

A SUFI STUDY OF ḤADĪTH

A Translation of At-Tasharruf and Ḥaqīqat at-Ṭarīqa

MAWLĀNĀ ASHRAF ʿALĪ THĀNAWĪ

Translated by

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Translator's Introduction



MAWLĀNĀ ASHRAF ʿALĪ THĀNĀWĪ was born in the village of Thānā Bhanwan, not far to the south of Delhi, in the Indian district of Muzaffar Nagar, in the year 1863. He had his early schooling in the same village and, at age thirteen or fourteen, began his formal education a few miles away at the institution known as Dār al-ʿUlūm at Deoband with some of the most gifted scholars of Islam ever to appear in the subcontinent.¹

By the age of twenty-one, Mawlānā Thānawī had satisfied his teachers of his facility with the classical disciplines of Islam and was graduated. In that year he became a teacher at Kānpur² and, by written recommendation of his teacher at Deoband, Mawlānā Rashīd Gangohī, was accepted as a spiritual disciple to Hājī ʿImdād Allāh, the sheikh of the Chishti order of Sufis who had sought refuge in Makka after the unsuccessful attempt to dislodge the British imperialists from India in 1857. At the end of his twenty-first year, Mawlānā Thānawī himself went to Makka to perform the Ḥajj, and to benefit from the spiritual care of his sheikh.³

On his return to Kānpur, Mawlānā Thānawī busied himself with teaching and writing, alongside his spiritual exercises of *dhikr* and *shughal*, until the latter compelled him to seek once again the companionship of his sheikh at Makka. Thus, he traveled a second time to Makka where he remained for several years in the company of Hājī ʿImdād Allāh. Shortly after Mawlānā Thānawī returned to Kānpūr in 1897, Hājī ʿImdād Allāh wrote to him with the following instructions:

1 Sheikh Muḥammad ʿIkram, *Mawj-e-Kawthar*, Urdu (Lahore, Pakistan: Idārā-e-Thaqāfat-e-Islāmiyya, 1975), p. 204.

2 Ibid., Mawlānā Thānawī taught at both the Fayd-e-ʿĀm Madrasa and at Madrasa Jāmiʿ al-ʿUlūm in Kānpūr over a period of some fourteen years.

3 Sayyid Sulaymān Nadwī, *Yād-e-Raftagān*, Urdu (Karachi, Pakistan: Maktabā al-Sharq, 1955) p. 284.

It is better that you go back to Thānā Bhawan. In fact, I hope that a great multitude of people will benefit from you both spiritually and academically. There, you shall bring our mosque and *madrasa* back to life.

On this auspicious note, Mawlānā left Kanpur and returned to his native Thānā Bhawan. True to the hopes of his sheikh, Mawlānā Thānawī revived the mosque and the *madrasa* at Thānā Bhawan and, for the next fifty years benefited the academic and spiritual lives of multitudes of subcontinent Muslims.

The Nature of Islamic Education in the Subcontinent

It is essential at this juncture that the reader understands something of the nature of the training and education received by Mawlānā Thānawī. In fine, the ideal advanced by Islam with regard to the education and upbringing of the individual Muslim is the achievement of moral and spiritual equilibrium. The Qurʾān says: “We have established you as a middlemost nation” (2:143). Thus, the objectives of the founders of Dār al-ʿUlūm at Deoband included the blending of book learning with character building, of *Sharīʿa* with *ṭarīqah*, of the *fiqh* of Abū Hanīfa with authentic ḥadīth, of the opinions of the pious predecessors with the revivalist scholars of succeeding ages and so on, in an attempt to tread a middle path between the various Islamic intellectual and spiritual trends and schools of thought.

As the *Sharīʿa* and knowledge of the Qurʾān and the Sunna are the basis of all Islamic intellectual activity, the emphasis at Dār al-ʿUlūm was on the teaching of the classical Islamic disciplines, beginning with Arabic grammar and proceeding with increasing complexity through subjects like rhetoric, logic, philosophy, jurisprudence, theology, and the sciences of the Qurʾān and the Sunna. While the student was engaged in the acquisition of these subjects, he was subjected to a rigorous daily schedule of classroom attendance, group-study sessions, and congregational worship in the mosque. Nearly all students boarded in the *madrasa* hostels or in the homes of their teachers, and there was very little time for leisurely pursuits.

