

Muḥammad Muṣṭafā al-A‘zamī (1930-2017) obituary

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Abstract

Professor Muhammad Mustafa al-A‘zamī (*1930 in Mau, India - 2017 Riyadh, Saudi Arabia) was educated at Darul-‘Ulum, Deoband, U.P., India (1952), al-Azhar University (1955) and Cambridge University (1966). Al-A‘zamī’s doctoral thesis at Cambridge University and his subsequent academic work was devoted to the history of the Ḥadīth and the Quran. Doctoral supervisor Professor Arthur John Arberry considered al-A‘zamī’s work to be “one of the most exciting and original investigations in this field of modern times.” Al-A‘zamī’s flagship achievements include *Studies in Early Ḥadīth Literature* [1968] and *On Schacht’s Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence* [1985], as well as his discoveries of the manuscript *Ṣaḥīḥ Ibn Khuzaima* and over a dozen hitherto unknown scribes of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ. For his achievements he was honoured with the King Faisal International Award (1980) and the King Khalid Award of Merits, First Degree (1982). He published two major works on the Quran: *The History of the Qur’ānic Text from Revelation to Compilation – A Comparative Study* [2003] and *Ageless Qur’ān Timeless Text – A visual study of Sura 17 across 14 centuries & 19 manuscripts* [2017]. al-A‘zamī fiercely defended his independence and regularly questioned the motives of Western academics in the fields of Ḥadīth and Quran scholarship. A substantial reply to al-A‘zamī’s work on Schacht and the Quran are yet to be published.

Keywords

Mustafa al-A‘zamī, early Ḥadīth literature, quran manuscript, Islamic scholar

“Do not eat my books, I will count them” he joked with me when he sent me off to his private library to spend the night. When he joked his face remained unmoved for a blink until the smile broke. I was always in awe observing him in his 80s navigating through handwritten Arabic manuscripts with the ease of a seasoned

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craftsman. The death of Professor Dr. Muḥammad Muṣṭafā al-A‘zamī at his home in Riyadh, *Muḥammadiya* district in Saudi Arabia on 20 December 2017, at the age of 87, has taken from this world one of the greatest Islamic scholars of the time and from his students a gentle and witty teacher.

Early years in Mau

He was born in or around 1930 to a poor family in the city of Mau (Maunath Bhanjan), Uttar Pradesh, British India. His father ‘Abd al-Raḥmān, a contemporary of Ḥabīb al-Raḥmān al-A‘zamī (1900-1992), was a local scholar who earned his income with handloom weaving of traditional Indian fabric. This was common amongst the majority of families of that period. His first Indian passport is a typical document of its time: date of birth and the spelling in Latin letters (amended upon Saudi naturalisation to al-A‘zamī) both a guesstimate. There is no record for the exact birth date of al-A‘zamī, or even the year he was born. His first passport stated it was 21 April 1932. Yet, al-A‘zamī clearly remembered the 1934 powerful earthquake that struck the northern part of India. He recalls everyone running out of the house, yet al-A‘zamī ran inside trying to save his Eid festival shoe. Indeed, the 15th January 1934 quake corresponds to 28th Ramadan 1352 AH. The first date al-A‘zamī recalls was his teacher signing the homework with the signature “Pandey 1937”.

The young al-A‘zamī lost his mother at the age of two, and he was never told her name. Growing up with a stepmother unkindly disposed to the young boy, al-A‘zamī named his own mother ‘Ā’iṣa, the name of the mother of the believers. He dedicated his later work “The History of the Qur’ānic Text” to his “dear mother, whose face I was too young to remember, whose greatest wish for me (as I was later told) was to memorize the Qur’an, and who I hope to meet again in the Gardens of Heaven.” Al-A‘zamī attended general state schooling where he enjoyed mathematics most. He and his stepbrother had to oversee a small agricultural land owned by his father on the outskirts of the city, where he spent every other night, with his stepbrother the other nights. He recalled he had to walk over five kilometres in the morning from the farmland to reach school. Once he arrived late to class. The teacher did not allow him to enter class throwing at him a harsh “get out”. Al-A‘zamī responded that he does not own a watch and it was only few minutes late. On a bad footing with the teacher it was not to his advantage that al-A‘zamī did not manage, despite his shyness, to conceal his boredom in class. Anecdotally, al-A‘zamī relayed with a chuckle that he often sat bored in the back of the class. He often mentioned how his pauper background was immediately obvious from his clothing. One day the teacher was solving a math problem on the blackboard but failed to arrive at the correct answer. Al-A‘zamī laughed to himself as the answers were printed in the key to the book’s annex. Several attempts and he still did not get it right; all along al-A‘zamī raising his hand. He came to the blackboard and pinpointed exactly where the teacher committed the mistake. His reaction: “you

