explaining how due to her family being "Kāhins" (Cohens), Mary spent her childhood in temple service and was called a "sister of Aaron" due to her Levite descent.<sup>52</sup> Implicit here is the need to explain that this appellation was not due to confusion or inaccuracy in the Qur'an as was sometime claimed by non-Muslims. In

<sup>46</sup> [II:111] And they say: None entereth paradise unless he be a Jew or a Christian. These are their own desires.

<sup>47</sup> [V.18] And the Jews and the Christians say: We are the sons of Allah and His beloved ones. Say: Why does He then chastise you for your faults?

<sup>48</sup> Flavius Josephus, *Against Apion (English)*, 2:176. <http://perseus.uchicago.edu/perseuscgi/citequery3.pl?dbname=GreekFeb2011&query=Joseph.%20Ap.%202.178&getid=1>

<sup>49</sup> *Ta'rikkh*, 8.

<sup>50</sup> *Ta'rikkh*, 8-9.

<sup>51</sup> *Ta'rikkh*, 9.

<sup>52</sup> *Ta'rikkh*, 10.

fact, it seems that in the case of Mary's background Nizāmī is filling in details according to Muslim sources that are not found in the biblical account of Mary. While the Muslim sources are silent on the topic of Joseph, Nizāmī reports about him what is available in the Gospel accounts. For example, he tells how Joseph was informed about Mary's condition in a dream and therefore accepts her as his wife. Nizāmī explicitly cites Luke 1: 26-37 as the basis for his description of the Annunciation to Mary and he directly quotes from Luke 1: 46-55 Mary's words of praise known as the *Magnificat*.<sup>53</sup>

Nizāmī's somewhat detailed discussion of divergent calculations regarding the date and year of Jesus' birth in the Christian calendar and how a date was settled on in the 4<sup>th</sup> century can perhaps be traced to the article "Jesus Christ" in the *Encyclopaedia of Biblical Literature* or a similar source.<sup>54</sup>

He then cites the Qur'anic verses regarding the birth of Jesus from Sura Maryam, the Qur'anic chapter telling the story of Mary. He concludes the section by first stating that despite minor differences, the major elements of the respective Muslim and Christian accounts of the Nativity agree, for example on Mary's purity and the fact that extraordinary portents surrounded the birth.<sup>55</sup> An immediately succeeding "note" states that, "Among both Christians and Muslims we find certain people who don't take the nativity in this sense and hold that Jesus was born of a union of male and female like everyone else, but we have no need to get involved in this controversy, because this book is not oriented to such arguments."<sup>56</sup>

<sup>53</sup> *Ta'rikh*, 13. Nizāmī's version was compared to a standard Urdu Bible of the period and was found to differ in expression and vocabulary used. Roman script Hindustani Bible 1910 reprint. *Injil-e muqaddas* (Cambridge: London British and Foreign Bible Society, 1910).

<sup>54</sup> *Ta'rikh*, 15. This was probably excerpted from *Encyclopedia of Biblical Literature II*. John Kitto and William Alexander (eds.) (Edinburgh: A. and C. Black, 1847), 545.

<sup>55</sup> *Ta'rikh*, 16.

<sup>56</sup> *Ta'rikh*, 16. Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan may have been on his mind among Muslims who questioned the divine parentage of Jesus, although Sir Sayyid apparently held conflicting positions on this issue. See Ismail Abd Rahman Muda, "The Interpretation of the Birth of Jesus and his Miracles in the Writings of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 14 (1, 2003): 23-31.

Nizāmī follows with the Christian Nativity narrative including the story of the shepherds from Luke, the visit of the Magi from Matthew, the massacre of the innocents, and the flight to Egypt. He recounts a number of events from Jesus' childhood and youth in Nazareth as found in the Gospels. One aspect about which Nizāmī offers some reflection seems to be an affirmation that Jesus received a good religious education in the Torah and books of the prophets and speculates that although he primarily spoke Aramaic, Hebrew being by then a dead spoken language, he also likely knew Greek.<sup>57</sup>

