

Looking back to the Woking Muslim Mission after 100 years

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Website Creator/Editor: www.wokingmuslim.org

24th September 2012 is the centenary of an event which was to place the town of Woking on the world map, in particular the map of the Muslim world. It would lead to Woking being visited for the next fifty years or more by kings, statesmen, ambassadors, generals, intellectuals, students, business men, and other leading figures from all over the Muslim world, as well as British aristocrats, scholars, linguists, writers and soldiers who had embraced Islam. Woking came to be described as “a miniature of Mecca” in the West.

On that day in 1912, there arrived in England from Lahore, a city in British India, a man called Khwaja Kamal-ud-Din (1870–1932). He was by profession a lawyer and by vocation a lecturer and orator on the religion of Islam and comparative religion. He came to plead a civil case before the Privy Council in London, the highest court of appeal for Indian cases at the time. However, his plan beyond that was to present Islam in this country on public platforms and correct the very serious misconceptions about Islam and Muslims, under which the people of Britain and its religious and political leaders were labouring. He soon came to know of the existence of the mosque at Woking. It had been built in 1889 by Dr G.W. Leitner, a European scholar and linguist who had helped in India in the establishment of the University of the Punjab. The mosque was part of his proposed Oriental Institute, which never came to fruition. The cost of the construction of the mosque was largely donated by Begum Shah Jehan, the Muslim lady ruler of the state of Bhopal in India, and the cost of the land by the ruler of the Muslim state of Hyderabad Deccan.

From 1889, past the death of Dr Leitner in 1899, to the year 1913, the mosque was opened only on special occasions and was generally derelict and disused. Khwaja Kamal-ud-Din, while considering where to base his

missionary activities, first visited the mosque in January 1913. In the summer of 1913, with the help of two prominent Indian Muslims who held high official positions (Sir Abbas Ali Baig and the Right Honourable Syed Ameer Ali), the Khwaja had a trust created to take charge of the property and its status declared as a mosque open for the use of all Muslims. He moved to the mosque as Imam in mid-August 1913 during the month of Ramadan, and opened it for regular use for the first time, with the call to prayer being sounded five times a day. In the house next to the mosque, he established the Woking Muslim Mission.

The purpose of opening the mosque was not merely to provide a prayer venue for Muslims in Britain. The Khwaja considered his most important work as being to place an accurate image of Islam before the British people, as the religion which best fulfilled the needs of the modern times. Leading Muslims in the Indian subcontinent considered this as an utterly mad and foolhardy venture, doomed to failure. How could Islam be acceptable in Britain, the country which dominated the world with its most advanced civilization, based on Christianity and science, while Muslims were considered to be mere barbarians following a primitive faith unacceptable by any modern standards? How could the British, with their mighty rule over a large part of the Muslim world, including the country from where the Khwaja came, take spiritual guidance from someone belonging to their subject races who was promoting his inferior religion? Yet the Khwaja was convinced that, if the real and true Islam was presented in Britain, refuting its prevalent, distorted image, people would become sympathetic to it, and many of them would succumb to its appeal and attraction. He derived this conviction, drive and energy from his contact with his spiritual mentor, the Founder of the Ahmadiyya Movement, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (d. 1908).

Khwaja Kamal-ud-Din launched the monthly *Islamic Review* in February 1913, which remained in publication till around 1970. Besides containing articles on religious issues, it published news relating to Muslims in Britain and thus its archives are a unique chronicle of the history of Islam and Muslims in this country during those years.

With Woking as his base, Khwaja Kamal-ud-Din went around Britain giving lectures on Islam. His activities were reported in national newspapers as well as local papers such as the *Surrey Advertiser* and the *Woking News and Mail*. The British Pathe news organisation filmed more than a dozen occasions at the mosque between 1914 and 1958, which can be viewed on its website.

Soon the Khwaja gained many British converts to his faith, among them people of high education and some titled persons. The most famous of them was a peer of the realm and distinguished civil engineer, Lord Headley, who, after accepting Islam in November 1913, worked tirelessly to help the cause of the Woking Mission till his death in 1935.

Numerous books on Islam were published from Woking, many of them written by Khwaja Kamal-ud-Din himself. In 1917 the monumental and voluminous English translation of the Quran with extensive commentary, by Maulana Muhammad Ali of Lahore, the first such work by a Muslim available in the West, was published from the Woking mosque.

