



Translating Islam, Translating Religion

Conceptions of Religion and Islam
in the Aligarh Movement

Arian Hopf

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Conventions for Transliteration

This study refers to several languages with differing systems of transliteration. Words of a South Asian language or other languages written in Arabic script, such as Persian and Arabic, are italicised. In order to maintain the exact identification of every word, without confusing the reader through an abundance of transliteration systems, I have deliberately decided to apply a homogenous system for all languages written in Arabic script referred to in this study (i.e. Urdu, Persian, and Arabic). Thus, I will transliterate these languages with the transliteration system of Urdu, as given below, since the modified Arabic script which is used for Urdu includes also all letters used in Persian and Arabic. However, words of Hindi will be transliterated according to the conventional system for modern Indo-Aryan languages in Indic scripts. Transliterated words have their necessary English plural form attached, but not italicised. To preserve the flow of the reading, I have abstained from transliteration from transliteration as far as possible: names and current terms will be reproduced according to English spelling. Thus, for example, Quran will be used instead of *qur'ān*.

Conventions for Transliteration

Letter	Transliteration	Letter	Transliteration
ا	a	ص	ṣ
ب	b	ض	ẓ
پ	p	ط	ṭ
ت	t	ظ	ẓ
ٹ	ṭ	ع	‘
ث	ṯ	غ	ġ
ج	j	ف	f
چ	c	ق	q
ح	ḥ	ک	k
خ	ḫ	گ	g
د	d	ل	l
ڈ	ḍ	م	m
ذ	ḏ	ن	n
ر	r	و	v
ڑ	ṛ	ہ	h
ز	z	ھ	h
ژ	ž	ء	’
س	s	ی	ī, y
ش	š	ے	e, ai

Introduction

What is religion? In the contemporary perspective, religion appears to be a universal category. It is assumed that some kind of religious belief and/or practice can be located in any culture and region of the world in contemporary times as well as in the past. Yet, from the perspective of religious studies, this universality has been contested and questioned. Is religion really a universal concept, or rather, a global if not a globalised concept? The assumption implies that religion is a human constant, perhaps related to human nature. If described as global, religion is detached of a naturalised claim; however, it still denotes a general distribution. The designation of religion as “global” or “globalised” therefore introduces the concept of processual dissemination. Religion then comes to be perceived not as a concept which can be translated without semantic change from one language and culture to another, as a short glance into perhaps any contemporary dictionary of any language seems to indicate, with a supposedly synonymous equivalent in the target language. Instead, further investigation into older dictionaries dismantles this unequivocalness to show a wider range of possible translations. Religion is a concept that experienced a long process of negotiation. This study aims at tracing this process through the history of South Asian Islam.

Language and Society

Religion not only proves to be the product of a process of negotiation, it equally resists a uniform definition. Different approaches have been brought forward, among the most recent being various polythetic definitions of religion. In contrast to former, normative definitions, polythetic ones aim to describe religion as a set of possible elements, which need not appear in a particular religion all at once. Scholars have criticised this view, however, because it presumes a prototype of religion is presumed which comprises all the elements of religion. The difficulty of this type of definition has already become apparent since it is not aimed at a general concept of religion, but rather takes a particular element as its point of departure. This definition of religion is not based on a top-down approach, but

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rather views a particular religion as a prototypical representative of its abstract category.¹ Simply put, the unknown and foreign is always categorised with relation to the known and familiar. The unknown is viewed through the lens of familiar categories.

This difficulty is inextricably related to the linguistic conceptualisation of the world:

According to a well-known saying of Epictetus, it is not deeds that shock humanity, but the words describing them. [...] It draws our attention to the autonomous power of words, without whose use human actions and passions could hardly be experienced, and certainly not made intelligible to others. This epigram stands in a long tradition concerned with the relation of word and thing, of the spiritual and the lived, of consciousness and being, of language and the world.²

In these introductory lines on the relation between history and concepts, Reinhart Koselleck describes a complex relation between the latter and society. Not only is the expression of an individual's thoughts or experience inextricably related to common concepts in society, but the sensation and experience itself is equally and recursively related to these concepts. Language is perceived, on the one hand, as a mirror of social circumstances, while those are, on the other hand, to a certain extent also formed and sustained by linguistically structuring and conceptualising the world. This structuring of the world through concepts is an inevitable condition for society, for "without common concepts there is no society."³ Yet, those conceptualisations are always contingent, lacking any natural reference as justification.

As a consequence of their inextricable relation to society, concepts are subject to historical change and require adaption in order to keep pace with societal change. This is accomplished either by reshaping the semantic field of a given concept or by abandoning a term for the sake of another that may better cover a changed context. Moreover, the relationship of language and society must not be misunderstood as unidirectional, but rather as reciprocal. Alteration of concepts may equally affect societal change. Altered concepts affect the structuring of the world and, thus and at the same time, society. Therefore, concepts have a history and do not relate to any objective point of reference.⁴

1 Michael Bergunder, "What is Religion? The Unexplained Subject Matter of Religious Studies." *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 26 (2014), 249f.

2 Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 75.

3 *Ibid.*

4 *Ibid.*

Religion – A Western Import?

These statements apply also to the concept of religion itself. Several studies have engaged with the conceptual history of religion, of which the four-volume German *Religio: Die Geschichte eines neuzeitlichen Grundbegriffs* by Ernst Feil is perhaps the most extensive. Tracing the term “religion” from antiquity, as a derivative of the Latin *religio*, Feil acknowledges the 18th century as „a significant break.”⁵ “‘Religion’ now received a completely new understanding, becoming the name of a ‘modern basic concept’ (neuzeitlicher Grundbegriff) that has held sway since the 19th century. Feil identified this with a Protestant theological variant of a religion of inwardness, attributed to Schleiermacher.”⁶ This assertion of a turning point in the 18th century, moving towards inwardness in the conceptualisation of religion, is widely shared.⁷

In his *A New Science: The Discovery of Religion in the Age of Reason*, Guy Stroumsa describes the discoveries of the 15th and 16th century as a crucial trigger: “The intellectual and religious shock caused by the observation of formerly all-but-unknown religious rituals and beliefs in the Americas and Asia provided the trigger without which the new discipline [i.e. religious studies] could not have been born.”⁸ Consequently, religion came to be perceived as a universal concept being transferred to formerly unknown cults. Religion was extended from its former meaning of belief to a plural category encompassing varying rituals. It obtained the position of an overarching category subsuming different entities.⁹

As a consequence of this development, religion has been criticised as a Western concept. Wilfred Cantwell Smith’s *The Meaning and End of Religion* is frequently described as the first instance of this critique and criticises a dissemination of this concept through colonialism:

In modern times, among most peoples of the earth the spread of Western ideas and attitudes and social patterns and the response to these seem to have led or to be leading among many other consequences to a development, at least at sophisticated levels, of a counterpart term and concept for ‘religion’. This is the case not only in

5 Ernst Feil as quoted in Bergunder: “What is Religion,” 258.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Guy Stroumsa: *A New Science: The Discovery of Religion in the Age of Reason* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 2.

9 Ibid., 3.

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Japan and China. For example, modern Hindi *dharam* is developing a meaning of the English term 'religion' that its classical Sanskrit counterpart did not have.¹⁰

Smith assumes that it was only through encounters with Europe via Christian missions and colonialism that the "Western" concept of religion spread beyond Europe and was adopted in indigenous terminology. This adoption is described as a reformulation or extension of existing terms resulting in an extended meaning that was formerly non-existent.

Bergunder, however, criticises this understanding as a unidirectional perspective where religion is being perceived as a mere imposition. He argues that this assertion is an overemphasis on the "origin" based in European history. "Such an approach," he writes, "leads to a neglect of developments since the 19th century, because it teleologically privileges the 'origin.'"¹¹ This limitation of the development of the concept of religion merely to its European history ignores the possibility of reciprocal processes of negotiation with colonised countries in the 19th century, when the mutual encounters reached a climax.

Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan & the Aligarh Movement

The aim of this study is therefore to scrutinise this assertion via the example of 19th century South Asian Islam. As a disclaimer, it should be noted that this study cannot accomplish a comprehensive analysis of the aspect of reciprocity and its potential repercussions on Christianity or the conception of religion in a European context, as this would require a thorough scrutiny of Christianity. This study is merely aimed at questioning the aforementioned assertion of an imposition of a "Western" concept on Islam in South Asia, and to study its encounters and discursive negotiations with Europe. Europe shall not be understood as a conceptual prototype or point of departure but, rather, be decentralised. The "Western" concept of religion will therefore be integrated as an equal part of this conceptual history, Europe thus being part of a global process of negotiation.

As this is still such a vast subject, the present study focuses on the Aligarh Movement and, in particular, the religious thought of its founder Sir Sayyid Ah-

¹⁰ Wilfred Cantwell Smith: *The Meaning and End of Religion: A New Approach to the Religious Traditions of Mankind* (New York: Mentor Book, 1964), 58f.