are right and I am wrong” and stepped out of the classroom in a huff. Due to his excellent grades the school gave him the option to skip the current grade to the next in return for a fee of 1 Rupee. That was beyond the family’s resources. His stepmother was in any case opposed schooling the boy beyond grade 3, unless he completes the daily domestic chores. This meant al-A‘zamī often stayed late night handloom weaving and studying under the candle light.

His father opposed British colonial rule and its language English. Instead he directed the young boy to study Sanskrit. Nevertheless, the spark and interest in the young boy to learn was alive and he persevered teaching English to himself one new word a day and sought company of those who spoke English around him. On one occasion however, al-A‘zamī did take his father’s advice. Despite the young boy’s early interest for Mathematics, his father directed him, as if with immense foresight, to the study of Ḥadīth. The seed his father has sown blossomed and his son would become one of the most influential academics in the field of Ḥadīth. Indeed, what followed was a lifetime track record of academic excellence and wholehearted dedication to the subject. With all the sociological parameters of “failure” (colour, origin and class), this young half-orphan from Mau would become a leading scholar leaving behind an important intellectual legacy for his people, the Muslim community. Till the very last day of his life, al-A‘zamī wrote in defence of the *sanad* system and integrity of the actual texts of the Ḥadīth and Quran as we know them today. Therein he found not only a vocation and career, but a calling. Pursuing this higher calling lay at the root of the plentiful fruits to which his life has given fruition.

Undergraduate and graduate studies: Deoband, Azhar

At the age of 23 (1952) he graduated with excellence from Darul-‘Ulum, Deoband, U.P. India (*Fāḍil*, B.A.), and three years later (1955) from al-Azhar University (*Al-‘Alamiyama ‘aijāzat at-Tadrīs*, M.A.). When he travelled for Egypt no one in his hometown Mau ever undertook such a voyage, so people called him “miṣrī” (the Egyptian), a nickname he is still known today by his associates in Mau. It took him over six months to get an Indian passport. Following the 1947 partition of the Indian subcontinent, officials in India looked suspiciously to Muslims and considered them Pakistani agents. The Egyptian embassy in India did not grant him a student visa as he did not have a formal admission to al-Azhar University. With the single-minded intent to pursue sacred knowledge he decided to travel to Cairo by land and apply in person to al-Azhar. Without a visa for Egypt he chose the land route via the newly formed states of Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and then Egypt. In Beirut he obtained a tourist visa to Egypt and sailed from Beirut to Alexandria. Arriving penniless in Cairo as if by heavenly conspiracy he met a man in a mosque who would become his life time friend: ‘Abdullāh b. ‘Aqīl al-‘Aqīl. Al-‘Aqīl gave him five Egyptian Pounds to cover his initial expenses, a large amount by the standards of the time, sufficient to support a student for a month. This gesture forged

a lifetime brotherhood between the two, to the extent that al-A‘zamī and al-‘Aqīl named their sons ‘Aqīl and Mustafa respectively. Within few days of arriving in Cairo al-A‘zamī managed to obtain admission to al-Azhar University, for him a great badge of honour.

