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## **Wilfred Scawen Blunt and his Ideas on the Future of Islam**

*Syed Munir Wasti\**

Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, like many aristocratic Englishmen in the age of Empire in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, took an interest in the Muslim populations of the colonies being governed by Britain. As a prolific writer and poet, his approach differs from his contemporaries in being, on the whole, genuinely sympathetic to Islam. In his book 'The Future of Islam' he shows how important the power of Islam in coming centuries is likely to be, and touches upon many important topics, such as the growing spread of Islam in the world and possible adjustments to the Caliphate. He would like to see the formation of a friendly association between Great Britain and the Muslims of the world in the political interests of Britain. Inevitably, many of his predictions and wishes did not materialize in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Wilfred Scawen Blunt [1840-1922] was an English gentleman who followed the leisurely pursuits available to affluent members of Victorian society, i.e., travelling and poetry. His travels in the Middle East made a powerful impression on his intellectual and emotional sensibilities. As E.M. Forster wrote in his essay on Blunt, he 'was drawn to Islam, and at one time thought of professing it.'<sup>1</sup> He was, no doubt, in sympathy with the subjugated peoples of the Middle East and with the Indians of South Asia who were groaning under the colonial yoke. Further in the essay, Forster writes, 'Egyptians found him too pro-Turkish and Indians too anti-British.'<sup>2</sup> This attitude was unique for a stolid Englishman of the time of the 'highnoon of Empire'. Blunt feared the advance of European powers in Oriental lands. Forster further writes: 'His detachment is amazing. He dreaded a war because it must involve Asia and Africa, and complete the enslavement of the conservative Oriental nations, whom he loved and who loved him..... and the war

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\* Prof. Dr Syed Munir Wasti, Former Chairperson, Department of English, University of Karachi, Karachi.

<sup>1</sup> E.M. Forster, *Abinger Harvest* (London, 1967), 296.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 302.

itself is seen as the last of a series of encounters that the West made upon the East, and as a squabble between two groups of robbers over their plunder'.<sup>3</sup>

Blunt's long residence in Egypt [where he had bought a house] and his general sympathetic attitude allowed him entrée into the most distinguished circles.<sup>4</sup> His incisive observations on Egyptian socio-political life were contained in a series of five essays that he wrote for the *Fortnightly Review* in 1881-82 that were collected together under the title of *The Future of Islam* and printed in book-form in 1882.<sup>5</sup>

In his introduction, he writes that he sees the Muslim peoples of the Middle East and South Asia in ferment as a reaction to the aggressive incursions of the French and the British. The spectre of a period of turbulence is predicted with dire consequences for European powers and the emergence of a new Muslim nation energized by the threat of occupation will put Europe on the retreat. He appeals to the impartial judgment of the Muslims who may see him exposing 'their domestic griefs' though he insists that 'his motive has been throughout a pure one, and he trusts that they will pardon him in virtue of the sympathy with them which must appear in every line he has written'.<sup>6</sup> Predicting the future of Islam, Blunt movingly writes: 'he [the Muslim] has a supreme confidence in Islam, not only as a spiritual, but as a temporal system the heritage and gift of the Arabian race and capable of satisfying their most civilized wants; and believes in the hour of their political resurgence'.<sup>7</sup> Blunt, in his first essay, is unique as presenting the Haj as a central focal point in the lives of Muslims the world over as the source of revival in the downtrodden Muslim world. He writes that he travelled to Jeddah the previous winter which was 'only forty miles distant from that famous centre of the Muslim universe.... There every race and every language are represented and every sect.... It is hardly too much to say that one can learn of modern Islam in a week at Jeddah than in a year elsewhere'.<sup>8</sup> In Jeddah, to his amazement he noted, 'I was astonished at the vigorous life of Islam, at its practical hopes and fears in the modern 19<sup>th</sup> century'.<sup>9</sup> One personal consequence of his visit to Jeddah was, according to

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 304.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 308.

<sup>5</sup> W.S. Blunt, *The Future of Islam* (Lahore, 1975). [photomechanical reprint]. All references are to this edition.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., ix.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 3-5.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 6.