The story of young Jesus bringing clay birds to life is not found in the Gospels but is part of the Qur'anic narrative V:110. This account, while non-canonical in Christianity, is found in the Gnostic source, the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*.<sup>58</sup> After noting the paucity of Gospel material regarding Jesus' early years Nizāmī quickly recounts the story of the bird without much commentary and in fact seems to dismiss it, preferring to speak about Jewish childhood at that epoch in a general way.<sup>59</sup> It has been noted that some other 20<sup>th</sup> century Muslim writers found a need to explain that the miracle of the "creation" of the birds by Jesus was at a different scale than an act of divine creation.<sup>60</sup> In fact, the position of Jesus' miracles among Muslims, especially for modern commentators, has in many instances occasioned some efforts to minimize them as a counter to the evidentiary role they play in Christian narrations. Some classical strategies in this case had included stressing the commonality of miracles recounted in the Gospels with miracles performed by the Hebrew Prophets.<sup>61</sup>

Thus, in speaking of Jesus' childhood Nizāmī describes what daily life was like among the Jews at that time in order to provide a sense of the context.<sup>62</sup> He again cites Josephus as a source about the religiosity of the Jews and how focused they were on imparting religious knowledge to their children. Nizāmī then cites in this regard some of the well-known hadiths that exhort Muslims to the seeking of knowledge. Further elaborating on the study of religion among the Jews he cites Philo as a

<sup>57</sup> *Ta'rikh*, 23.

<sup>58</sup> Kate Zebiri, "Contemporary Muslim Understanding of the Miracles of Jesus." *The Muslim World* 90 (1/2, 2007), 81-82.

<sup>59</sup> *Ta'rikh*, 23.

<sup>60</sup> Zebiri, 82.

<sup>61</sup> Zebiri, 76.

<sup>62</sup> *Ta'rikh*, 21-22.

source for their dedication to religious knowledge and imparting it as part of a child's formation.<sup>63</sup>

The topic of Jesus' brothers and sisters receives some attention at this juncture. Niẓāmī begins with the statement that Jesus had four brothers whom he names and two sisters, also named. This is generally a Protestant view and Niẓāmī does point out for the reader that the Catholic Christian position denies that Mary had other children besides Jesus, seeking to preserve her exalted role as "Mother of God."<sup>64</sup> Niẓāmī's personal view on this disagreement, which he in this case articulates, is that there is nothing objectionable to the idea of Mary and Joseph having had other children together.

The next topic covered is the birth and role of John the Baptist (Yaḥyā). Niẓāmī's account draws on Luke 3:21-23 but also includes corroborating material from the Qur'anic verses that mention John. This is one instance where the words of three of the Gospels explicitly use the language of "sonship" as in, "This is my beloved son with whom I am well pleased" (John 3:23) during the baptism of Jesus. Niẓāmī handles these passages as follows:

Having said this, Jesus went into the water and received baptism at the hand of John. In the Gospel it is written that the sky opened in one place and the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus in the form of a dove and a voice from the heavens conveyed good tidings.<sup>65</sup>

We may characterize Niẓāmī's treatment of this episode as avoiding the issue of what the "sonship" language might have meant, and we may offer the conjecture that he either decided that it did not carry theological import that needed to be addressed or that he preferred to avoid directly discussing it.

Following the story of Jesus' baptism by John, the life of Jesus continues with accounts of his temptation in the wilderness by Satan, the recruitment of the first four disciples (based on John 1:24-26), and the miracle of the wedding at Cana.<sup>66</sup> Here Niẓāmī's recounting of the miracle of the transformation of water into wine concludes with the parenthetical

<sup>63</sup> *Ta'riḳh*, 21-22.

<sup>64</sup> *Ta'riḳh*, 25.

<sup>65</sup> *Ta'riḳh*, 29.

<sup>66</sup> John 2: 1-12.

observation that “at that time wine was not religiously prohibited (ḥarām).”<sup>67</sup>

Next come accounts of various other miracles performed by Jesus, a detailed translation of the teachings imparted in the Sermon on the Mount,<sup>68</sup> his giving his disciples the power to perform miracles and then sending them out to preach, the feeding of the 5,000, accounts of numerous parables,<sup>69</sup> the annoyance of the Pharisees that Jesus healed on the Sabbath, his trip to Tyre and Sidon, the Transfiguration,<sup>70</sup> and Jesus’ teachings on forgiveness according to Matthew 18:7-20.<sup>71</sup>

The presentation of the Transfiguration has an interesting feature or adjustment on the part of Nizāmī. He cites Matthew 17:1-13 but one critical passage (Matthew 17:6), the wording of which is found in Mark and Luke as well, has the voice of God saying, “This is my son with whom I am well pleased.” Interestingly Nizāmī renders this as a voice being heard saying, “This is the *promised Messiah* (masīḥ maw’ūd) with whom I am well pleased.”<sup>72</sup> Now, had the word “son” been used, it certainly would have created dissonance with a Muslim theological understanding of Jesus, still the strategy of mistranslation without commentary could be criticized.

