

MARGRIT PERNAU  AND MAX STILLE 

## Obedient Passion—Passionate Obedience: Ashraf Ali Thanawi's Sermons on the Love of the Prophet

---

Ashraf Ali Thanawi (1863–1943) was one of the most influential South Asian preachers and authors of the twentieth century. His sermons range from Friday sermons in Arabic to those held before select disciples or at mass rallies in Urdu, and they were printed ever since his lifetime in great number and consistency. This article is particularly interested in the emotional roles allotted to preacher and audience and the overlap between religious and emotional dimensions of the communication process. Against the background of the changing roles of emotions in colonial India and the turn of preaching to print, this contribution focuses on sermons that concern the celebration of the birthday of the Prophet (*mīlādu 'n-nabī*), a practice that was central for an emotionalised piety directed towards the person of Muhammad and was highly contested. Thanawi elaborates on the necessity, limits, and cultivation of the love towards the Prophet and discusses the evocation and expression, intentionality, and temporality of the Muslims' ideal emotional practices. Maintaining limits of devotion serves as the basis for an even more passionate love. Obedience, in preaching as an emotional practice as much as in the religious feelings towards the Prophet, is central to develop and communicate feelings that are all-pervading, continuous, and unimpaired.

---

The birthday of Prophet Muhammad (*mīlādu 'n-nabī*) is celebrated each year on the twelfth of the month of *Rabī'u 'l-awwal*.<sup>1</sup> In South Asia, families and neighbours gather in the early evening in a festively decorated hall. At one end of the hall stands a low platform for the reciter, whereas the audience sits on the floor. Quranic recitations alternate with poems in praise of God and the Prophet and stories about the miraculous events surrounding his mother's pregnancy, his birth helped by angels, and his wet nurse. Towards the end, the whole congregation recites the blessing called *durūd sharīf* in salutation

<sup>1</sup>For transliteration of Arabic into Latin script, we use a simplified version of the transliteration given in J. T. Platts, *A Dictionary of Urdu, Classical Hindi, and English* (London: Allen, 1884). We provide diacritics only for long vowels, 'ain and hamza, not for retroflex and emphatic consonants. We transcribe *é* as *che*, *ê* as *chhe*, and *gāin* as *ghain*. In the main text, we do not use diacritics for names of persons, cities, and localities. All translations by the authors unless otherwise stated.

\*Margrit Pernau and Max Stille are at Max Planck Institute for Human Development, Germany

of the Prophet and rise to their feet because he is believed to be present at this moment. As with other festivals, the joy of the event finds its expression in the distribution of sweets.<sup>2</sup>

These celebrations have probably been going on in India for a long time (although surprisingly, none of the early nineteenth-century descriptions of festivals seem to have mentioned them). Towards the second half of the nineteenth and even more in the twentieth century, they became a site for contestation because they brought together in a nutshell several debates in which two main groups opposed each other. Both sought an answer for the future of the Muslim community after the catastrophe, which the Revolt of 1857 had meant for them: the *Barelwis*, followers of Ahmad Raza Khan (1856–1921), a Sufi from the North Indian town of Bareilly; and the *Deobandis*, followers of the seminary of Deoband, founded in 1866 to systematize and teach the theological foundations on which they wanted the faith and practices of the Muslim community to be based.<sup>3</sup> The debates between the two groups were acrimonious and at several instances led to mutual excommunication. They centred on a number of topics, all of which played into the debate on the legitimacy of the *mīlād* ceremony: the development of customs and rituals (*rusūm*), which lacked an explicit basis in the Quran and the Sunnah and might hence be read as a reprehensible innovation (*bidʿa*); the discomfort of the reformers with celebrations, which might also be found in other religions, and might even be seen as borrowing from them, like Christmas and Krishna's birth celebration, the *Janmāshṭamī*; the role women played both in the texts recited and in the gatherings; and last but certainly not least, the strong emotions linked to the event, which the Barelwis saw as a proof of their devotion to God and his Prophet and which the Deobandis considered dangerous because they might lead Muslims to transcend the boundaries laid down by the divine law. Insisting only on the law and discipline, however, opened the Deobandis to the charge that they loved the Prophet less than other people did, and it identified them with the legalistic Shaikh, who in centuries of poetry always had lost against the Sufi, drunken if not mad with love.

In this article, we will investigate the subtle interpretation with which Ashraf Ali Thanawi (1863–1943) reconciled passionate love (*muhabbat*, sometimes *ishq*) of and strict obedience to the Prophet in the context of preaching. For

<sup>2</sup>For a charming description of present day *mīlād* celebrations in North India, see R. Jalil, "Milad-un-Nabi: How Poets and Lyricists Celebrate the Birth of Prophet Muhammad," *Scroll.in* (2 December 2017), <https://scroll.in/article/859950/milad-un-nabi-how-poets-and-lyricists-celebrate-the-birth-of-prophet-muhammad> (accessed 22 October 2018). For *mīlād* in Islamic traditions, see the important work of M. H. Katz, *The Birth of the Prophet Muhammad: Devotional Piety in Sunni Islam* (London, Routledge, 2007). For a classical study on the role of the Prophet in Islamic thought and practice, see Annemarie Schimmel, *And Muhammad Is His Messenger: The Veneration of the Prophet in Islamic Piety* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985).

<sup>3</sup>The classical studies for the two movements are B. D. Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860–1900* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982) and U. Sanyal, *Devotional Islam and Politics in British India: Ahmad Riza Khan Barelwi and His Movement, 1870–1920* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

Thanawi, passion that did not transgress the limits of obedience and obedience that encompassed passionate love were intimately linked. For reformers like Thanawi the central problem of normative innovation was its infringement of God's sovereignty, that is, the belief that something not decreed by God could be considered obligatory in the same way as the Sharia. Even acts that could be seen as harmless in themselves, like standing up to honour the Prophet or distributing sweets, would become reprehensible if they were performed under the assumption that they were mandatory.<sup>4</sup> Our first argument starts from this and pushes it further by focusing on emotions. Whereas it might be tempting to read the emphasis on God's sovereignty and the law as leading to an increasing control over the emotions, and thus embed it in a narrative on modernity and discipline, Thanawi does celebrate strong religious feelings — and especially a passionate love for the Prophet — even if in exceptional cases they lead to states of mystical rapture and ecstasy (*wajd*, *hāl*), which annihilate the human will and its possibility to manage the emotions and their expression. But he points out that in ordinary circumstances love and the law belong together to the extent that none can exist without the other: obedience to the law creates the state of purity needed to be drawn into a loving relationship to God — a movement that can only originate from God's grace; at the same time, love is the ultimate fulfilment of the inner meaning of the law. The passion of loving devotion and the obedience to the law cannot and should not be separated. These arguments continue longstanding intellectual exchange and debates on *mīlād* and legal thoughts in Sufi and Hanafi traditions, notably in the framework of the Indian reception of al-Ghazali's thoughts.<sup>5</sup> Thanawi was as much a Sufi as a scholar, and his reformist impulses draw equally from both roles.<sup>6</sup>

Our second argument is that the emotions at stake — their norms, their interpretation, and their practices — are transformed under British rule even though the classical debates remain very much present in the work of Thanawi. For this, we look at preaching as an emotional practice. The sermons on the Prophet's birthday are particularly interesting because they explicitly thematize the love for the Prophet. However, to grasp their emotional dynamics and impact, we have to look at the way Thanawi conceives the emotions of the preacher and the audience in the sermons' rhetoric; it is here that he prominently elaborates his ideas about passionate obedience and obedient passion. This opens up to a more general consideration of the role of emotions in his preaching practices, the core question our article addresses.

<sup>4</sup>For this argument, see S. Tareen, *Defending Muhammad in Modernity* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, forthcoming); see also B. D. Ingram, *Revival from Below: The Deoband Movement and Global Islam* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018), 65–80.

<sup>5</sup>See Katz, *Birth*, chapter three and even more specifically 117–125 on love. On Ghazālī and his reception in South Asia, see Ebrahim Moosa, *Ghazali and the Poetics of Imagination* (Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), particularly 21–22.

<sup>6</sup>This does neither imply that both strands are uncontested, nor that they were for Thānawī, whose tension and efforts to arbitrate between views of Imdādu 'Ilāh and Gangohī on *mīlād* are described by both Ingram, *Revival from Below*, 72–78; and M. Q. Zaman, *Ashraf 'Alī Thanawi: Islam in Modern South Asia*, Makers of the Muslim World (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2008), 24–25.

The British influence can be traced along two main pathways. The first is the impact of technological transformations. Thanawi was very conscious of the power of print and systematically instructed his disciples to collect and preserve his words, be it his sermons or the conversations at his Sufi lodge. The practices of collecting the sayings of spiritual leaders and the genres in which they were preserved had existed before; however, availability of print in Thanawi's case meant that his sermons were available to a much larger number of people, most of whom could only access Thanawi through print media.<sup>7</sup> This does not mean that orality no longer played a role; instead of looking at a linear change from orality to print, it seems more promising to look at the ways they competed, overlapped, and reinforced each other.<sup>8</sup> Although we have studies about how knowledge was changed through print and about the new public sphere it created,<sup>9</sup> little has been done on the transformation of emotions once the personalized interaction with a Sufi teacher was complemented by print media. Different genres (for instance, pamphlets written for publication and sermons first delivered to an audience and then printed) are differently situated between orality and print and give rise to different forms of interacting emotionally with an audience.

