

*Abul Ala Mawdū*

**Towards  
Understanding  
ISLAM**



*The Islamic Foundation*

ABUL A'LĀ MAWDŪDĪ

TOWARDS  
UNDERSTANDING  
~~ISLAM~~

Translated and edited by Khurshid Ahmad

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## FOREWORD

Some may think it pretentious of me to write a foreword to a book by an Islamic thinker as outstanding in our time as Mawlānā Mawdūdī, especially when any need to introduce the eminent author or his remarkable book *Towards Understanding Islam* has been magisterially fulfilled by Brother Khurshid Ahmad. *Towards Understanding Islam* has already made its mark and this edition is only an improved English version. However, I can hardly neglect this opportunity to express our gratitude to Allah, *subhānahū wata‘ālā* for having enabled us to bring out a new revised version of a book which has so deeply influenced such a large number of men and women. Only recently I received a letter from a friend in Brazil, saying how a leading journalist had embraced Islam purely because of the simple and persuasive exposition of the Islamic way of life in *Towards Understanding Islam*. There must be innumerable other examples of a similar kind and I hope that the book will be even more effective in its present form.

The Islamic Foundation envisages a comprehensive plan to bring the moving and inspiring work of Mawlānā Mawdūdī before the world at large, in English and other major European languages. *Towards Understanding Islam* is only the first step and we hope that other important books by him, certainly some of the most influential in our age, will soon find their way to thirsty souls and hungry intellects.

We pray to Allah to bless our effort with mercy and acceptance.

13 December, 1979  
24 Muḥarram 1400 A.H.

**K. J. Murad**  
Director General



## AUTHOR'S PREFACE TO SECOND EDITION

The present edition of *Towards Understanding Islam* is more than a new translation of my book *Risālah Dīniyāt*: it is an entirely new and revised version. The first edition, which was rendered into English by the late Dr. Abdul Ghani (Director of Public Instruction, Afghanistan), was very brief and sketchy. Unfortunately, Dr. Abdul Ghani did not live to improve the translation. I later revised the original book and made substantial additions to it. This revised edition of *Risālah Dīniyāt* has now been skilfully translated by Prof. Khurshid Ahmad, to whom my heartfelt thanks are due for this labour of love. I am confident that the book will serve its purpose better in this new form.

My object in writing this book has been to provide all those — Muslims and non-Muslims alike — who have no access to the original sources with a brief treatise giving a lucid, comprehensive and all-embracing view of Islam. I have avoided minute details and endeavoured to portray Islam as a whole in a single perspective. Apart from stating what we Muslims believe in and stand for, I have also tried to explain the rational bases of our beliefs. Similarly, in presenting the Islamic modes of worship and the outlines of the Islamic way of life, I have also tried to unveil the wisdom behind them. I hope this small treatise will go far towards satisfying the intellectual cravings of Muslim youth, and that it will help non-Muslims to understand our real position.

Lahore  
11th September, 1960

ABUL A'Ā





## EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

It is a cherished intellectual fashion of our times to highlight the challenge of secular civilization to faith and religion. There is, however, very little reflection on the challenge that religion — particularly Islam — poses to the sensate culture of the age.

For the last few centuries religion in the West has been on the defensive, most often apologetic, at all times making concessions to and compromises with an approach to life and culture that is alien to the values and ideals of religion. The Muslim World has also weathered the global onslaughts of Western civilization, especially its politico-economic arm, imperialism, which inflicted many a dent and deformity. The religious approach to life and its problems was discarded and the role of religion in the socio-economic spheres became minimal. At both the conceptual and operational levels the faith and religion of all those under colonial rule, and of the Muslims in particular, was reduced to a secondary position, if not to one of total irrelevance. The situation is now changing. The tide of imperialism has receded. The Muslim World, after attaining political independence, is now engaged in an ideological effort to rediscover its cultural personality. By drawing upon its own spiritual and historical sources it is trying to develop new attitudes and roles for restructuring its own society and for the establishment of a new world order. This new resilience in the Muslim World symbolises the revivalist movement of Islam.

The Muslims look upon the crisis of the twentieth century as a crisis of values and believe that the way out of the human predicament lies in the construction of a new social order. The real need is not to seek concessions here and there or to effect a few changes in the institutional superstructures. What is needed is a searching re-examination of the foundations on which the entire structure of society is built and of the ideals which the culture aspires to achieve. The crisis in economic and political relations is the natural outcome of the ideals, values and institutions that characterize modern civilization. Islam, therefore, suggests that it is only through summoning mankind towards a new vision of man and society that its house can be set in order. This calls for a basic change in man's approach. It is only through a thorough understanding of the social ideals and values of religion and a realistic assessment of their socio-economic situation — resources, problems and constraints — that faith-oriented communities can

develop a creative and innovative approach to the challenges confronting humanity today.