¹¹ Bergunder: "What is Religion," 258.

mad Khan (1817-98) and his religious thought. This source selection perhaps requires some explanation, as Khan and the Aligarh Movement can by no means be described as understudied. At least three important studies of his life and religious thought have been published in English. The first, *Religious Thought of Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, was published by Bashir Ahmad Dar in 1957. Along with Johannes Marinus Simon Baljon's *The Reforms and Religious Ideas of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan* (1964), this work provides a good overview of Khan's religious ideas, yet lacks any thorough localisation of Khan's thought. Christian W. Troll's *Sayyid Ahmad Khan: A Reinterpretation of Muslim Theology* (1978) is the most voluminous and thorough study of Khan among the three works discussed here. He divides Khan's thought into different periods and describes the different stages of his development via a careful study of Khan's extensive work, which will be referred to in this study extensively. Yet, for the most part, Troll does not transcend the limits of mere description and lacks a thorough investigation of the triggering points for Khan's development, as well as his intellectual framework. Apart from these three studies dedicated exclusively to Khan's religious ideas, an unmanageably vast amount of biographies, articles, and chapters on Khan and the Aligarh Movement have also been published that, despite their number, seem merely to reproduce what has already been said countless times and lack any innovative insight.¹² Since this study has been prepared in the department of Modern South Asian Languages and Literatures, it was a crucial concern to first of all critically review the primary sources in their original language but secondly also to take into account secondary sources from South Asia which are usually disregarded. I include and discuss this undervalued material as well, as these sometimes open up new vistas. In the following, I would like to mention a few books from which the present study benefitted a lot. In regard to Ramchandar, Şiddīq-ar-Raḥmān Qidavā'ī's *Master Ram Chandra* (1961) has to be mentioned. With reference to the Nazir Ahmad, Iftikhar Ahmad Siddiqi's exhaustive study *Maulvī Nazīr Ahmad Dihlavī* (1971) can be described as reference literature in this context. The author presents a substantiated book on Ahmad with many details on his versatile and extensive workstudy, even though the analysis seems to be restricted to a mere summary. Nasir Abbas Nayyar's comprehensive study *Urdū adab kī taškīl-i jadīd* (2016) has also been referred to in most chapters. Even though his book is primarily a literary history of Urdu, it overlaps with crucial topics of the present study in its

12 Troll mentions in his *Sayyid Ahmad Khan* (1978) that, already, "we can count about fifteen biographies and monographs, more than fifty articles in English and over a hundred in Urdu journals, dealing with Sir Sayyid's life and achievements. In addition, there are chapters dealing with or passages commenting upon him in a number of books" (Christian W. Troll: *Sayyid Ahmad Khan: A Reinterpretation of Muslim Theology* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1978), 3). One can only imagine to what extent the amount will have increased at this date.

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discussion of Hali, Shibli, Khan and Ahmad. All of them were crucial with regard to their view on Islam as well as for their impact on the emergence of a new literature in Urdu.

Moreover, this study shall avoid redundantly repeating biographical details which have been exhaustively examined in the literature discussed above. It shall instead reference necessary background only wherever relevant. Furthermore, this study also does not aim to give an all-encompassing representation of Khan's ideas, let alone the whole of the Aligarh Movement. Thus, for a general overview of Khan's biography or a comprehensive description of his ideas, the reader is referred to one of the aforementioned studies.

Overarching Questions

After having mentioned the extant literature on Khan and the Aligarh Movement, and having described what this study cannot accomplish, I will now summarise the innovations this study aims to present regarding this over-studied area. First and foremost, I will transcend the limits of mere description by closely examining Khan's intellectual framework. The study's central concern is the question of the commonplace charge of "Westernisation" as it appears in various analyses. Khan's thought has been frequently oversimplified as a mere adoption of "Western" ideas. Since this study is first of all structured as an analysis of the different trajectories of Khan's ideas, this issue runs through the entire study as an overarching question. It will be discussed with some detail in chapters 1 and 3, but will be addressed at least briefly in virtually every chapter. This question relates most clearly to the initial concern described at the beginning of this introduction: whether the concept of religion can be perceived as a mere imposition or whether it has passed through a process of reciprocal negotiation.

Thus, this study will ask how Islam came to be conceived, and how the concept of religion as an umbrella category came to be represented, in the context of South Asian Islam. With this in mind, my selection of Khan for the lead role of this study becomes clear, as Khan witnessed almost the entire 19th century during his extraordinarily long life and, what is more, left a vast number of books, pamphlets, and articles ranging from the 1840s onwards until his death. This extensive period of writing, combined with the consistent adaptation of his thought, allows us to trace back the development and alteration of the concept of religion – first, on the side of different critiques of Islam triggering a response from Khan, which, secondly,

allows us to present the latter's adaptations and reformulations of Islam as well as his counter-concept of religion. While Khan's early religious writings are concerned solely with inner-Islamic debates, his perspective gradually widens towards a response to the Christian mission, historiography, and eventually science. In the latter case, particular religions do not engage in a debate with one another. Rather, science appears as the antagonist against which religion – as a plural, comparative notion – has to delimit itself. Khan's thought passed through all of these different stages as it developed, which were then mirrored in his significant reformulations. Having said this, the second reason to focus on Khan has already been suggested implicitly: that is, his intense encounter with European thought and in particular with science. While, during the 19th century, British educational institutions as well as science were frowned upon by most Muslim scholars because of the danger of their inducing doubts in Islam, Khan faced this threat and aimed his thought at harmonising Islam and science in presenting their mutual conformity.

Originating from Khan, this study furthermore presents other authors or associates of the Aligarh circle and their views on related issues. The work is structured around four blocks with at least one chapter spent in discussion of a developmental stage in Khan's philosophy, with the exception of the final block. – From this, I will examine other authors' engagements with related issues where applicable. The complete structure of this study is fully described below.

Historical Setting

The Aligarh Movement denomination can be traced back to the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College, which was Khan founded in 1875 in Aligarh. The core circle of this loose school of thought was located in Aligarh because of the college, yet its wider circle extended beyond the city. The college was characterised by its dependence on the British educational system, thus utilising English as the medium of instruction and emphasising the importance of science in its curriculum. These efforts have to be read in the context of 19th century South Asia, when the mere acquisition of English was deemed taboo or even blasphemous in Muslim society.¹³ Thus, even most of the authors discussed here had never (or had only recently) acquired some competency in English. Most prominent among these was

13 Mushirul Hasan: "Sharif Culture and Colonial Rule: A 'Maulvi'-Missionary Encounter," in Zaka Ullah of Delhi (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), x.

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Khan himself, who had only passing proficiency in English. What caused the representatives of the Aligarh Movement to take this step to utilise English as the medium of instruction and, what is more, engage with contemporary European debates? What made these authors engage with a foreign system of categorisation and how did it prove to have such a long-lasting impact on South Asia and Islam? To put it simply, how did it happen that, in contemporary times, a more or less global concept of religion can be found in virtually any region and culture – even though this apparent universality will prove to be something of a misapprehension? In order to grasp this development, one has to bear in mind the tremendous power asymmetry created through colonialism. Only this context can explain the necessity felt by Khan and his Aligarh circle to come to terms with the dominant discourse of the coloniser. It explains their efforts to make sense of those foreign categorisations through translation into their own framework. In order to understand this situation, we will have to consider his background and the broader context of 19th century South Asia in general.

Khan was born and grew up in his grandfather Khwajah Farid-ud-Din Ahmad Khan's (1747-1828) house, in a family with strong bonds to the Mughal court. His grandfather was a *wazir* at the court, but also held the position of ambassador in Iran and Burma for the East India Company. Furthermore, he was a renowned mathematician and astronomer, and taught at the Calcutta Madrasa, which had been founded in 1780 by Warren Hastings as the country's earliest educational institution under British administration. With the aim of qualifying graduates for lower posts in government offices, students were trained in Persian, Arabic, and Muslim law (*fiqh*).¹⁴

Furthermore, Khan's family had a strong affiliation with Sufism. Troll writes:

Two of the seven brothers of Farīd al-dīn were outspoken dervishes. The famous Khwājah Najīb al-dīn (d. 1843), then popularly known as Shāh Fidā Ḥusain, was an adept of the Rasūlshāhīs, a recent branch of the Suhrawardī *silsilah* (Sufi order). Najīb al-dīn strongly adhered to the doctrine of *waḥdat al-wujūd* (unity of being) [...]. Khwājah 'Alā al-dīn (d. 1855), on the other hand, was *murid* (disciple), and *khalīfah* (successor) of the famous Naqshbandi Shaikh, Shāh Muḥammad Āfāq (d. 1835) [...].¹⁵

Hence, the two prominent positions in Sufism were present in Khan's family at the same time. Yet, the latter tendency of the Naqshbandi order made a particular

14 Troll: Sayyid Ahmad Khan, 28; Khan, B. R.: "Calcutta Madrasa, The," http://en.banglapedia.org/index.php?title=Calcutta_Madrasa_The

15 Troll: Sayyid Ahmad Khan, 28f.

impact on his worldview, as his mother Aziz an-Nisa Begum – to whom Khan paid great respect – had given allegiance to the order.

The doctrine of *vaḥdat al-vujūd* was the most prominent position during the Mughal reign and assumes a unity of God and His creation. This doctrine was put forward by the famous Sufi Ibn al-Arabi (1165-1240), who is recognised as the first to give early Sufi tendencies a structured framework. God is deemed to be the only existence, while any manifestation in creation is perceived solely as a manifestation of this single being. This doctrine was countered by Ahmad Sirhindi (1556-1605) and his *vaḥdat aš-šuhūd*, emphasising a clear distinction between God and His creation, as anything else would deny the unity of God. Sirhindi was the leader of the Naqshbandi order, which urged a strong reaction to the doctrine of *vaḥdat al-vujūd*. They “feared the potential for permissiveness which it offered and detested the free-thinking habits of the Mughal emperors.”¹⁶ Although Robinson notes that the Naqshbandi reaction did not have an immediate impact on Mughal society, it gained particular influence during Aurangzeb’s reign, as he made significant concessions to religious scholars. These concessions aimed “at centralising and neutralising mystical orders, which tended towards autonomy and heterodoxy. Orders such as the Qadiriyya became the target of Aurangzeb’s iconoclastic policies and were gradually co-opted within orthodoxy.”¹⁷

Along with the Sufi tendencies of the *vaḥdat al-vujūd*, Robinson describes rational learning (*ma’qūlāt*) as one important pillar of the Perso-Islamic culture of Mughal India: the *ma’qūlāt* were based on ancient Greek philosophy, which came to be applied to theological questions evolving in a distinct discipline, *kalām*, resting largely on logic. On the other hand, the rational sciences were also closely associated with the Mughal administration and formed a compulsory branch of training.¹⁸ In the early 18th century, however, these pillars began to shake with the struggling Mughal empire. After the death of Aurangzeb in 1707, succession wars were predominant, tremendously weakening the empire. Accelerated through various invasions by the Marathas, Sikhs, and Afghans, the fragmentation of the Mughal empire in independent regional states further increased. Robinson writes:

Not much more than half a century after the death of Awrangzeb in 1707 the Mughal empire was reduced to a few pathetic square miles around Delhi. By the beginning of the nineteenth century Muslim power itself was reduced to Awadh, Hyderabad and the north-western borderlands. Instead, there now ruled confident non-Muslim powers: the Sikhs in Punjab, the Marathas across a great swathe of territory from

16 Francis Robinson: *The ‘Ulama of Farangi Mahall and Islamic Culture in South Asia* (London: Hurst, 2001), 15.

17 Jamal Malik: *Islam in South Asia: A Short History* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 196f.

18 *Ibid.*, 199.

