

AMSS 35th Annual Conference

**Cosponsored by
Hartford Seminary, Hartford, CT
October 27 – 29, 2006**

Abstract Only – Work in Progress

**“Being Muslim in Pre-Partition India: Maulana Ashraf
‘Ali Thanawi’s Negotiation of Identity and Politics”**

**By: Fareeha Khan
(Ph. D Candidate, University of Michigan, MI)**

While the scholars of the Deobandi school of India are considered to be among the most traditional of the Subcontinent’s *‘ulama*, their views on the changing world during the Pre-Partition days of Indian history did not conform necessarily to what would be expected of them. By studying the ideas of one of the most well-known scholars of Deoband, Maulana Ashraf ‘Ali Thanawi, it becomes apparent that such a clear-cut differentiation between the modernists and traditionalists cannot be made so easily. Thanawi, like his *modernist* contemporaries, approached the onset of modernity and the pressures within his politically charged society with a view toward the politics of identity and self-definition. One indication of Thanawi’s recognition of his changing world was his manner of reconciling religion with nationalistic identification. Though perhaps ideally he would have preferred that Muslims adopt Islamic practices for the sake of Islam itself, he saw that this was neither a practical, nor realistic desire. For this reason, Thanawi began to formulate his ideas on religious reform keeping in mind the fact that Muslims in India did care about their *qanmiyyat*, or nationalistic identity. Another indication of Thanawi’s recognition and acceptance of change was the flexibility he demonstrated in his ideas on politics. For much of his life, Thanawi conformed to the Deobandi stance that involvement in the politics of irreligious men was Islamically improper. However, toward the end of his life, Thanawi broke away from this position and began advocating participation with the nationalistic Muslims who were calling for a separate Muslim state. Though he admitted to the secular character of this group of politicians, he still felt that it better served the nationalistic (and in his mind, religious) interests of the Muslims of India. Thanawi was not afraid to alter his own views or to challenge the current views of his fellow *‘ulama* when attempting to discover and define the new social position of Muslims in India.