As Nizāmī continues with the story of Jesus the story of the woman condemned to stoning is followed by one of the complex passages from the Gospel of John 7:2-59 that includes many references to “sonship”. How Nizāmī handles this in translation is quite interesting. One may say that there is a certain Islamization of the discourse, not only in terms of vocabulary choices but also in terms of its direct expressions.<sup>73</sup>

In the course of this sermon (wa’z) he (Jesus) said, “Remember this, that when Allah may He be exalted, selects a person for guidance then He blesses him with spiritual light (rūḥānī roshanī) such that whoever believes in him, this Prophet (nabī) illuminates with spiritual and heavenly (āsmānī) light and this light will always remain with this person, even

<sup>67</sup> *Ta'riḳh*, 32.

<sup>68</sup> *Ta'riḳh*, 41-45

<sup>69</sup> *Ta'riḳh*, 55-56.

<sup>70</sup> *Ta'riḳh*, 60.

<sup>71</sup> *Ta'riḳh*, 65-66.

<sup>72</sup> *Ta'riḳh*, 61.

<sup>73</sup> *Ta'riḳh*, 76.



after death. He will never fall victim to darkness. O people! I am the light of this world so whoever seeks light must follow me.”

How could the Jewish scholars (‘ulamā) tolerate that someone who was born yesterday (kal kā bachcha) could assail their dignity? Therefore, they retorted with animosity, “What is the point of praising yourself? Unless someone else bears witness to the veracity of your claim what is the point? Why should your testimony on your own behalf be credible?”

Jesus replied, “You are mistaken in your thinking that whatever I have claimed is self-conceit and praise or that I myself am both the claimant and the witness. Neither of these two arguments is accurate because I am like an instrument of the hand of God and whatever words He commands me to utter, I say. I am indeed his messenger (rasūl), neither can I say, nor do, anything out of my own volition. I have come from Him because I have been sent to guide you and then I will return to Him. If you had any comprehension of His pure essence, you would not have such negative thoughts about me. Well, reflect on this—when you neither have any awareness of who I am, nor of the one who sent me, and you neither have awareness of my purpose nor of my spiritual state (hāl), then how can you render any judgment in my regard? What right do you have to label me as one who makes false claims about God and as a liar? Alas that you have no idea who sent me since your eyes are clouded by prejudice (ta‘aṣṣub). Remove the veil of prejudice from your eyes and only then will you know whether I am lying or truthful. You are afflicted with the malady of seeing only the external, while the reality (ḥaqīqat) of things cannot be manifested through exoteric vision (zāhir bīnī). I did not come to issue a judgment but rather to save the masses from the fires of Hell and I am not alone, my heavenly father (āsmānī bāp) who sent me is with me. He will bear witness to the veracity of my words and His witness is sufficient.”

The Jews responded, “Then where is your father?” Jesus said, “Alas for this situation in which you neither know me nor my father. If you would come to know me, then you would know my father. **He is not just my father but the father of all humanity!**<sup>74</sup> However, the situation is such that you are based in the lower world (‘ālam-e suflā) and I in the higher realm; you are submerged in materiality and I am speaking at the spiritual level. You are drowned in worldly thoughts and I am intoxicated

<sup>74</sup> The original Urdu text is bolded at this point.

(mast) with spiritual ideas. Your hearts are bound to the fleeting pleasures of the world while I dwell in the spiritual universe.<sup>75</sup>

It may be noted here that Niẓāmī is clearly operating at multiple realms of translation, not from the English version of the New Testament, which presumably would have been the King James version at that time, but through the medium of a missionary Hindustani translation from English, the basis of which was laid by Henry Martyn, and then followed by numerous revisions under the auspices of the Bible society.<sup>76</sup>

