

Sovereignty of the Ethical: Decentering Colonial Modernity and Islamic Reconfiguration of Order in South Asia.

Extended Abstract

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Introduction

This study investigates the transfiguration of Muslim political thought in colonial South Asia, arguing that the intellectual interventions of the time were a fundamental ontological and epistemic re-centering of the political within the ethical rather than merely reactive tactics of a "minority" in decline. The study maps a decolonial approach that attempted to restore the very possibility of an Islamic life under the conditions of colonial modernity, going beyond the traditional historiographical "narrative of loss" that focuses on the fall of Mughal rule in 1857.

I. The Colonial Upheaval: From Universe Order to Bureaucratic Closure

The study starts with the idea that South Asian Muslims' "social imaginary" was drastically altered by colonial control, which was an ontological rupture. Instead of merely installing a new ruler, colonialism imposed a Westphalian episteme that called for the division of life into "private faith" and "public law." The traditional *Isnad* (chains of authority) that had traditionally connected political government to philosophical reality were shattered by this dislocation.

The "Sovereignty of God" was structurally overshadowed by the "Sovereignty of the Bureaucrat" during the British Raj, which replaced theological foundations of legitimacy with secular reason and territorially limited government.

Accordingly, the Muslim subject experienced a sense of ethical "homelessness" as a result of this shift, since the conventional grammars of authority and community were no longer relevant to the lived reality of a colonised people.

II. The Conceptual Turn: The Ethical Sovereignty

The definition of the "Sovereignty of the Ethical" is the main theoretical contribution of this work. It contends that Muslim scholars implemented a radical shift of authority following the collapse of temporal rule. The ethical development of the community (Millat) became the main site of sovereignty when the state was no longer the vehicle for Islamic principles. Sovereignty is now viewed as a collective's moral autonomy to maintain its own normative universe rather than as a monopoly over land or violence. Muslim intellectuals were able to envision a political existence that was both internally and outwardly sovereign as a result of this move. It turned political reasoning into an *Akhlaq* (ethics) exercise, where the community's survival was determined more by its commitment to a heavenly moral discipline than by its ownership of a throne.

III. Genealogical Locations: Charting the Discursive Domain

The study looks at four different philosophical reactions that make up a common discursive field of Anti-Colonial Islamic Modernity in order to trace this transformation:

- Theology of the Covenant and Maulana Hussain Ahmad Madani: Madani is the embodiment of "Contractual Decoloniality." He argued that Muslims might share a Qaum (territorial country) with non-Muslims without compromising their Millat (ethical identity) by articulating Muttahida Qaumiyat (Composite Nationalism) and using the Mithaq-e-Medina (Covenant of Medina) as a discursive precedent. His project was a decolonial endeavour to use the secular notion of the "nation" as a weapon in order to achieve the moral goal of overthrowing the Zillat regime (humiliation).
- Muhammad Iqbal and the Metaphysics of *Khudi*: Iqbal used a metaphysics of the Self to fight the "mass politics" of his time. He was afraid that secular nationalism would "hollow out" the Muslim spirit by substituting the limited, "tribal" identity of the state for the limitless ethical possibilities of the individual. Iqbal believed that *Khudi* embodied the "Sovereignty of the Ethical"—the development of a strengthened ego that maintains spiritual sovereignty despite political oppression.
- Ashraf Ali Thanwi and the Regulation of Intention: Despite being mislabeled as "quietist," Thanwi's ideas provide a critique of performative politics. He contended that

the nationalist movement's "exuberance" ran the risk of substituting public spectacle with *Niyyah* (sincere intention). In order to prevent the fight for freedom from resulting in an ethical deterioration of the self, his intervention was to safeguard the "Sovereignty of the Ethical" by subjecting political action to stringent Juristic and Sufistic supervision.

- Abul A'la Maududi and the God-State Critique: Maududi concluded the criticism by pointing out that the contemporary nation-state is a type of "Modern *Jahiliyyah*" (ignorance). Any unity within a secular nationalist framework, he contended, was an ethical compromise of *Tawhid* (the Oneness of God). His relocation of sovereignty was absolute: the "Ethical" could not fully find its sovereign home unless a polity based on *Hakimiyyah* (Divine Sovereignty) was established.

IV. The Existential Battle for Ethics and Dignity

The study focuses on the ideas of *Izzah* (dignity) and *Zillat* (abasement) as the main affective forces behind this discourse. Colonialism was seen as a structural condition of *Zillat*, an ontological situation in which the colonised are deprived of moral agency, rather than merely as a political rule. Thus, the "Sovereignty of the Ethical" was a rehabilitation initiative. Since solidarity was the only way to attain the collective *Izzah* required to see the Truth in public, it became an ethical requirement (*Wajib*).

This study probes questions of Eurocentric teleology that links political maturity to the nation-state by emphasising concepts like *Izzah* (dignity), *Tawhid* (oneness/unity), and *Akhlaq* (ethical discipline). It shows that Muslim thinkers created a theoretical innovation that separated territory from authority. The "Sovereignty of the Ethical" contends that the ethical community that can uphold moral duty in a divided world—rather than the border—is the real site of decolonisation. By mapping an alternative fantasy of the political—one that finds its sovereignty in the unconquered ethical spirit rather than the colonial map—this work adds to the field of global intellectual history.

V. Theoretical Importance

By reconstructing these discussions, the paper questions Eurocentric teleologies that visualise contemporary political philosophy as a path toward the secular nation-state. Rather, it reveals an

alternative modernism that is fundamentally ethical, passionately decolonial, and immensely theological. It concludes that the Muslim experience in South Asia offers an important case study for Global Intellectual History, showing that the ethical community does not vanish when political sovereignty is rejected; rather, it becomes the new frontier of sovereignty. This "Sovereignty of the Ethical" still influences how Islamic law, secular governments, and the pursuit of dignity in a post-colonial world interact today.