Elizabeth Longford, 'he carried away with him a growing faith in Islam'.<sup>10</sup>

After this expository chapter, Blunt proceeds to discuss the 'modern question of the Caliphate'. He makes a historical survey of the development of the Caliphate as the premier Muslim political institution bringing it down to the then contemporary situation. Blunt refers to the proclamation of Islam by Napoleon in Egypt and discusses the connotations of a great Muslim empire founded by Napoleon. He then attacks the Turkish caliphs, Abd al-Majid and Abd al-Aziz, for instituting changes in Turkey that were inspired by Europe in 'defiance' of Islam. He sees the contents of the Hatti Humayuni as 'points in the history of the Ottoman Caliphate's decline'.<sup>11</sup> Referring to Abd al-Hamid II, he makes this scathing observation: 'Of all the lands of Islam his own are probably those where Abd al Hamid has now the most scanty following'.<sup>12</sup> At the beginning of the next essay, Blunt states that Abd al-Hamid II would prove to be the 'last Caliph of the House of Othman' and then surveys the field for possible replacements. After examining, and rejecting, possible candidates such as Abd al-Qadir of Algeria who revolted against the French occupation of his country, the Sennoussi chief in Tripoli and various Indian leaders, Blunt feels that no suitable replacement was forthcoming.

In his third essay, Blunt discusses the position of Mecca as 'the true metropolis of Islam'. He argues that choice of a new Caliph, based in Mecca, would be 'the one which gives the best promise of renewed spiritual life for Islam'.<sup>13</sup>

Chapter Four tackles the prospects of a 'general reformation' for Islam in 'her political and moral life' to meet 'the intellectual invasion of her frontiers with a corresponding intelligence'.<sup>14</sup> Refuting the charge of inflexibility or immobility in Islam, Blunt writes that 'the fact is, Islam does move'.<sup>15</sup> He supplies the evidence by citing reports of reforms advocated by religious-minded persons to broaden the intellectual base of Islam especially while encountering modern challenges. Referring to the rapid Turkish advance into Europe, Blunt writes that, 'Christendom certainly at that time was in danger of political annihilation, or fancied

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<sup>10</sup> Elizabeth Longford, *A Pilgrimage of Passion: the Life of Wilfrid Scawen Blunt* (London, 1979), 168.

<sup>11</sup> Blunt, *op. cit.*, 78.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* 89.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

itself to be so, and the apprehension of devout persons in Central Europe were roused to a vivid consciousness of impending evil by the thought that this was perhaps another authorized scourge of God'.<sup>16</sup> The Islamic world also exhibited corruption and palpable decline which flowed from a lack of commitment to Islam – not to inherent Islamic weakness. Blunt writes, 'Islam as yet hardly shows a taint of infidelity', and, 'there is no sign as yet that it has ceased to be a living faith'.<sup>17</sup>

The impulse for an indigenous Islamic reformation, Blunt argues, must come from within either through a charismatic leader like the Sherif Abd al-Mutalleb [whom Abd al-Hamid appointed as his representative in the Hijaz] or by new rules, pacts and observances—such as those which went into the enactment of the Covenant of Medina which the Holy Prophet signed with the non-Muslims in Medina. Finally, in this chapter, Blunt writes: England, at least, may afford now to acknowledge Mohammedanism as something not to be merely combated and destroyed, but to be accepted by her and encouraged.

The fifth and last chapter is titled 'England's interest in Islam'. Blunt remarks with justice that Europe has always exhibited social hostility and political aggression towards Islam whether during the Crusades or in the colonial conquest of Muslim lands.<sup>18</sup> Blunt states that in the future, Islam must see great territorial losses at no distant date and a consequent impoverishment of its population. Islam must focus on sub-Saharan Africa to make good the losses on the Mediterranean coast by the 'conversion of the Negro race of the tropics'.<sup>19</sup> Blunt sees the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire as inevitable; out of the ashes of the Ottoman Empire new hope would emerge with Constantinople being replaced by Cairo or Mecca and the Tartar by the Arab – which no 'lover of Islam need deplore'.

England entered South Asia as merchants and engaged in trade agreements with the potentates there. No doubt Indian Muslims would desire the restoration of their paramount position but their feelings are less bitter towards England than towards the Hindus, their former subjects and present rivals.<sup>20</sup> By assuming the role of adviser and protector, England will be able to direct the tone of thought of Muslims throughout the world using it for purposes of humanity and progress.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 137.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 175.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 178.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 194.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 198.

Next, in Egypt, England would benefit by having a homogeneous population of active agriculturists who will not pose any danger to the English. As regards Turkey, England had signed a pact for its defence against the danger posed to it by Russia. Though England was morally bound to intervene on Turkey's behalf, the distance of such territory made it impossible for military movement.