First contact with Orientalist writing leading to doctoral studies in Cambridge

In 1955, upon graduation from al-Azhar, al-A‘zamī informed by his faith prioritised three things over pursuing further research: completing Hajj, obtaining a paid job and getting married. In deed he achieved performing his first Hajj in 1955. In conversations he recalled the architecture and life of the two holy cities of the late 1950s fondly and often lamented the architecture and loss of simplicity of the aughties. He got married to Tashrifun-Nisa Haji Ayoub, in whom he found a loving and the most loyal ally. Together they moved to Qatar, then still a British protectorate, where he obtained his first post. His first job was to teach Arabic to non-Arabs, mainly British doctors, engineers, government officials, and South Indian nurses. Later he joined as Librarian the National Library of the State of Qatar (NLQ). Qatar would become an important stepping stone that changed his life. He remembered the time in Qatar as its infrastructure was poorly developed and locals were still carrying their water, an image in stark contrast to today. Four of his five children were born during this period, two of which passed away very early in their life (an unnamed son who died shortly after birth, and Fatima who died at the age of two in 1960). His surviving children are ‘Aqīl (1960), Fatima (1962) and Anas (1975). Qatar’s physical and intellectual landscape of the late 50s/early 60s offered little fertility for academic curiosity to grow. It was to his credit that in 1960, he discovered the manuscript of “*al-Sunan al-kubrā*” of an-Nasā’ī (later other scholars claimed the discovery). A turning point for the young Deobandi and Azhari scholar was when he fortuitously came across J. Schacht’s “The Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence”. He recalled it was stamped as a gift by the “The Shell Company of Qatar Ltd” (the British-Dutch multinational oil and gas company) to NLQ. It may raise the eyebrow of one or the other why a Western corporation was engaged in the spread of Orientalist ideas that were so repulsive to local values. For al-A‘zamī it was the first time he came across Orientalist writings. Yet, al-A‘zamī would make a mark in the academic landscape formulating a robust engagement and probably a fatal refutation of Schacht and Goldziher. Without an academic background in Western Oriental studies, the privilege of wealth or class, the ambitious young al-A‘zamī obtained admission to pursue doctoral studies at Cambridge University. He self-funded his studies through consuming his almost a year worth of unpaid vacation. In 1964, at the age of 34 with his wife and two children, he set to Britain – a determination to the field that has never left him. One year into the Cambridge PhD programme al-A‘zamī wanted to throw in the towel: duties of a father, finances and research took a strain on him. He proposed

to return to Qatar and work for few more years and return to resume his PhD at a later stage. It was his wife who objected and convinced him otherwise. His wife recalls how he worked day and night on his thesis in the library and completed it in two instead of three years. Reflecting this monumental decision, he wrote in his last work of his life *Ageless Qur'an Timeless Text* (2017): "I dedicate this book to my beloved wife who for sixty years shared my life of good days and bad days, and perhaps a word from her changed the course of my life [...]"

Under the direction of Professor A.J. Arberry, and later under Professor R.B. Serjeant, he completed his doctoral thesis "Studies in Early Ḥadīth Literature" at Cambridge University in 1966. Many of the Arabic references were not yet printed at the time and so al-A'zamī relied on manuscripts, an early training that stayed with him for life. His thesis was later to be published as a book. Professor Arberry, himself a pre-eminent Arabist, wrote about his student one of its kind commendations:

In this field Dr. Azmi has done pioneer work of the highest value, and he has done it according to the exact standards of scholarship. The thesis which he presented, and for which Cambridge conferred on him the degree of PhD, is in my opinion one of the most exciting and original investigations in this field of modern times.

"Studies in Early Ḥadīth Literature" remains to this day a powerful work, translated into Turkish (in 1993), Indonesian and Urdu (in 1994); it occupies a regular position on student reading lists in the field of Ḥadīth. His work was later developed into further studies such as "*Dirāsāt fī al-aḥādīth al-nabawīya. Tārīkh Tadwīnīh*" (first edition King Sa'ud University Press, Riyadh, 1976) and "Studies in Ḥadīth Methodology & Literature" (first edition, American Trust Publication, Indianapolis 1977, also translated into Tamil, Malay, Sinhali and Turkish). Professor al-A'zamī dedicated his "Studies in Early Ḥadīth Literature" to his father "who diverted my course of studies from Mathematics to Ḥadīth, but did not live long enough to share the joy of the first fruit". His emphasis on the "*first fruit*" brings to surface al-A'zamī's single minded focus to continue pursuing his passion of research in the field of Ḥadīth. Indeed, the world of Ḥadīth Studies would see other substantial contributions in the remaining 51 years of his life.