The Woking Mosque and Mission became the national centre of Islamic activity in Britain. Its Imam was regarded by the government as the de facto head of the Muslim community of the U.K. The Eid prayers at Woking were, till the mid-1960s, a national event for Muslims of Britain. It became commonplace for visiting dignitaries of international fame from the Muslim world to call at the Woking Mosque. Kings, princes, presidents, sultans, generals, statesmen, political leaders, ambassadors, high government officials, writers and intellectuals from Muslim countries came to Woking to visit the mosque and attend functions organised by the Mission.

A Muslim, observing the Eid-ul-Adha gathering at Woking, a festival which takes place on the occasion of the great Pilgrimage to Mecca, wrote in 1930: "Almost all Muslim nations in the world are represented in the gardens of the Mosque, prostrating themselves before their God and magnifying the Most High, even as they magnify Him at Mecca on this sacred

occasion. Woking is the only town in the world which becomes on such days a replica in miniature of the Ancient House of God in Arabia.”

Initially working with the barest of help, Khwaja Kamal-ud-Din arranged for staffing of the mission from India. The missionary and administrative staff which came from the Indian subcontinent had, like the Khwaja, to make great sacrifices. The journey to England took at least three weeks by sea and rail. Here they were faced with an entirely unfamiliar environment, suffering hardships and deprived of all the cultural and social facilities for Muslims which only started becoming available here in the 1960s. They left families behind, and the normal means of communication with home was by letter. People today cannot conceive that coming to the U.K. in those days was not an alluring prospect. It was the Lahore Ahmadiyya Movement which made the sacrifices to provide the staff and the finances for the running of the Woking Muslim Mission.

Khwaja Kamal-ud-Din concluded his first visit to Britain in August 1914, returning again in 1916. He made four or five visits in all. At the end of his third visit, in June 1923, he accompanied Lord Headley to the pilgrimage at Mecca, a journey widely covered in the press here and in the Middle East. On the way, they passed through Egypt where public meetings were held in Lord Headley’s honour. They paid a call upon Field-Marshal Lord Allenby, the British representative in Egypt, who sent a report about their visit to the Foreign Secretary in London, Lord Curzon, these two men being famous in British history.

During the two World Wars, the Woking Muslim Mission extended its support to Britain, in the same way as the British public did. During the First World War, Kitchener’s famous appeal “Your King & Country Need You” was published in the *Islamic Review*. In 1914 the Imam of the Woking Mosque was invited by the War Office to approve a site for a Muslim cemetery for the burial of soldiers who died here after being wounded in the battle-fields of France and Belgium. The Imam suggested that the cemetery should be better located in Woking. The War Office accepted his

suggestion, and as a result a cemetery was established within Brookwood, which also came to be used as a general Muslim cemetery.

When the Second World War began, the Imam of the Woking Mosque declared in his Eid sermon in November 1939: “Muslims are ordered [in the Quran] to sacrifice their lives not only to save their own mosques but the religious houses of other peoples as well. ...the very fact that synagogues have been pulled down in Germany upon the slightest pretext makes it obligatory upon us Muslims to throw our weight into the cause of the Allies”.

A Muslim convert, First World War veteran, and Woking resident by the name of Major J.W.B. Farmer (1897–1966), M.B.E., M.C., who was also a trustee of the Woking Mosque, was awarded the M.B.E. after the Second World War “in recognition of Meritorious Service in the Home Guard” in Surrey.

The Woking Mission also supported various just Muslim causes around the world and brought them to the notice of the public and press in this country. As early as 1917 it publicised the case for justice in Palestine. The best minds from all over the Muslim world used to meet at the Woking mosque, where they used to hold discussions on problems facing their countries. The campaign for an independent Muslim homeland on the Indian subcontinent, with the proposed name of Pakistan, started from a meeting of students at the Woking mosque in 1932.

Various Muslim U.K. national organisations also had either their birth at the Woking Mission or sought assistance from the Mission in their early days. The first public meeting of the “British Muslim Society” was held at the Woking mosque on 20th December 1914. The first ever “Congress of Muslims living in the U.K.” was a gathering called by the Woking Mission, and it was held as a two-day event on 25–26 June 1952 at the Woking Mosque.

