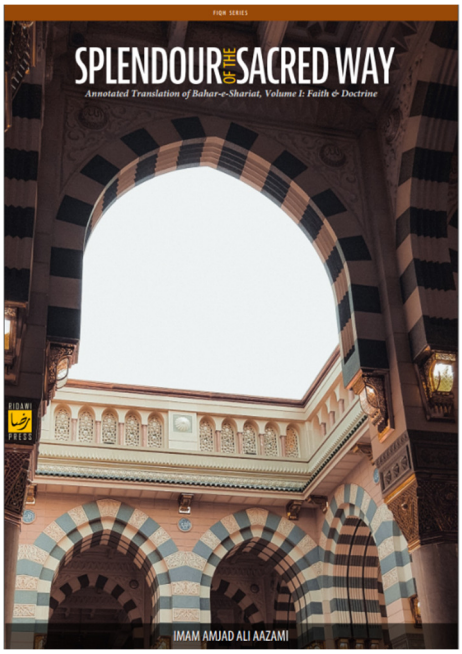
BOOK REVIEW

Splendour of the Sacred Way: Annotated Translation of Bahār e Sharīát, Vol.1, Riḍawī Press, 2025.



Islam, at its core, is a system of beliefs. Every obligation, ritual and recommended practice is predicated upon one or more beliefs. Hence, more than anything else, Islam emphasises the preservation of its belief-system. The sophistication of this belief system has not been matched, let alone surpassed, by any other religion or cult or any secular 'ism', through the annals of history. The internal consistency and cohesion of its tenets are a delight for the logician and provide it with a natural immunity against corruption, ensuring its unadulterated continuation down the generations.

As a doctrine that has thrived for centuries in various epochs, cultures and geographies, Islam has seen more than its fair share of detractors, borne attacks of every conceivable variety and withstood ruthless scrutiny by prejudiced and inimical critics. It has weathered all forces of deformation and reformation that have sought to mangle its belief system into idiosyncratic shapes of untold descriptions. And through it all, it has remained pristine as ever, emerging unscathed every time and winning over many of the acutest intellects the world has seen. Any other faith would have crumbled under far less vicious conditions. And indeed many have - one has only to look at the tatters of dogmas that litter the world, dogmas that once were part of religions that boasted millions of adherents but which now lie prostrate before one reform or cultural revolution or another.

So what is the secret of this invincibility that Islam alone seems entitled to? Divine Protection!

The Islamic faith stands on two immovable foundations - its Holy Book, the Qur'ān and the Tradition, or the Sunnah, of it's august Messenger, the Prophet Muĥammad ﷺ. Based directly on these noble and incorruptible sources are the core doctrines of the Islamic faith - the fundamental precepts of religion that every Muslim needs must bear faith in and needs must hold true without a suspicion of doubt or vacillation. These fundamental dogmas are considered axiomatic, uncontroversial and non-negotiable. They admit no room for interpretation and brook no opinionated disagreement. Any person who rejects these, ejects himself out of the pale of Islam instantly, howsoever much might he insist on the staunchness of his faith or his bona fides as a life long believer. Such then is the importance of these verities, these articles of faith. That no Muslim can afford to remain ignorant of them is a foregone conclusion.

So what *are* these beliefs that every Muslim should profess and submit to unquestionably? That is the question that the present translation of an important work on doctrine answers, and answers in great detail. *Bahār e Sharīát* is an Urdu work on Islamic Jurisprudence - specifically the legal rulings on a range of everyday issues as per the Ĥanafī School of Law. It runs into several volumes, the first of which is a lengthy discourse on Islamic Beliefs - beliefs that all Muslims must necessarily profess, and beliefs that all Muslims must necessarily reject.

The author of this priceless work was a 19th century polymath, a scholar of Islam and an accomplished doctor of Greek Medicine, Mawlana Amjad Álī Aáżamī , a scion of a long line of scholar-doctors hailing from the town of Ghosi in the British ruled Indian state of United Provinces. Though his expertise extended to many sciences, including the rational sciences (Máqūlāt), principles of creed (Áqīdah) and Prophetic Tradition (Ĥadīth) - he was known best for his mastery of Ĥanafī Fiqh. And it was on account of this genius for fiqh that he was conferred with the rare title of *Ṣadru's Sharīáh* - or the Chief of Sharīáh - by his teacher, spiritual guide and mentor, Imām Aĥmad Riđā Khān al-Barailwi, himself a scholar of formidable stature and worldwide repute.

