

ZAFAR ISHAQ ANSARI (DECEMBER 27, 1932–APRIL 24, 2016)

GLIMPSES IN MEMORIAM

Muzaffar Iqbal

“Allah keeps as His friend one who has three characteristics: generosity like that of a river, from which whosoever desires can drink; warm affection like that of the sun, which illuminates every place; and humility like that of the earth, which permits both the good and the wicked to live on it.” This saying of Mu‘in al-Dīn Chishtī (1141-1236), the founder of the eponymous sufi order in the Indian subcontinent, aptly describes Zafar Ishaq Ansari as I found him over the course of a friendship that extended a quarter century: he was generous of heart, freely giving his time, kind words, and possessions to all; he saw only good in others and lavishly praised them for it, bringing out more good. He was always warm and affectionate, even when he himself was going through difficult times. He was humble; I never heard any boast from him.

We first met in Islamabad at my office on a fine winter morning. “I am sorry to have come without advance notice,” he said. “I just heard so much about you from Iftikhar Arif that I thought I would stop by and say salam before going to my office.” He was then almost sixty, not a tall man but exuding a robust energy. Iftikhar Arif, our mutual friend, was chairman of the Pakistan Academy of Letters, for which I had recently edited the first issue of the journal *Pakistani Literature*. I was then working at the Organization of Islamic Conference Standing Committee on Science and Technology (COMSTECH), and Ansari was the Director General of the Islamic Research Institute (IRI) at the International Islamic University, Islamabad (IIUI). The warmth of that first encounter was to endure over the next twenty-five years across the contexts in which we interacted—conferences, funerals, marketplaces, official meetings, family settings, work-a-day routines, among friends, and in extremely tense

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circumstances involving high stakes for Pakistan's premier institutions.

He was among the last of that highly-cultured generation of scholars from the Indian subcontinent who knew their Qur'ān, Hadith, and fiqh, and who could also recite couplets of Rumi and Iqbal with ease. That generation witnessed and participated in historical events which shook the world. Born in a scholar's home, Zafar Ishaq Ansari's personal and intellectual makeup was, in many respects, formed by that of his father, Mawlana Muhammad Zafar Ahmad Ansari (1908-1991), who was a gifted scholar with zeal to apply Islamic solutions to contemporary problems. He had been the author of the Ansari Commission Report (1983) which reestablished the primacy of Islam in Pakistan's attempt to formulate a new constitution. Born and raised in Allahabad, Mawlana Ahmad left his teaching career at Allahabad University in 1942, when Liaquat Ali Khan (1895-1951, the first Prime Minister of Pakistan from 1947 until his assassination) invited him to join the All-India Muslim League. Zafar Ishaq, then ten years old, saw his father devote his next seven years to the struggle for Pakistan, serving as the Secretary to the Central Parliamentary Board and Assistant Secretary to the All-India Muslim League.

Zafar Ishaq witnessed the impact of the Second World War on his immediate surroundings, followed by the bloodshed at the time of Partition (when some million people were killed and fifteen million uprooted). The Ansari family moved to Karachi, where Mawlana Ahmad devoted himself, as Secretary of the Board of Islamic Teachings of the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan,¹ to the immediate national problem of drafting of the first constitution, in the context of a sectarian subcontinent and divisions among religious scholars. In 1951, Mawlana Ahmad and 30 other religious leaders representing Islam's recognized legal schools proclaimed a 22-point framework for the constitution, declaring Islam to be the official religion of the new country.² This landmark was, however, quickly overshadowed by the assassination of Liaquat Ali Khan by a hired assassin, Saad Akbar Babrak, who shot him twice while he was addressing a public rally in Rawalpindi on 16 October 1951.

The country was plunged into turmoil, and Zafar Ishaq continued his education. He graduated from the University of Sindh (1950) with majors in

1. The Constituent Assembly, which was also Pakistan's first parliament, convened on August 11, 1947. It was not until March 12, 1949, that it proclaimed, by majority vote, the landmark Objectives Resolution which laid the constitutional framework for Pakistan's future direction as an Islamic state. Liaquat Ali Khan called it "the most important occasion in the life of this country, next in importance only to the achievement of independence." The Objective Resolution is included as an Annex of the current Constitution of Pakistan.