The Caliphate, as a purely religious and spiritual institution, must function under British protection be it in Cairo, Damascus, Baghdad, Central Asia or Mecca. The Sherifiate must continue there and the pilgrimage should remain uninterrupted. The revenue from the Hajj would provide funds for a Jeddah-Mecca railway, ports for steamers and pilgrim ships and further funds could be available from Waqfs [pious endowments]. 'The main point', writes Blunt in conclusion, 'is virtue. Let Britain take Islam by the hand and encourage her boldly on the path of virtue'.<sup>22</sup>

These 'progressive' [for the time in which they were articulated] ideas did not achieve a rapid fulfillment. The world had to wait until 1918 for the Ottoman Empire to be dissolved and that too at the hands of the Turks themselves who also put an end to the Caliphate. It never could be revived anywhere else. Britain's hold on India weakened only by slow degrees. Blunt's prediction about sub-Saharan Africa becoming a Muslim belt is slowly emerging and taking shape. The North African coastal countries were able to free themselves from colonial yoke. Blunt's sympathy lay with the Muslims but he treated them as he treated the servants in his Cairo mansion with a patronizing air. He could not acknowledge the superiority of Islam over all religions nor publicly attest to its truth. As Thomas J. Assad writes, his writings 'are calculated to educate the reader in the political importance of the East and the evils of imperialism'.<sup>23</sup> Blunt was affected by the simple life of the Bedouin. He deviated from his initial assessment of their virtues, as Kathryn Tidrick writes, 'He conceived a life-long sympathy with them which was based upon two things: his perception of the nature of their religious beliefs and his perception of their form of government, both of which possessed for him an acute emotional appeal'.<sup>24</sup>

It will be interesting to note the subsequent unfolding of the events predicted by Blunt in his book, *The Future of Islam*. Writing about this book, he mentions in his later *Secret History of the English*

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 213-14.

<sup>23</sup> Thomas J. Assad, *Three Victorian Travellers: Burton, Blunt, Doughty* (London, 1964), 136.

<sup>24</sup> Kathryn Tidrick, *Heart-beguiling Araby* (Cambridge, 1981), 120.

*Occupation of Egypt* [1907], that the wave of Islamic resurgence that had swept through the country with the coming of the great Islamic scholar, Jamal al-din Afghani and his exuberant advocacy of Islam that took the intelligentsia by storm and made them rally round him against the forces of reaction. Far from being under an inferiority complex, Afghani gave the message that Islam was capable of meeting and defeating all challenges. As Blunt writes, ‘He taught that Sunnite Islam was capable of adapting itself to all the highest cravings of the human soul and the needs of modern life.’<sup>25</sup> As a result, Afghani was listened to ‘with respect and soon got a following among the younger students. He inspired courage by his own boldness.... [He showed them] that the law of Islam was no dead hand but a system fitted for the changing human needs of every age, and so itself susceptible of change. These salutary ‘shocks’ which Afghani gave to the stagnant waters of stultified thought were carried further by his successor, Muhammad Abduh, who became Grand Mufti of all Egypt. Blunt had a most refreshing and reinvigorating interaction with Abduh which lasted for a quarter of a century till the latter’s death in 1910. He was deeply impressed by Abduh’s ‘strength of intellect and moral character’ and continued a healthy and fruitful interchange of ideas on matters of common interest. ‘These [opinions] afterwards embodied in a book published at the end of the year under the title, *The Future of Islam*. Armed with the arguments of the Afghani-Abduh discourse, Blunt went to Jeddah [as detailed above] and later returned to England. He writes:

The summer of 1881 I spent ... writing the book which was the fruit of my winter experience: “*The Future of Islam*.”... In it I committed myself without reserve to the cause of Islam as essentially the “Cause of Good” over an immense portion of the world, and to be encouraged, not repressed, by all who cared for the welfare of mankind.<sup>26</sup>

It is a matter of grave concern that the world has not accepted the political philosophy of Blunt with its catholic attitude and cosmopolitan outlook towards the world of Islam recognizing in it a force for good. As Mary Fitzgerald wrote in her introduction to the 2007 edition of the Blunt’s book, ‘Blunt continued his quest for Islamic renewal right up to

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<sup>25</sup> Wilfred Scawen Blunt, *Secret History of the English Occupation of Egypt* (London, 1969), 101 [1<sup>st</sup> edition 1907].

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

the turn of the century.... In his fruitless search for a suitable actor and stage to lead a reformation of the faith'.<sup>27</sup>

The end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century have resulted in a wave of intolerant and ignorant dismissals of Islam with associations of evil, violence and terrorism. Compared with present attitudes, the opinions of Blunt seem mild and indulgent. But it is the onus of the Muslims to show the true face of their religion in spite of the torrent of negative propaganda against it.

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<sup>27</sup> Mary Fitzgerald, Introduction to Blunt's *The Future of Islam* (Dublin, 2007), 17.