The changes under colonialism, however, are not limited to the introduction of new technologies and their effects. When reflecting about sermons, Thanawi, in a move that echoes the denouncement of Persian poetry for its hyperbolicism and artificiality, emphasized that strong but simple and authentic emotions lie at the core of preaching. Both the preacher and the audience must eschew all elements of pretence and show off, which are but signs of the dominance of the carnal self. Obedience and selflessness, on the contrary, open the believer for God's guidance and thus to the reality of divine love and its passionate emotions.

This article is organized as a movement from the general to the specific and from the outside to the inside. The first two sections place the sermons and the emotions at play in a broader context: We start with an introduction to the historical background (1). From there, we move on to looking at the corpus of Thanawi's sermons, focusing on questions of their geographical spread, audiences, recording, and diffusion through print (2). In the next three sections, we walk the reader through the different stages of sermonizing and their emotions. We start from Ashraf Ali Thanawi, his perception of himself as preacher and of the audience and trace his stance on the role of divine inspiration and affective communication (3). From there, we proceed to a close reading of two sermons that centrally deal with religious emotions as Thanawi describes the proper feelings towards God and his Prophet and how they should translate or not into the celebration of the Prophet's birthday. His reflections on the proper way to celebrate Milad can be analysed for

<sup>7</sup>See Zaman, *Ashraf 'Ali Thanawi*, 27–28.

<sup>8</sup>Cf. F. Orsini and K. B. Schofield, eds, *Tellings and Texts: Music, Literature and Performance in North India*, (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2015).

<sup>9</sup>B. D. Ingram, J. B. Scott, and S. K. Tareen, eds., *Imagining the Public in Modern South Asia* (London: Routledge 2016) with references to the older literature.

what they tell us about the debates and practices surrounding this particular festivity. Here, however, they provide us with an entry to the more general question of how emotions are conceived as well as how sermons can be read for the strategies they use to draw the audience into the argument and engage not only their cognitive but also their affective powers (4). Finally, we describe the emotional effects of his sermons, once again broadening the source base to include the instances where the reaction of the audience is documented (5). If for the sake of clarity we separate the author from the text and both from the reception, we are well aware of the fact that production, performance, and reception come together in one process, linked through multiple feedback loops. We suggest that bringing together these layers allows us to reach new insights into the emotional dynamics of preaching — and through this to a more general contribution to the history of the transformation of emotions in the early twentieth century.

### The Historical Background

The lifetime of Ashraf Ali Thanawi overlapped with the period of high imperialism in India. After the Revolt of 1857, the British Crown had taken over as the ruler of the Indian Empire, ostensibly promising a policy of noninterference but in reality profoundly transforming not only the political and economic structures but also the educational system and everyday social life. For the Muslims, the situation was exacerbated by the fact that the colonial power held them responsible for the revolt and for several decades withheld their patronage — or so it seemed from the Muslim perspective. This led to intense debates within the community about how to face the challenges of the present: keeping the inheritance of the pious elders intact (*Barelwis*), eliminating superstitions and reforming the practices of the Muslims to lead them back to a golden age in which the holy texts were known and obeyed (*Deobandis*), or aiming at a collaboration with the colonial government in order to gain access to Western knowledge needed to reform religion and enhance the worldly power of the Muslim community (the position held by the Aligarh college). The debates opposing the groups were harsh; however, the lines between the opponents were not always as clear cut as it seemed at first sight. In the nineteenth century, these debates were increasingly taken into public spaces, which not only gave them a new importance but also transformed their rhetoric. Modelled and provoked by the example of the missionaries, forms of preaching by Christian, Hindu, and Islamic organizations flourished and diversified.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup>D. Lelyveld, “Eloquence and Authority in Urdu: Poetry, Oratory, and Film,” in *Sharī‘at and Ambiguity in South Asian Islam*, ed. K. P. Ewing (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 98–113. R. Ghose, “Politics for Faith: Karamat Ali Jaunpuri and Islamic Revivalist Movements in British India circa 1800–73” (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 2012); J. Jones, *Shī‘a Islam in Colonial India: Religion, Community and Sectarianism*, Cambridge Studies in Indian History and Society (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

The period of Thanawi's most intense preaching overlaps with the beginnings of the national movement. The Indian National Congress was founded in 1885; the Muslim League followed in 1906. In the first decade of the twentieth century, the Swadeshi movement in Bengal and the pan-Islamic movement marked the beginning of intense popular mobilization. At the same time, violent clashes between the communities increased in frequency and bitterness.

Any research on Thanawi is faced both by an overabundance and a lack of sources. As just mentioned, Thanawi made sure that his writings and sayings were collected and preserved; they have been constantly reprinted until the present day and are now available on the internet. This means that scholars can draw on an incredible wealth of material describing not only his intellectual biography but also his day-to-day interactions, habits, and interpretation on an incredible variety of events and subjects. To this can be added a biography in four volumes by his disciple Khwaja Azizu 'l-Hasan Ghawri. Three of these volumes were published during Thanawi's lifetime and approved by him.<sup>11</sup> However, we have hardly any material that is not authored by individuals within Thanawi's network and would provide an outside perspective.

The core facts of Thanawi's biography are well known: he was born in 1863 in Thana Bhawan to a family with an appreciation for both Islamic and modern colonial knowledge. Ashraf Ali completed the curriculum at the theological seminary of Deoband in just a few years and started teaching at Kanpur at a young age. After fourteen years, he took over his Sufi master's shrine at Thana Bhawan, where he spent the rest of his life guiding his disciples and writing letters and pamphlets. However, his retreat was interrupted by frequent travelling to deliver sermons (see below). Thanawi passed away in 1943; his life thus spans the crucial time between the immediate aftermath of the Revolt of 1857 to almost the eve of independence and partition, a time crucial for debates on Muslim faith, practices, and emotions and the identities they generated.

The biographies written by Thanawi's followers add to these reports of a precocious intelligence and piety. Already as a child he preached in empty mosques and later organized circles with his friends at Deoband to practice preaching and defend his faith in *munāzarās*, that is, formalized debates between representatives of different religions.<sup>12</sup> They also emphasize the deeply emotional relations that bound him to his teachers and spiritual guides and the impact his sermons had on his audience. The persona, which was depicted here with his acquiescence, was of a man whom God had blessed with many gifts who was loved and appreciated by his elders and venerated by his disciples. He was a learned man, an *'ālim* (pl. *'ulamā'*), and a Sufi at the same time, something that was true not only for him but for most men in

<sup>11</sup>Khwāja 'Azīzu 'l-Hasan Ghawrī, *Ashrafu 's-Sawānih*, 4 vols (Multān, Idāra'e Ta'lifāt-e Ashrafiya, 2008 [first edition 1935]). The biography by 'Abdu 'r-Rahmān Khān, *Strat-e Ashraf* (Delhi: Farīd Book Depot, 1955) is based on this work and aims at a style more accessible to the masses.

<sup>12</sup>Ghawrī, 1, 102–30.

the Deoband tradition at the time. The distinction between the scholar and the Sufi did not describe different persons but different roles within the same individual. The opposition between the exterior (*zāhir*) and the interior (*bātin*) was not one between worldly or useful and religious knowledge. Both were religious and thus useful, and both were needed to guide a Muslim towards a correct faith. This faith in turn became evident not only through the right deeds but also through the right emotions towards God and the Prophet. In Thanawi's words, the scholars were those who knew everything about preparing the delicacies of a banquet, whereas the Sufis made them taste the sweetness of the food. Individual teachers as well as their disciples might have leaned more towards one or the other according to their gifts. However, the acrimonious debates that marked the nineteenth and early twentieth century did not oppose the 'ulamā' and the Sufis but groups that differed in their interpretation of the role of customs and rituals. The central question was which customs constituted a reprehensible normative innovation and should thus be reformed, and which of them needed to be kept out of respect for the elders who had installed them.<sup>13</sup>

Historians of South Asia have started to argue for the importance of thinking about the role of emotions.<sup>14</sup> The emotional ideal for Muslims who wanted to be well behaved in society and committed to their faith underwent vital changes during Thanawi's lifetime. The generation born before the Revolt had still been brought up on an Aristotelian ideal of harmony. Virtues and vices were not intrinsic to an emotion, meaning that love was not necessarily always good and anger always bad. Rather, virtue consisted in a state of balance between two extremes, whereas the extremes would be qualified as vices — excessive love thus would be a vice, whereas temperate anger would be virtuous. For Thanawi's generation, the findings were more ambivalent. On the one hand, and especially in Sufism and in medicine, the idea of avoiding excesses and striving towards balance (*ītidāl*) was still considered important on all levels, from the micro- to the macrocosm. On the other hand, the validation of strong passions, which had been restricted to specific contexts earlier, started to pervade both the private and the public. Loving passionately to the point of losing the use of the senses and the faculty of

<sup>13</sup>Tareen, *Contesting Muhammad in Modernity*; A. Zaidi, *Contested Identities and the Muslim Qaum in Northern India: c. 1860–1900* (Ph.D. diss., Churchill College, Cambridge, 2009); Jones, *Shi'a Islam in Colonial India*.