2. Among the signatories of this document were Sayyid Sulayman Nadwi, Sayyid Mawdudi, Mawlana Ihtisham al-Haq, and Yusuf Bannori.

political science and economics and then obtained a Master's in economics from the University of Karachi (1952). In 1952, he joined Urdu College, University of Karachi, as lecturer in economics. His interest, however, was in political dimensions of Islam as it was affecting the contemporary Muslim polity. He left Pakistan in 1956 to pursue a Master's at McGill University's Institute of Islamic Studies. By then, the second Constituent Assembly of Pakistan had finally promulgated its first constitution on March 23, 1956, and Pakistan had declared itself an "Islamic republic".

His two-year stay in Montreal was not only a pleasant personal experience, it also opened his intellectual horizon to the wider world of scholarship on Islam. At that time, McGill's Institute of Islamic Studies was a major hub of scholars in Islamic studies and it was shaping the contours of the academic discourse on Islam in North America under the able leadership of Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1916-2000), who had witnessed the violent Partition of the Indian subcontinent first-hand and was convinced that understanding Islam was necessary to understand Muslims, that Islam needed to be studied on its own terms and within the context of its living presence in Muslims' heart and minds. Charles J. Adams (1924-2011), who had done a twenty-month research residency in Pakistan, later succeeded Smith as Director of the Institute and served as Ansari's thesis supervisor.

The topic of his Master's thesis, "An Inquiry into the Interrelationship between Islām and Nationalism in the Writings of Egyptians (1945-56)," as well as its dedication to his father,³ suggest a deep commitment to his father's lifelong concerns and a continuation of his interest in the existential realities of the newly emerging Muslim states, in a rapidly changing world where decolonization was producing new challenges for Muslim intellectuals. It was, however, a limited undertaking, constrained both by the lack of availability of sources and the limited scope of the problem he was investigating. These conditions notwithstanding, he saw a clear parallel between the questions he addressed in Egyptian writers and the broader contemporary struggle of the Muslim world:

It is apparent that the all-embracing nature of Islām, and its insistence on the universality of Islāmic brotherhood, cannot go hand in hand with nationalism. Similarly, nationalism with its secular and particularist orientation, denying the ideals of Islāmic state and Pan-

3. "With deep filial love and respect and gratitude to my dear father Muhammad Zafar Ahmad Ansari, Esq. No education and no intellectual training has been more enlightening and valuable than the one I have had at your feet. If this first academic effort of mine evidences any clarity of mind, any grasp of the issues involved, the credit mainly goes to you. As for the confusion and the muddle and the mediocrity that this work might contain, it is all mine—and it is there in spite of you. Zafar Ishaq"

Islāmism, cannot go hand in hand with Islām, if neither of them is prepared to modify its views.

This thesis is an attempt to study the problem of the interrelationship between Islām and nationalism which is facing the contemporary Islāmīc world. This inquiry is restricted to Egypt, and covers only eleven years, 1945-56. It is hoped, however, that the exposition and analysis of the problem in the following pages will prove helpful in understanding this important problem not only as it is confronting Egypt, but as it is facing the whole of the Islāmīc world. For, the nature of the inter-relationship has been essentially the same in almost every Islāmīc country. (MA thesis, p. 9)

After completing his Master's coursework, Zafar Ishaq had returned home to write his thesis, whose four chapters provide a panoramic view of political and religious trends in Egypt. By then, General Mohammed Ayub Khan (1907-1974), the first native four-star general and the only Field Marshal of the Pakistan Army, had assumed power through a military coup d'état. Ayub Khan banned the Islamist party Jama'at-e Islāmī and started to move the country away from the system of governance envisioned in the 1956 Constitution. It was amidst this political upheaval that Zafar Ishaq started his career as lecturer at the Department of Islamic History (University of Karachi), wrote his thesis (submitted to McGill in 1959), and got married.

