Khurshid Ahmad was born in Delhi in 1932. He had a traditional Islamic education at home and completed his secondary education in an Anglo-Arabic Higher Secondary School in Delhi. At the time of India’s partition, his family moved temporarily to Lahore and later settled in Karachi. He enrolled at the Government College of Commerce and Economics and graduated in economics. In 1955, he took an MA in the same discipline; in 1958 he became a Bachelor of Law; and in 1964 he took an MA in Islamic Studies. He proved to be a brilliant student. His formal training in these disciplines was to have a decisive influence on his later, public life. Through the study of economics and law ‘not only did he develop a propensity for empirical and sociological analysis (something that is very rare among active Muslim workers), but he also acquired that uniquely “practical” bent of his personality, the ability to give a concrete, institutional form to vague dreams and visions . . .’.

Delhi provided him with a multicultural environment. He describes how ‘from a very early age I was in contact with Muslims, Hindus, Christians and Sikhs in particular’. This encouraged him, in later life: ‘when I was working’, he says, ‘for my Masters in Islamic Studies, one of the subjects was Comparative Religions. That further increased my interest in the comparative study of Islam, Christianity and other religions.’

During his student life he had an obsession – to have command of the English language. This led him to read Jawaharlal Nehru’s writings, which guided him, gradually, towards ‘secularism’ and ‘atheistic thought’. Through Nehru’s writings he discovered N.M. Roy, whose writings further developed and deepened atheistic roots in him. Later, he says, he read Bertrand Russell, John Stuart Mill and others, whose writings inspired scepticism and doubts about various aspects of human life, especially about religion and God. He was searching for a direction. During these years of intellectual wandering he sought the advice of a close friend, who advised him either to read the literature of the Communist Party or Mawdudi’s writings and to understand the system of Jamaat-e-Islami. Although Mawdudi was a close friend of
his father, Aziz Ahmad, Khurshid discovered him through *Taqīhat* (lit. Evaluation), *Tafhīmat* (lit. Explications) and *Khutbat* (lit. Orations or Sermons). The writings of Iqbal – *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought* – and Mohammad Asad’s *Islam at the Crossroads* attracted him to Islamic thought in general. These proved to be the turning point in his life.3

Khurshid joined *Islami Jamiat-e-Talaba* and became its national President from 1953 to 1955. Then he joined *Jamaat-e-Islami* in Pakistan in 1956, was elected to its Central Executive Council in 1957, and is currently one of the four *Na‘īb Amir* (deputy leaders) of the organization. As editor and translator into English of Mawdudi’s thoughts, he became one of the best communicators of *Jamaat-e-Islami* outside Pakistan.

He is an activist. His very mission in *Jamaat-e-Islami* is to establish Islam in all its totality in Pakistan. This brings out the whole question of Shari‘ah – its meaning and implementation, as well as its relation to other believers. This makes a discussion on him more significant. How does an activist, and not a theologian as such, understand dialogue in its wider context? Secondly, his experience of living in the West, especially in Britain, and maintaining a continuous connection with various Islamic organizations and institutions in the West, provides an added dimension to his views on dialogue. Furthermore, during his stay, he has actively participated in and organized dialogues, mainly with Christians, but also with Jews, at regional, national and international levels.

Khurshid first came to England in 1966. From 1969 to 1972 he joined the University of Leicester as a research scholar. This was a period for encountering questions dealing not only with the challenges that come from secular ideologies or from Western civilization as such, but also with the challenges that come from the Christian and Jewish religions. He argues that there are major areas where Islam and Christianity cannot meet, but he stresses that ‘there is also a vast area where our approach is common’. But he points out the approach of the Churches is much more accommodating of ‘the Western civilization and culture’, rather than realizing that the Church ‘has a much higher role to play in the future of mankind . . .’.4

His direct involvement in dialogue began when he decided to live in England for a longer period. He established the Islamic Foundation in Leicester in 1968, but began functioning in 1973. Through the activities of the Foundation, he was exposed to various national and international dialogues, especially with Christians. He also took the initiative to have a multi-religious dialogue involving Jews. This step, he notes,