<sup>14</sup>See S. Ramaswamy, *Passions of the Tongue. Language Devotion in Tamil India, 1891–1970*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); R. K. Ray, *Exploring Emotional History: Gender, Mentality, and Literature in the Indian Awakening*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001); C. W. Ernst, B. B. Lawrence, *Sufi Martyrs of Love: The Chishti Order in South Asia and Beyond*, (New York: Palgrave, 2002); F. Orsini, ed, *Love in South Asia: A Cultural History*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2006); the special issues "The Social Production of Space and Emotions in South Asia," *Journal of the Economic & Social History of the Orient* 58, ed. R. Khan, (2015); "Concepts of Emotions in Indian Languages" *Contributions to the History of Concepts* 11, no. 1, ed. M. Pernau (2016); "Feeling Modern: The History of Emotions in Urban South Asia," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 27, no. 4, ed. E. Chatterjee, S. Krishnan, M. E. Robb (2017); "Feeling Communities," *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 54, no. 1, ed. M. Pernau (2017); "Friendship in Indian History," *Studies in History*, 33, no. 1, ed. D. Ali, E. J. Flatt (2017).

reason was no longer just considered a poetical trope. Whether the beloved was the romantic partner or friend, the Prophet, God, or even an abstract object such as the community of believers or the motherland, passionate love became desirable, if not essential, for survival. Salvation in the religious but also in the worldly sense depended on the ability to feel the right emotions and to feel them passionately.<sup>15</sup> This development crossed the lines of the contesting groups and was not restricted to Muslims, as it can be shown for Hindus as well. It is against this background that Thanawi's sermons have to be read: denying the legitimacy of passion was no longer a viable option at the turn of the century.

### The Sermons: Settings and Sources

The two sermons that we will analyse in more detail below are part of a large archive. Shedding some light on this archive gives us an important context for Thanawi's preaching practice. Thanawi was among the most prolific religious authors of his time and handled many different genres, both traditional and innovative, ranging from juridical opinions (*fatāwā*, sing. *fatwa*) and letters to disciples to articles in magazines<sup>16</sup> to his famous advice book for women, the *Heavenly Ornaments*.<sup>17</sup> In mid-1932, Thanawi counted 551 printed works,<sup>18</sup> including sermons (*mawā'iz*), the *Heavenly Ornaments*, and his 12-volume Quranic exegesis. Thanawi also sticks out for the meticulous and orchestrated collection of his oral discourses. His aphorisms and snippets of conversations with his disciples (*malḥūzāt*) have recently been reprinted in a twelve-volume collection.<sup>19</sup> Thanawi praises these for providing his listeners with concrete contexts that are not included in the more general sermons.<sup>20</sup> This also is precisely what makes them such a valuable source for historians because they allow us to describe the emotional practices around Thanawi's preaching.

The expectations of audiences were specific to the preacher and the kind of sermons they would listen to. Thanawi was well aware of generic identities even while these were being reconfigured by printing technology.<sup>21</sup> Thanawi took the legal position that the ritual Friday sermon (*khutba*) had to be delivered in Arabic<sup>22</sup> and in 1929 compiled a collection of such sermons

<sup>15</sup>For a detailed elaboration of this argument, see M. Pernau, *Emotions and Modernity in Colonial India: From Balance to Fervour* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

<sup>16</sup>Information on the magazines can be found in Khān, *Sīrat-e Ashraf*, 337. According to his list, the earliest magazines are *al-Imdād* and *An-Nūr*, which were started in 1914 and 1920, respectively.

<sup>17</sup>Ashraf 'Alī Thanawī, *Perfecting Women: Maulana Ashraf 'Alī Thanawī's Bihishti Zewar, a Partial Translation With Commentary B. D. Metcalf* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992).

<sup>18</sup>Ashraf 'Alī Thanawī, *Malḥūzāt-e Hakīmu 'l-Ummat*, vol. 4 (Multān: Idāra'e Ta'līfāt-e Ashrafiya, [2002–4]), 144 (dated 13 Rabī'u 'l-awwal 1351).

<sup>19</sup>Thanawī, *Malḥūzāt*.

<sup>20</sup>Thanawī, *Malḥūzāt*, vol. 2, 165.

<sup>21</sup>On genres as performing authorial identities, see A. A. Mian, "Surviving Modernity: Ashraf 'Alī Thanawī (1863–1943) and the Making of Muslim Orthodoxy in Colonial India" (Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 2015), 60–61.

<sup>22</sup>Thanawī, *Malḥūzāt*, vol. 4, 250.



to be used by preachers each week of the year.<sup>23</sup> Because he engaged in religious competition and polemic (*munāzara*) only in his earlier years and strongly disapproved of them later, these were not recorded.<sup>24</sup> His main focus in preaching was his long Urdu sermons (*mawā'iz*, sing. *wa'z*). The thirty-two volume collection of 338 Urdu sermons<sup>25</sup> held by Thanawi is even more exceptional because there is no similar collection of the sermons of Thanawi's contemporaries.<sup>26</sup> In the preface to an early collection of his aphorisms and sermons, Thanawi names the different objectives of the three genres — the Friday sermon, the *munāzara*, and the *wa'z*-sermons — as, respectively, providing wisdom, struggling with opponents, and admonition.<sup>27</sup>

For the reception of his sermons, it is key that Thanawi both defended the spoken word and strategically advocated turning it into print. He emphasized the power of the spoken word of the sermon (*wa'z*) to address a wider public beyond the students and specialists as he would do in writing or a lesson (*dars*).<sup>28</sup> In the above-mentioned preface to an early collection of sermons and statements, Thanawi describes that noting down and printing his sermons had often been the sporadic initiative of individuals. When writing the preface in 1911, Thanawi announced his joy about the support of a new patron that sparked off a new movement for compilation and distribution of his sermons. He also stressed that he not only decided the structure of the publication and their timing but also guaranteed the readers that the content remained true to its original.<sup>29</sup> Thanawi pointed out that the sermons spearheaded the organized recording and publishing of his spoken word.<sup>30</sup> Of course, the sermons might be edited some years after their initial recording as a personal effort and service of the compilers,<sup>31</sup> who also struggled a lot to keep up with Thanawi's speaking pace.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Ashraf 'Alī Thānawī, *Khutbātu 'l-ahkām li-jumu'āti 'l-'ām* (Karāchī: Maktabatu 'l-Bushrā, [no date]), 12. The collection is used during Friday service throughout the subcontinent up to this day.

<sup>24</sup> Thānawī, "Islāh zātu 'l-bayān," in Ashraf 'Alī Thānawī, *Khutbāt-e Hakīmu 'l-Ummat*, vol. 19 (Multan: Idāra'e Ta'lifāt-e Ashrafiya, [no date]), 263–320, here 286–87; Thānawī, *Mal-fuzāt*, vol. 9, 223; Ashraf 'Alī Thānawī, *Majālis Hakīmu 'l-Ummat*, ed. Muhammad Shafī (Karachi: Dar ul-ishā'at, [no date]), 279.

<sup>25</sup> The publisher of the first volume of the early posthumous collection *at-Tablīgh* assumes that originally, 450 sermons existed. See Ashraf 'Alī Thānawī, *Zikr-e Rasūl* (Multan: Idāra'e Ta'lifāt-e Ashrafiya, [no date]). The sermon series we refer to in this article is Ashraf 'Alī Thānawī, *Khutbāt-e Hakīmu 'l-Ummat*, (Multan: Idāra'e Ta'lifāt-e Ashrafiya, [no date]). It is not dated, but the repeated preface by Muhammad Ishāq is in some volumes dated 2006. The whole collection is also available online at <https://archive.org/details/KHUTBAATEHAKEEMULUMMAT> (accessed 23 October 2018).

<sup>26</sup> The sermons of Ahmad Rizā Khān, for example, are only available hidden in his *fatwa*-collection (personal communication Usha Sanyal).

<sup>27</sup> Ashraf 'Alī Thānawī, *Da'awāt-e 'abdiyat* (Deoband: Idāra'e Ashrafu 'l-Mawā'iz, 1957), 8.

<sup>28</sup> Thānawī, "Ta'līmu 'l-bayān," in *Khutbāt-e Hakīmu 'l-Ummat*, vol. 2, 284–302, here 297.

<sup>29</sup> Thānawī, *Da'awāt*, 7. Although the preface is not dated, all sermons in the volume date from 1329.

<sup>30</sup> Thānawī, *Da'awāt*, 8.

<sup>31</sup> Their role becomes evident, for example, in the preface to the sermon "Rāhatu 'l-qulūb," dated July 1918, by 'Azīzu 'l-Hasan. Cf. Ashraf 'Alī Thānawī, *Rāhatu 'l-qulūb* (Peshawar: Khānqāh-e Imdādiya, [no date]) and an also undated, but old edition in the library of Aligarh, Ashraf 'Alī Thānawī, *Rāhatu 'l-qulūb* (Delhi: Kutubkhāna Ashrafiya, [no date]).