Early academic career

Upon graduation al-A'zamī made attempts to publish his work with academic publishers: without success. As he would observe later: "Orientalists have their own giants, their own idols and rather not destroy their own idols." Academic dogma was ultimately rooted in what Edward Said would describe as a cultural bias against Muslims. In deed that bias has a Western tradition as the former German Ambassador Dr Murad Wilfried Hofmann wrote in a review on al-A'zamī's work "The History of the Qur'ānic Text" (The Muslim World Book Review, 24:4, 2004).

A case in point is when Prof. A.J. Arberry rejected an invited article written by al-A‘zamī for a two-volume book Arberry was editing “Religion in the Middle East: Three Religions in Concord and Conflict” (Cambridge, 1969). Arberry had personally asked al-A‘zamī to contribute an article on the subject of Ḥadīth for the second volume of the edited work. Al-A‘zamī wasn’t happy with the decision and requested a technical reason for the rejection, for which Arberry replied, “The article was too orthodox even for the orthodox”. Quoting J. B. Taylor who reviewed the work, “Perhaps the greatest disappointment is that although distinguished Jews and distinguished Eastern Christians were invited to contribute articles to Volume I, only two Muslims (both Shi‘ī), Seyyed Hossein Nasr and A.A.A. Fyzee, were found to contribute to the section on Islam, and one Muslim, A. L. Tibawi, to the last part on interpretation.” (Taylor, J. (1971). Arberry A. J. Religion in the Middle East: Three Religions in Concord and Conflict. Pp. xii 595 and xi 750 (Cambridge, 1969). £7. Religious Studies, 7 (4), 382-383. doi:10.1017/S0034412500000457). While his work is commonly cited, he maintained till his death that “they cannot defend their position so they chose to ignore despite the scientific evidence”.

Following his PhD, al-A‘zamī briefly returned to Qatar to his post as librarian only to move on for his first academic post in Saudi Arabia. In 1968 al-A‘zamī was offered an academic position in Saudi Arabia, where he settled and developed his career, first at College of Shari‘a in Makkah (1968-73), where he helped in the creation of the graduate programme with the late Dr. Amīn al-Miṣrī, and then at the Department of Islamic Studies at the College of Education, King Sa‘ud University (formerly, University of Riyadh) (1973-1991). Full of ambition and aware of his distinguished academic credentials, like many idealistic able Muslim men and women he asked himself again the question about his purpose in life. Ḥadīth was his field of study, but should he engage himself in ivory tower research or popular education and preaching. Sitting in Makkah and soul searching a purpose how to utilise his abilities, he had an important conversation with A. A. Mawduḍi. Mawduḍi advised that preachers existed in abundance but there was a lack of Western trained researchers. Al-A‘zamī till his death encouraged Muslims to pursue academic research and to write.

1970s: King Faisal International Award in Islamic Studies and international break through

In the 1970s, Professor al-A‘zamī, now in his forties, produced a string of significant works that would earn him international repute, including the discovery of the manuscript of “*Ṣaḥīḥ Ibn Khuzayma*”, which for centuries was considered irretrievably lost (four volume critical edition published by al-Maktab al-Islāmī, Beirut, 1970-1979) to pioneering the computerisation of Ḥadīth collections. A major contribution is the discovery of additional, yet unknown, scribes of the Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ. According to al-A‘zamī since al-Anṣārī (d. 783/1381) Muslim tradition counted only 44 scribes of God’s messenger Muḥammad ﷺ. Professor al-

A'zamī in his work “*Kuttāb al-nabī*” (first edition al-Maktab al-Islāmī, Damascus, 1974) identified over 60 such scribes. This contribution to Muslim history alone is significant, and yet it took 42 years for the work to be translated into English (*The Scribes of the Prophet*, Turath Publishing, 2016). Al-A'zamī took it upon himself to translate the work and prepare it for publication. It was ready for print in around 2005 and by 2016 al-A'zamī found about 4 additional scribes their entries however were reserved for a future second edition. His ambitions however outspanned his life time. At the end of the 1970s, a decade of labour of love, he was awarded the King Faisal International Award (1980), Saudi citizenship by special royal dispensation (1981) and the King Khalid Award of Merits, First Degree (1982). Following the new citizenship, he finally corrected the spelling of his family name from “Aẓmī” to “al-A'zamī”.