Zafar Ishaq returned to McGill to pursue a doctorate. Meanwhile, his research interests had shifted to the early period of Islam, and his dissertation was supervised by the well-known Pakistani academic Fazlur Rahman. Having known Zafar Ishaq Ansari since he was sixty, I can only imagine how energetically he must have pursued his studies when he was half that age. His life of those years seems so full of creativity and an ever-expanding horizon. The courses he took at McGill, including those offered by the History department as well as the Institute of Islamic Studies, occasioned his grappling with fascinating ideas related to the formative period of Islamic law. He was particularly impressed, he writes in the introduction to his dissertation, by the seminar of Niyazi Berkes on sociological and historical aspects of Islamic fiqh, the graduate course of Toshihiko Izutsu, and Smith's seminar on theology. He read Shawkānī's *Irshād al-fuḥūl* with Muḥammad Rashīdī and Arabic literature and poetry with Mawlana Sa'īd Aḥmad Akbarābādī, a visiting scholar at the Institute. The Institute also arranged a monthly visit to Columbia (New York), where Ansari would spend part of the day with Joseph Schacht (1902-1969), then considered the most erudite Western scholar in the field of Islamic law.

In October 1963-April 1964 he studied in Cairo, where he enrolled at the Ma'had al-Dirāsāt al-Islāmīyya and where he benefitted from the personal attention, company, and instruction of some of the most learned Muslim

scholars of the time, including Muḥammad ‘Abd Allāh al-‘Arabī, the director of the institute, and Shaykh Muḥammad Abū Zahrah (1899-1974), perhaps the greatest Muslim jurist of the era. He discussed Schacht’s work with the latter, in particular the 1955 article “Pre-Islamic Background and Early Development of Jurisprudence”, which Ansari translated into Arabic in order to elicit the shaykh’s views on its author’s approach and method. The Shaykh’s response, a lengthy rejoinder entitled “Ta’liqāt ‘alā awḥām Shakt,” exposed inadequacies of Schacht’s approach.

Zafar Ishaq studied with many renowned Western scholars, but he meanwhile maintained contacts with authentic representatives of the Islamic tradition. Unlike many of his peers and the generation before him, his work shows no trace of submission to the dictates of Western academe. He chose to write his dissertation in Karachi so that he could consult Pakistani scholars on an ongoing basis, writing, he says in the introduction, “every single page” in the fabulous library of the State Bank of Pakistan and discussing his work with leading scholars of the time (he names Muntakhabu-l-Ḥaqq, ‘Abdu-r-Rashīd Nu’mānī, Abū al-A‘lā Mawḏūdī, Ṭāsīn, Abdu-l-Quddūs Hāshimī, Muḥammad Taqī ‘Uthmānī, his father-in-law, Muḥammad Nāẓim Nadvī, his father, and Muhammad Hamidullah).

His 600-page dissertation, titled “The Early Development of Islamic Fiqh in Kufah with Special Reference to the works of Abū Yūsuf and Shaybānī,” has not been published in book form, but it was one of the first to vigorously contest the reigning orthodoxy of Western academic discourse on Islamic law. He unambiguously rejected Schacht’s findings. His abstract, presented in bullet-points, is strident:

- The legal content and bearing of the Prophet’s teachings are undeniable; this is corroborated by the establishment of judiciary during his life-time.
- Prophetic *sunna* was normative from the beginning.
- Islamic legal doctrines were mainly the result of endeavor to apply Prophetic teachings.
- Trends towards formalism and systematization followed the emergence of *fuqahā’* ca.100. In Kufa Ibrāhīm typified this.
- During the second century *sunna* of the Prophet retained its importance. Besides traditions from the Prophet its embodiments were traditions from Companions, and ‘practice’. Inter-school polemics led to increasing formalism, culminating in Shāfi‘ī’s theory which equated *sunnah* with Prophetic traditions. Kufian doctrines normally rested on traditions from the Prophet and Companions rather than ‘practice’. Kufians represent the trend which led to Shāfi‘ī’s legal theory.

- The theory of “back-projection” of traditions is untenable.
- In respect both of legal theory and technical legal thought, Kufians stood mid-way between ancient schools and Shāfi‘ī.

