

O B I T U A R Y

REMEMBERING MUHAMMAD HAMIDULLAH

Mahmud Rifat Kademođlu

It was a damp fall morning in Paris. The year was 1983. I had wandered through the streets for almost an hour and had finally found the apartment where Professor Muhammad Hamidullah lived a solitary life. I knocked at the door but there was no answer. I waited for a while and knocked again. When no answer came, I left a note and returned to my hotel. Later that day, when I came back to my hotel after a long stroll, I found a small note on the door of my room: "I am sorry to have missed you. I was in my apartment, but my hearing is not good anymore. Please accept my apologies. Hamidullah."

I was touched by the humility of tone and by the fact that the old Professor had taken the trouble to come to my hotel and leave the message; we had never met before and he did not even know me. I went back to his apartment and had a memorable meeting. He was as lucid in his thoughts as in his books and his grasp of contemporary realities of the Muslim world was amazing.

On Tuesday, Shawwāl 13, 1423/December 17, 2002, the 94-year-old Professor Hamidullah awoke in Jacksonville, Florida, USA, in the house of his brother's grand-daughter, Sadida, said his Fajr prayer, had breakfast, and after a while went back to sleep, never to awaken again in this life. He was laid to rest in the Muslim cemetery in Jacksonville on December 19, 2002 at about 1:30 pm. Funeral prayer was led by his long-time friend Dr. Yusuf Ziya Kavakçı, an eminent Turkish scholar and Imam of Islamic Association of North Texas; about 75 people attended his burial.

His distinguished academic career, numerous books and articles testify to a life devoted to scholarship in the grand tradition of his ancestors. He discovered a very old ḥadīth manuscript in a Damascus library and published it in a bilingual Arabic-Urdu edition. This discovery of Şaḥīfah Hammām bin Munabah was to have a great impact on the course of Islamic studies.

In the early 1950s, Professor Hamidullah helped draft the first Islamic constitution of Pakistan but resigned from the commission over differences

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*with vested interests. He was awarded the highest civil award of Pakistan in 1985, but turned over the cash award to the Islamic Research Institute, Islamabad, Pakistan, saying "If I take it here, what would I get there?"*¹

The following memorabilia by Mahmud Rifat Kademoğlu, one of Professor Hamidullah's Turkish students, highlights numerous aspects of the life of an extraordinary scholar.

Editor

Professor Muhammad Hamidullah was surely one of the most remarkable personalities of our age. In person, a strong and upright model, in scholarship, a brilliant source of inspiration, he lived his life as a testimony to God and his outstanding personality will be remembered as one committed to scholarship and research in the service of Islam. By Allah's grace, the great success he achieved with his determination is very exceptional and extraordinary.

Muhammad Hamidullah was born in Hyderabad, the capital of the Princely State of Hyderabad Dakkan, India, on the 16th of Muḥarram 1326 (January 19, 1908). His father was Abū Muḥammad Khalīlullah and he was the youngest of eight children. He was first educated at home in the traditional Islamic sciences and then studied at the Dār al-ʿUlūm.

1. Meaning thereby that he sought the reward in the Hereafter. This remark opens a window to understand his piety and spiritual orientation. See Ansari, Zafar Ishaq (2003), "Dr. Hamidullah: Great Encounters—Karachi, Paris and Dahran" in *Impact*, No. 1-3 (January-March) 33, pp. 24-7.

Starting from his childhood and continuing with a deepening focus during all his life, centered on the Qurʾān, Hamidullah became a scholar of the first rank in the Islamic tradition. We have a document that tells us that he obtained an *ʿIjāza* for Qurʾān recitation at the Maṣjid al-Nabawwi, and it also lists all the masters, starting from his own teacher and going back to the Prophet himself. In this way, he was a living testimony to the tradition in which the student is directly taught and guided by a master who gained his authority in a traditional manner, the chain reaching back to the Messenger of Allah—may Allah’s peace and blessings be upon him. A reference to this can be found in the “Introduction” of Professor Hamidullah’s French translation of the Qurʾān, *Le Saint Coran*.