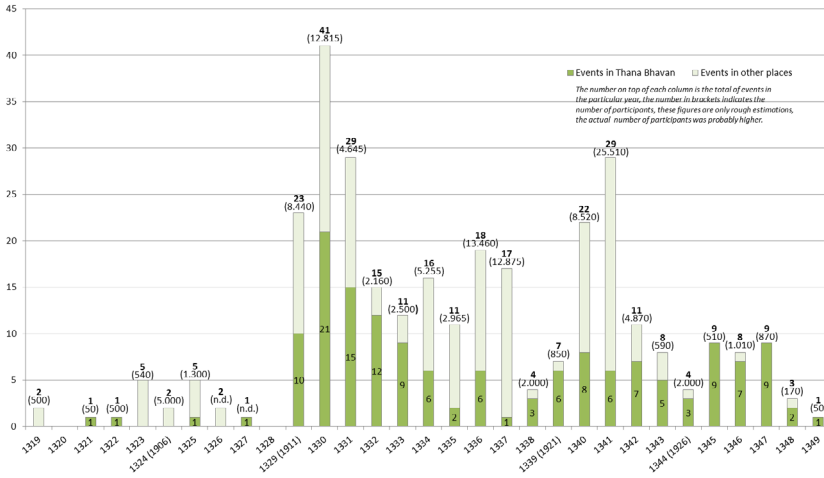


Figure 1 Number of Sermons and their listeners over the years (calculations by authors).

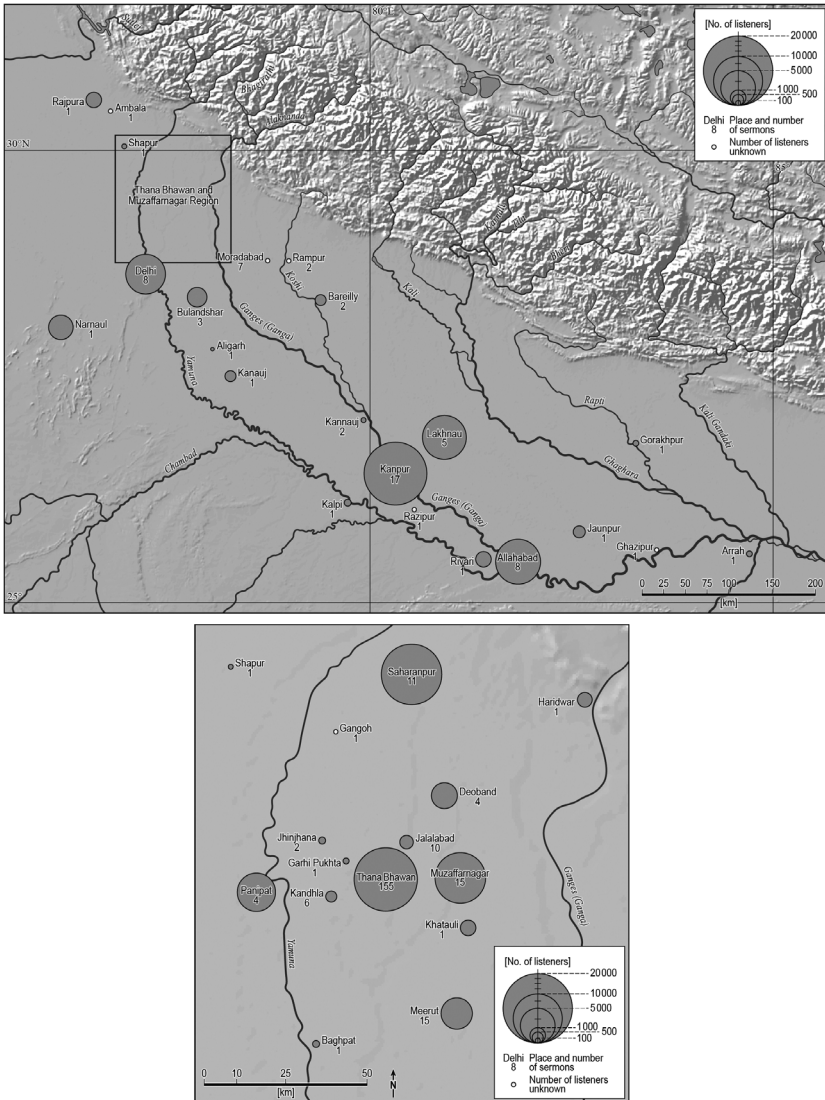
Compiled sermons included a standardized set of data on the sermon setting. These included each sermon’s date, place, locality, duration (often precise to the minute); the number of listeners (or rather of men, in the case of women the scribe could only indicate that they were present and did not count them); whether Thanawi was standing or sitting; and whether there was any special request or occasion. Although not all scribes always provided all information, the aggregated data yields interesting insights into the peaks of Thanawi’s preaching activities, their geographical range, and their audiences. We can get a sense of Thanawi preaching after the short Arabic sermon on Friday or on other occasions: in mosques,<sup>33</sup> at his own or other Sufi lodges, in private homes with women among his listeners, while waiting for trains, or during the train journey — or even from top of an elephant.<sup>34</sup>

Figure 1 shows a strong rise in published sermons from 1911 onwards, owing most probably to the push to print publications described above. This rise falls in the years around World War I which were a time of anxieties, heightened emotions, and mobilization for many Muslims in North India. International Islamic politics had increased in importance, and the Balkan Wars and the lack of British support for the Ottoman case threatened the integrity and symbols of the worldwide Islamic community. In British India, many Muslim leaders were unsettled by the British decision to revoke the partition of Bengal. Conflicts triggered by missionary movements of Hindus and their Muslim counterparts slowly gained momentum. The controversy

<sup>33</sup>Thānawī, *Khutbātū ‘l-ahkām*, 10; Thānawī, *Malfuzāt*, vol. 2, 67–68.

<sup>34</sup>This was the case for the sermon “Adabu ‘l-A‘lān,” held in December 1916 during travels in the district of Gorakhpur. See Thānawī, *Khutbāt-e Hakīmu ‘l-Ummat*, vol. 28, 417.

about the demolition of a washing house of the mosque in Kanpur became a case of heightened emotions defending an Islam in danger, manifesting in riots and wide coverage in the Urdu press in 1913.



**Figure 2** (a) Map of Thanawi’s preaching activities in the United Provinces (illustration by authors). (b) Map of Thanawi’s preaching activities in Thanawi’s home region, own illustration.

The decline in recorded sermons from 1925 onwards, on the other hand, testifies to Thanawi's reduced interest in preaching<sup>35</sup> and shows that he did not use sermons as a means to lobby for a gradually developing political position.<sup>36</sup> Also declining is the proportion of mosques among the sites of preaching. Although from 1910–14, Thanawi preached predominantly in mosques, their proportion declines continually. It is surpassed in 1923–27 by the number of sermons held in private homes, which also means that the proportion of sermons where women were present was on the rise.

When we geographically map out the data provided by the compilers on Northern India (figures 2a and 2b), we find a surprising concentration of Thanawi's preaching activities. Most of the published sermons stem from Thana Bhawan in particular and from Thanawi's home region between Delhi, Moradabad, and Saharanpur at large, seconded only by the region around Thanawi's erstwhile home as a young madrasa teacher, Kanpur, and the rail-road line. There were only a few excursions to faraway places like Rangoon, Hyderabad, or Bombay. The number of listeners is often the largest in sermons Thanawi held at larger cities. The numbers provided by the compilers seem quite realistic, although the "about forty thousand" listeners at a sermon Thanawi held in 1918 was an estimation of the number of visitors at the shrine in Panipat on the occasion of the death anniversary (*urs*) of the saint Bu Ali Shah Qalandar.<sup>37</sup> Because the latter's Sufi lineage was well known for intoxicated practices outside of Sharia norms, preaching at this occasion meant that Thanawi could directly address those who mistakenly thought the love for God could allow licentious practices, in this sense quite similar to the sermons on the Prophet's birthday analysed below.

The picture drawn by the data runs contrary to Thanawi's fame as a preacher whose translocal presence is fired by modern transportation and again emphasizes the role of print. It presents him as a preacher who is well known and omnipresent by his printed sermons, which he originally held in his home base. This, however, should not make us forget that Thanawi's communication by printed sermons is always flanked by disciples travelling to his lodge and by his correspondence with them in letters. The regions Thanawi frequented are as interesting as those he omitted. He did visit both Delhi and Lakhnau instead of siding with one of the rivals but did not give special importance to either of them. Particularly his relative neglect of Delhi is surprising. Even more so is his complete negligence of the Punjab, with not one of the printed sermons having been held in Lahore. Towards the

<sup>35</sup>Khān, *Sīrat*, 157.

<sup>36</sup>This speaks against the notion that Thanawi was key in the later success of the Muslim League because it is argued in V. Dhulipala, *Creating a New Medina: State Power, Islam, and the Quest for Pakistan in Late Colonial North India* (Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2016). The didactic approach in the sermons underlines Thanawi's political engagement with the Muslim League as described in M. E. Robb, "Advising the Army of Allah: Ashraf Ali Thanawi's Critique of the Muslim League," in *Muslims against the Muslim League: Critiques of the Idea of Pakistan*, ed. A. U. Qasmi and M. E. Robb (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 142–68.

<sup>37</sup>In the map, we calculated the event with 5,000 listeners, which was the highest number reported from other events.

East, Benaras and Patna, which were important centres of the *Tarīqa Muḥammadīya*, were not venues of preaching either. Of course, this might just be a source bias hinging on the selection of sermons to be published, with others being omitted from publication. But it seems more reasonable to assume that it was part of outer influences and pressures, for example, by other regions being “taken” by competitors. Had there been tacit agreements among sects and preachers on which group preached where? Were there distinct expectations towards preaching in different localities?