Introduction

Gujarat almost to the eastern seaboard, and the British in most of the Gangetic basin, Bengal, and Madras.¹⁹

Yet, Robinson hastens to add that the 18th century must not be precipitately viewed as a decline of this culture. On the contrary, rational learning gained even wider dissemination in the 18th century, originating from the Farangi Mahall in Lucknow and its syllabus, the *dars-i nizāmī*. The administration system remained largely based on Mughal structures. Thus, the

emphasis on the rational sciences [in the Farangi Mahall] was widely accepted because of the training it gave those who hoped for posts in government, a tendency which was reinforced when Warren Hastings adopted the Dars-i Nizami as the curriculum for the Calcutta Madrasa, thereby setting the standard expected for service under the East India Company.²⁰

The same applies also for the Sufi orders: those orders propagating the doctrine of *vaḥdat al-vujūd* experienced a recovery throughout the 18th century. Still, this time period was simultaneously the point of departure for challenges to emerge in countering this Perso-Islamic culture.²¹

Rational learning as conveyed through the *dars-i nizāmī* began to be countered by an emphasis on “traditional” learning, that is, based on the study of the Quran and the tradition of Muhammad’s sayings (*ḥadīṣ*).²² The most prominent representative of this development is Shah Waliullah (1730-62), who significantly reformed the curriculum of the Madrasa-i Rahimiyya in Delhi, which he had taken over from his father. During a stay in the Hijaz, he studied under the auspices of scholars of the *ḥadīṣ*. After his return to Delhi, he excluded several books on logic and *kalām* from the curriculum and instead placed the focus on “tradition.” Shah Waliullah criticised the rational sciences as having limited benefit in religious issues. Apart from this shift towards “tradition” (*manqūlāt*), Shah Waliullah also aimed to harmonise esoteric and exoteric knowledge of Sufi mysticism with “traditional” scholarship. He recognised the fragmentation of Muslim society as the central reason for the decay of Muslim power. Morals and behaviour acquired

19 Robinson: The ‘Ulama of Farangi Mahall, 20.

20 Ibid., 23.

21 Ibid., 27.

22 Similar to developments in Sufism, this trend towards *ḥadīṣ* scholarship had also already had its predecessors during the Mughal reign, first with Shah Abd al-Haqq (1551-1642), who criticised the rational sciences and its effects, as would be seen in Akbar. Cf. Ibid., 14.

much more emphasis: the individual's responsibility to acquire Islamic knowledge and its moral implications were stressed as needing implementation in daily life.²³ Parallel efforts are to be seen in the mystical sphere, these largely overlapping with Shah Waliullah's ambitions. He was himself initiated in various Sufi orders. Yet, he upheld the Naqshbandi order with greater emphasis and those within it stressed the abandonment of superstitious traditions and practices, as well as any kind of mediation. The order vehemently criticized whatever could violate the unity of God.²⁴

Early Reformist Approaches

This general focus on individual responsibility and the efforts by Shah Waliullah and the Naqshbandi Sufi order to cleanse Islam of superstitious practices threatening God's unity, were two important factors impacting the early thought of Khan, whose family was tied to both tendencies. As has been discussed, one of his grandfather's brothers was himself a *ḥalīfah* of the Naqshbandi order. Both his parents were initiated in this order, while the close connection of his family with Shah Abd al-Aziz – the son of Shah Waliullah who took up the Madrasa and continued his father's legacy – is of equal importance.²⁵

Apart from this, Troll highlights a third significant influence on Khan's early religious thought: the *Tariqah-i Muhammadiyah* (*ṭarīqah-i Muḥammadiyāh*), founded in the early 19th century by Sayyid Ahmad Barelwi, emerged in the context of this "fundamentalist" approach, developing, however, in a *jihād*-movement against the Sikhs of the Punjab. Preceding this militarisation, Muhammad Ismail, grandson of Shah Waliullah, penned several influential religious pamphlets. Their importance is related to their shift in language from Persian towards Urdu in order to reach a broader audience.²⁶

Chapter 1 of this study therefore aims to locate Khan's early religious thought within this background. He had been writing several tracts on various topics, among them historical studies on scientific matters as well as a few religious pamphlets. With the exception of his study of the historical sights of Delhi, his *Āṣār*

23 Malik: *Islam in South Asia*, 201.

24 Margrit Pernau: *Ashraf into Middle Classes: Muslims in Nineteenth-Century Delhi* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2013), 39-41.

25 Troll: Sayyid Ahmad Khan, 30f.

26 *Ibid.*, 30, 35f.

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aṣ-ṣanadīd (1846), these texts have been almost entirely ignored in academic studies. Troll is an exception and concisely discusses a selection of the early religious texts, but lacks, however, any thorough study of their implications or connections relating them with Khan's later thought. This lack of interest in his early thought subsequently reinforces the assertion of a radical break in his philosophy. In discussing and locating these early texts, this chapter aims at laying a sound foundation on which to juxtapose these writings with later developments in his thought and evaluate the continuities and discontinuities. As it stands, the disinterest in his background and early thought combined with a focus on his later thought may have culminated in the assertion of a radical break and, accordingly, of a "Westernisation" of his philosophy, as continuities are not taken into account.

One ancillary aim of this chapter will be to excavate Khan's localisation in Sufi doctrine and its potential continuity in later developmental stages. It should be noted here that Troll remarks in a footnote on the desideratum of considering potential dependencies on Sufi theology in Khan's later thought:

Is it far-fetched to think that Sayyid Ahmad Khan's insistence on an inductive approach to prove the existence of God on the pattern of the empirical method of the sciences, was facilitated by his appreciation of the experiential side of religion, due to his early contact with Sufism (mainly in the specific form of the Naqshbandī Mujaddidī tradition)? In any case, the question of a possible link between the 'rationalism' and 'scientism' of Muslim modernists, and their contact with the Sufi heritage in practice and thought merits a close enquiry.²⁷

In the course of the following chapters, the question of to what extent Khan shows continuities from his early background shall be continuously addressed. Where applicable, dependencies on Sufi thought shall be highlighted.

Encountering Europe

While Khan's early religious tracts merely engage in an inner-Islamic debate, Chapter 2 discusses the widening of his perspective in encounters with the Christian mission. The Christian mission in South Asia focused initially on Hindus, while their attention shifted only gradually to Muslims in South Asia in the 1830s. An important role was played by the German missionary Karl Gottlieb Pfander (1803-1865). Due to his missionary training, he was proficient in Arabic and later

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 221.

acquired other Muslim languages, as well, among them being Persian and Urdu. This language proficiency allowed him to base his argument on the Quran and, what is more, present it in Urdu, thus potentially obtaining a broad readership. This meant a formerly unknown and, accordingly, threatening attack on Islam which triggered unrest among the religious scholars in the 1840s when Pfander published his *Mīzān al-Ḥaqq* in 1841 in Agra. The controversy eventually resulted in a debate between Pfander and Rahmatullah Kairanawi, who, on his side, presented an equally percussive argument. The outcome was perceived as a victory of the Muslims over the missionaries, which meant an abrupt end to this encounter.

Khan, however, revived this debate in writing a commentary (albeit an uncompleted one) on the Bible (1862-64), which has often been interpreted as an attempted rapprochement between Muslims and the British, for the British first and foremost recognised Muslims as responsible for the rebellion of 1857. The crushing of the rebellion culminated eventually in the abandonment of the Mughal reign, which had remained merely symbolic. The *Mutiny* implied a distrust felt towards Muslims. Already in 1859, Khan set out to write his famous *Asbāb-i baḡāvat-i Hind* (The Causes of the Indian Revolt), wherein he argues that the rebellion must not be misunderstood as having been initiated by Muslims as a community. Furthermore, he aims to refute that Islam inherently incites disobedience against British rule. Perhaps with this obvious attempt of rapprochement in mind, his commentary was hastily perceived as another effort in this vein. Yet, those assertions ignored that Khan had engaged already, since 1855, in countering missionary critique, although his commentary was planned only after 1857.²⁸

Chapter 2 shall discuss to what extent it is reasonable to describe Khan's commentary on the Bible as a mere attempt of rapprochement meant to familiarise Muslims with Christian doctrine. His commentary will be juxtaposed against Pfander's *Mīzān* in order to evaluate whether or not the commentary should be read as an adaptation of Pfander's approach of arguing on the basis of an opponent's sources for one's own purpose.

