CHAPTER 3

Muslim Missions in Interwar Berlin

In May 1922, the Indian revolutionary Abdul Sattar Kheiri, stranded in Berlin since the end of the First World War, made the following observation:

Among all the countries of Europe, there does not appear to be as much scope for the propagation of Islam as there is in Germany. She suffered defeat in the War and now she is seriously thinking of rebuilding her future course in order to usher in a new era of peace and prosperity. Everyone here is convinced that rebirth is not possible without following true religion.1

During the war, Germany had adopted a politics of supporting and manipulating the pan-Islamic movement as a means of undermining the British.2 Not surprisingly, it made a good name for itself among Indian and other Muslim nationalists to the extent that ‘Muhammadans say that the welfare of Islam is bound up with the welfare of Germany.’3 After the war, Berlin quickly became a centre for Indian, Arabic and Tatar independence movements. Students from Tunis to Calcutta and from Tirana to Tashkent registered at one of the Berlin universities and were made welcome by the Germans, for attracting international students was now considered an important foreign policy strategy to remedy Germany’s loss of face.4 While students prepared for the task of assuming leadership in their home countries, Sattar and his brother Abdul Jabbar Kheiri, who during the war had worked for the German war intelligence,5 saw

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their chance to take leadership of the nascent Muslim community in Berlin. Winning over the Germans for Islam seemed to sit well with this plan. As Sattar put it, ‘I feel that I would be disloyal to Islam if I did not inform the Indian Muslims of this great opportunity for propagating Islam in this country.’

Following their own suggestion, the Kheiris proceeded to set up a mission organization and to approach the Germans in the name of their cause, making an appeal in which religious redemption and global liberation politics were inextricably entwined. Unluckily for them, two teams of Ahmadi missionaries simultaneously arrived in Berlin. Their arrival not only signalled a very different kind of mission from the one the Kheiris had in mind, but also within a few years the Ahmadiyyas dominated the mission field. They put forward a daring suggestion to reform the Islamic tradition, one the majority of Sunni believers was quick to dismiss as sectarian but which Christian converts experienced as closer to their expectation. Adding insult to injury, instead of the world revolution that the Kheiris were trying to foment, the Ahmadiyyas embraced a non-political, sympathetic approach to the British. In the previous chapter, I explained that the Lahore branch stressed intellectual exchange and cooperation within the empire, whereas the Qadian branch stressed its martyr status. On the following pages we enquire into the dynamics evolving from the different mission concepts, observing not only the two Ahmadiyya organizations, but also the Muslim mission of their politically minded compatriots. Some 15,000 Muslims conditioned the emergence of a diversified religious community, counting at least ten religious organizations and very many headstrong players. The competition they engendered and the frictions this caused within the Muslim community of Berlin helps to place the Ahmadiyya mission in its proper perspective.

The mission we encounter in Weimar Berlin may be considered yet another step towards adjusting and reversing Western domination. Here, I address the local embedding of the missionary enterprise and enquire into the dynamics that ensued between the Indians and the local Muslim population. The reader will meet the above-quoted Abdul Sattar Kheiri (b. 1885) and his brother Abdul Jabbar Kheiri (b. 1880) who in 1922 founded the Islamische Gemeinde zu Berlin e.V. (Islamic Community of Berlin); Mubarik Ali (no dates), the Ahmadiyya missionary of the Qadiani branch who tried to cater to the Islamische Gemeinde but failed to build the required mosque; and his competitor Sadr-ud-Din, the Ahmadiyya missionary of the Lahore branch who actually managed to build a mosque in 1924. Equipped with very different ideas, these men

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6 Kheiri, ‘The Need for Propagation.’