### Divine Diagnosis and the Preacher as Healer of Hearts

Thanawi’s conception of the preacher continues the traditional conception of the Shaikh as a healer of souls. He saw the preacher as a doctor (*tabīb*) whose sermon is a spiritual cure and medicine (*‘ilāj ruhānī*) for the audience’s sicknesses of the soul (*amrāz ruhānī*).<sup>38</sup> The medicine is always specific to the ailment, that is, to the necessities and situation of those addressed. This orientation and sensitivity towards the audience is in turn bound to the preacher’s emotions: according to Thanawi, Maulvis who preach the same to every audience do not convince people to reform as they preach with a dead heart.<sup>39</sup>

Moreover, the preacher must be sensitive to God, who judges the audience’s ailment and finds out the cure. “It is God’s habit to fling into the heart (*dil men dāl dete hain*) of the preacher that he should at this time explicate a certain cure.”<sup>40</sup> The preacher works on behalf of and with the help of God. It is with God’s support that Thanawi as a preacher is able to address even hidden doubts of his listeners. “God knows the state of all hearts. He puts into my heart the topics fitting to that which is in the heart, and discharges it from my tongue, so that [the listener] can be healed by it.”<sup>41</sup> How could such an emotional healing by God himself not be attractive to listeners?

For the preacher, it means that he has only limited control over the preparation and performance of his sermons. In one instance, Thanawi reflected about his sermon beforehand, drawing on his own ideas and knowledge instead of relying on God’s inspiration. He was immediately cured from this pride (*nāz*): when he was about to start his sermon, his mind went blank. He did not remember anything he had prepared nor any other sermon he had ever held.<sup>42</sup> The incident and its interpretation by Thanawi left a lasting impression on his followers. A posthumously published biography vividly retold the incident, dramatized Thanawi’s thoughts and feelings, and carved

<sup>38</sup>Thānawī, *Malfuzāt*, vol. 10, 306.

<sup>39</sup>Thānawī, “Zātu ‘l-bayān,” 268; Thanawi, *Malfuzāt*, vol. 11, 180.

<sup>40</sup>Thānawī, “Zātu ‘l-bayān,” 269.

<sup>41</sup>Thanawi is of course careful not to claim any divine inspiration in the sense of *ilhām*. In Thānawī, “*Ghawā‘ilu ‘l-Ghazab*,” he even confirms that this holds true for the Prophet, who could heal his companions immediately because of his own judgement. The expression *dāl denā* that Thanawi uses to describe the transmission of God’s diagnosis to the preacher is less affected by this theological scrupulousness.

<sup>42</sup>Ghawrī, *Sawānih*, vol. 1, 125. A much dramatized and coloured account is given in Khān, *Strat*, 144ff.

out the shame inflicted upon him when he realized he was not able to speak and then realizing that he had been tempted by the devil.

I was forced to say to the assembled: "Gentleman! At this moment no topic comes to my mind. What should I preach? Just hold the prayer." So I ended the sermon after the prayer. Ended it before even having started. Shame came, as there the props for the sermon were there. The carpet, the chair, etc., everything was there. Also the people had assembled, longing to listen to the sermon, but I could not preach anything."<sup>43</sup>

His divine assignment thus has repercussions on the preacher's agency and on the degree to which his actions and emotions can and should be controlled by his will. The divine diagnosis of the audience's illnesses and the knowledge about the cure they need comes to him suddenly and unexpectedly and cannot be fully controlled or even brought about by will. The preacher's emotions are in this respect similar to the Sufi's attraction towards God's irresistible, near-ecstatic pull, *jazb*, and they tie in with the period's leaning towards strong, involuntary emotions (*jazbāt*). The preacher cannot shirk from his duty to deliver the divine diagnosis even if the medicine is bitter. At the same time, the hearts of the opponents should not be hurt. Thanawi praised a preacher who always spoke out the truth, even if it was a Sunni truth at a Shiite court,<sup>44</sup> but at the same time followed the etiquette and did not bring others into danger. In a similar vein, Thanawi's biographer praised him for delivering the bitter Karela vegetable of his message tempered by tasty masala spices.<sup>45</sup>

The divine diagnosis also demands a lot from the listeners who have to accept the preacher's authority. One of Thanawi's common complaints is that those who seek a cure tamper with the medicine and do not accept the doctor's authority. They suggest what medicine they want to take by proposing what topics he should address, instead of following his prescriptions.<sup>46</sup> At times, they want to hide their sickness instead of showing it to the doctor or are even angry when their sicknesses are addressed. Thanawi adds that the audience is misled to think that someone has slandered them when the preacher addresses their illnesses instead of realizing that God knows the interior of their hearts. Rather than quarrelling with other patients, they should recognize the cure and make use of it by relating their own case to the more general cases outlined by the preacher.<sup>47</sup> They should always visit sermons to seek cure not pleasure (*lazzat*).<sup>48</sup>

The role of preacher and audience that Thanawi envisaged had practical consequences that ran contrary to common preaching practice at the time. Because the medicine comes from God, calling the preacher to talk on particular topics or even preventing him from delivering the medicine is out of

<sup>43</sup>Khān, *Strat*, 137.

<sup>44</sup>Thānawī, "Zātu 'l-bayān," 266.

<sup>45</sup>Ghawrī, *Sawānih*, vol. 1, 126.

<sup>46</sup>Thānawī, "Ghawā'ilu 'l-Ghazab," 227.

<sup>47</sup>Thānawī, "Zātu 'l-bayān," 269.

<sup>48</sup>Thānawī, "Zātu 'l-bayān," 268.

question. The sermons are always general enough to save the preacher to be pushed into controversies wherever he travels, be it in fractions within a madrasa or between different Sunni sects.<sup>49</sup> And of course, the preacher cannot accept any payment or gift whatsoever.<sup>50</sup> Thanawi not only distances himself from preachers who make preaching their profession (*peshā*) but also argues that they cannot aim for fame or praise by their superiors.<sup>51</sup> Even Thanawi's temporary withdrawal from the madrasa in Kanpur is said to have been caused by his refusal to partake in preaching as a means to raise madrasa funds.<sup>52</sup>

What about the process of delivering the medicine? As the authority of the doctor and the role of the obedient audience suggest, Thanawi emphasizes that preaching is not about pleasure. His rhetorical reform aims to shed outer pleasures in the process of preaching, be they from the voice of the preacher, who is not to sing, or from superfluous stories or excessive humour. In particular, Thanawi thunders against newness, which is to bring the delight (*maza*) of variety.<sup>53</sup> Does the doctor prescribe different medicines each time a patient visits him? All of this outer lustre is, according to Thanawi, employed by preachers, who do not have knowledge of the truth and Sharia, like the "lecture" style, and are followers (*muqallidīn*) of Europe.<sup>54</sup> Like the political "leaders," they are magicians skilled in the art to evoke consent (*hamkhayāl*).<sup>55</sup> On the contrary, Thanawi maintains that the ideal preacher does not need to learn the "style (*tarz*) of lectures." Rather, he relies on direct and explicit communication without any artificiality, just like a child.<sup>56</sup> Thanawi claims that such simplicity (*sādagī*) is the core of following the Prophet. The passions evoked by this style of preaching are strong and enduring and not only temporary.<sup>57</sup> At a first glance, such a critical stance against verbose or unauthentic rhetoric shares a lot with the naturalist poetics of the Aligarh school. However, in Thanawi's homiletics the natural feelings and their simple expression always include God as an actor and feelings towards Him.

That the preaching process is within the boundaries of God's law means that the preacher can reach the listeners' hearts without obstructions of human will or outward show and pomp. It is, for example, good to stutter if this helps avoid saying anything against the Sharia. "If someone's speech lacks flow/smoothness (*rawāna*) because of his fear of the hereafter, then it is as demanded by Hadith. ... This is because whatever causes the lack of flow is in turn caused by the speech."<sup>58</sup> Because it is God's medicine that is

<sup>49</sup>Ghawrī, *Sawānih*, vol. 1, 124, 106.

<sup>50</sup>Thānawī, *Malfuzāt*, vol. 4, 343.

<sup>51</sup>Ashraf 'Alī Thānawī, *Tarbīyatu 's-sālik o tanīyatu 'l-hālik*, vol. 1, reprint of the edition of 1914 (Karachi: Dar ul 'Isha'at, 1982), 374–75.

<sup>52</sup>Ghawrī, *Sawānih*, vol. 1, 75. Zaman, *Thanawi*, 18.

<sup>53</sup>Thānawī, "Zātu 'l-bayān," 268.

<sup>54</sup>Thānawī, "Ta'līmu 'l-bayān," 288.

<sup>55</sup>Thānawī, *Malfuzāt*, vol. 4, 270.

<sup>56</sup>Thānawī, *Malfuzāt*, vol. 2, 170.