'Bahār' literally means springtime or the abundance and grandeur of nature in springtime. Idiomatically, '*Bahār e Sharīát*' means the Splendor or Brilliance of Islamic Law. The title does complete justice to the contents of the book - which is undoubtedly one of the masterpieces of Hanafi Fiqh of the last century, renowned for its encyclopaedic nature, its crystal clarity and easy accessibility. At the outset, it had been envisaged as a book of Fiqh or a handbook of legal rulings for practising Muslims, structured along the lines of previous well-known fiqh works. But in time, perceiving a threat to the faith of the Muslim masses from the multitude of heretical sects that had proliferated under the auspices of the British rule, the author decided to preface his work with an extensive chapter on aqida, expounding on the orthodox creed of Islam and refuting heresies that had become rife in his time.

In every age, heresies have threatened to overwhelm the Islamic discourse with spurious beliefs, gnawing at the faith of its adherents from the fringes, carving out sect after sect from the main the body of believers. And in all ages, Muslim scholars have successfully fought back and vanquished or subdued them, keeping the core of the belief system unblemished. It is with works such as these, written by scholars like Mawlana Amjad Álī, that the Divine Favour for the religion of Islam manifests itself and the status quo on Islamic doctrines is validated, re-iterated and maintained - across ages and geographies, in a myriad of languages and cultures - all books and authors drawing from the same two Divinely Protected well-springs - the Qur'ān and the Sunnah.

The fundamental acknowledgement that makes a person (and keeps him) a Muslim, is the formula or the creedal statement of Islam: *There is none worthy of worship but Allāh and Muĥammad ﷺ is His Messenger ﷺ*. Thus, at the head of the central beliefs of Islam is the rejection of every claimant or candidate to Divinity, affirmation of a single and exclusive Creator, Who alone deserves to be worshipped and obeyed and affirmation of the universal Messengership of the Prophet Muĥammad ﷺ for all peoples and times.

Accordingly, the book opens with a description of necessary beliefs about Allāh Almighty, the Creator and Sustainer of everything, followed by beliefs about the Prophets in general and about the Prophet Muĥammad ﷺ in particular. This section also includes essential beliefs about the Speech of Allāh - the Qur'ān and other heavenly books - beliefs that must be affirmed and those that must be rejected. Then follow sections on two rational beings other than humans that the Islamic faith mandates belief in and affirmation of - the Angels and the Jinn. These sections sum up the beliefs about things present in the here and now - which, even if unseen and concealed, must be accepted on the strength of revelation.

Then follow a series of chapters on things yet to come - things that are as fully beyond human experience as can be - life after death, resurrection, Accounting, Judgement, Paradise and Hell. In a word - Islamic eschatology.

Then comes the all important section on the definition of faith and unbelief - what constitutes each and how the people are judged as belonging to one group or the other. Its here that the author dives deep into the heresies that were prevalent in his day - most of which have continued to our time. Sub-sections deal with each heretical group individually - the Qādiyānīs, the Rāfiđīs, the Wahābīs and Deobandis and those who reject and prevent the following of Juristic expertise in matters of religion. He cites excerpts from the books of those deemed heretics as proof and pronounces judgement on each.

The last section deals with the concept of Awliyā'a - or the Exceptionally Pious Muslims, the Elect who are closest to Allah after the Messengers and Prophets ﷺ. The scriptural basis to classify them into a separate category distinct from the generality of Muslims, what are their traits and how Allah favors them with His Mercy and Closeness.

The part that was included as an afterthought but found its place at the head of the work has now been translated into the English language in a superlative manner. The translator has endeavoured to make his translation an extremely thorough and well-researched piece - with over 1200 elaborate footnotes and a long list of appendices running into several pages each. The footnotes include such details as: the *takhrij* of the ĥadīth quoted by the author, explanation of creedal nuances wherever relevant, linguistic and historical details, and other finer academic points. The translator makes few assumptions about his readers and goes out of his way to ensure that they understand every word and concept mentioned by the author. Almost every technical term has been explained, difficult concepts have been commented upon - either in adjoining parentheses, or in a footnote. Where footnotes alone were found insufficient to convey the full import of the text, comprehensive appendices and end-notes have been provided in order to assist the readers in developing a wholesome appreciation of the subject matter at hand.

These appendices include - translations of verses from the Qur'ān [**Appendix A**] from which the author has mentioned the attributes of Allāh Almighty, explanatory treatment of a series of doctrinal issues mentioned briefly in the main text [**Appendix B**], discussion on the Divine Immunity from sins granted to the Prophets [**Appendix C**], beliefs and actions that cause a Muslim to exit faith and be ruled a disbeliever [**Appendix D**], biographies of well-known scholars and leading Imāms, brief accounts of

heretics whose heresies have been denounced in the penultimate section [**Appendix E**], and exhibits i.e. documentary evidence for the heresies from the heretics' own books - many from first or early editions [**Appendix F**]. These also include some interesting though little known historical facts surrounding these heresies.