The second part of this block consists of two chapters on historiography which discuss the constructivist character of history. Chapter 3 follows up on Chapter 1 as a discussion of the change in Khan's conception of history due to his encounter with William Muir's *The Life of Mahomet* (1858-61). When Khan first read Muir's biography, he felt urged to write a response, as he deemed this text to be misleading young Muslims.²⁹ It will be argued that Muir, being requested by Pfander to write a biography of Muhammad based on material which is acknowledged by Muslims, took up an approach to history that was much reminiscent of Khan's

28 Ibid., 69f.

29 Ibid., 113, 127.

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early religious writings and early reformist tendencies in general. They shared the assumption that Islam as practiced in the lifetime of Muhammad served as a crucial point of reference, while the latter's life and deeds obtained the role of an embodied manifestation of Islam. Yet, Muir differs with regard to his historiographical approach, developing a catalogue of critically examined and evaluated sources. Furthermore, Muir studies Muhammad as a mere human being, denying his prophetic character. He thus disregards the Quran's status as a divine message, viewing it as merely human word. As a result of his study, Muir criticised Islam for reinforcing the evils of former times such as polygamy and the oppression of critical thinking. Hence, Muir comes to the conclusion that, due to Muslims' verbatim belief in the Quran, Islam has a monolithic character which prevents any advance or reform.

With this critique in mind, Khan set out to write a rebutting biography of Muhammad which is characterised by its structural analogy modelled on Muir's text. While this is commonly described as the point of departure for Khan's examination and integration of European thought, this chapter aims at demonstrating crucial continuities with his earlier writings, perhaps veiled by its resemblance to Muir's equally golden-age-view of history. The chapter will examine how much this encounter with Muir affected an adaptation in Khan's approach in order to counter this critique. It asks: to what extent does this mirror the latter's view of Islam?

This question will be further discussed in Chapter 4 by means of the example of Khwaja Altaf Husain Hali's (1837-1914) famous *Musaddas* (1879), which bemoans the decay of Muslim culture, and Ameer Ali's *The Spirit of Islam* (in its first edition [1873] titled *A Critical Examination of the Life and Teachings of Mohammed*). I will present these two approaches to the history of Islam and its conception. Chapter 4 asks: how did the critique of Islam on behalf of the Christian mission and European orientalism inform Islam's response? Hali attempts to reverse this critique by projecting its negative on "original" Islam, which has been abandoned by Muslims, thus culminating in their devastating situation. All criticised aspects are rejected with reference to "original" Islam. On the other hand, Ameer Ali takes a different path and conversely turns to criticising European critique as based on an insufficient point of reference, assuming an incompleteness of Christianity. Ali views Islam not with regard to Europe or Christianity, but rather as a self-explanatory entity.

Science

The second half of the 19th century in South Asia shows a significant discursive shift, with science emerging as the most influential and legitimating point of reference. The situation changes from that of an inter-religious encounter between particular religions, elevating the dispute to a clash between science and religion in general. The latter has to prevail against the charge of superstition and far-fetched metaphysical claims on behalf of religion. From the 1870s onwards, Khan began to participate in this discussion intensively. Scholars have described the texts Khan published from this period until his death as being those of his most influential and innovative phase. The majority of prior academic studies on Khan have been restricted to these later texts, taking them to be his sole perspective. Khan utilised his newly established journal *Tahzīb al-aḥlāq* to disseminate his ideas. From 1880 onwards until his death, Khan published his albeit uncompleted commentary on the Quran, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*. These publications are part of his greater project to prove the conformity of Islam with science.

Chapter 5 will then discuss Khan's attempt to bypass the difficulty of the mutually incommensurable truth-claims of the inter-religious perspective, which also appeared implicitly in Ameer Ali's denial to accept an external point of reference for his vision of Islam. Khan, however, takes this thought a step further and aims at establishing reason – and this implicitly also indicates science – as an overarching *tertium comparationis* among the incommensurable truth-claims. The religion proving to be in conformity with reason will be recognised as the single true one. Khan here introduces a distinction between the Work and the Word of God as nature and His message – both, however, being God's creation. Khan denies their mutual contradiction as impossible. Thus, he sets out to prove that apparent contradictions in the Quran are mere misinterpretations built by human perception. While this approach grasps the thesis of a conflict between science and religion from the angle of Islam being reformulated from a new perspective, Shibli Nomani (1857-1914) takes a different path. Chapter 6 discusses his attempt to integrate science as an inherent aspect of Islam, claiming that, in fact, Islam was the crucial catalyst allowing for the development of ancient Greek philosophy into modern science.

In Chapter 7, I will examine both Khan's and Shibli's conceptions of science. I will attempt to infer their epistemological understandings from their writings – a topic only inherently touched upon by either of them. Yet, this permits us to question their inherent claim of science serving as a stable point of reference. In fact, both rather re-inscribe science into an Islamic conceptual framework. It appears to

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be the case here that universal concepts like science and religion are swept up in the maelstrom of translation.

Sedimentation

The last block, consisting only of Chapter 8, will examine an internal encounter within the sphere of the Aligarh Movement. While Khan's theses evoked several reactions, these being as fierce as *fatwas* declaring him an unbeliever (*kāfir*), this chapter focusses only on Nazir Ahmad's (1830-1912) view and his reinterpretation of Khan's thought. Ahmad, famous first of all for his novels in Urdu, is frequently and too hastily described either as a mere simulacrum of Khan in the literary sphere or as his antagonist. Both perspectives favour a black and white view of Ahmad. Furthermore, his explicitly religious tracts have been greatly ignored so far, reducing him to his creative phase as a novelist.

Ahmad criticises Khan's view of Islam as too mechanistic and tries to bring back the latter's engagement with the conflict of science and religion on a more human basis. While Khan tried to combine reason and religion under a shared umbrella, Ahmad emphasises their strict distinction and argues for a "re-mystification" of Khan's disenchanted Islam. Reason is vehemently denied access to the sphere of religion. Still, Ahmad bases his thought on a clearly analogous approach to Khan's even using corresponding terminology to some extent. The latter's thought, which was a response to European critique, had become incorporated as an integral part of Islamic discourse upon which Ahmad could base his argument. This chapter shall therefore scrutinise the sedimentation and concealment of formerly contested ideas which came to obtain an intrinsic character.

Ahmad, however, also developed a very individualistic approach to religion, denying *any* kind of mediation, and going so far that even consulting another person about the meaning of a Quranic verse was criticised. This not only implies difficulties regarding the identificatory aspect of Islam, but also allows us to draw conclusions about the general context of 19th century South Asia, which was characterised by a strained atmosphere of religious debate both from within Islam as well as from other religions such as the Christian mission or Hindu reformist movements like the Arya Samaj.

South Asia – A Religious Continuum

In particular, the last quarter of the 19th century in South Asia was characterised by the emergence of several reformist movements in the Islamic sphere, which shaped the religious discourse up to that point. These movements argued about the appropriate answer to the aforementioned confrontations with the Christian mission, science, and, in general, the undeniable loss of Muslim power and its implications for the maintenance of an Islamic outlook for a Muslim society no longer backed up by the administrative structure of Muslim reign. Apart from inner-Islamic debates, the Christian mission had already, early in the 19th century, evoked fierce debates with Muslims, the aforementioned dispute with Pfander being the most prominent example. Yet, one aspect has been entirely ignored thus far: Hinduism.

Since Islam's arrival, South Asia has been a place of religious contact and exchange, with strict borders coming to be emphasised no earlier than the 18th and particularly the 19th century. As Pernau writes:³⁰

Boundaries were drawn and defended more resolutely from the eighteenth century onwards, partly as a result of reformist movement within Islam, but also through its counterpart in Hinduism. It should not, and indeed cannot, be denied that colonial rule played a fateful role in bolstering these tendencies, particularly in the second half of the nineteenth century. On the other hand, the break between the eighteenth and nineteenth century should not be overemphasized. [...] The process of dissociation from other religious communities was already underway.³¹

While the preceding centuries in part saw a lively exchange between Islam and Hinduism, reformist tendencies in Islam in the early 19th century began to describe superstitious practices such as excessive saint and grave veneration as influences from Hinduism.³² But, in particular, the strained atmosphere of religious debate

30 Pernau, *Ashraf into Middle Classes*, 48-51; Barbara Daly Metcalf: "The Taqwiyat al-Iman (Support of the Faith) by Shah Isma'il Shahid," in *Islam in South Asia in Practice*, ed. Barbara Daly Metcalf (Princeton University Press), 2009, 205.

31 Pernau, *Ashraf into Middle Classes*, 46.

32 Bergunder, for example, describes flourishing relations between Sufism and Nath Yogis: their shared emphasis on monism allowed them to view one another's tradition as a commensurable doctrine. Equally worth noting, Richard Eaton attributes the reference of Sufis in the Deccan region to Hindu terminology used to introduce new converts to Islam to its basic doctrines. Tony K. Stewart, too, presents a reminiscent phenomenon in pre-colonial Bengali texts denying any unequivocal identification and ascription to the categories of Hinduism or Muslim. Cf. Michael Bergunder: "Religionsvergleich in der nordindi-

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extended also to a conflict between Hindu and Muslim reformist movements. The extensive operations of the Arya Samaj in the Punjab, focusing on the “re-conversion” of Muslims, was perceived as a serious threat.

With this in mind, the refusal to reference parallel developments in Hindu reformist thought on behalf of the writers of the Aligarh circle appears to be reasonable: in the material discussed in this study, Hinduism virtually does not exist, and there are only a very few instances referring to Hindus, while any discussion of doctrinal aspects could not be found. Although explicit references cannot be observed, still significant analogous ideas in Hindu reformist thought can be perceived in the texts discussed in this study. Another overarching aim of this study is thus to present those parallels. Such parallels should not be overstressed, however, and must remain speculative because of their lack of demonstrability.

schen Nirguna-Bhakti des 15. bis 17. Jahrhunderts? Die Sant-Tradition und ihre Vorstellung von ‘Hindus’ und ‘Hindus’,” in *Religion in Asien? Studien zur Anwendbarkeit des Religionsbegriffs*, ed. Peter Schalk (Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet, 2013), 43–80; Richard M. Eaton *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier: 1204-1760* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Tony K Stewart: “In Search of Equivalence: Conceiving Muslim-Hindu Encounter Through Translation Theory,” *History of Religions* 40, no. 3 (2001): 260–87.