<sup>57</sup>Thānawī, *Malfuzāt*, vol. 10, 315.

delivered, preacher and audience furthermore are in the same position. Thanawi presents not merely a cure to the audience; however, when he addresses the hearts of others, he also addresses his own heart, striving for its reform.<sup>59</sup> This correspondence between the preacher's emotions and those transmitted to the audience is bodily. Sitting while preaching is good because the relaxation it causes in turn induces a sense of calmness in the audience.<sup>60</sup> A preacher of truth (*muhaqqiq*) can have a greater effect in just a sentence than others in ten to twelve sermons. Only hearing a couple of words from one such preacher by coincidence, Thanawi recounts, a dancing boy immediately dropped all his clothes and started rubbing off his hand colouring.<sup>61</sup>

In his preaching about preaching and his advices to his disciples, Thanawi hence dialectically does not oppose but rather links strong emotions of preacher and audience on the one hand and restraint in presentation and reception of sermons on the other. Emotions have to be truly felt by the preacher and are at the same time beyond his influence, resting on God's intervention. Both these limits in turn allow for making a strong effect on the audience. This perception links to and in many ways is parallel to Thanawi's position on religious emotions in his discourses of how to love the Prophet and of why the outward celebration of the Prophet's birthday is not the right way to do so.

### Two *mīlād* Sermons (1913–14)

Thanawi held one sermon on the celebrations of the Prophet's birthday in each of the four consecutive years from 1913 to 1916.<sup>62</sup> Despite the turbulence of these years, Thanawi concentrated on seemingly timeless religious aspects, which were linked to other social activism primarily by their work on emotions. He held all four sermons in the month of the *mīlād*'s celebration, all in the congregational mosque of Thana Bhawan, preaching for around two and a half hours in front of about one hundred to two hundred attendants. In the following, we concentrate on the first two sermons, called "The Light" (*an-Nūr*) and "The Manifestation" (*az-Zuhūr*), both of which were printed within one year of their delivery.<sup>63</sup> How does Thanawi, famous for always teasing out new aspects of the problems he preaches about, move beyond the legal interpretation of the *mīlād* as impinging on God's sovereignty that he had offered in a treatise fourteen years earlier? How do the sermons bring emotions into his argument, and how does this argument relate to the form of the sermons?

Thanawi begins "The Light" in his usual way with the ritual Arabic formulas also common to the Friday sermon and recites a very short quote from

<sup>59</sup>Ghawrī, *Sawānih*, vol. 1, 110.

<sup>60</sup>Thānawī, *Malfuzāt*, vol. 1, 203.

<sup>61</sup>Thānawī, *Malfuzāt*, vol. 10, 315.

<sup>62</sup>For a short discussion of "as-Surūr," see Ingram, *Revival from Below*, 79–80.

<sup>63</sup>Thānawī, "An-Nūr," in *Khutbāt-e Hakīmu 'l-Ummat*, vol. 5, 98–129; Thānawī, "Az-Zuhūr," in *Khutbāt-e Hakīmu 'l-Ummat*, vol. 5, 13–47. There seems to have been a mistake in the date given for "An-Nūr," which according to the references Thanawi makes in "Az-Zuhūr" and "as-Surūr" must have been held in 1331 and not 1333.



the Quran, this time Q5:15b. He hence formally marks his sermon as an exegetical undertaking but at the same time reduces the length of the Quranic reference and turns it into a theme rather than the beginning of an interpretation, which follows the Quranic structure. As in all the *mīlād* sermons, Thanawi starts with a short disclaimer to solve the performative contradiction that he opposes the fixed establishment of a particular festive season while speaking on the topic during this very season.<sup>64</sup> Starting his argument, he makes clear that of course he is not opposed to remembering the Prophet because his opponents in the heated debates of his times would accuse him. Although preachers from the Barelwi school would accuse him of not loving or honouring the Prophet enough, in this sermon he shows that the opposite is indeed the case. Of course, Thanawi affirms, Muslims should always and continuously remember their Prophet. “When something is in someone’s heart, then its memory comes into his mind regardless of what he (physically) perceives. If that is already the effect of the love to trivial things, then what to say of those who have the privilege of the love to God and the Prophet.”<sup>65</sup> Thanawi elaborates this continual remembrance in a humorous analogy:

This is the story of a miser, who gave a chicken to a friend. But afterwards, no matter what was on [the miser’s] mind, the chicken immediately suggested itself: “He went on the day on which I gave you the chicken,” “This incident happened on the day on which I gave you the chicken.” ... Finally, the friend was fed up and bought a chicken, gave it to [the miser] and said: “Brother, take it, and let its memory go.”<sup>66</sup>

After this lighter note, Thanawi tops off the argument that real lovers always, and not only in particular circumstances, remember the beloved, in a more traditional comparison by citing a Persian verse describing the passion of the archetypal lover Majnun. Both analogies are telling. Thanawi is not averse to humour in his sermons and does not refrain from worldly analogies bound to the listeners’ everyday experiences. And when he brings in Majnun, he advocates a passionate love to the Prophet, one that is impassioned and excessive, self-forgetting, and not bound by ratio (*‘aql*).

After this temporal dimension of love, Thanawi makes a similar point in relation to love’s all-pervasive nature, which extends to every aspect of the beloved. Because the real lover always remembers the Prophet, so he remembers him in all his aspects. Even the Prophet’s criticism or anger evoke love because in love the bitter is sweet. The real lover also loves the Prophet’s deeds and orders. By acting according to them, he can gain closeness to God and act according to the wishes of his beloved, who himself never valued his birth a lot. The obedience to the Prophet is passionate and in itself a passion.

If it is love that calls for obeying the law, no passions directed at the Prophet can be in contradiction to the law. Thanawi in the following lays out his ideal of how real religious emotions are felt and expressed and to explain

<sup>64</sup>Similarly in the next year: Thānawī, “Az-Zuhūr,” 21.

<sup>65</sup>Thānawī, “An-Nūr,” 100–1.

<sup>66</sup>Thānawī, “An-Nūr,” 102.

the emotional errors of those who celebrate the Prophet's birthday. He makes clear to the audience that the lover of the Prophet can burn from his emotion (*josh*) and be overcome by ecstasy (*wajd*). While the ecstasy lasts, even outwardly inappropriate behaviour is legitimate. Ecstasy however is a subtle state that can, but does not need to be, expressed, and certainly cannot be commanded or instilled easily.

Thanawi opposes what he sees as easy lip service to the Prophet instead of a full remembrance and as hypocritical show without the real feeling. Standing up (*qiyām*) is not a problem per se but needs to be caused by rapture. He underlines this systematic argument with a narrative of historical decline from earlier times. "In the beginning, someone got up involuntarily (*muztarrakar*), and to support him and to prolong this laudable state, also the others got up. ... The Sufis did this to preserve the special state (*kaiḥḥiyat*). But he who gets up first in the *majlis* crowd may under no circumstances fake (*makar*) it."<sup>67</sup> As ecstasy cannot be pretended, it also cannot be ritualized. If it is, it ceases to be involuntary (*ghair ikhtiyārī*) and becomes a custom (*rasm*), for which no emotional work needs to be done but only sweets distributed. Attached to this custom are the wrong beliefs that the Prophet would himself appear to be present or that standing up when remembering his presence would be a sign of respect. As these practices and beliefs continue, they are mistaken as obligations. Thanawi here does not so much make a theological argument because he points to a history of the loss of authentic and individually felt emotions.

Furthermore, Thanawi continues, the Prophet's birthday has developed into an extravagant celebration that does not remain within the limits of the *Sharia* and sometimes even includes sleazy dance celebrations. Is this the right attitude, at any time but even more so in the present days of calamity for the Muslim community when the Turks are sacrificing their lives for Islam?<sup>68</sup> And would a lover bribe his beloved and fish for blessing (*baraka*) by organizing a festivity with pleasurable melodies that are not expressing piety but are the result of sweet and smooth voices? Instead of turning the Prophet's birthday into a show-off by the community (*shawkat qawmī*), Thanawi recommends to the audience, one should read his books on a daily basis — and should do so in the spirit of loving worship (*wazīfa*) and not in order to ask for reward. Here, he takes up points of his earlier criticism about the *mīlād* celebrations but also adds some new features such as the reference to the Balkan Wars to underline the wrong display of extravagant emotions.

When Thanawi closes "The Light" with the advice that it would be strange to love the Prophet but at the same time disobey him<sup>69</sup>; he concludes the movement of his argumentation from the appreciation of constantly and ecstatically loving the Prophet, even surpassing his opponents in the love to the Prophet, towards his warning of excesses, shedding which he also

<sup>67</sup>Thānawī, "An-Nūr," 107.

<sup>68</sup>Thānawī, "An-Nūr," 111.

<sup>69</sup>Thānawī, "An-Nūr," 129.

considers as part of love. Interspersed with anecdotes and verses, the sermon moves from addressing the inner aspects of real remembrance and real love to the more visible aspects of *mīlād* celebrations. In the end, burning love for the Prophet and respect for the legal limits he revealed for *mīlād* celebrations come together as an undividable whole.

