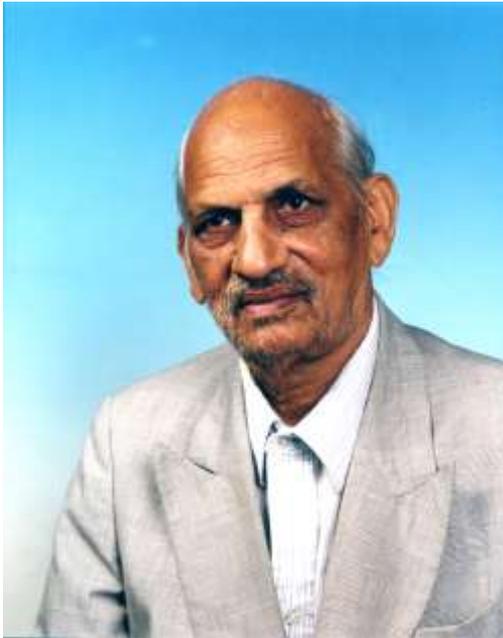


## Afzalur Rahman - Obituary



Afzalur Rahman who had retired in 1976 after a lifetime of teaching yet never stopped working, selflessly and tirelessly, for the next 22 years in the field of Islamic education, died of a stroke on 26 July, aged 83. He was born on 12 July 1915 in Malikpur village in Gujranwala, Punjab. Though economics was his subject in which he had a post-graduate degree, his abiding passion was in fulfilling the need to disseminate the knowledge of Islam; hence a prodigious output of books on various aspects of Islam, including an eight-volume *Seerah Encyclopaedia* which he compiled. He was also founder member and first chairman of the Muslim Educational Trust, London, founder member (and later secretary general) of the Muslim Schools Trust, and the Seerah Foundation, London.

An athlete and an all-India record-holder for cross country walk, Afzalur Rahman studied at Islamia College, Lahore (1934-1940), from where he too his bachelor and master's degrees. After a spell as a lecturer in a college in Jullundar (now Indian Punjab), he moved to New Delhi to work as a statistical officer in the Indian Railways. In Pakistan, he returned to teaching and lectured briefly at Islamia College, Lahore (1948-1951) and Emerson College, Multan (1951-1955).

He had come to London in 1955 to do doctoral research in (Islamic) economics and took admission at the London School of Economics. However, any talk of interest-free economics in those days was tantamount to heresy. The supervisor would not allow him to do any research which sought to undermine the very foundations of the modern economic system, nor was the student prepared to tailor

his research to win an interest-friendly PhD and in the end Afzalur Rahman gave up his research and took up teaching. He went to teach in Makkah al-Mukarramah for a year (1964-65) and thereafter returned to London and joined the Inner London Education Authority as a teacher. He had taken an early retirement in order to devote more time to his writing work and the work of the Muslim Educational Trust which he had helped to found in 1964.

The Education Act 1944 gave parents the right to withdraw their children from the morning school assembly which was held according to Anglican rights. However, firstly few Muslim parents were aware of the right and secondly, the question was what should the Muslim children do while the rest of the school children were at the assembly. The Muslim Educational Trust was established in order to try (1) to educate Muslim parents of their right to withdraw and (2) to provide during this period alternative Islamic instructions to Muslim children.

The idea was not exactly his but once convinced he became both its engine and its driver. He worked tirelessly to correspond, to meet and to convince school heads to allow Muslim volunteer teachers from the Muslim Educational Trust to take Islamic classes for their Muslim children during the assembly period. It was a new idea for the schools as well but the majority of the schools approached responded favourably. The New Ham Education Authority in East London was the first to respond positively and so began the process of imparting Islamic education to Muslim children in British schools within the educational system itself. It was a very small beginning but one that lay at the root of many other developments in the field of Islamic education in Britain.

The Trust had almost no funds and most of the work was done on voluntary basis, but Afzalur Rahman, not a rich man by himself, never withheld from spending his own money whenever needed. The teachers who went to the schools were unpaid volunteers too that is until the first substantive donation came from the late King Faisal.