This Hindustani version of the Bible itself faced challenges in being rendered into a local idiom. The language needed to be a level of Hindustani that was not overly Persianized given the broad and diverse local audience for whom it was intended. At the same time certain concepts in translation seem to have defaulted to Islamic terms due to the parallels between Jewish and Muslim religious legal concepts and religious practices and perhaps derived from the usages that emerged under Mughal rule. For example, Niẓāmī translates that Jesus was speaking in the “bait al-māl” (treasury), rather than the temple.<sup>77</sup> This explicitly Islamic term for “treasury” had been used in the Hindustani version of the Bible. Likewise, the “scribes” of the King James version of the Bible are rendered as “faqīh” (sic—faqīh is singular, not plural) in the Hindustani Bible. The debate in the translated passages from John’s Gospel, which implies a need for two witnesses to attest to Jesus’ claim, has also been presented in a way evoking sharī’a norms in the Hindustani Bible.

An initial comparison of Niẓāmī’s version generally, and specifically of these passages based on John’s Gospel to the missionary Hindustani version of the Bible, indicates that Niẓāmī consistently employs more eloquent vocabulary and expression. In his choice of words and expressions Niẓāmī also grasps and imparts an implicit resonance between the spirituality of John and Sufi concepts as evident in his choice of vocabulary employed in Neoplatonic Sufi cosmology.

<sup>75</sup> *Ta'rikh*, 77-8.

<sup>76</sup> A more detailed discussion of this process of translation may be found in H. U. Weitbrecht Stanton, “The Urdu Language and the Urdu Bible,” *The Muslim World* 19, no. 3 (July 1929): 274-286.

<sup>77</sup> *Ta'rikh*, 76. *Bait al-māl* referred to the treasury in early Islamic history. The word “treasury” is used in the King James’ Bible.

At the level of theological concepts, in his translation Nizāmī takes some liberties. "Sonship" would of course have presented a challenge and his choice of having Jesus assert: "He is not just my father but the father of all humanity" could have been inspired by the Hindustani Bible's translation "ibn-e Adam"<sup>78</sup> for the Gospel's messianic appellation "son of Man". "Ibn-e Adam", literally "son of Adam", in Urdu generally means "mankind" or "humanity." Jesus' declaration that he had come to save humanity from the fires of Hell as rendered by Nizāmī is neither found in English versions of the Gospel nor in the Hindustani Bible translation. It would, of course, be broadly consistent with later Christian theology. In fact, Nizāmī here seems to articulate salvationist Christology more bluntly than the words of John themselves!

In the following sections Nizāmī describes the arrest of Jesus, the trial by Pontius Pilate and the Crucifixion closely following the Gospel accounts. Interestingly, he does not include any concept of someone else being substituted for Jesus at the last moment as in some Muslim understandings of these events.<sup>79</sup>

The events of Jesus being tried by Pilate, mocked and humiliated are recounted according to the Gospels as well as the poignant and painful aspects of the crucifixion. After describing the last moments and death of Jesus on the cross Nizāmī tersely comments on the divergent Muslim understanding of the Crucifixion where he briefly states that Muslims believe that the ascension of Jesus to heaven took place before the Crucifixion whereas Christians hold that it took place afterward.<sup>80</sup>

The account of Jesus' life and mission ends with an enumeration of the sightings of Jesus after the Resurrection as taken from various gospels and Paul's letter to the Corinthians as they would have been compiled by Christian sources.<sup>81</sup>

<sup>78</sup> John 8:28. *Kitāb i Muqaddas, ya'ne, Purānā aur Nayā Ahd-namā [The Holy Bible in Urdu (Latin script version)]* (London: British and Foreign Bible Society, 1887), 130.

<sup>79</sup> This is, however, mentioned later in a brief section comparing Christian and Muslim beliefs regarding Jesus. The substitution thesis often states that Judas was the one crucified instead. Nizāmī reports the story of Judas' remorse and suicide on p. 179 and seems to follow the account in Matthew's Gospel.

<sup>80</sup> *Ta'rikh*, 197.

<sup>81</sup> *Ta'rikh*, 198-202.