I. Struggling for the Representation of Muhammad

The main protagonist of this study, Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817-1898), is best known for his educational impulses via his establishment of the Anglo Muhammadan Oriental College, later renamed as Aligarh Muslim University. His main achievement is described as the attempt to reconcile the British and the Muslims after the upheaval of 1857. In the aftermath of this upheaval, Muslims were suspected of being disloyal to the British because of their faith – a thesis Khan tried to refute vehemently. He is further known as a religious reformer who tried to develop a peculiar stance towards the confrontation between science and religion in harmonising Islam with the findings of the natural sciences. Those topics shall be discussed in later chapters. Yet, this summary already implies Khan's discursive localisation in encounters with Europe. The emphasis of these aspects in Khan's thought, combined with an almost general neglect of his background and early writings before 1857, implicitly presupposes that his thoughts are a mere adoption of European ideas. Thus, almost all studies discussing Khan's religious thought or views on educational reform commence with his post-1857 writings.

This said, it cannot be denied that his later writings show a far more developed thought process, while the early texts lack such originality. Thus, it is sometimes noted in secondary literature that, if 1857 had not evoked a radical break in Khan's thought, he perhaps would have remained merely an ordinary scholar among others. But those early texts are interesting insofar as they allow for the localisation of Khan's early background – a background which is frequently, sharply delineated from his later texts. The first aim of this chapter is thus to situate Khan in the context of the first half of the 19th century, which shall provide us with the necessary tools to analyse to what extent Khan's post-1857 texts can be described as a mere adoption of European thought and whether or not there are crucial dependencies on his early thought. In short, can the upheaval of 1857 really be described as a radical turning point in Khan's thought, or is the assumption of a radical break in Khan's thought rather a result of previous studies turning a blind eye towards his early background?

While the second part of this question shall be discussed in Chapter 3, this chapter shall first of all situate Khan in the context of early 19th century reformist thought. In order to do this, I will first describe the historical background of Khan's

religious ideas in his first phase. The main focus will be on three texts: a short biography of Muhammad, *Jilā' al-qulūb* (1842); his *Kalimat al-Ḥaqq* (1849), a discussion of the Sufi practice of *pīrī-murīdī* (teacher-student relationship); and his *Rāh-i sunnat aur radd-i bid'at* (1850), a discussion of the concept of *bid'at*, i.e. the rejection of religious innovations and their inadmissibility. These works shall provide a picture of Khan's situation within the context of early 19th century religious discourse. I will focus on his stance regarding the increasing dispute over positioning the role of Muhammad, as well as his views on historiography relevant to this issue.

1. Early Reformist Tendencies in South Asia

The first reformist tendencies in South Asia are usually associated with Shah Waliullah (1703-62). As son of the founder of the *Madrasah Rahīmīyah*, he was born in a time of steady decay of the Mughal empire. The reign of Aurangzeb (d. 1707), the last influential sovereign of the Mughal empire, was followed by several successive quarrels with only short-lived periods of rule. The sovereigns were incapable of preventing a disintegration of the empire into several *de facto* independent, regional states. Furthermore, the area of Maharashtra was lost to the expanding Marathas. The empire was then struck by Afghan invasion and the Sikhs' increase of power in the Punjab.¹

In this situation of political decay and a loss of power for the Muslim state, Shah Waliullah developed a reformist approach emphasising the responsibility of the individual. Two important facets of his biography influenced this perspective: on the one hand, his and his family's Sufi-orientation and, on the other hand, the influence of his travel to the Hijaz, from which he returned in 1733. After his return, he fundamentally restructured the curriculum of the Madrasah, which had hitherto had a rational focus (*maqūlāt*), that is, an inclination to disciplines significantly influenced by ancient Greek philosophy. Books on logic and theological philosophy were therefore replaced by an emphasis on the study of the Quran and the traditions of the Prophet. The rationalist focus was replaced by a focus on tradition (*manqūlāt*).²

1 Malik: *Islam in South Asia*, 211-5.

2 *Ibid.*, 201.

His reforms are often equated with and reduced to an influence of Wahhabism. Although an impact of his travel to the Hijaz cannot be denied, this assertion appears to be rather a continuation of British nomenclature, as Jamal Malik argues:

[T]he movement was given a religious colour much later and that too in India only. This happened when Europeans began documenting the doctrines of Arabic Wahhabiyya, considering both this and the Indian variety to be pan-Islamic and a political opposition. [...] Subsequently, “Wahhabi” mutated into a religious concept and was transplanted into the Arabian landscape.³

Instead, Malik argues that Shah Waliullah’s project was a conciliatory effort made between the different tendencies within Islam:

[S]hah Wali Allah [...] considered his mission to integrate various fragmented and contradictory articulations of Muslim history of ideas. He looked for a way to bring together the deliberations of philosophers, theologians, and mystics.⁴

Shah Waliullah’s stance towards Sufism was therefore ambivalent. He considered himself a Sufi and was initiated to several Sufi orders. But, at the same time, he denounced what he saw as excesses of Sufi practices. In particular, the “excessive veneration of the saints and the cult at their graves” was a thorn in the side.⁵ The main purpose of his critique was to transfer the responsibility of “Muslim behaviour” to the individual and to deny the necessity of “an intermediary on the path to God and for a life pleasing to Him.”⁶

In a similar vein, his abandonment of rational learning in the curriculum of the Madrasah must also be read as an emphasis on individual behaviour. Shah Waliullah perceived rational knowledge as merely preliminary and auxiliary to the revealed knowledge of the *shariat*. Only the *shariat*’s divine origin could guarantee definitive knowledge. Malik recognises this argument as Shah Waliullah’s demand for more individual responsibility on a religious basis: merely speculative knowledge of God or mystical love, as provided by the rational approach of *ma‘qūlāt*, is replaced by an emphasis on moral behaviour and action. This challenged established authorities and conferred religious responsibility to the individual.⁷

Francis Robinson describes this abandonment of the religious scholars’ monopoly as an effort to create a substitute for the declining Mughal empire, which

3 Ibid., 256.

4 Ibid., 200f.

5 Pernau: *Ashraf into Middle Classes*, 50.

6 Ibid., 50.

7 Malik: *Islam in South Asia*, 201f.

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had hitherto maintained a Muslim identity. When the Mughals increasingly lost power, their weakened state was incapable of preserving this identity:

If Islam could no longer be supported by the swords of Muslim princes, it could now be supported by the enhanced religious understanding of Muslims themselves.⁸

Shah Waliullah and his sons, who continued their father's mission, thus emphasised individual responsibility. Religion experienced a shift from a focus on the hereafter to a focus on this world. The lack of a state capable of preserving Muslim identity had to be overcome by educating the individual. The individual had to be equipped with sufficient knowledge of his faith.⁹ The underlying fear of the religious scholars was a renunciation of Islam:

[W]ithout power they [i.e. the *'ulamā'*] were fearful of Islam. They were apprehensive that the community, the vast majority of whom were converts from Hinduism, might slip back into the maw of Hindu India. [...] They were frightened because there was no legitimate power to put the holy law of Islam, the *sharia*, into operation. Their answer to this was better religious knowledge. Muslims should know, much more clearly and much more certainly than before, how to behave as Muslims.¹⁰

Two factors played a crucial role in executing this mission: translation and print. The former had already been begun by Shah Waliullah, who had prepared a translation of the Quran in Persian. This first step was continued by his sons. His eldest son, Shah Abdul Aziz (1746-1824), who assumed responsibility of the Madrasah Raḥīmīyah after his father's death, prepared a new translation of the Quran in Urdu. Furthermore, in the first half of the 19th century, several compendia, short treatises and pamphlets on religious topics, were penned.

But all this would not have come to fruition if printing technology had not been utilised. Only print permitted the authors to reach a wider audience. Printing had already been known since the 15th century in the Islamic world and had also been made applicable to the Arabic script. This innovation, however, presented the printer with difficulties: in its cursive script, Arabic letters have different forms depending on their position. Still, the Quran had been printed in the 15th century in Italy and Christians in Syria had by this time used print for Arabic texts. Robinson ascribes this reluctance of Muslim scholars to print to the traditionally oral trans-

8 Francis Robinson: *Islam and Muslim History in South Asia* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), 77.

9 Pernau: *Ashraf into Middle Classes*, 60; Robinson: *Islam and Muslim History*, 77, 105.

10 Robinson: *Islam and Muslim History*, 76.

mission of the Quran, which came to be perceived as divinely ordered: many Muslims associated printing with *kuf̄r*. Robinson mentions the example of one “printing press operated by Muslims in Istanbul in the 1730s and 1740s [which] aroused so much opposition that it had to be closed down.”¹¹

According to Robinson, the tradition of oral transmission also significantly affected the entire educational system. As with the first texts of the Quran, which were a mere aid to memory, books taught in *madrasas* were often written in rhyming prose to also aid the memory. The reading of books was always supervised by a teacher, who would eventually give his authorisation (*ijāzah*) to the pupil:

The completion of the study of the book would involve a reading back of the text with an explanation. If this was done to the teacher’s satisfaction, the pupil would then be given an *ijaza*, a licence to teach the text.¹²

Education and the transmission of texts were controlled by religious scholars, and only with their authorisation was one allowed access to the texts. With this in mind, Muslim scholars’ reluctance over printing becomes more reasonable, as the multiplication of texts and uncontrolled access to them radically opposed the established system of education.¹³

However, in the early 19th century, the situation changed significantly. The Mughals as well as the princely states of Avadh etc. remained only nominally sovereign. In fact, the East India Company had firmly established its power in North India. Muslims had to face the loss of their former elitist position and were confronted with a competition with Hindus under a foreign rule. Furthermore, confrontation with Christian missionaries gradually increased.