King Faisal paid a state visit to Britain in 1967 when the still fledgling British Muslim community gave him a reception in appreciation of the efforts he was making in order to bring the Muslim world together. That was a unique honour accorded to any Muslim statesman by Muslims in Britain. Afzalur Rahman was a very modest and self-effacing person and, therefore, he had virtually to be

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forced to act as chairman of the reception committee for King Faisal. One salubrious outcome of the reception was the sanctioning by the Saudi monarch of an annual grant to the Muslim Educational Trust and for the educational welfare of the Muslims in Britain.

After the Muslim Educational Trust he also set up two other institutions, the Muslim Schools Trust and the Seerah Foundation and threw himself headlong into writing work. Among the spate of his works are: the *First, Second, and Third Primer of Islam, Economic Doctrines of Islam* in three volumes, *Utility of Prayer, Muhammad: Blessing for Mankind, Banking and Insurance, Muhammad as a Military Leader, Role of Muslim Women in Society, Liberty: Readings in Political Philosophy, Encyclopaedia of Seerah vols 1-8 and Encyclopaedia of Seerah for Children vol. 1.*

His love of study did not desert him even after he had a stroke and a heart attack. Only a few months ago he told a friend that he had obtained a set of Iqbal's books and he was planning to study them, again.

His love of learning was perhaps a reflection of the educational environment of his student days in Lahore. Islamia College was then a live, throbbing intellectual centre. There he came under the influence of the scholarly Ilmuddin Salik, who taught Islamic studies, and the famous Allama Abdullah Yusuf Ali, the translator of the Qur'an, who was the principal of the college. Lahore was a hive of political and intellectual activities in British India. Other luminaries such as Allama Iqbal and Maulana Zafar Ali Khan had already made a deep imprint on the socio-political and religious life of the Muslims.

Afzalur Rahman treasured the memory of the occasions when he observed these luminaries from a distance in various gatherings or listened to them, enough, as it turned out, to inspire him. He listened to Iqbal reciting some of his poems at the annual gatherings of the Anjuman Himayat ul-Islam which ran the Islamia College, and to Abdullah Yusuf Ali, reading his English translation of the Qur'an in the morning assembly of the college.

Afzalur Rahman was as sincere as he was unpretentious. Frank, honest and truthful, he was also kind and generous and he supported many in his native city in Pakistan. He had bought a house on mortgage, but as soon as he was convinced - through a correspondence with Maulana Maududi - that it was not permissible as it involved interest and that living in a non-Muslim society did not make interest permissible for Muslims - he straightaway disposed of the house (1970)

and moved into a rented accommodation.

Afzalur Rahman is survived by his wife, five daughters, two sons and grandchildren.

**Saleem Kayani**

**From Istanbul Muhammed Khan Kayani adds:**

In 1962 when the list of invitees was being drawn up for the first meeting of the UK Islamic Mission at East London Mosque, Mr Sher Afzal of Swat state asked me to invite Mr Afzalur Rahman. At the time he was teaching at a school in London. At the meeting, he approached me and quietly put £75 - no mean sum in 1962 - in my hand, even though he did not know me. He said: 'You can spend this on any good cause that you may think appropriate.' I thanked and assured him I would do so. I was struck by his modesty, his good intention and his trust in other people.

I used his donation to establish the book service department of the UK Islamic Mission and imported Islamic books from Islamic Publications Lahore. It later developed into a permanent Islamic bookshop in London. Not many people were aware of this; perhaps not even he was. He never asked me what had I done with the money.

Later I invited Afzalur Rahman to speak at London Islamic Circle which used to meet every Saturday in the old building (Regent's Lodge) of the Islamic Cultural Centre, London. He was the most modest person I have ever met. His most important and lasting contribution to Islam is his monumental work *Encyclopaedia of Seerah*. When I requested him to allow me to translate the *Encyclopaedia of Seerah* into Turkish, he readily agreed. He wished to help us financially to do it, but he did not have the necessary funds. However, with the cooperation of the Inkilab Publications, Istanbul, the *Encyclopaedia* was translated and printed beautifully in five volumes in September 1996. It has proved very popular in Turkey. One of the newspapers distributed the *Encyclopaedia* together with the seven-volume Turkish translation of *Tafhim ul Qur'an* by Abul A'la Maududi. Today both publications occupy a very special place in thousands of Muslim homes and research institutions in Turkey. I believe the *Encyclopaedia of Seerah* has been translated and published in Indonesia and Malaysia as well.