The sermon “The Manifestation,” held one year later, takes the opposite route to arrive at a similar conclusion. Already the Quranic quotation with which Thanawi, as always, opens his sermon, warns against the dangers of excess. Thanawi glosses (Q15:72) in Urdu as “Oh Muhammad, upon your life! That is how the people of Lot have been misled by their drunkenness and intoxication (*masī aur nasha*).”<sup>70</sup> Thanawi continues to stress the limits (*hadd*) set by the Sharia and the harm and impudence caused by transgressing it. As part of his general scrupulousness not to diminish God’s sovereignty,<sup>71</sup> Thanawi tells his audience that it is a diminution (*tanqīs*) of God to praise the Prophet excessively. At the same time, in his sermon Thanawi expands the argument emotionally. He mobilizes anti-Christian sentiments by distinguishing this concept from the Christians, who are guilty of exactly this sin of reducing God by calling Isa (Jesus) his son. He furthermore links the topic of praise with feelings of family honour: “To praise (*madah*) the Prophet so much is indecent (*be-adabī*) towards God’s grace. Outwardly, the Prophet is praised — but actually, it is presumptuous and an impoliteness against God. It is the same when some person praises someone so much that it insults his father. Then the son will not appreciate so much praise and get angry.” Hence wrong attributions to Isa are a slander of God.<sup>72</sup>

Next, Thanawi once more complements the limits of praising the Prophet with the need for constantly remembering him, his deeds, and commands. Although he started off where “The Light” ended — at the limits of love — Thanawi again shows how this view is integrated in the lover as the ideal role model and himself takes on the garb of the reformed Sufi guide. Emphasizing the Sufis’ special gifts of understanding and showing the inner meaning of books that scholars can only list,<sup>73</sup> Thanawi supplements his exegesis with a lengthy interpretation of the *Masnawī*. This ecstatic work of love by the Persian mystic poet Rūmī is “one of the most prolifically copied, recited, and performed poetical (or other) texts in Islamic history,”<sup>74</sup> was often called the “Persian Qur’ān” and considered an unparalleled authority in Sufism, being studied and partially known by heart by anyone serious on the mystic path, including Thanawi’s own spiritual guide. Thanawi tells his listeners that the topic of the sermon this time came into his heart while he was just writing an interpretation of the *Masnawī*.<sup>75</sup> Although more detailed explorations of the role of (Persian) verse in general and

<sup>70</sup>Thānawī, “Az-Zuhūr,” 14.

<sup>71</sup>Cf. footnote 5.

<sup>72</sup>Thānawī, “Az-Zuhūr,” 15–16.

<sup>73</sup>Thānawī, “Az-Zuhūr,” 18–19.

<sup>74</sup>S. Ahmed, *What Is Islam: The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 21.

<sup>75</sup>Thānawī, “Az-Zuhūr,” 23. Thanawi’s 24-volume work on the *Masnawī* seems to have been ongoing, with its first parts already being published in 1904. See Mian, “Surviving Modernity,” 64.

the *Masnawī* in particular for the emotional workings of Islamic preaching and prose in South Asia have to be explored in the future, the effects of its inclusion on the emotional texture of the sermon certainly cannot be overestimated.

Over hundreds of years of Indo-Persian and Urdu culture, verses, and emotions have been developed in tandem to forge a strong connection between them. This association also holds true for the religious field and when prose expression and simple expression gain currency.<sup>76</sup> The expectation to cite poems is so strong that Thanawi, unlike other pleasures, does not reject including them in his discourses: they are enjoyment (*tafirih*) along with nourishment (*ghazā*),<sup>77</sup> and Thanawi here cites Rumi himself as his model. Whereas he is always careful to say that his verses transport meaning and are therefore not mere waste of time, his biographer says that he knew a thousand verses by heart. And if intended or not, the verses certainly had strong emotional effects on his listeners, who are reported to be startled<sup>78</sup> and brought into ecstatic states by Thanawi “grabbing the hearts.”<sup>79</sup>

The interpretation of the *Masnawī* brings the religious emotions of *mīlād* in contact with the mystic appreciation of different states of the wayfarer and hence subjective knowledge and the imperative to perfection. Thanawi derives from Rumi that the Prophet attained perfection, was “twice-born” and underwent “a hundred resurrections (*qiyāmat*).”<sup>80</sup> Resurrection, Thanawi explains, means that Muhammad was oscillating between *fanā* (lit. annihilation) and *baqā* (lit. “remaining” in God after annihilation), two central topics of Sufism that Thanawi here interprets on the basis of what he had explained before. To follow the Prophet, Thanawi suggests, in an interesting twist, means to not take *fanā* and *baqā* literally but to place them in relation to morals and knowledge in this world. In this sense, *fanā* asks to remove negative moral traits and distractions, whereas *baqā* means to substitute them with positive morals and retain these.<sup>81</sup> In short, whereas “The Light” already showed the way how the reformed listener can love the Prophet more often, more comprehensively and more deeply, “The Manifestation” guided listeners and readers on how to become lovers of a higher kind. Through emotional work in the here and now and guided by the limits of law, they can attain purified and permanent love.

### The Emotional Effects of the Oral and Printed Sermons

Thanawi and his biographers were convinced that his sermons did have the emotional impact he aimed at. Listeners burst out in tears or entered ecstasy, and most importantly perceived their life and actions in a new light as an

<sup>76</sup>C. Petievich and M. Stille, “Emotions in Performance: Poetry and Preaching,” *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 54, no. 1 (Special Issue: Feeling Communities, ed. M. Pernau) (2017): 67–102.

<sup>77</sup>Thānawī, “An-Nūr,” 116.

<sup>78</sup>Ghawrī, *Sawānih*, vol. 1, 107.

<sup>79</sup>Khān, *Sīrat*, 138.

<sup>80</sup>Thanawi refers to couplet no. 750 in the 6th book of Rūmī’s *Masnawī*.

<sup>81</sup>Thānawī, “Az-Zuhūr,” 35.

effect of these emotions. Overwhelming, the audience emotionally was thus one strategy (never the only one), which led to healing and reform, which in turn was a precondition to experiencing the pure passion of a loving relationship to the Prophet and God himself.<sup>82</sup> Obedient passion and passionate obedience cannot be separated.

However, as shown above, the settings for Thanawi's sermons varied widely, ranging from small and intimate gatherings with his disciples at Thana Bhawan to mass events that brought together thousands, if not tens of thousands of listeners. In the first case, we can assume that every word and every verse was carefully listened to and pondered over; in the second case, a sermon delivered without the aid of a microphone might not even have been audible for a large section of the audience.<sup>83</sup> The management of the listeners' emotions through rhetorical devices or the effect of listening to a famous and saintly figure, standing in a crowd of like-minded believers and waiting together patiently before the sermon finally started,<sup>84</sup> must have produced quite different results. To this needs to be added Thanawi's adaptation of his preaching to the gender and what he assumed to be the social and intellectual background of his listeners.<sup>85</sup>

The sources unfortunately do not allow us to link specific emotions to specific audiences and events (for instance, disciples crying less and entering ecstasy more often), and they allow even less to relate the emotional curve of a sermon to its effects on the audience. The fact that the only reports on the emotional impact of the sermons originate from Thanawi himself or his close collaborators can be viewed as problematic because it might be assumed that no matter what, they would tend to reproduce the generic expectations marking a good sermon. On the other hand, the fact that these were expectations they shared with many in the audience might also have created a dynamic of its own, in which expectations learned at the level of the mindful body led to the production of the appropriate emotions — not in every single case because emotions can fail but in a significant number of cases. Descriptions therefore are rarely only postfactum reports on what has happened but rather part of the performance of emotional practices, blending experiences and anticipations.<sup>86</sup>

However, the events were not always as harmonious as this picture of expectations and their fulfilment suggests — after all, the topic of how to

<sup>82</sup>Thānawī, *Malfuzāt*, vol. 2, 32–34; Ghawrī, *Sawānih*, vol. 1, 107–13.

<sup>83</sup>Thānawī, *Malfuzāt*, vol. 10, 204.

<sup>84</sup>Ghawrī, *Sawānih*, vol. 1, 108.

<sup>85</sup>Compare, for instance, the elaboration of the finer mystical points in “Az-Zuhūr” (see above) with the rather down-to-earth way he exhorts women to control their anger in Ashraf ‘Alī Thanawī, “Ghawā’ilu ‘l-Ghazab,” in *Khutbāt-e Hakīmu ‘l-Ummat*, vol. 19, 213–62. M. Pernau, “Male Anger and Female Malice: Emotions in Indo-Muslim Advice Literature,” *History Compass*, 10, no. 2 (2012), 119–28. For the adaptation of his imagery to the social background of the audience, see Thānawī, *Zātu ‘l-bayān*. On Thanawī's distinction between public and crowd in his perception of the public, cf. B. D. Ingram, *Revival from Below*, 92–115.

<sup>86</sup>M. Scheer, “Are Emotions a Kind of Practice (And Is That What Makes Them Have a History)? A Bourdieuan Approach to Understanding Emotion,” *History and Theory* 51, no. 2 (2012): 193–220.

properly love the Prophet had been the subject of heated debates since the nineteenth century. Thanawi prided himself on his mildness of manners, although this is something that his adversaries might not always have agreed with. As an instance of his exemplary restraint, he narrated his experiences in Jaunpur. A butcher had invited him to give a sermon, prohibiting normative innovations, probably with reference to the *mīlād* ceremonies. Although already in Jaunpur, he received a letter calling him a low-caste weaver (*julāha*), unbeliever, and ignoramus, and daring him to preach in this town. Once at the pulpit, he waived off the first objection because being a *julāha* was no sin; but anyhow, he had not come to Jaunpur to ask someone in marriage (the most prominent occasion in which lineage matters in South Asia) — a joke that probably already diffused part of the tension and brought the laughers to his side. If he was an unbeliever, he continued, he would recite the *kalima* here and now, and this would settle the matter. What remained was the problem of his ignorance. This he was willing to admit. But then, his aim had never been to propound his own wisdom but rather only to repeat what he had heard from his elders or read in their books for the benefit of his audience. If they did not want to listen to him, he was willing to walk away immediately. At this moment, the atmosphere turned in his favour and he was asked to give his sermon. As usual, he spoke with freedom and alternated between eliciting fear and desire in his audience, mentioning the objectionable customs “just by chance.”<sup>87</sup> Although Thanawi claimed that the audience listened to him in rapt attention and it was only after he had finished that some Maulwis challenged his interpretation, his biographer added that there had been commotion (*zor o shor*) throughout the sermon, and that some people started an uproar (*shor o ghāl*) afterwards.<sup>88</sup> Especially with this kind of topic and at a location where he did not have a secure backing, the emotions Thanawi evoked were not uniform throughout the audience and certainly not always those he had planned for.