The ‘*ulamā*’ realised that the loss of a Muslim state, which maintained the Muslim character of society, could only be answered with a general transmission of religious knowledge. While this knowledge had formerly been controlled by the ‘*ulamā*’ themselves, the new state of affairs required a general transfer of responsibility to the individual. Although the ‘*ulamā*’ had to face a significant loss of influence, as virtually any “Ahmad, Mahmud or Muhammad” was now able to read the Quran in Urdu and several other regional languages, this abandonment of their monopoly for the sake of the individual prepared in religious matters was the lesser of the two evils.¹⁴ Otherwise, an entire loss of control was threatening:¹⁵

11 Ibid., 69.

12 Ibid., 71.

13 Ibid., 73.

14 Ibid., 80.

15 Ibid., 75-77.

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But, ironically, while print enabled the *ulema* to extend their influence greatly in public affairs, it also seriously damaged the roots of their authority. By printing the Islamic classics [...] and by translating them into the vernaculars they undermined their authority; they were no longer necessarily around when the book was read [...]; their monopoly over the transmission of knowledge was broken.¹⁶

The importance of the Prophet Muhammad increased extensively in this context as the perfect symbol for an exemplary Muslim life. Already, Shah Waliullah and his sons had called for a return to authentic Islam. History was perceived as a continuous distancing from the time of the Prophet, thus increasing the threat of deviation from the perfect model and *bid'at*, the innovation of practices or doctrines in opposition to the Quran and the tradition of the Prophet. There were many such issues in the view of these early reformers. Thus, they propagated the study of the Quran and *ḥadīṣ* as a crucial means to restoring original Islam.

This restoration is often described, with reference to Shah Waliullah, as a purgation of Hindu influences in Islam. However, as Pernau argues, such communal distinctions were not the core issue. The early reformers, rather, challenged the excesses of Sufism and the veneration of saints. Instead, their admonition of Muslims to adhere to the prescriptions of their faith or the refutation of Shiites was at the forefront.¹⁷

Muhammad obtained a crucial role in this project, as he was demythologised and humanised. An entire genre of biographies of Muhammad flourished. While earlier biographies had focused on his miracles and the supernatural aspects of his life, early 19th century biographies emphasised his human character. Aspects of how to live the life of a good Muslim came to the forefront and human virtues were consistently pointed out. Muhammad's biography appears to be utilised to "project unto him [an] image of a perfect human self – a perfect, twentieth century, educated Muslim middle class self."¹⁸

In the following section, I will examine Khan's early writings and attempt to read them in the context of early reformist approaches in South Asia. For this purpose, three texts written in the time between 1842 and 1850 shall be considered in order to excavate Khan's intellectual background.

16 Ibid., 80.

17 Pernau: *Ashraf into Middle Classes*, 48-51.

18 Robinson: *Islam and Muslim History*, 96.

2. Restoration – Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan and his Early Writings

In his comprehensive study, *Sayyid Ahmad Khan: A Reinterpretation of Muslim Theology*, Troll distinguishes four major phases in Khan's work. These phases have been referred to in the present study – however, Troll's third phase shall be termed a transitional phase. Troll's study provides a well-researched perspective on the development of Khan's thought, given that most studies discussing Khan and his texts reduce him merely to his last and most influential phase from the 1870s onwards – the period after his return from England, whereupon he initiated the publication of the journal *Tahzīb al-Aḥlāq* that would become his and his companions' platform for circulating their reformist ideas. In this period, the relation between science and religion became Khan's main concern. The texts penned in this phase had perhaps the most lasting impact and discussed the burning issues of his time, which still have not been concluded and remain under discussion today.¹⁹

Nevertheless, it is absolutely vital to trace the gradual development of Khan's thought if one wants to thoroughly study him, as his last phase cannot be understood without the preceding phases. The most sophisticated thought from his last phase must not be imagined as a sudden break or novel inspiration, but seen as a gradual and tedious development of earlier conclusions. Although Troll is aware of this need and aims to depict the steps of this development, he gives an emphasis to Khan's post-Mutiny development, which he seems to perceive as an incisive turning point. Khan's reviews of some of his early writings from 1878 and 1880, which suggest a renunciation of his early convictions, seem to reinforce Troll's assertion. He then merely lists and concisely summarizes the texts Khan penned before 1857.²⁰

Even though the drastic changes in the aftermath of 1857 cannot be denied, one must not forget that Khan lived half of his life before the *Mutiny*. Although 1857 compelled Muslims to eventually realise the decline of the Mughal empire and obliged them to come to terms with British rule, Khan's thought must not be misunderstood as a radical break from earlier conclusions, but rather as a rethinking and adaption of his convictions.

19 Significantly, many of the topics Khan discussed appear also in contemporary discourse. Frequently, even much reminiscent responses are posed in contexts wherein a reference to Khan may not be acknowledged, as he would be perceived as standing outside of "orthodox" Islam. However, this assertion would require much scrutiny of a vast amount of contemporary material, which cannot be accomplished within the scope of this project. Cf. Chapter 3 for concrete examples.

20 Troll: *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 37.

Without doubt, Khan breaks with several ideas he had supported in the past. But can this be perceived as a total break? Are his early writings irrelevant to understanding the post-1857 Khan, as Troll seems to suggest in only marginally mentioning them? In this chapter and in Chapter 3, I will aim to refute the assertion of a total break and the reduction of Khan to his later texts. I will instead evince crucial continuities in Khan's thought, including a discussion of his pre-Mutiny writings.

As representative texts of his early phase, I will refer primarily to his biography of Muhammad, *Jilā' al-qulūb*, and to his discussion on *pīrī-murīdī*, *Kalimat al-ḥaqq*, as well as his discussion on *bid'at*, *Rāh-i sunnat aur radd-i bid'at*. In Chapter 3, I will contrast these texts with his second and far more influential biography of Muhammad: *Al-Huṭbāt al-Aḥmadīyah*.

2.1 *Jilā' al-qulūb*

Khan had penned several texts in his early phase, taking on mostly historical but also scientific topics. His most famous books are perhaps the voluminous *Āṣār aṣ-ṣanādīd* (1846), a study of historical sites of Delhi, and his edition of the *Ā'in-i Akbarī* (1855).²¹ *Jilā' al-qulūb* (1842) is Khan's first work with explicitly religious aspirations. In his review of this text, Khan mentions that it was written for *maulūd*-gatherings, which were held on the twelfth day of any month to remember the Prophet Muhammad. According to the review, numerous pamphlets on the life of Muhammad were published in this time. Unsatisfied by these and critical of their use of unreliable sources and myths, Khan thus aimed to present a biography of Muhammad that was based on only reliable traditions.²²

The *Jilā' al-qulūb* is divided into several sections on different aspects of the life of Muhammad. After a short introduction with poems of praise, Khan very concisely describes the most important stages of Muhammad's life. With great fervour, he describes events which accompanied and announced Muhammad's birth: the palace of the King of Persia shook and the holy flame of the Zoroastrians, which had been constantly burning for a thousand years, was extinguished.²³ He then concisely lists the most important events in Muhammad's life, among them being the revelation of the Quran, the *mi'rāj*, Muhammad's travel to heaven, and

21 Ibid., 36, 40.

22 Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan: *Maqālāt-i Sar Sayyid*, ed. Muḥammad Ismā'īl Pānīpatī (Lāhaur: *Majlis-i Taraqqi-i Adab*, 1962), Vol. VII, 31. Cf. also Tauqīr 'Ālam Falāḥī: *Sar Sayyid kā dīnī šu'ūr* ('Alīgarḥ: 'Alīgarḥ Muslim Yūnīvarsīṭī Pres, 2005), 98f.

23 Ibid., 7.

the *hijrat* from Mecca to Medina. Significantly, Khan gives only a very abridged description of Muhammad's life, which rather resembles a mere enumeration, without discussing the context or implications of the separate events.²⁴

Furthermore, in a later section, Khan describes various aspects of Muhammad's conduct and behaviour: he describes the beauty of his appearance and style of clothing. His behaviour with friends and foreigners is depicted. An entire section is dedicated to the miracles accomplished by Muhammad: in the first place, Khan mentions the Quran as the most important miracle, but also the splitting of the moon (*šaaqq al-qamar*) and other smaller miracles. Khan closes the biography with a lengthy description of Muhammad's farewell-pilgrimage (*ḥujjat al-vidā*) and a final poem. The *ḥajj* is described in some detail, as Khan ends with Muhammad's death.²⁵

It shall suffice here to merely list the topics addressed by Khan in this very short biography. He himself does not discuss any details which would have stood out in the time of publication. I am more interested, rather, in localising Khan in the context of his time. In a time when Persian was still the language of the learned – despite its removal as the official language by the British in 1835 – Khan's choice of Urdu as the language of his biography, in addition to its unadorned style, suggest Khan's assertion that the *Jilā' al-qulūb* be read in the context of an increasing emphasis on Muhammad as the role model of a pious Muslim life.

It is uncertain, however, if Khan's biography of Muhammad, the first of his religious writings, can already be assigned to the reformist sphere around Shah Waliullah and his sons, as seen with his subsequent works. In his review of the *Jilā' al-qulūb*, Khan's view on his positions in the biography suggests a further differentiation from his early phase's writings:

When I became stricter [*zīyādah-tar puḥtagī*] in terms of religious matters [*mazhabī masā'il*] and leaned more towards those doctrines which are called Wahhabism [*vahhābīyat*]²⁶, I began to perceive *maulūd*-gatherings as *bid'at*.²⁷

24 Ibid., 22f.

25 Ibid., 23-29.

26 Interestingly, Khan designates himself here as Wahhabi, a highly problematic term in the South Asian context. As has been remarked with reference to Malik, this category has been applied by the British without discrimination for South Asia as well as for the Arabian Peninsula, assuming their equity. This notion seems to have entered South Asian Muslim discourse, as Khan adopts the category of Wahhabi and applies it to himself from the retrospective perspective of his reviews of the late 1870s.