These are followed by two special appendices – first, a mid-sized biography of the author, Imām Amjad Álī Aáżamī [**Appendix G**] - his journey to writing the book and beyond, the time he spent in the company of Imām Aĥmad Riđā Khān and the personal tragedies that prevented him from completing this and a few other projects. This section translates the author's personal reminiscences in an evocative language which takes us back to the early 20th century Barailly - one can almost picture oneself witnessing first hand the master (Imām Aĥmad Riđā) and the disciple (Mawlānā Amjad Álī) sitting close by, on a dark and cold night, illuminated by nothing but an oil lamp, the disciple reciting verses of the Qur'an, the master dictating their translation as effortlessly as if reading from a book, the disciple pausing every now and then to dip his reed pen in the ink jar to jot down the translation on a sheet of rough paper, while moths alight on them from all sides, as if seeking to bask in the spiritual luminescence that envelops them, and the angels under the shelter of whose wings they are seated, praying to Allah for the acceptance of their painstaking labour.

The other special appendix is an overview of the contents of *Bahār e Sharīát*, the sources referenced by the author and a comparative analysis of the structure and special features of the entire 20 volume work - the translation of 19 volumes of which remains an eagerly awaited work in progress [**Appendix H**]. This appendix also contains some amusing observations on Biĥishti Zeywar, Ashraf 'Ali Thanawi's manual of quack remedies and other abominations.

The next appendix is a compilation of a list of works for further reading [**Appendix I**]. This list includes names of approximately 50 works on creed, in Arabic and Urdu combined, 8 works on the Names and Attributes of Allāh, 3 on Angels and Jinn, 2 on the special lives of Prophets after their passing away, 11 on eschatology, 7 on the topic of Predestination and Free Will, and nearly 50 books in refutation of various heretical sects mentioned above.

The last but one appendix is a glossary listing more than 200 Arabic words with their meanings in brief [**Appendix J**]. The book closes with an appendix consisting of bibliography which lists about 20 sources used for referencing hadith and 11 other works [**Appendix L**].

The chapters pertaining to death, resurrection, rewards and punishments have been beautifully supplemented by additional information in the Endnotes. These are crucial chapters that will handsomely reward several re-readings.

Man's perception is a source of both happiness and misery, and in the mind of modern man, the material world looms disproportionately large. The descriptions of death and afterlife found in these chapters are important not only as points of doctrine but also as reminders of an immense world to come. The shift in perspective that their reading engenders is comparable to the difference between beholding a mighty

ocean from an overhanging cliff and marvelling at the expanse of the earth, and looking at the earth from a distant arm of the Milky way! The illusion of enormity induced by the former perspective vanishes completely, leaving in its place an obscure speck, missed if one blinks. This drastic readjustment of perspective is sorely needed, to place the persistent illusion of 'material reality' in its proper context - especially in our times when Muslim communities throughout the world are besieged from all directions - intellectually, communally, culturally, economically, politically and militarily. The intricate descriptions of Paradise, its purity, abundance and unending bliss, followed by hair-raising accounts of the horrors of hell can also assist greatly in fighting temptations, which, again, are so ubiquitous in our times - often just a button-click away. Muslim youth and school-aged kids should be encouraged to commit to memory as many of these descriptions as they can - as a provision for the rainy days that they must inevitably pass through when they wade alone into the wider world upon reaching adulthood.

Lastly, Article/Aqida#79 merits a special mention for its assertive and meticulous description of the authority that Allāh Almighty has granted to His beloved Messenger, Prophet Muĥammad ﷺ - which justifies for him the title of *Mukhtar-al-Kull* - one given comprehensive authority. This is one of the special traits – *khasā'is* - of our master Muĥammad ﷺ - that everything in creation has been subordinated to him and he is subordinate to no one save his Lord-Almighty Allah. This article is a litmus test of sorts, since no one who has been touched by so much as a whiff of heresy will concede these high ranks for RasūlAllāh ﷺ. Most heretics will reject them outright as polytheism. And yet, every word in that passage is supported by scripture - as the translator has proven amply in the End-notes, quoting the Qur'ān and authentic Ĥadīth for every precedence mentioned in the text.

Also included in the End-notes are hadith that prove that the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) had the authority to dispense in the Shari'ah - the permission form his Lord-Almighty to declare things halaal or haram. Another important end-note is a three-pages long commentary on Sūrah Aāl Ímrān, 3:81, the verse that proves our Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) is the Prophet of all other Prophets and obedience to him is obligatory upon them all (upon them and our Prophet be blessings and peace).

Before closing, there remains but one other important contribution that should be highlighted - viz., the second entry in Appendix B (Endnotes). This section is dedicated to the difficult to grasp concept of '*Takween*' - which has been explained in as simple a manner as the subject permits, with bulky citations from five important works of aqida translated in full.

May Allah bless the author, Imām Ajmad Álī, and the translator, Shaykh Abu Hasan, and allow us to benefit from their knowledge. Āmīn.

Úbaydullāh Riđawī
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