The Place of Ṭarīqa in the Madrasa System of Education

During the period of study (*taḥṣīl*, or aquisition), however, only the formal and essential modes of worship were encouraged. Nonetheless, it was carefully impressed upon the students that after graduation they were to seek the spiritual guidance of an accomplished sheikh. Nor were the students encouraged to prefer one *ṭarīqa* to another. The important thing in the selection of a sheikh was his adherence to the *Sharīʿa*.⁴

4 For Mawlānā Thānawī’s own teaching on the subject see his *Qaṣd al-Sabīl*, “The Third Teaching.”

Indeed, to the 'Ulamā' of Deoband the value of *taṣawwuf* was in its translating knowledge into action, and learning into deeds. One did not pledge allegiance to a sheikh in order to become a Sufi, but in order to become a practising Muslim. It was not escapist mysticism that the 'Ulamā' of Deoband were seeking for their students, but the way to *iḥsān* or the complementary inner state which gives depth and added meaning to the outer state of Islam. Essentially, the revivalist movement that began in Deoband and which aimed at remedying excesses in Indian Muslim society, was propelled by a group of scholars who added emotional fervor in their practice of Islam to their deep understanding of its sources and principles. It was in this atmosphere of learning and devotion that Mawlānā Ashraf 'Alī Thānawī grew and prospered.

Mawlānā's Writings

Mawlānā Thānawī's most obvious contribution to the Muslim community of the subcontinent was his incredible output of literature on Islamic subjects.

Jalāl al-Dīn Suyūṭī (d. 911 AH) is generally known as the most prolific author in the history of Islamic scholarship, and his writings are numbered at over five hundred.⁵ Mawlānā Thānawī's writings have been variously numbered between six and eight hundred.⁶ In addition, he maintained a voluminous daily correspondence with his khalifahs and murīds, and his published lectures and public addresses number in the hundreds. Moreover, Mawlānā's gifted disciples undertook hundreds of other works at Mawlānā's insistence, and with his guidance, so that any definite accounting of the number of his works is next to impossible.

The subject matter of Mawlānā's works included all the classical Islamic disciplines. Mawlānā's *Bayān al-Qur'ān*, in three volumes, is undoubtedly the most erudite of all commentaries on the Qur'ān in the Urdu language. At the other end of the spectrum of Qur'ānic scholarship, Mawlānā's *Jamāl al-Qur'ān* became the standard textbook for students of *tajwīd*, or the science of Qur'ānic recitation, throughout the subcontinent; and remains so to this day. Mawlānā's other works on the various Qur'ānic sciences are as numerous as they are instructive.

Likewise, Mawlānā Thānawī wrote with authority on subjects like *ḥadīth*, *fiqh*, *uṣūl al-fiqh*, *ʿaqidah*, *logic*, *philosophy*, *rhetoric*, *grammar*, and much else. In the field of *taṣawwuf*, however, the Mawlānā's writings are particularly interesting for their scholarship and variety. Among the works which best represent the breadth

5 Jalāl al-Dīn Suyūṭī, *Fihrist Kutub al-Suyūṭī* (Madras, Maṭba' al-'Ajā'ib, 1379 AH). See also 'Umar Riḍā Kuḥālāḥ, *Mu'jam al-Mu'allifin* (Damascus: Maṭba' al-Taraqqī, 1958), Vol.5, p. 128.

6 Munshī 'Abd al-Raḥmān Khān, *Sirat-i-Ashraf* (Multan: Idāra-e-Nashr al-Ma'ārif, 1956), p. 368. A separate volume of bibliography, entitled *Ta'lifāt-e-Ashrafīyya*, was compiled by Muḥammad 'Abd al-Haq Fateḥpūri and published separately in 1353 AH.