### **The Appearance and Special Characteristics of Jesus**

There follows a section using the Islamic hagiographic categories of *ḥilya* (features) and *khaṣā'is* (special characteristics) of Jesus.<sup>82</sup> In terms of “features” Nizāmī is rather non-specific, explaining that the Gospels do not provide any material about Jesus’ appearance and generally opining that in character he was kind and hospitable.<sup>83</sup> A physical description of some details of Jesus’ appearance said to originate from a Roman officer’s account is also provided which appears to be drawn from the Letter of Lentulus, a document that would probably have been deemed a forgery in the Christian sources used by Nizāmī. He further discusses how that Jesus was not excessively ascetic but rather allowed and participated in the regular enjoyments of life.<sup>84</sup>

Aside from comments on the style of Jesus’ teachings, Nizāmī emphasizes that they continued the law of Moses and affirmed the same God. He notes that Jesus emphasized God as a father and as a loving God, that he called God “father” is his regular teachings, and taught his disciples the prayer, “Our Father who art in heaven.”<sup>85</sup>

### **Muslim Views of Jesus**

In the section under this sub-heading Nizāmī declares that he has composed this book as a history and based it on Christian views of Jesus. He states most directly:

Muslim views are completely separate. Muslims do not accept that Jesus was crucified. They believe that Jesus was raised to the heavens while alive and that he will return at the time of the Day of Judgment and that he will obey Imam Mahdi and together with him will spread peace and guidance through the world.<sup>86</sup>

Nizāmī explicitly mentions here the qur’anic indications that Jesus was not crucified and that the Jews were deceived in this regard since

<sup>82</sup> *ḥilya* refers to the physical description of a person, but is often specifically used for descriptions of the Prophet Muḥammad, although in some cases the term is applied to other sacred personages. *Khaṣā'is* refers to the exceptional qualities of an exemplary figure.

<sup>83</sup> *Ta'rikh*, 202-3.

<sup>84</sup> *Ta'rikh*, 203.

<sup>85</sup> *Ta'rikh*, 205.

<sup>86</sup> *Ta'rikh*, 206.

someone else was substituted. He continues by citing the minority Ahmadiyya view that Jesus remained alive and ended up in Kashmir, indicating, however, that this view is restricted to the followers of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad.<sup>87</sup>

Continuing on the theme of Jesus in the Qur'an, Nizāmī states that of all the Prophets mentioned in the Islamic scripture, Moses is named most frequently, followed by Jesus, and that Christians on the whole, are favorably portrayed in the Muslim scripture, such that had not political conflicts persisted over the centuries, Muslims and Christians above all should have coexisted in affection and friendship.<sup>88</sup>

Therefore, he sees the present moment as a time in which the followers of these two faiths should become properly informed about each other's religions rather than seeking out negative elements in one another's teachings. Nizāmī affirms that his intention in preparing the book in to bring the two religious communities together in reconciliation so that Muslims would come to know and appreciate see the Christian Jesus.<sup>89</sup>

As he moves towards the completion of the volume, Khwāja Ḥasan Nizāmī further expounds on the importance of the figure of Jesus in Islamic literary and intellectual traditions. He observes that in Persian and Urdu each poet usually penned anywhere from ten to two thousand lines in honor of Jesus, so that his story had become as famous as Shirin and Farhad in Iran or Layla and Majnun in the Arab world, and hence it was known in every household.<sup>90</sup> He explains that his motivation in gathering examples of this poetry in an appendix is to make Christians aware of the deep love and reverence that Muslims hold towards Jesus, then he mentions that in comparison he cannot think of a single Christian poet who has written in this vein about the Prophet Muhammad. Finally, he explains that his further objective in citing examples of this poetry is to alert Christians to the inner love that Muslims have for Jesus that has become part and parcel of the life of Islamic civilization, so that Christians could learn to treat the greatest leader of Muslims in the same way.<sup>91</sup>

<sup>87</sup> *Ta'rikh*, 206.

<sup>88</sup> *Ta'rikh*, 207

<sup>89</sup> *Ta'rikh*, 207.

<sup>90</sup> *Ta'rikh*, 207.

<sup>91</sup> *Ta'rikh*, 209.

He then offers a disclaimer stating that he has prepared the book to explain Christian teachings about Jesus, and that should these narrations be at variance with Muslim teachings, it should not be taken that he is anything but a solid Muslim, but rather that the book's purpose is historical, and therefore he has avoided expressing his personal views in it. These concluding remarks present the book as an original overview of the life of Jesus such as had never before existed in Urdu, or even in English. Finally, Niẓāmī ends with a supplication: "We implore of Allah, may He be Exalted, that He grant Christians and Muslims success in living together in love and sincerity, which was the true and essential purpose of the writing of this book."<sup>92</sup>