Our Professor, who had his license to practice law from Osmania University’s Faculty of Law, also obtained a Master’s degree from the same university; his work drew attention to the uniqueness of rules of Muslim conduct as related to the field of international law. He was then sent by the Osmania University to the University of Bonn, Germany. During the early years of 1930s, he could be found hard at work in the libraries of Makkah, Madinah, Ṣanāʾ, Damascus, Cairo and Istanbul. As a result of these studies, he obtained a doctorate from the Bonn University (1933); his thesis was entitled “Neutrality in the Islamic Law of Nations”. Our Professor also had an opportunity to use the rich primary sources available in European and North American libraries. He earned a second Ph.D. from Paris University in 1934, this time with a thesis entitled, “Early Islamic Diplomacy”. He returned home in 1936 and taught at the Osmania and Nizamiyah Universities.

In 1947, he was back in Paris, doing research. During this sojourn, he also represented the Princely State of Hyderabad at the United Nations. While he was still abroad, his State was occupied by India in 1948. Hamidullah didn’t accept this injustice and initiated a sustained campaign to draw international attention to the plight of his people. Because of his attitude, the Indian government cancelled his passport, making him a scholar without a state. When the dust settled, he was accepted by the French government as a stateless person.

Devoting his life to scholarship at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, (CNRS), Hamidullah published many important books and

articles during a long and distinguished career. Professor Hamidullah was invited a few times by the government of Pakistan to guide its efforts to establish an Islamic government. For years, he gave lectures at various universities in France, Turkey, Egypt, Pakistan and many other countries; he was also a popular speaker at conferences.

After 1954, he came to Turkey almost every year during the summer term to give scheduled lectures and seminars, mainly at Istanbul University, but also at the universities of Ankara and Erzurum. Many generations of Turks were enlightened by him during the course of these lectures and he trained many students. This lasted until 1978. These years were also the time when religious education in terms of Islamic education was reestablished and reshaped in a modern way in Turkey. With his lectures, conferences and works, our Professor played an important role in this period; and we can almost say that with his method and attitude, he was the harbinger of a new movement. This makes his impact on modern Turkish thought one of lasting nature; he has deeply influenced people in contemporary Turkey. The love and respect he enjoys in Turkey became evident when the news of his death reached Turkey. Many funeral prayers were held in absentia, remembrance meetings drew large crowds and many articles were published. Many famous writers and many people who were enlightened by his knowledge wrote and recalled their thoughts and feelings about him. This still continues.

Hamidullah, who is thought to have written around 40 books and 700 articles, published his works in English, French and German as well as Arabic and Urdu. He also knew Sanskrit, Persian, Turkish, Italian and Russian. His works were published in original and in translation in at least twelve languages. Some of his best known works are *Introduction to Islam* and *The Muslim Conduct of State* in English, *Le Saint Coran*, his French translation of the Qur'ān and *Le Prophete de l'Islam* in French.

In 1996, our Professor went to the United States from Paris where he lived with his near relatives until his death, *Surely we are from Allah and to Him we return*.

بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم
İslami İlimler Fakültesi,
Erzurum 20.5.1978

Pek aziz Kardeşim Mehmet bey
Emelâni aleyküm ve rahmetullah!
Derim tezekkürler. Evvela ^{Nisan} Mayıs numarası,
sonra, his hafta önce, ~~May~~ Nisan ve Mayıs
numaraları bol miktarda geldiler. Henüz devamı
var. Yoksa bu numaraları burada tekerrür
ede bilirdim. Paris'de ihtiyacı çok. Bu bol
miktar sayıları burada:
Dr. İhsan Süreyya Suma
İslami İlimler Fakültesi,
Erzurum
yanında baskıyımla gelecek numaraları aynı
miktarında göndereceksinizse, lütfen o'na gön-
deriniz; o onları tevzi edecek. Bana Paris'de
2 nüsha kafi di "4, Rue de Tourmon,
75006-Paris, Fransa".
Tekrar çok, çok tezekkür ederim. Allah
razı olsun.
M. Hamidullah

Translation of Professor Hamidullah's letter

In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful.