He addressed Schacht’s discourse on Islamic law as his lifelong friend M.M. al-A‘zamī (b. 1930—) did Schacht’s theory of back-projected hadith *isnād* in his own PhD thesis submitted to the University of Cambridge that same year.⁴ Schacht considered the chains of transmissions that are a hallmark of Islamic scholarly tradition (the *isnād*) to have been a late development, the most arbitrary part of the ḥadīth, appended to the text (*matn*) in order to impart authority to it (and the reporter). Both Ansari and al-A‘zamī were to show serious flaws in this theory, arising out of misreading original texts and projecting his own preconceived ideas onto the material he was using. Al-A‘zamī, for instance, points out that in his reading of the statement of the Successor Ibn Sīrīn (“the demand for and interest in *isnāds* started from the civil strife (*fitna*), when people could no longer be presumed to be reliable without scrutiny...”), Schacht arbitrarily decided that the *fitna* referred to was the assassination of Walid b. Yazīd, without attending to the established usage of the term.⁵

Years later, as we were driving toward the Edmonton airport after he visited our family, Ansari told me what Smith had said to him after reading the draft of his thesis: “It is good, but take a liberal quantity of words and phrases like ‘perhaps,’ ‘maybe,’ ‘it can also be said,’ ‘it may mean,’ and sprinkle it all over the text.” Ansari knew that despite his sympathy toward Islam and Muslims, Smith was committed to maintaining the fundamental aspects of Western academic discourse, in which certitude of faith was not acceptable. Ansari’s thesis shows that he did not take Smith’s advice. Zafar Ishaq Ansari and M.M. al-A‘zamī, together with Muhammad Hamidullah (1908-2002) and Fuat Sezgin (1924—) are pioneers of critical Muslim responses to Orientalism; their works, though significant, have, however, remained isolated instances of such responses.

Following his PhD, Zafar Ishaq Ansari first worked at the Department of Oriental Studies (Princeton University) (1966-67) as visiting lecturer, then King Abdulaziz University (Jeddah) as Assistant Professor of History and Islamic Studies (1967-70). In 1970, he moved to Dhahran as Associate Professor of History of Islamic Studies at the University of Petroleum and Minerals, and was appointed full professor in 1977. He was to spend sixteen memorable years in Dhahran—a time he often mentioned and cherished. During his tenure in Saudi Arabia, Ansari made two significant trips back to North America, first as Visiting Professor at the Institute of Islamic Studies, McGill University (1976-77)

4. Published as *Studies in Early Ḥadīth Literature with a Critical Edition of Some Early Texts* (Indianapolis: American Trust Publications, 1978). See Chapter VI, “Isnād”, pp. 212-247.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 216.

and then as Visiting Research Scholar, University of Chicago (Summer 1979).

In 1986 he returned to Pakistan, where he joined the newly established International Islamic University, Islamabad (IIUI) as professor and dean of the Faculty of Shari‘ah and Law. The foundation of this university (then named “Islamic University”) was laid on the first day of the 15th Hijra century (November 11, 1980/Muharram 1, 1401), but it was only the year before Zafar Ishaq arrived that it was upgraded, restructured, and reconstituted by promulgation of Pakistan’s president. He spent the rest of his years there, variously as Director General (Shari‘ah Academy), Director General (Islamic Research Institute), Vice President, and Professor Emeritus. He also served as the country head of the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT), which had opened an office close to his residence in Islamabad and where he routinely worked on various programs and scholarly publications late into the night.

IRI’s quarterly journal *Islamic Studies* was a project close to his heart; he improved the caliber of its articles as well as its print quality. He was member of several international academic bodies, including the Editorial Committee of the UNESCO-sponsored 6-volume series *Various Aspects of Islamic Culture*; his last completed work was Volume I of this series, entitled *Foundations of Islam* (forthcoming 2016). He was a member of the editorial or advisory boards of several international journals and academic institutions, and published several books and dozens of scholarly articles on subjects ranging from the Samusi movement to Islam among African-Americans. His lifelong interest in the life and works of Mawlana Mawdudi produced an early volume coedited with Khurshid Ahmad, *Islamic Perspectives: Studies in Honour of Sayyid Abdul A‘la Mawdudi* (1979), and came to full fruition in the English translation of Mawdudi’s influential Urdu tafsir *Tafhīm al-Qur’ān* (Leicester: Islamic Foundation, 1998-2010, 10 vols., suras 1-46, 78-114). An abridged version of the *Tafhīm* covering the entire Qur’ān was released in 2007; printed with the original Arabic, it is one of the more authentic translations of the Qur’ān, though not the most eloquent.