### Conclusions

While this book is not a "Sufi" Christology of Jesus in the tradition of classical Sufi sayings, Ibn 'Arabī's mystical interpretations, or Rumi's poetry, it is an effort towards interfaith understanding. In fact, it may be said to have featured less Sufi content than Sir Sayyid's *Tabyīn*, which represents an early stage in that author's career when he had recourse to Sufi ideas in interpretation, even quoting from Ibn 'Arabī's *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam* in the spirit of a Sufi Christology.<sup>93</sup>

Neither author drew on the classical Arabic Sufi tradition of sayings about Jesus, for this in fact, was not their project, and perhaps this Jesus was not well-known in South Asian Islamic interpretations. The Muslim Sufi Jesus disclosed through these classical sayings, dispersed in earlier Arabic Sufi texts such as Abū Nu'aym al-Isfahānī's (d. 1038) *Ḥilyat al-Awliyā'* is presented through a range of agrapha (individual sayings attributed to Jesus), many of which are unknown in Christian sources.<sup>94</sup> Leirvik notes that while some interest in these sayings was "found both among Orientalists and biblical scholars of the 19th and early 20th centuries," it was the Lebanese historian Tarif Khalidi who published a critical edition of 303 of the sayings in 2001.<sup>95</sup>

<sup>92</sup> *Ta'rikh*, 209.

<sup>93</sup> *Tabyīn* Intro, xxi.

<sup>94</sup> Oddbjørn Leirvik, *Images of Jesus Christ in Islam: Introduction, Survey of Research, Issues of Dialogue*. Vol. LXXVI, *Studia Missionalia Upsaliensia*. (Uppsala: Swedish Institute of Missionary Research, 1999), 59f.

<sup>95</sup> Tarif Khalidi, *The Muslim Jesus: sayings and stories in Islamic literature*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

These accounts depict Jesus as a committed ascetic who in his teachings is both socially radical and deeply compassionate towards all living beings. Khalidi demonstrates how these sayings of Jesus were utilized by early Sufi-inclined Muslims who saw Jesus as an ally in their intra-Muslim opposition to what they perceived as a mounting worldliness in Islam along with their religion's evolution into a new political empire.<sup>96</sup>

Yet reading Nizāmī's translation of the Gospels into Urdu does evoke a Sufi aspect of Jesus in the choice of expressions that resonate with mystical Islam. For example, Jesus' parables and teachings are described by Nizāmī as bringing out the "inner" (bāṭin) vs. the "extrinsic" (zāhirī) aspect<sup>97</sup> of phenomena. The Transfiguration of Jesus is rendered as "his [Jesus'] body becoming light."<sup>98</sup> As previously noted, passages from the Gospel of John are particular suited for translation by Nizāmī into a Sufi mystical idiom that resonates with a shared Neoplatonic cosmology.

Like Sir Sayyid, the approach of Nizāmī can be characterized as making Christian and Muslim beliefs appear to be "inherently convergent."<sup>99</sup> While on a few occasions Nizāmī points out differences in opinion, these differences are not cited so as to impugn the Christian position. Even in the case of the doctrine of "sonship" and the account of the Crucifixion, Nizāmī usually offers no gloss that points out differences in the biblical versions of events from a Muslim perspective.

In avoiding the more strident elements of religious debate over differences, Nizāmī certainly had Sir Sayyid as a precedent. One may observe that Nizāmī's audience was certainly less academic than Khan's and that his level of presentation is directed at a more "popular" level, which, in turn, has its own significance in terms of developments in

<sup>96</sup> Oddbjørn Leirvik, "Jesus in modern Muslim thought: from anti-colonial polemics to post-colonial dialogue?" In *Jesus Beyond Nationalism. Constructing the Historical Jesus in a Period of Cultural Complexity*. Ward Blanton, James G. Crossley and Halvor Moxnes (eds.), (London: Equinox Press 2009), 142-3 based on Tarif Khalidi, "The Role of Jesus in Intra-Muslim Polemics of the First Two Islamic Centuries." In *Christian-Arabic Polemics During the Abbasid Period (750-1258)*, edited by S. K. Samir and J. S. Nielsen. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994, 146-156.

<sup>97</sup> *Ta'rikh*, 71.

<sup>98</sup> *Ta'rikh*, 61.

<sup>99</sup> Bruce Lawrence, "Foreward" *Tabyīn*, viii.