27 Ibid., 32.

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In the time after the publication of the *Jilā' al-qulūb*, Khan began to more thoroughly study Islam and also to perceive the *maulūd*-gatherings as inappropriate gatherings not in conformity with Islam. He does not elucidate whether he only refrained from such gatherings or if he also renounced the views on Muhammad's life described in his *Jilā' al-qulūb*. Although he disavows the statements of this early biography in his review, this departure seems to be a later opinion, reflecting his perspective at the time when he wrote his second biography. Despite his initial intention of presenting a biography based only on reliable sources, he subsequently realised that his own biography was equally based on unreliable material.²⁸ During his pre-Mutiny phase, Khan apparently did not have this view. Thus, strictly speaking, even his early phase cannot be described as a homogeneous phase, but can already be divided into internal gradations.

Still, it cannot be determined with certainty whether he wrote his *Jilā' al-qulūb* in support of the reformist sphere or whether these writings are merely an expression of the societal context that increasingly emphasised the role of Muhammad as exemplary for Muslim life. In any case, Khan here engaged his at-first-glance unspectacular biography in the increasing debate on the role of Muhammad and tried to detach excessive attributions from his persona. Muhammad is described in the work as a rather humanised individual, although Khan does not deny his ability to work miracles. Khan's conception of reliability here has to be distinguished from his later stance towards miracles: while his critical perspective in *Jilā'* seems to be restricted to the denial of unreliable sources – specifically regarding their status in *ḥadīṣ*-criticism – his later view was instead directed by his effort to exclude any supernatural tradition. Thus, his early perspective did not disregard miracles in general, but only those which were based on untrustworthy traditions. Thus, the most striking point of his *Jilā'* is not its stance towards miracles. This short biography has to be read rather in the context of the 18th and early 19th century instead of taking science as a point of reference, which acquired a prevalent position only in the second half of the 19th century in northern South Asia. By contrast, Khan seems to refer here to perceptions of Muhammad which conferred him a superhuman status.

In Sufi traditions, Muhammad acquired a superhuman status and is ascribed a pre-eternal existence as light (*nūr Muḥammadiyah* or *nūr-i Muḥammadi*).²⁹ Anne-

28 Ibid.

29 Khan himself mentions that “through Muhammad's perfect beauty, the world became enlightened/illuminated [*munavvar*]” (Ibid., 7). Yet, he does not further elaborate nor base his biography on this assertion as a fundamental doctrine.

marie Schimmel traces these ideas back to presumably “Hellenistic gnostic speculations.”³⁰ Schimmel describes Ibn Arabi (1165-1240), perhaps the most influential Sufi writer, as the first to give these ideas a philosophical and consistent framework:

These theories on the *nur Muhammad* were, like so many early trends in Sufism, elaborated and systematized by Ibn al-‘Aarabi, who states in his probably spurious profession of faith that ‘the first light appears out of the veil of the Unseen and from knowledge to concrete existence and is the light of our prophet Muhammad.’ He then goes on to compare Muhammad, the *siraj munir*, to the sun and infers that the heavenly intelligences, the spirits, the intuitions, and the essences are nourished by the luminous essence of (Muhammad) Mustafa, the Elect, ‘who is the sun of existence.’ In philosophical terms, with Muhammad, the first self-determination of the Absolute, the Divine begins to manifest itself gradually to the world, and the primordial light, which has permeated all prophets from the beginning, reaches its full development in the Perfect Man, the historical Muhammad.³¹

Ibn al-Arabi’s writings were followed by most Sufis of South Asia during the Mughal reign. But these ideas were also widely received in less elaborated versions in folk traditions. In its more philosophical manifestation, however, the concept of *nūr-i Muḥammadī* showed dependencies on (Neo-)Platonism in its assertion of a hierarchy of Divine knowledge descending from God via the light of Muhammad towards various gradations of *auliya* (pl. of *valī*, i.e. a friend of God, roughly translatable as saint). In order to reach God, an ordinary man had to ascend this hierarchy in reverse through the intercession of spiritual masters (*pīr*), saints, and finally Muhammad. Muhammad was therefore conceived of as an inevitable mediator between God and man, a relation which was frequently further split with the emphasis on a *valī* as a mediator between man and Muhammad.³²

Taking this into account, Khan’s statement about abstaining from unreliable attributions to Muhammad attains a rather different meaning than that of his later stance. This view is perhaps indebted to Shah Muhammad Ismail’s *Taqwīyat al-īmān*, which evoked an increase of biographies on Muhammad. The text’s author aims to make “clear the importance of the Prophet as a human model rather than as a source of miracles or a mere conduit of revelation.” Khan likewise attempts to present a rather human view on Muhammad – without entirely denying the Prophet’s miracles.³³

30 Annemarie Schimmel, *Rhine to Indus: Collection of A. Schimmel’s Rare Writings* (Lahore: Pakistan Writers Cooperative Society, 2012), 76.

31 Ibid.

32 Robinson: *The ‘Ulama of Farangi Mahall*, 15; Schimmel, *Rhine to Indus*, 119.

33 Metcalf: “The Taqwīyat-al-Iman”, 201.

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Troll recognises Shah Waliullah's texts and the continuation of his teaching, as carried on by the Tariqah-i Muhammadiyah (*tarīqah-i Muhammadīyah*), as a crucial influence on Khan's early writings. Shah Waliullah's thought can be characterised by a "fundamentalist" approach, which proposes "only the Qur'ān and the *sunnah* as the sole significant sources of the Islamic Sharī'a."³⁴ Later, the Tariqah around Sayyid Ahmad Barelwi and his disciple, Shah Muhammad Ismail, grandson of Shah Waliullah, radicalises Shah Waliullah's "fundamentalism" and advocates *jihād* against the Sikhs in Punjab.³⁵ The Tariqa was founded by the "mystical and charismatic figure" of Sayyid Ahmad Barelwi and initially focused on preaching against "the cult of Muslim saints, against rites and customs borrowed from the Hindus, and all kinds of customs they deemed contrary to the pure monotheism of the Holy Prophet and his Companions."³⁶ The Tariqa proposed a radical return to the Islam of the time of Muhammad and emphasised the Quran and Sunna, the conduct of Muhammad, as the sole sources of Islam. Any change to this *sunnat* was condemned as a deviation from the true path.³⁷

The Tariqah had heretofore produced a significant "corpus of doctrinal and missionary literature and established a network of missionaries all over India."³⁸ In particular, Shah Muhammad Ismail assumed the role as ideologist of the movement and penned several influential texts. In 1826, however, they abandoned preaching in favour of *jihād*. When, in 1831, Sayyid Ahmad Barelwi and Shah Muhammad Ismail were defeated and killed by the Sikhs, some of the members decided to continue their armed struggle. Others, however, devoted themselves to the initially missionary intent of the movement. Still others can be described as both scholars and silent supporters, participating in disseminating the "fundamentalist" thought of the Tariqah without being members. Gaborieau also counts Khan as a supporter of the Tariqah in his early phase, stating:

Before elaborating his modernist theology, he [Khan] wrote several tracts between 1841 and 1852, inspired by Wahhabi teachings.³⁹

34 Troll: *Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 33.

35 Ibid.

36 Marc Gaborieau: "Late Persian, Early Urdu: The Case of 'Wahhabi' Literature," in *Confluence of Cultures: French Contributions to Indo-Persian Studies*, ed. Françoise Delvoye (New Delhi: Manohar [et al.], 1995), 173f.

37 Troll: *Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 35.

38 Gaborieau: "Late Persian, Early Urdu," 174.

39 Ibid.

Gaborieau thus includes the *Jilā' al-qulūb*, as it was published only in 1842. Thus, even though Khan's convictions when penning this biography cannot be definitively clarified, a proximity of intent can be identified.

With their intention to reach a wider audience, the supporters of the Tariqah were some of the first to compose religious texts in Urdu, texts so far having been written only in Persian or Arabic. Likewise, Khan wrote his biography in Urdu. The structure and focus of the text emphasised the conduct of Muhammad in daily life rather than his actual biography. This further reinforced the assertion of proximity, as Khan equally aimed to implement an uncorrupted picture of Muhammad and his behaviour in the daily routine of Muslims. His unadorned style as well as his choice of Urdu affirm this suggestion.⁴⁰

Thus, Khan was in several respects part of the crucial changes of the early 19th century: on the one hand, he was part of the utter boom of biographies on Muhammad aimed at positioning him as exemplary for a pious Muslim life.⁴¹ On the other hand, Khan was part of the tendency to disseminate Islamic knowledge in order to enable the common Muslim to become a self-responsible Muslim. Furthermore, Khan was himself a product of this opening of the '*ulamā*'s monopoly on Islamic knowledge. He himself frequently emphasised his lack of any formal education as a religious scholar.⁴²

40 Khan: *Maqālāt*, Vol. VII, 32.

41 This humanisation of Muhammad while simultaneously sacralising his everyday conduct is paralleled by the humanisation of Krishna in Hindu reformism, as Hans Harder argues with reference to Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay (1838-94), a prominent author of Bengali literature who is credited for having introduced the Bengali novel. In his later years, the author turned to essay writing, with religion and Hinduism becoming his central topics. Among his essays, he penned his *Kṛṣṇacaritra* (1886/1892), a study of Krishna: "its aim is to establish Kṛṣṇa as a historical figure and the ideal of mankind by extrapolation from mythology" (Hans Harder: *Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay's Śrīmadbhagavadgītā* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2001), 14. Very reminiscent of Muhammad since the early reformist tendencies in South Asian Islam, Krishna is here presented as "the ideal man." Harder identifies the confrontation with Christianity as a stimulus for this account. Krishna was modelled as the Hindu equivalent of Jesus, a historical person and the ideal point of reference for Christianity. Even though it appears highly questionable to trace back the emphasis of Muhammad as the ideal man to an influence of Christianity, as this approach has been proposed at least since the 18th century and thus precedes the period of extensive encounter with the Christian mission, the parallels in both approaches are striking. Perhaps the entanglement is even more complex, given that one could also envisage the Muslim approach as a stimulus for Hindu reform. Cf. Harder: *Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay's Śrīmadbhagavadgītā*, 1f., 14, 174.