This approach must be ideological. The real objective which inspires the Muslims is not a package of economic and political concessions nor even certain changes in the economic superstructure, but the construction of a new world order, with its own framework of ideals, values and foundations.

The Western approach has always assumed that radical change can be brought about by changing the environment. That is why emphasis has always been placed on change in structure. This approach has failed to produce proper results. It has ignored the need to bring about change within men and women themselves and has concentrated on change in the outside world. What is needed, however, is a total change — within people themselves as well as in their social environment. The problem is not merely structural, although structural arrangements would also have to be remodelled. But the starting point must be the hearts and souls of men and women, their perception of reality and of their own place and mission in life. The Islamic approach to social change takes full cognizance of these aspects.

Islam is an Arabic word. It is derived from two root-words: one *Salm*, meaning peace and the other *Silm*, meaning submission. Islam stands for “a commitment to surrender one’s will to the Will of God” and thus to be at peace with the Creator and with all that has been created by Him. It is through submission to the Will of God that peace is brought about. Harmonization of man’s will with the Will of God leads to the harmonization of different spheres of life under an all-embracing ideal. Departmentalization of life into different water-tight compartments, religious and secular, sacred and profane, spiritual and material, is ruled out. There is unity of life and unity of the source of guidance. As God is One and Indivisible, so is life and our human personality. Each aspect of life is inseparable from the other. Religious and secular are not two autonomous categories; they represent two sides of the same coin. Each and every act becomes related to God and His guidance. Every human activity is given a transcendent dimension; it becomes sacred and meaningful and goal-centred.

Islam is a worldview and an outlook on life. It is based on the recognition of the unity of the Creator and of our submission to His will. Everything originates from the One God, and everyone is ultimately responsible to Him. Thus the unity of the Creator has as its corollary the Oneness of His

creation. Distinctions of race, colour, caste, wealth and power disappear; our relation with other persons assumes total equality by virtue of the common Creator. Henceforth our mission becomes a dedication to our Creator; worship and obedience to the Creator becomes our purpose in life.

The Creator has not left us without guidance for the conduct of our life. Ever since the beginning of creation He has sent down Prophets who have conveyed His message to humanity. They are the source from which to discover God's Will. Thus we have the chain of Prophets beginning with Adam (peace be upon him) and ending with Muḥammad (peace be upon him). Abraham, Moses, Noah, John, Zechariah and Jesus (peace be upon them) all belong to this golden chain of Prophets. The Prophets David, Moses, Jesus and Muḥammad (may peace be upon them all), brought revealed books of guidance with them. The Qur'ān, the Book revealed to the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him), is the last and final of these books of guidance.

The Qur'ān contains the word of God. In it is preserved the divine revelation, unalloyed by human interpolation of any kind, unaffected by any change or loss to the original. In it is distilled the essence of all the messages sent down in the past. In it is embodied a framework for the conduct of the whole of human life. There are explicit criteria for judging between right and wrong; there are principles of individual and collective conduct. In it are depicted the human follies of the past. In it are warnings for humankind, and in it are assurances for continued guidance for those who seek God's help.

The Qur'ān has depicted a path, the Straight Path (*Ṣīrāt al-Mustaqīm*), which when followed revolutionizes the whole of life. It brings about a transformation in character and galvanizes us into action. This action takes the form of purification of the self, and then unceasing effort to establish the laws of God on earth, resulting in a new order based on truth, justice, virtue and goodness.

Men and women play a crucial role in the making of this world. They act as God's vicegerents (*Khulafā'*)—His deputies and representatives on earth. They are morally prepared to play this role. Success lies in playing it properly, by enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong, by freeing people from the bondage of others, by demonstrating that a sound and serene society can only result if one harmonizes one's will with the Will of God. This makes seeking the Creator's pleasure one's purpose in life, treating the whole of creation as one's partner, raising the concept of human

welfare from the level of mere animal needs to seeking what is best in this world and what is best in the Hereafter.

This is the Islamic worldview, and its concept of men and women and their destiny. Islam is not a religion in the Western understanding of the word. It is at once a faith and a way of life, a religion and a social order, a doctrine and a code of conduct, a set of values and principles and a social movement to realize them in history.

The uniqueness of Islamic culture lies in its values and principles. When Muslims, after an illustrious historical career, became oblivious of this fact and became obsessed with the manifestations of their culture, as against its sources, they could not even fully protect the house they had built. The strength of Islam lies in its ideals, values and principles, and their relevance to us is as great today as it has ever been in history. The message is timeless and the principles Islam embodies are of universal application.