His departure from the world comes as a personal loss on two levels: it marks the end of an era which my generation is the last to have observed firsthand through men like him; and it has created a void in that particular niche of my heart that was soothed by assurance of his kind and loving welcome whenever I returned to Islamabad. He read the manuscripts of two of my books (*Islam and Science* and *Dawn in Madinah*), offered insights into others, and his unconditional love and support for my various projects and initiatives—including this very journal

(*Islam & Science*, 2003–)—were always meaningful and encouraging. In 1999, he invited me to jointly translate Volume VII of *Tafhīm al-Qurʿān* (published 2000); in 2000, he invited me to guest edit a special issue of *Islamic Studies* on Islam and science. That same year, when I approached him to host a course on Islam and science in Islamabad, he enthusiastically received the idea and organized the course. The following year, we jointly organized an international conference in Islamabad (Science and Religion: Christian and Muslim Perspectives), in which three generations of scholars from both religious traditions participated. His generosity and hospitality remains alive in the memory of all those who attended. As his health deteriorated and kidneys failed, he remained focused on finishing Volume I of the UNESCO series, *Foundations of Islam* (which he completed, but did not live to see in print). When his lifelong friend Ibrahim Nawab died without finishing the chapter on the Prophet, he asked me to write that chapter in a short time.

The only time he hesitated and advised caution was when, in 2007, I sent him the prospectus for *The Integrated Encyclopedia of the Qurʿān*, seven projected volumes comprising the first English-language encyclopedia of the Qurʿān by Muslims seeking to represent their tradition on their own terms. “This is an enormous undertaking,” he said on the phone, “requiring considerable resources.” Yet when the project began, he became one of its pillars; he enlisted considerable support in Pakistan, including hosting an office at IIUI. He read through several entries of the first volume; when the first volume (2013) was sent to press, he rejoiced and lavishly praised the labor of love it had become over the seven years it took us to reach that landmark.

Among his unforgettable acts of kindness to me was when he arranged a last meeting for me with Pakistan’s President Farooq Ahmad Khan Leghari, who was also chairman of COMSTECH, the organization which had become my *raison d’être* and to which I had given the best years of my life. The President had asked me to write a plan for the restructuring of COMSTECH, where I was then the second-most senior officer, after the Coordinator General, who was about to finish his second four-year term. The Coordinator General lived in Karachi and came to Islamabad once or twice a month to look after the affairs of this international organization which was supposed to bring a sea-change in the science and technology sector of its 57-member states. When I presented this plan, he said, “let us wait for the old man to leave, then we will move.” My plan involved the appointment of a full-time, dynamic Coordinator General through a transparent process of selection made known to all its member states for seeking their real interest in the organization, followed by a process of restructuring based on their active participation. In the summer of 1996, after weeks of silence, the President suddenly constituted a Search Committee consisting of three members suggested by me; he appointed me

as its Secretary. After three meetings of the Search Committee, we submitted a detailed plan to the President for the appointment of the new Coordinator General with the draft of an advertisement which was to be published in several international journals. Two days later, however, one member of the Search Committee suddenly became the Coordinator General. The new appointee lived in Karachi and had spoken loudly about how “our” Search Committee would set ethical standards for transparency in this country. I do not know how he managed to get appointed, but I was appalled. When it became obvious that the organization would remain what it was, I resigned. My resignation was accepted within ten minutes. The shattering of my dream was such that I fell in an abyss of depression. After a few weeks, I decided to meet President Leghari one last time and explain my situation to him, with the hope that something would change. My contact with his office, however, produced no result; this was in stark contrast to when I was still in COMSTECH.

Zafar Ishaq, who had been a constant emotional and intellectual companion in my dreams for COMSTECH and the efforts to revive it, deeply perceived the true nature of my crisis and took it upon himself to call, almost on a daily basis, as I remained locked in the empty silence of my home in Islamabad for months. This was around the time when his dear wife was fighting breast cancer. On the day she died, I met him at the funeral prayer held at Islamabad’s impressive Faisal Mosque. After the prayers and before proceeding to the graveyard, he came to me, held my hand and took me aside from the others (including the President and many other officials). “I have just talked to him,” he said in a low voice, referring to the President, “you will receive a call from his office.” At the moment of his deepest sorrow, he had not forgotten another’s anguish!