Faculty of Islamic Sciences,
Erzurum

20.5.1978

My dearest brother Mahmud Bey,
Assalamu alaykum wa rahmatullah!

With my profound thanks. First the April issue and then, a week ago, many copies of April and May issues arrived. [I hope, the future issues] will continue to come. Even if [many copies] were not available, I could make copies here. There is no need for several copies in Paris. I will leave the copies available here, with Dr. İhsan Süreyya Sirma, Faculty of Islamic Sciences, Erzurum.

If you are going to send future issues, please send the same number of copies to him; he will distribute them. Only two copies will be enough for me in Paris: "4 Rue de Tournon 75006—Paris, France."

Many thanks again and may Allah be pleased with you.

M. Hamidullah

*Translated from the original Turkish by
Osman Kademoğlu*

For years, I attended his lectures at the Faculty of Letters at the University of Istanbul. His memories and impressions are ingrained in my mind. However among all the memories, the memory of our wedding ceremony bears a very special significance for me.

Soon after my engagement, I requested him to contract our marriage ceremony, and considering his age and health as well not to keep him from his work, I had told him that I would bring my fiancée to his office on the arranged day. He accepted my wish without hesitation. Since marriage is a religious obligation, our professor was always pleased to hear news about marriage ceremonies and played an active role in the establishment of this blessed bond. That is why, I felt, he was especially pleased with my request. However, he said it would be much more appropriate to perform the ceremony at the bride's house instead of his office. This was more pleasant for all of us, especially for the family of my fiancée. I felt a great surge of happiness for being honored by such kindness. He himself noted the necessary information about the families and the witnesses.

On the appointed day, we met with our Professor and his faithful friend and translator Dr. Salih Tuđ, and went to my future wife's house at Üsküdar-Bađlarbaşı; it was Thursday, the fifth day of the first month of 1394 AH/May 23, 1974 A.D. After a brief introduction of guests, Professor Hamidullah said, "I have received a wonderful news today!". Then he took out an Arabic newspaper from his bag. It included an article which was about the discovery of the original letter which our Prophet had sent to—if I'm not mistaken—the Byzantium Emperor Heracles, in order to invite him to Islam. This newspaper was the May 5, 1974 edition of *al-Itihād* which used to be published at Abu Dhabi.

The discovery of this historic document was of utmost significance because it would establish many fundamental aspects of early Islamic history beyond doubt. Our Professor understood the importance of this discovery and was extremely happy on that day. He especially wanted to share the pleasure of the publication of this discovery with the wedding guests. Thus his merriment became ours as well. This was, indeed, a very lovely and happy beginning for us.

This event is also significant in other ways; it shows what kind of events our beloved Professor used to follow ardently and what kind of things

pleased him. I never thought our Professor would prepare a written text for the ceremony. Although it was not so feasible in those days, he had found a typewriter with an Arabic font and with it he had prepared a very touching and simple text, including passages from the Qurʾān, some aḥādīth and supplications besides the marriage contract that he himself had composed. Perhaps he had typed the whole document himself. He had left a blank where the amount of bridal money was to be written and during the ceremony, he filled it in with his fountain pen in Arabic.

He read out the text, directed the contract and made graceful supplications. Then he supervised the signing of the contract—which he had already prepared in three copies—by both sides and the witnesses. Besides the witnesses he also had the signature of the bride’s father, under the name of “Parent of the bride” and finally he himself signed it as well. He left one copy for each side and took the third one for himself.

After accepting our humble offerings, he presented to my wife two of his books, *Introduction to Islam* and *The Prophet Muhammad*, both autographed, dated and inscribed with wonderful words. He then, once again, facilitated our marriage in graceful prayers, and leaving us with feelings of gratitude, he departed.