In our search for a new world order today, Islam emphasizes that we must aspire to a new system of life through which to approach human problems from a different perspective, not merely from the perspective of limited national or regional interest, but from the perspective of what is right and wrong, and how best we can strive to evolve a just and a humane world order at different levels of our existence, individual, national and international.

That the present order is characterized by injustice and exploitation is proved beyond any shadow of doubt. But Islam suggests that the present order fails because it is based upon a wrong concept of man and of his relationship with other human beings, with society, with nature, and with the world. The search for a new order brings us to the need for a new concept of man and his role. From the viewpoint of world religions in general, and of Islam in particular, the focus of the discussion must be shifted to a new vision of man and society, to an effort to bring about change at the level of human consciousness, of values, leading to new cultural transformation.

This is the concept of Islam that lies at the root of the contemporary resurgence of Islam. It is in the framework of these parameters that the Muslims are today awakening to a new world role, facing the problems of modernization, challenging the secular concepts and institutions of the world establishment, purging their thought and society of alien intrusions

from Western civilization, and harnessing their resources to build a new order at home which could act as a window on the Islamic order for all humankind. Amongst the chief architects of this new awakening in the world of Islam is Mawlana Sayyid Abul A'la Mawdūdī.

Born in 1903 C.E., Mawdūdī started his public career as early as 1918. He wrote and spoke as editor, scholar, religious thinker and leader of a movement, authoring over a hundred works of varying size and delivering more than a thousand speeches. His death in September 1979 marks the end of an era.

He made his debut in the intellectual life of the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent in 1927, at the early age of twenty-four, and created a stir by his voluminous scholarly work *Al-Jihād fi al-Islām* ("Jihad in Islam") first serialized in a newspaper, and subsequently published in the form of a book in 1930. From the early thirties he was a major, dominating, undaunted figure on the intellectual scene of the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent. The monthly magazine *Tarjumān al-Qur'ān*, which he edited since 1933, has been a major influence on the minds of the Muslim intellectuals of the subcontinent. Since the forties, when Mawlānā Mawdūdī's writings began to be available in translated versions, especially in Arabic and English, his ideas have attracted an increasing number of people far beyond the confines of the subcontinent. It is no exaggeration to say that by the time of his death he had become the most widely read Muslim author of our time, contributing immensely to the contemporary resurgence of Islamic ideas, feelings and activity all over the world.

Islam, however, was never a merely intellectual concern of Mawlānā Mawdūdī. He consciously tried to live Islam and to live for Islam. As far back as his mid-twenties he had resolved not only to devote all his energy to expounding the teachings of Islam, but also to do all that lay in his power to transform Islamic teachings into practical realities. Mawlānā Mawdūdī was always emphatic in asserting that Islam is not merely a body of metaphysical doctrines, nor merely a bundle of rituals, nor even merely a set of rules of individual conduct. It is indeed a way of life, the bases of which lie rooted in Divine Revelation; a way of life which is permeated with God-consciousness and is oriented to doing God's Will and actualising good and righteousness in human life. A Muslim is committed to follow this way of life, to bear witness to it by word and deed, and to strive in order to make it prevail in the world. Hence, in addition to his intellectual contribution, in 1941 Mawlānā Mawdūdī founded a movement known as the *Jamā'at-i Islāmī* ("The Islamic Organization"). He led this movement as its chief from

its inception till 1972. Even after getting himself relieved of the duties of its formal headship for reasons of health, he continued to be a major source of guidance and inspiration for those associated with the *Jamā'at-i Islāmī*, and indeed for a very large number of men and women across the globe, who do not have any affiliation to that organization. More and more people, particularly Muslims of the younger generation, are coming to appreciate Mawdūdī and even identify with the vision of Islam that he articulated so lucidly and incisively.

Mawlānā Mawdūdī, therefore, was no mere academician; he was also a man of action engaged in a grim struggle for the implementation of the Islamic vision. During this struggle the many sterling qualities of his character came to the surface — notably his magnanimity and tolerance. It is because of his involvement in practical matters, especially since 1948, that Mawlānā Mawdūdī often had to suffer persecution at the hands of the men of authority in Pakistan who failed to perceive the real motives and true character of his movement. Many a time he had to court imprisonment, not unlike some of the great heroes of Islam — Abū Ḥanīfah, Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, Ibn Taymiyah, Shaykh Aḥmad Sirhindī, and Sayyid Quṭb of our own time, to name only a few luminaries. Not only that, in 1953 he narrowly escaped the gallows and, in 1963, the bullets of an assassin. In braving persecution for the sake of his cause, Mawlānā Mawdūdī displayed a serene dignity and heroic fearlessness which won him the abiding love and respect of friends and foe alike.