1980s

During the 1980s, now al-A'zamī, being in his fifties and with his international standing tremendously boosted, was offered international academic assignments: Visiting Scholar at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan (1981–82), St. Cross College, Oxford, England (Hilary 1987), University of Colorado, Boulder, Colorado, USA, (1989-91) and King Faisal Visiting Professor of Islamic Studies at Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey (1992).

In 1981 he published “*Maghāzī 'Urwah bin az-Zubayr*” (Maktab at-Tarbiya al-'Arabiya li Duwal al-Khalīj, Riyadh) making the case that the compilation of the Prophet's sīra ﷺ started immediately after the death of the Prophet ﷺ, using the earliest written material on the biography of the Prophet ﷺ by 'Urwah b. az-Zubayr (22-93 A.H.).

In 1985 he published an extended version of his work “Studies in Early Ḥadīṭ Literature” under the title “On Schacht's Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence” (John Wiley and Sons, 1985; translated into Turkish, Arabic and in parts into Urdu). The work is a line by line appraisal of Schacht's “Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence”. Precisely because it is a line by line refutation of Schacht, it is impossible to represent the work here properly. Al-A'zamī points out serious mistakes of fact and misunderstanding of Schacht. Through clever lines of reasoning and engaging Orientalist writings to further his case against Schacht, the impression left of Schacht's work is that it has been picked with so many holes that it could not be safely used as an authoritative work any longer. The thrust of al-A'zamī's work is in defence of the historical integrity of the *sanad* system, a refutation of the claim that Ḥadīṭ were only recorded in the second and third Hijri century. The main contribution remains that the Sunnah of the Prophet ﷺ was recorded at the time of the Prophet ﷺ and in any event authenticity of Ḥadīṭ material did not rely on recording alone. The response by non-Muslim and Muslim scholarship could not be any different. Christopher Melchert's review was representative of the humdrum method of attacking the work as “Azami's criticism is

mostly the sort that will only convince believers” (Journal of Law and Religion, Vol. 15, No. 1/2 (2000-2001), pp. 364) but avoided to contest the substance of the work. In essence this was a typical reaction of Orientalist scholarship, which till his death had failed to engage him in debate. In contrast however University of Chicago’s Professor Fazlur Rahman (Journal of Near East Studies, 47(3):228-9] wrote favourably:

It is for the first time that we have a work like Azami’s; he has devoted literally years of research to the investigation of Ḥadīṭ and has analyzed, tested, and passed scholarly judgment on Schacht’s argument step by step, working with actual Ḥadīṭ materials. This book is, indeed, an effective response to Schacht

Professor Fazlur Rahman’s review continued: “Azami has, through this and other works, demonstrated himself to be an outstanding scholar of Ḥadīṭ. At least, to my knowledge, he is the most well-versed and learned scholar of the Islamic science of traditions.”

Al-A‘zamī’s work is often put aside and quoted and essentialised as “the Muslim view”. To my knowledge, there is no serious engagement of al-A‘zamī’s substantive argument to date.

By the end of 1984 a project he started in 1977 with great personal sacrifice came to fruition. Yet it took five more years for it to be released. In June 1989, al-A‘zamī released “Electronic Ḥadīṭ Library”, a prototype CD-ROM supporting Ḥadīṭ retrieval in Arabic language from the six canonical Ḥadīṭ collections, and Musnad Ibn Ḥanbal. At the same time several commercial Ḥadīṭ retrieval systems started appearing on the market. For al-A‘zamī there was an important qualitative difference: He wanted to develop a non-commercial tool crafted by a Ḥadīṭ scholar for other scholars and relied on manuscripts read by Muslim scholars instead of on printed editions of Ḥadīṭ books. Before committing a manuscript, al-A‘zamī checked the genealogy of the manuscript and verified that it has been read by well-known scholars. Al-A‘zamī pioneered the computerisation of Ḥadīṭ and spent a great amount of personal effort into the project, most prominently selling valuable land in order to utilise the proceeds to purchase computers.