The Professor held a deep love for truth which he cherished a great deal and which motivated him to spend his life in search of knowledge. His scholarship, clear insight into nature of things and erudition was only possible because of his love for truth and honesty. His magnificent intelligence, rationality of approach, analytic capabilities and, above all, his honesty and soundness formed the basis of his vigor and integrity.

All his efforts were directed toward one goal: to learn and understand, and he always did his best to communicate and share his learning and understanding. The noble excitement he felt in attaining the truth, always motivated him to work harder in a scientific way and to accumulate merits in the sight of God which is the prerogative of a few mortals.

Above all, Professor Hamidullah’s knowledge was built upon a very solid foundation of Arabic and the Noble Qurʾān. Starting from that point, his deep cognizance and his deeply rooted intellectual experience in the Islamic tradition of learning made him a great scholar. He was fully aware of the ancient sources of Islam. To say that he was the master of history

would not be an overstatement. Moreover, he examined all texts of the “People of the Scriptures” with great attention and inquired closely into Jewish and Christian societies, and he never avoided acquaintance with their elite. In addition, he also had substantial scholarship in the Indian religions, especially Buddhism. In general he attributed great importance to the history of religions and worked as an influential and distinguished specialist in this branch.

The research methods of the West which developed and gained validity in the modern times were not alien to Our Professor; he evaluated them thoroughly and used them in his work. Both in the West and in the East, he was regarded as a highly prolific and respected writer. It is well-known that our Professor never wasted his time; still, how he managed to publish such a vast number of works in a single lifespan is amazing.

As far as I know and understand, he also acknowledged the importance of current matters, political and cultural; keenly followed the developments and was never indifferent to his own times. He was aware of everything therefore his knowledge was never merely accumulated theoretical information. He never refrained from opposing malice he witnessed in society; he struggled against it as much as possible, at least with his words. The examples of these are well known.

Like each and every mortal, quite naturally our Professor could have been mistaken in some matters as well. But I am sure of one thing, the degree he reached in knowledge and action, his intelligence, assiduity, and especially his *ikhhlās* (sincerity), all represent a very high stage.

I believe I am speaking for all his students who have followed him in action and thought, and therefore I can wholeheartedly say that Professor Hamidullah never failed to handle any opportunity in the best way and to achieve this he always tried hard to use all his capacities. Undoubtedly, first of all, his students and readers, then everyone to whom he and his work has been a great source of enlightenment and inspiration and the whole world of knowledge feels a deep gratitude to him. May Allah be pleased with him for the work he presented for the enlightenment of mankind, and for the great service he rendered to learning and education.

Professor Hamidullah had a deep commitment to his ummah and he attached great importance to this relationship with the wider body of

Muslims. That is why he was always keen on taking responsibilities that would help in solving the problems of the Muslim world. For the same reason, defending the rights of Muslims was an honorable responsibility he carried all his life. He was a person who reflected the glory of a Muslim in his character. He was dignified but at the same time very modest, amiable and cheerful. He always had a warm relationship with his students and with everybody who came in contact with him; his sincerity and honesty were always the most obvious and noticeable things about him. He had an elegant, noble, sensitive, and attentive nature but he liked to make witty remarks as well. He had devoted himself to worship and knowledge so much that he always preferred abstinence and never favored the world. He was always far from egoism and had a simple lifestyle. He was selfless in his efforts. It was his principle not to accept copyright payments for his books.

The tranquility and serenity was apparent in his behavior. He had an outstanding intelligence. His penetrating earnestness, simplicity and spiritual purity was remarkable. He was a person of medium height with a slim physique, he was recognized by his dignified beard which adorned his face and by his fur cap and neat double-breasted suit.

Our beloved Professor, who lived as a *mu'min*, a pious servant of Allah, passed away as a devout, loyal and sincere savant. With his scholarship, teaching and work, he initiated a brand new movement of learning in the Muslim world and worked as if he was an institution. His whole life was a kind of alms-giving, an expression of philanthropy. His path will always illuminate ours and we will remember him as an admirable and exceptional model.

*Translated from the original Turkish
by Gülnur Utku and Fakih Kademoğlu*