The Central London Mosque in Regents Park owes its origin to the Woking Muslim Mission. The plan to build a Mosque in Central London

was proposed by Lord Headley during the First World War. This was followed up in the 1930s by the creation of a Trust, collection of funds, purchase of land, and even laying of the foundation stone in West Kensington, near Olympia. This Trust, whose original members were headed by Lord Headley and Khwaja Kamal-ud-Din, was later incorporated into the Trust that controls the Central London Mosque in Regents Park today.

In this article, we must also note the general picture of Islam as presented from the Woking Muslim Mission. The distinctive features of Islam as emphasised through this Mission's work are that:

- The beliefs and practices of Islam are simple and rational, and to be understood in the light of knowledge and reason. There are no dogmas, mysteries or rituals imposed upon a believer.
- The teachings of Islam are broadminded and tolerant. Islam accepts others religions as being originally revealed by God, acknowledges good in people of other faiths, grants complete freedom of religion to all, and urges friendship between faiths.
- In Islam there is no priesthood which controls the way to God.
- Islam creates a universal brotherhood of people of all countries, races, colours, classes and cultures, disregarding all such distinctions.
- Islam is not tied to the local culture of any Muslim country.
- It is a religion of unity, whose followers should be united by its fundamental teachings, but who respect one another's differences.

Legacy of the Woking Muslim Mission

During the 1960s Muslim migrants, mostly from Pakistan, arrived in the U.K. and settled in various towns and cities, forming communities of increasing size. Muslim religious centres and mosques began to spring up around the country, catering to the religious and cultural needs of their local Muslim communities. The Woking Mosque too went into the hands of other management who turned it to the use of the local Muslim population. From around 1968 onwards, Woking ceased to be the national centre for

Muslims of the U.K. and to serve its international role for the Muslim world. The Woking Muslim Mission no longer operated.

The passage of time since then, however, has proved that the picture of Islam as presented by the Woking Mission is needed more than ever before in order to solve the problems of the Muslims in the U.K. and to improve their standing in the country and their relationship with the wider community. Islam as preached from the Woking Mission was the very opposite of the religious extremism, isolation and separatism from general society, and wholesale rejection of all modern ideas, which are the attitudes, rightly or wrongly, associated with Muslims living in the U.K. today. The Woking Mission did not teach that Muslims should become an inward-looking community, living in isolation and regarding the outside society as a threat. Instead of this, Muslims must communicate and interact with the wider society, explain their faith to others sympathetically, respond to criticism in a dignified manner, present to others the best they can offer from their values, and accept from others the best they have to offer. In responding to offence or grievances, whether real or perceived, Muslims must be temperate and abstain from violence.

The Woking Mission also showed how Muslims could be true to Islam and yet fit into British society and life. For this they must correct some of their own religious notions which are not justified by Islam, and they must bring about reform of certain Muslim cultural and social practices which are not part of the religion of Islam but merely local customs in some places in the Muslim world which are now proving harmful.

The website www.wokingmuslim.org, managed by the writer of this article, is devoted to compiling all the available information and records, in the form of printed material, photographs, newsreel film clips, about the history and activities of the Woking Muslim Mission.

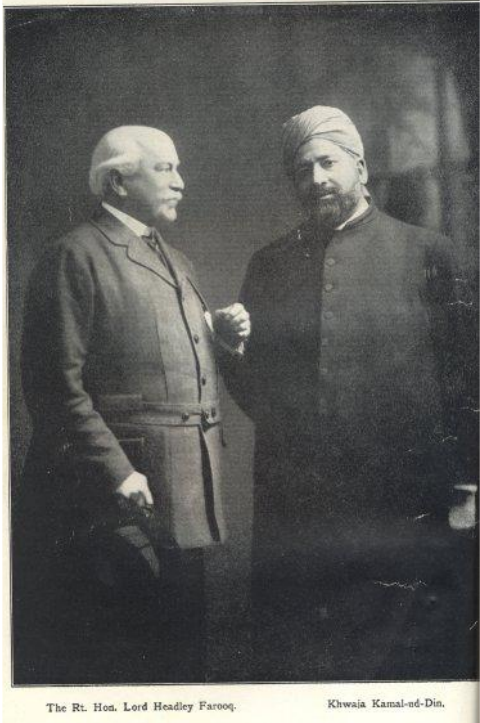
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East meets West in the Unity of Islam.

Right:

*Khwaja Kamal-ud-Din with
Lord Headley in 1913*



Below:

*Khwaja Kamal-ud-Din with
some other converts to Islam
outside the Mosque, 1926*