1990-2017: Retirement and new discoveries

Retired at the age of 62 in 1991, the same year he was diagnosed with diabetes, his hard work and passion for the subject did not subside. Despite retirement he continued his battle for the historical veracity of Quranic and Ḥadīṭ sources and produced a string of works: “*Al-Muḥaddithūn min al-Yamāmah*” (first edition al-Maktab al-Islāmī, Beirut, 1994) identified around 130 scholars of the Yamamah region of the Peninsula; *The History of the Qur’ānic Text from Revelation to Compilation – A comparative Study*, UK Islamic Academy, Leicester, 2003, Azami Publishing House, 2008 (second edition); *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī – A Facsimile of the copy at Koprulu (Istanbul)*, Azami Publishing House, 2014; and *Ageless Qur’an*

Timeless Text – A visual study of Sura 17 across 14 centuries & 19 manuscripts, Azami Publishing House 2017. His facsimile reproduction of the *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* was published just three years before his passing and would be his last work on Ḥadīṭ. Only fifty copies exist of it worldwide. The German *Institut für Islamische Theologie* at the University of Osnabrück holds one of these valuable copies. Al-A‘zamī dedicated it to “all those who use or champion the use of the Sanad system, one of the foremost achievements of the Islamic civilization”. The defence of the *sanad* system and the integrity of the Quran and Ḥadīṭ as the sources of Islam, if anything, was his life theme. It was yet not his final work.

At the age of 70, al-A‘zamī could have enjoyed life at leisure with his grandchildren. His children followed his early passion for Mathematics: Aqil (PhD in Computer Science), Fatima (PhD in Mathematics) and Anas (PhD in Genetics) have pursued academic careers in Mathematics and Natural Sciences. Yet retiring from work did not mean to him retiring his cause. In 1999 a vile article by Toby Lester appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly*, “What is the Koran?” It further suggested that though Muslims believe the Quran to be the Book of Allah, they were incapable of defending this view in any scholarly fashion. The whole article in *Atlantic Monthly* was based on an interview of G. R. Puin, a German scholar who worked on restoring the Qur’anic fragments accidentally discovered in 1971 after the collapse of a secret chamber in the Grand Mosque of San’a’ where damaged and ruined fragments of the Quran were kept. The article stated Professor Puin and von Bothmer arranged Government funding for their agenda and travelled to Yemen. Al-A‘zamī travelled to San’a’, Yemen, to investigate the Yemeni fragments of the Quran as well.

For the next 18 years of what would remain of his life, al-A‘zamī dedicated to the defence of the integrity and history of the Quranic text. He published two works on the Quran (*The History of the Qur’ānic Text from Revelation to Compilation – A comparative Study*, UK Islamic Academy, Leicester, 2003, second edition published at Azami Publishing House 2008; *Ageless Qur’ān Timeless Text – A visual study of Sura 17 across 14 centuries & 19 manuscripts*, 2017), one in 2003 and the other in 2017 just few months before he passed away. Both works again were largely made only possible through his children acting as research assistants and project managers and investing family resources for travel across the globe inspecting manuscripts. In “The History of the Qur’ānic Text” al-A‘zamī reproduced a letter Dr Puin wrote to al-Akwa, the head of the Yemen Antiquities. The letter was considered of such importance that it was printed in full in the Yemeni newspaper ath-Thawra on 11.3.1999. Therein, Dr Puin pointed out that the Yemeni manuscripts discovered “do not differ from those found in museums and libraries elsewhere” (History of the Quranic Text, page 12). Yet, al-A‘zamī took the opportunity to journey through the history of compilation of the Quranic text. His work boasts a number of colour prints of relevant manuscripts (Part I). He contrasted the superior robustness of the Quranic text to those of Christian and Jewish sources (Part II) and surveyed Orientalist motivations (Part III). For any student and

researcher of the Quran, this work is compulsory reading. The former German Ambassador Dr. Murad Wilfried Hoffmann wrote in a review of “The History of the Qur’ānic Text” in 2004: “For Muslims, this is easily the most important book of recent times” [The Muslim World Book Review, 24:4, 2004].