Muslim public opinion regarding Christianity at that time. In fact, “popularization” was a deliberate goal of Nizāmī, for example, in his preparing an *‘Āmm Fahm Tafṣīr*, i.e. a translation of aspects of the Qur’an into contemporary Urdu.<sup>100</sup> In the preface to this work on the Qur’an Nizāmī explicitly discusses the need to reach the majority of the public who would not be able to comprehend the previous renderings of the text into heavily Arabized Urdu.<sup>101</sup>

Additionally, in contrast to Sir Sayyid, for Nizāmī there is no impulse to demythologize the sacred text, for example, he takes the portents and miracles surrounding Jesus at face value. As a further contrast, Sir Sayyid’s study of the Gospels has been described as being directed to multiple audiences, both his fellow Muslims and English speakers, especially Christians.

Ahmad Khan wished both to recommend the study of the Bible to his Muslim fellow religionists and to make his views known to his English fellow subjects. Hence he had published the commentary in parallel columns of Urdu and English.<sup>102</sup> That Ahmad Khan intended such a dual purpose is borne out by Hali’s account of the beginnings of the commentary, where he described Ahmad Khan as intending to demonstrate as far as possible the conformity of Muslim and Christian principles and explain those incidental differences that did appear, thus, on the one hand, removing Christian suspicions concerning Islam and, on the other hand, removing Muslim misunderstandings of corruption [taḥrīf] and the

<sup>100</sup> Khwāja Ḥasan Nizāmī, *‘Āmm fahm tafṣīr* (Delhi: Darvīsh Press, 1343/1924). Nizāmī’s various projects of Qur’an dissemination, including his preparing a Hindi version, are discussed in Mushīr al-Ḥaqq, “Khwāja Ḥasan Nizāmī Mutarjīm-o Mufasssīr-e Qur’ān,” In *Khwāja Ḥasan Nizāmī: Hayāt-o-Kārmāma*. Khwāja Ḥasan Thānī Nizāmī (ed.) (Delhi: Urdu Academy Delhi, 1987), 98-108. The title “āmm fahm” conveys the purpose of the project as being “widely accessible to the comprehension” of the general public, it could further be noted that the serialized version of the Urdu translation was published in his magazine *Munādī* under the title “Āsan Qur’ān” (Easy Qur’ān).

<sup>101</sup> Mushīr al-Ḥaqq, “Khwāja Ḥasan Nizāmī Mutarjīm-o Mufasssīr-e Qur’ān,” 99.

<sup>102</sup> That is, the first two volumes of the three volume *Tabyīn* contained these translations, even in the initial versions.



dependability of the Bible.<sup>103</sup> Ahmad Khan had set out to dispel the hostile feelings, ignorance, and intolerance that had been increasing on the part of both towards each other's religion.<sup>104</sup>

Yet it should be noted that his preface to *Ta'rikh-e Masīh* Nizāmī indicates that he has prepared his work on Jesus with a broader intent and aimed at a wider audience than merely offering basic education about the Jesus of the Christian Gospels to Muslim students. Indeed, he continues that everyone, whether Hindu, Muslim, Christian, or other, could benefit from reading his account so that all could become informed about the history and teachings of Jesus.<sup>105</sup> This goal may have been largely aspirational or even hyperbolic. Beyond certain missionaries who appreciated the effort, readers of Urdu on the Christian side were likely few, and the appeal of the Urdu account of Nizāmī to English speakers who possessed direct access to the Gospel stories in their own language was likely limited. Still, it is noteworthy that amidst the increasing communal tensions of the 1920s, a Muslim influencer offered this restatement of the Jesus story according to the Gospels to a broad Indian Muslim audience in a tone and mode that was appreciated both by contemporary Christian missionary scholars of Islam.

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<sup>103</sup> Alṭaf Ḥusayn Ḥālī, *Ḥayāt-i Jāved*, 114–115. Cited in Guenther (see below).

<sup>104</sup> Alan Guenther, "Christian Responses to Ahmad Khan's Commentary on the Bible." *Comparative Islamic Studies* 6, nos. 1-2 (2010), 83 composed this assessment which in turn summarizes a review of Khan's work by the missionary scholar John Robson, "A Mahomedan Commentary on the Bible," *The British and Foreign Evangelical Review* 16 (1867): 556–570, 558; Second Notice, vol. 17 (1868): 58-65.

<sup>105</sup> *Ta'rikh*, 1.

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