The importance of print capitalism for the transformation of knowledge, the social position of scholars, and the public sphere has been at the core of many studies in the last three decades. The argument that the face-to-face interaction of oral sermons works according to a different logic than the perusal of their printed version is probably widely accepted by now; how this relates to the way manuscript sermon collections were used in the preprint days in North India; however, is difficult to tell given that no such collections have become known yet.

Printing is part both of intellectual and economic history; from the beginning, publishing houses were also businesses, which had to be profitable in order to survive, and whose economic rationale could impact their intellectual content.<sup>89</sup> For Thanawi, the situation was slightly different because he

<sup>87</sup>Thanawī, *Majālis*, 196–98.

<sup>88</sup>Ghawrī, *Sawānih*, vol. 1, 115–18.

<sup>89</sup>U. Stark, *An Empire of Books: The Naval Kishore Press and the Diffusion of the Printed Word in Colonial India* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2007).

apparently did not have to worry about financial support. For him, as for many Muslim scholars since the first decades of the nineteenth century, printing was part of the reformist project, a part that he took very seriously. It permitted him to expand the circle of people he could reach as well as to streamline the training of his disciples. Not least due to the influence of his sermons and pamphlets, the number of people seeking his guidance surpassed what could be handled through traditional face-to-face communication. Whereas Thanawi's homiletic conception described above focuses on preaching in person, with no direct reflections on the role of print, he did make various practical comments on printed sermons in the interaction with his disciples. When men approached him personally or through letters to ask for his advice or to become his disciples, he first directed them to his written texts and notably sermons. He then provided them with instructions on how to read the texts to gain the most benefit from them. Only when men worked according to the rules, he exhorted them, did God grant them the benefit to have their hearts reformed.<sup>90</sup>

These rules implied not only reading the sermons with the right intention but also going over the same texts repeatedly for several days in a row if need be.<sup>91</sup> When reading them, the disciple was to ponder which of the sins and inequities described were his and then act according to the suggestions on how to get rid of them. Similarly, he had to identify the virtues he was still lacking and start striving for them.<sup>92</sup> This did not mean that learning virtues and emotions had become a process devoid of emotions. Nor did it mean that the Sufi master had become dispensable or was no longer the focus of his disciples' loving attention. Printed texts could only impart knowledge and prepare the heart of the disciples. They should not be overconfident; after all, it was potent medicine that they were dealing with. If their auto-medication led them to experience states of anxiety (*taraddud*) and difficulties (*ishkāl*), it did not match their advancement on the Sufi path. In this case, they should not take this medicine but rather consult the expert spiritual doctor. The love and passion for God, which were the ultimate aims, went far beyond this initial stage and transcended all possible knowledge. They could therefore only be attained through the personalized instruction of a spiritual guide.<sup>93</sup>

Unfortunately, we lack sources describing the emotions felt by people reading Thanawi's sermons at the time. At first sight, it seems obvious to point to the sensory reduction: what had been an event, which brought together sight and sound but also the sensory experience of bodily proximity, became an encounter with only the words of the sermon. Given the distrust with which Thanawi regarded the outer rhetorical lustre and affectionate vocal performance, this might have been a change that he would have welcomed, although it is less clear how he would have judged the possibility of a decrease in tears and ecstasy.

<sup>90</sup>Thānawī, *Malfuzāt*, vol. 8, 325; see also Thānawī, *Malfuzāt*, vol. 7, 105 and vol. 8, 72.

<sup>91</sup>Thānawī, *Malfuzāt*, vol. 2, 165; Thanawi, *Tarbīyatu's-sālik*, 442.

<sup>92</sup>Thānawī, *Tarbīyatu's-sālik*, 429.

<sup>93</sup>Thānawī, *Malfuzāt*, vol. 9, 88.

Instead of a clear-cut transition from face-to-face interactions that catered to the needs of a particular audience or even individual disciples and were driven by the charisma of the preacher to a medialization both generic and impersonal, Thanawi's is a situation in which both strands remained tightly interwoven. If we look at the maps once again, we see that despite the new possibilities offered by the railways, most of his travels retained their local focus; if anything, the territory covered by early nineteenth century preachers was more extensive, not less.<sup>94</sup> Nevertheless, it was these sermons that provided the nucleus for his publishing activities. His printed texts in turn not only created an image, desire, and anticipation that fed back into the personal encounters and created the expectations needed for the emotional experiences to take place. They also allowed him to reach out to a much larger audience than he could ever have interacted with personally. For the emotions, this means that the lack of felt presence of the preacher and the audience might not have been so stark as assumed; the experience of reading fed off other experiences of bodily encounters, which were remembered and reimagined, and in turn it contributed to the expectations of future encounters, be it with Thanawi, or with other disciples of his.

Lastly, it was the large archive of printed texts that has sustained a whole Thanawi industry of ever new collections, which are being published until today and are widely sold in the stalls in front of mosques and shrines in India and Pakistan. Meanwhile, video channels allow for a second phase of orality; many of the debates on unlawful normative innovation and reform alternatively propagating or condemning Thanawi's arguments are now taking place on YouTube for an increasingly global audience.<sup>95</sup>

## Conclusion

As our article has shown, religious emotions are of central importance in the work of Ashraf Ali Thanawi. For him, the disciplining scholar and the loving Sufi, obedience and passion are not opposites but aspects that must come together at every step along the path towards God: obedience must become passionate, and passion must become obedient. God is the master of the path; he shows the preacher which topic requires his intervention, He creates the conditions through which a heart-to-heart conversation with the audience becomes possible, and it is His grace that finally leads to the fulfilment of a loving relationship. This is the one essential religious emotion towards which all efforts and feelings are geared, not only for Sufis as a distinguishable social group but for every Muslim.

This does not absolve the believer from the obligation to prepare his soul for such emotions. Passionate love does not stand in contradiction to obedience. At the beginning of the path, the disciple is to carefully observe the religious law in his everyday interactions to purify his soul as far as possible

<sup>94</sup>For Saiyid Ahmad and Shah Ismail, see Ghulam Rasul Mihr, *Saiyid Ahmad Shahid* (Lahore: Jamia Ashrafiya, 1952).

<sup>95</sup>A search on YouTube for Ashraf Ali Thanawi generated more than 12,000 hits (9 July 2018).



and to ready it for the encounter with God. It is only in the fleeting moment of the actual experience of this encounter, when the lover of God is set on fire by his passion (*josh*) and enters a state of ecstasy (*hāl*), that even things which would be inappropriate (*be-adabī*) according to the rules pertaining to worldly behaviour become appropriate (*bā-adabī*).<sup>96</sup> The deepening of his love, which is the result of this experience, does not absolve him from obedience but makes the desire to obey the beloved an element of love itself, dissolving any possible dichotomy between the two.

As the close reading of the sermons has shown, the will (*irādat*) of the believer has an ambivalent role in the creation of the appropriate emotions. Thanawi is at pains to point out that neither the topic of his sermons nor the diagnosis of the illnesses and the suggestion of the remedies are his decision — a classical device to combine utmost humility with supreme authority. At the same time, both the preacher and the audience must actively facilitate the experience of religious emotions. Even the rhetoric of simplicity and of renouncing rhetorical strategies needs an investment on the part of the preacher, needs teaching and practice. Naturalness does not always come naturally. Once the sermons have been held, careful attention to their wide distribution in print is not only legitimate but required. The audiences, on their part ideally do not reach the setting of the sermon without prior preparation: reading earlier sermons, listening to the stories circulating about the preacher, or preparing their soul to receive instruction and be reformed. Religious emotions thus are poised between the free and unsolicited grace of God and the active preparation for their experience by the faithful.

In the end, this raises the question of the historicity of religious emotions. Thanawi himself remains ambivalent on this subject: similar to a doctor, who cannot prescribe the same medicine for all illnesses, the preacher must be aware of what ails a particular audience before advising them how to reform. But illnesses are limited in number and well known to the doctor, and so are the remedies. Even the new times do not bring about new sins that would require new remedies. Using the train to travel to new destinations, printing sermons, or spreading them through YouTube does not alter the message — or so Thanawi and his later disciples think. Historians would beg to disagree, and this article has hopefully brought out that although there is no clear break between the immediate and the medialized, medialization nevertheless did change some emotional experiences. What this does not allow us to explain is why Thanawi's sermons and other texts still work so well and continue to evoke emotions one hundred years after they were written — and not only in South Asia but globally. However, this is a topic for a further article.

### Acknowledgments

Open access funding enabled and organized by ProjektDEAL.

<sup>96</sup>Thanawī, “An-Nūr,” 103.