Edward Said wrote

Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient, dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating restructuring, and having authority over the Orient

(Orientalism, Introduction, Routledge, 1978). Al-A‘zamī was concerned about the way his detailed analysis and work was marginalised in Western circles. Al-A‘zamī grew older and he raised the questions of motive. In “The History of the Qur’ānic Text” (Part III of the book) al-A‘zamī writes: “Realizing what motives drive the present research on the Qur’an is vital”. “Despite all its tendencies against Islamic tradition, Orientalism insists that it is performing a service for Muslims by providing them with pure, impartial, objective research.” He questioned whether mainstream Western scholarship can “be regarded as the standard in ‘unbiased’ Islamic research”. He takes account of Western policies promoted by governments flanked by universities in his chapter “Orientalist Motivations: A Study of Subjectivity”, wherein he characterises their objectives as:

...the main thrust was to expose Muhammad as a false prophet, the Qur’an as an amateurish and dreadful counterfeit, the Ḥadīth as spurious, and Islamic Law as a poor salad burgled from other cultures. In short, findings that sought to demoralize Muslims...and to assist the colonial powers in producing a crop of loyal subjects by crushing any notions of a regal Islamic past or a distinguished Muslim identity

On Schacht al-A‘zamī wrote “critical studies of his work have been systematically neglected, if not barred”. On Muslim scholarship he wrote: “Muslim scholarship concerning the Qur’an is generally relegated to second-class status in Western circles, since the former espouses traditionalism while the latter seeks revisionism”. Just weeks before his passing at the age of 87 al-A‘zamī saw the publication of his final work “Ageless Qur’an Timeless Text”. He intended to refute those in Western academia who argued against the authenticity or integrity of the Quran text. In this work he juxtaposes major Quran manuscripts from the earliest to the most recent available for Chapter XVII of the Quran (Surah Isra). At a glance the visual proof is made: the Quranic text today is the unaltered original. Al-A‘zamī is a rare genus of scholar combining the depth of Muslim and Western scholarly traditions. Undoubtedly his works on the texts of Ḥadīth and Quran deserve continued detailed attention whether by the devout or the critical.

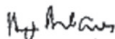
Data Sheet and Images for Obituary to be considered for publication

- Born ca 1930, in the city of Mau, Uttar Pradesh, India. Passed away 20 December 2017 at home in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Buried in Riyadh in al-Naseem Cemetery.
- Survived by his wife and three children.
- Graduated from Darul-‘Ulūm, Deoband, U.P., India in 1952 (Fāḍil (B.A)), from al-Azhar University in Al-‘Alamiyama‘aijāzat at-Tadrīs (M.A) in 1955 and from Cambridge University (PhD) in 1966.
- Awarded King Faisal International Prize for Islamic Studies (1980).
- Saudi citizenship by special dispensation (1981).
- Major works include: “Studies in Early Ḥadīth Literature [1968]”, critical edition of “*Ṣaḥīḥ Ibn Khuzayma*” [1970], critical edition of “*al-‘Ilal by Ibn al-Madīnī*” [1972], “*Manhaj an-naqd ‘ind al-muḥaddithīn*” with critical editing of “*Kitāb at-tamīz of Imām Muslim*” [1975], “Studies in Ḥadīth Methodology and Literature” [1977], critical edition of “*Maghāzī ‘Urwah b. al-Zubayr*” [1981], critical edition of “*Sunan Ibn Mājah with computer generated indices*” [1984], On “Schacht’s Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence” [1985], critical edition of “*Muwatta’ of Imām Mālik*” [1995], “The History of the Qur’ānic Text from Revelation to Compilation – A Comparative Study” [2003], “The Scribes of the Prophet” [2016], “Ageless Qur’ān Timeless Text – A visual study of Sura 17 across 14 centuries & 19 manuscripts” [2017]
- Famous for: Substantive reply to Schacht and Goldziher; Discovery of over 20 additional scribes of the Prophet, Discovery of the manuscripts “*Ṣaḥīḥ Ibn Khuzayma*” and of “*al-Sunan al-kubrā*” of an-Nasā’ī; Discovery of 130 Muhadith of the Yamama region in Saudi Arabia; pioneering the computerisation of Ḥadīth; and his work on the history and integrity of the Quranic text.

FOREWORD

Pembroke College,
Cambridge.
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No doubt the most important field of research, relative to the study of Hadith, is the discovery, verification, and evaluation of the smaller collections of Traditions antedating the six canonical collections of al-Bukhari, Muslim and the rest. In this field Dr Azmi has done pioneer work of the highest value, and he has done it according to the exact standards of scholarship. The thesis which he presented, and for which Cambridge conferred on him the degree of Ph.D., is in my opinion one of the most exciting and original investigations in this field of modern times.



Professor A.J. Arberry