It is remarkable that despite the exacting tasks laid on Mawlānā Mawdūdī's shoulders as the head of a large movement, he remained prolific as a writer and his writings remained impressive, not only qualitatively, but also quantitatively. His *magnum opus*, of course, is his translation and *tafsīr* (exegesis) of the Holy Qur'ān, an epitome of his elegant literary style, his erudition, and the clarity and brilliance of his thought. One of the major characteristics of Mawlānā Mawdūdī was his ability to bring out the relevance of Islam to the problems and concerns of man in the present age. This is largely because he combined with his Islamic scholarship an awareness and knowledge of the intellectual trends and practical problems of man in the modern age. In encountering the challenge of modernity, Mawlānā Mawdūdī displayed neither ultra-conservative rigidity, nor proneness to be overawed by the ideas and institutions current in our time simply because they were fashionable in the modern age or had gained respectability among the nations which are currently the leaders of the world. He wanted the Muslims to appropriate creatively the healthy and beneficial elements from the cumulative treasure of human experience, and

to employ them to serve the higher ends of life embodied in the Islamic tradition. It is this aspect of Mawlānā Mawdudī which has attracted many, but at the same time repelled many others, particularly the ultra-conservative and the ultra-westernized elements in Muslim society.

*Towards Understanding Islam* is another of his important books. It is an elementary study of the basic concepts and principles of Islam. It offers a simple, understandable and unsophisticated interpretation of the meaning and message of Islam for the ordinary reader, particularly the young. It is not written in the brow-beating style of theology books, rich in awe-inspiring jargon and legal quibblings but of little help in bringing the reader into direct contact with the spirit of the faith.

*Towards Understanding Islam* is a religious text with a difference. It offers a simple exposition of Islam: its approach to life, the articles of its faith, its worship and prayers, and the scheme of life which it envisages. The method of exposition is steeped in the methodology of the Qur'an. It offers in summary form the essential teachings of Islam. And as the book is primarily meant for lay readers and students no attempt is made to burden the mind of the reader with difficult or philosophic dissertations. The language and style of the author are clear, candid and rational.

Originally written in 1932 in Urdu, under the title *Risālah Dīniyāt*, the book was intended as a text-book for students of the higher classes and for the general public. It served an important need and became a popular Islamic reader. Most of the schools and colleges of the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent adopted it as a text-book in theology and made its study a part of their curricula. It has been translated into many of the world's languages, including English, Arabic, Hindi, Persian, German, French, Italian, Turkish, Portuguese, Swahili, Indonesian, Japanese, Malayalam, Tamil, Pushto, Bengali, Gujrati and Sindhi.

The first English translation appeared in 1940 (Translator: Dr. Abdul Ghani) and ran into many editions. In the early fifties the need for a new translation was felt for more than one reason. The earlier translation suffered from certain deficiencies. Moreover, the author re-edited the text in the forties, making substantial alterations and revisions. I was assigned the task of rendering a new translation based on the revised text (sixteenth [revised] edition), which I accomplished in the mid-fifties. Although I kept the earlier translation before me, only a very few paragraphs were finally embodied in the new translation. Strictly speaking, I did not venture a literal, word-for-word, translation of the original text. I tried to follow the



original as faithfully as possible, but departed wherever necessary from a strictly literal rendering in the interest of a more effective communication of the meaning of the text. The learned author was kind enough to go through my translation in 1959 and it was offered to the public with his approval.

During the last two decades many reprints of the 1959 edition have appeared. As the years went by I came to feel that the translation needed further improvement. My long stay in the United Kingdom (1968–78) provided me with an opportunity for further reflection upon a work done in my student days. Now a revised translation is being published by the Islamic Foundation. I am grateful to my friend Paul Moorman, Editor, *Middle East Education* and a former Foreign Editor, *The Times Higher Educational Supplement*, for his meticulous assistance in revising the present text. I would also like to place on record the assistance I received from Khwaja Abdul Wahid and Ansar Azam in preparing my first translation. I cannot but record my profound debt to Mawlānā Mawdūdī for the influence his ideas and his noble example have had on my own life, in all phases of its development so far, and how impoverished I feel by his departure from our midst towards life-eternal. May Allah bless his soul and enable his intellectual progeny, to which I among others feel proud to belong, to continue his mission. *Towards Understanding Islam* is one of those books which have changed the lives of many and set them along the Islamic path. Over a million copies of this book have appeared in different languages of the world. It is a unique privilege to be associated with the production of this edition of the book.

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Islamabad, Pakistan.

**KHURSHID AHMAD**

1st Muḥarram, 1400  
November 20, 1979.