The most common venue of our meetings was his office at IRI or IIIT, where I would meet him in the flow of his work-a-day routine. His desk at the far end of a large office at IRI would always be cluttered with files, papers, manuscripts, and books, yet everything was at his fingertips. Sitting behind the desk, amidst the flurry of activity, he would order endless cups of tea (later green tea and finally boiled water as his health conditions changed), attend to phone calls, proofread and edit articles for *Islamic Studies*, and get up to welcome new visitors (from visiting Western scholars to high officials of foreign embassies in Islamabad and IIUI administrators)—all with remarkable agility and energy. He attended to everything from IIUI staff appointments to upcoming conferences, meetings, even the needs of drivers and peons who would approach him respectfully but without hesitation, assured that he would lend them his sympathetic ear. His working day often extended from ten in the morning until dawn prayer the

next day.

During the long years of our association, I saw him pass through several phases of his life; the most obvious and outward change came with his realization of not having enough time to do all that he wished to do. This produced a certain degree of haste in his intellectual endeavors and the lengthening of his working hours. Yet all day long his time was still taken up by unending administrative chores, whether at the IRI office (in the morning) or the IIT office (in the afternoon). Pakistan's academic institutions lacked (and still do) competent middle-order administrators or departmental secretaries who could effectively take care of routine matters. As a result, highly gifted scholars waste their entire lives in sorting out affairs of no relevance to their intellectual work. Zafar Ishaq's anguish about the state of affairs of IUI was deeply felt; since I often expressed my own anguish to him about various institutions in the country (including COMSTECH), he would sometime share his insights into the malaise of IUI. At one time, its president was a man who ran extensive businesses throughout the Middle East and who would remain absent from Islamabad for months on end, leading to the University's near collapse because no important decision could be made in his absence. Zafar Ishaq boldly (and successfully) approached the President of Pakistan to prevent that businessman's tenure as university president from being renewed. But when the President Leghari sounded him out as a possible candidate, Ansari refused, stating that his intervention was only for the effective functioning of the university, not personal gain.

Despite the replacement of the IUI president, there was no change in its lethargic intellectual atmosphere. Even IRI, over which Zafar Ishaq had total control, could not be reinvigorated. If one went there at 10 am, offices would be empty, clerks and peons would be sitting around lazily, and the whole building felt deserted. He would patiently listen to my disappointment but would never pinpoint anyone as responsible. His vigorous efforts, which I witnessed, produced no institutional change; such was the malaise of the country. The issues of *Islamic Studies* which he edited bear witness to his hard work, but with his departure, the journal sank; he could not set up an institutional mechanism for effective, long-term change. Ansari did succeed, however, in improving the resources of IRI despite limited funds: he acquired new journals, often on an exchange basis; the book collection was greatly improved by donations; and the seminars and conferences he organized were of higher than the usual Pakistani standards. Yet a sense of doom hung over the national institutions writ large, born of a lack of responsibility or devotion to intellectual pursuits.

His long years in Saudi Arabia were likewise devoid of any long-lasting impact. Unlike Western institutions, where a scholar's legacy is embedded in both the institution and his or her students, there is hardly a place in the

Muslim world where one can sow seeds and hope to harvest. The creativity, brilliance, and hard work that went into his dissertation did not beget a scholarly tradition, even though that thesis then had the potential of reframing contemporary academic discourse on Islamic law; in fact, there are enough kernels and insights there that a suitable institution could have established a long-term research program on the basis of what it examined and explored. Such a program of sustained discourse could in turn have produced a generation of Muslim scholars dedicated to the task of recovering the true picture of the formative period of Islamic thought (not only law but also hadith and tafsir). Ansari and al-Aʿzamī were the early stars of a decolonized Muslim world, but they only twinkled briefly and were dimmed without producing a light that kindles other lights.

Drained by the daily routine and unending problems of running an inadequate academic organization, Ansari could only devote time to intellectual work in the late hours of the night. But as the years passed, this time often brought a fatigue of its own. He often worked on several projects simultaneously, and reserved the best portion of the night for his translation of Mawdudi's *Tafhīm al-Qurʿān*. Late at night, he would pray with full devotion, supplicate for succor, and plunge himself into the ocean of Qurʿānic studies. I recall one particular night prayer when I and one other person were with him at the IIT office. He led the prayer with such spiritual energy that both of us felt the whole room was literally vibrating.