42 Cf. Khan: *Safar-nāmah-i Panjāb* ('Alīgarh: 'Alīgarh Insṭīṭyūt Pres, 1884), 187-213; translated by Troll: *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 307-331. Yet, he was by no means ignorant of religious knowledge, as his edition of the *Ā'in-i Akbarī* already suggests. The *Ā'in* contained among other things varying explanations of these debates. Likewise, his upbringing was

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Interestingly, however, Gaborieau as well as Khan himself describe the influence of the Tariqah as “Wahhabi” thought. As has been discussed earlier, this categorisation can be traced back to a generalisation by the British, assuming a commonality between the Wahhabi thought of the Arabian peninsula and the tradition of Shah Waliullah and the Tariqah. This denomination lacks an important differentiation between the two and thus culminated in a misconception of the latter. While the Wahhabi thought of the Arabic pen-insula was characterised by a pronounced hostility to any kind of mysticism, Shah Waliullah and likewise the Tariqah approved of Sufi practices, however much they abandoned any excesses of venerating graves or saints. As Hermansen writes:

The so-called “Wahhabi movement” in India was said to trace back the *jihād* of Sayyid Ahmad Shahid and Shah Isma‘il Shahid on the frontier. However, this was clearly a movement which was not anti-Sufic in the way which the Arabian ‘Abd al-Wahhab’s doctrine had stressed. While sharing an aversion to the interpolation of local practices into the Muslim cult of the saints, the Indian Mujahidin clearly persisted in many features of Sufi belief and organisation such as taking allegiance to a spiritual guide, believing in his charismatic and even miraculous powers, and tracing spiritual genealogy through the existing Sufi *tariqas*, alongside membership in the all-embracing *Tariqa Muhammadiyya*.⁴³

The denomination of Shah Waliullah and the Tariqah as Wahhabi is therefore misleading, as it veils the crucial aspect of Sufism in their thought. As we will see, Khan’s self-description as Wahhabi is equally misleading and perhaps based on his adoption of the British usage.

Two later religious texts which Khan wrote after more openly engaging with the context of Shah Muhammad Ismail’s writings remain on this track and discuss Khan’s self-description as Wahhabi. In the following section, I therefore question the extent to which those Sufi tendencies of the Tariqah can be traced in Khan’s texts.

modelled on the traditional Mughal model, which included religious subjects to a certain extent. Altaf Husain Hali mentions in his biography, *Ḥayāt-i jāved*, several personal teachers who taught Khan Persian, Arabic, the Quran, medicine, etc. Thus, even though Khan might not have received a formal education as a religious scholar, it can be reasonably assumed that he was well acquainted with the discourse through his upbringing and personal study; cf. Altaf Husain Hali: *Ḥayāt-i javīd* (Lāhaur: *Ā‘īnah-i Adab*, 1966).

43 Marcia Hermansen, “Wahhabis, Fakirs and Others: Reciprocal Classifications and the Transformation of Intellectual Categories,” in *Perspectives of Mutual Encounters in South Asian History 1760-1860*, ed. Jamal Malik (Leiden, Boston, Köln: Brill, 2000), 32.

2.2 *Kalimat al-ḥaqq*

The preceding analysis of Khan’s biography of Muhammad already suggests a “fundamentalist” understanding of Islam in its most literal terms: the early period of Islam is glorified and transfigured as a shelter of pure and unadulterated Islam. This point of reference centers on Muhammad, which clarifies the boom of biographies on his life. While Khan’s biography may only point to this tendency, his later texts are explicitly based on this perspective.

The *Kalimat al-ḥaqq* (1849) is a significant text in this regard. Khan herein discusses the Sufi concept of *pīrī-murīdī*, the spiritual initiation of the disciple (*murīd*) by his spiritual mentor (*pīr*). It was a common practice for a pious Muslim in South Asia to undertake an initiation (*bai‘at*) into any Sufi order and with a particular mentor within this order. Khan argues in this small tract against this practice, describing it as completely contrary to the *sunnat* of Muhammad and without any proof in the Quran and *ḥadīṣ*.⁴⁴

Khan introduces this tract with a short *du‘ā*:

God, grant [us] love for you and your beloved Muhammad, the Prophet of Allah (peace be upon him) and let us follow his *sunnat* and let us die according to his *sunnat*, *āmin*, oh Lord of the Worlds.⁴⁵

Already, this introduction points to the subsequent line of argument: namely that the practice of Muhammad as transmitted in his *sunnat* is declared as the highest goal. In the following passage, Khan describes the position of the Sufis who perceive themselves as being elevated from the merely external (*zāhirī*) *shariat*. Khan describes an abuse of *pīrs* through their position and bemoans that they are not judged on their actions:

If someone says: ‘Dear [*miyān*], he is acting in contradiction to *ṣar‘*,’ then he would answer: ‘Oh, you do not know. This does not apply for Sufism [*ṭarīqat*] [...]. *Shariat* applies only for the external [*zāhir*].’⁴⁶

Khan proceeds to emphasise the general applicability of the *shariat* without any exception. In fact, a real beloved of God (*valī-Allāh*, at the same time also a common denomination for a Sufi – Khan seems to imply both notions as a pun) fully adheres to *shariat* rather than denying its application:

44 Khan: *Maqālāt*, Vol. V, 267.

45 Ibid., 269.

46 Ibid., 270.

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The one who has deviated only minimally from the way of *shariat*, has lost his way. [...] Being *Valī* or *Abdāl*, *Ġauṣ* or *Quṭb*⁴⁷ does not require any miracles and charms [*kariṣmah aur karāmāt*]; ghosts and evil spirits, demons and *jinns* [...] can also show a spectacle and act hocus-pocus. *Valī* and *Abdāl*, *Ġauṣ* and *Quṭb* is the one who acts entirely in accordance with *shariat*.⁴⁸

Thus, only the one who follows the *shariat* can be a true beloved of God. In presenting several quotes from the Quran and *ḥadīṣ*, Khan affirms his argument and concludes that the one and only *pīr* is Muhammad:

Only in the *sunnat* of Muhammad lies blessing [*ni‘mat*] and, by God, in no one else, in no one else, in no one else. Thus, one is obliged to follow solely the path of Muhammad’s *sunnat* and try to comply with the *shariat*; and recognise only him as *Valī* and *Abdāl* and *Ġauṣ* and *Quṭb* who follows his *sunnat*, and whoever leaves his *sunnat*, shall be recognised as even worse than the devil.⁴⁹

Any deviation from the path of Muhammad is therefore to be condemned. In reference to a *ḥadīṣ*, Khan even refuses any innovation or adjustment of his *sunnat*:

[I]n the *shariat* of Islam it is stated that the companions [of Muhammad, *ṣahābah*] despised and disregarded the one who innovated anything or introduced a new custom which had not existed in the time of Muhammad, be it of minor or great extent, be it with respect to mundane [*duniyā ke mu‘āmlon men*] or religious [*dīn ke*] matters or in the way of remembering God.⁵⁰

Khan then proceeded to transfer this position onto Sufis who claim to be in contact with God and, thus, can act as a mediator between the ordinary Muslim and God:

Now imagine if the companions despised even any innovation in the way of worship and remembrance of God, then anyone who invents anything new in contradiction with the *sunnat* of God’s Prophet, calls them religious service [*‘ibādat*] and even claims that God meets him is a complete liar [*jhūtā*] and impostor [*makkār*]. There is no other way to meet God except the *sunnat* of His Prophet.⁵¹

Muhammad is therefore recognised as the solely valid *pīr* and his *sunnat* as the only way to God. Khan thus challenges established elites and refutes mediatory

47 Various titles for Sufis.

48 Ibid., 270.

49 Ibid., 273.

50 Ibid., 273f.

51 Ibid. 274.

claims by Sufis and scholars. Instead, he emphasises the responsibility of the individual:

*You must put right your book of [good] works (nāmah-i a'māl). That will come in useful [when you are] in your grave as well as on the Day of Resurrection. On that day God will do you justice.... Only this one question will be asked: "Speak up, what you brought goodness or badness? Have you practised the following of the Messenger of God or not? Through God's grace alone, then, is there salvation of both pīr and murid."*⁵²

Instead of resting one's responsibility on mediators, the individual must fulfil his own responsibilities. In order to abandon such deviations from the original *sunnat*, Khan calls for a return to the original sources of Islam, the Quran and *ḥadīṣ*. This point is also reflected in the structure of his *Kalimat al-ḥaqq*: the entire tract is organised in successive quotes from these sources. His complete line of argumentation is based on these successive quotes.

The second part of the tract is devoted to an analysis of the concept of *bai'at*, the initiation of the *murīd* and its validity from the perspective of the Quran and *ḥadīṣ*. Khan argues that the form of initiation in Sufi orders, as has become common practice, lacks any evidence from the Quran and tradition. Yet, he does not dismiss initiation entirely, but rather links it to the condition of adherence to Muhammad's *sunnat*. The *pīr* is thus judged on his conformity to the *shariat* and explicitly not on his affiliation with a Sufi order or his power to work miracles (*karīmah*). In Khan's view, the *pīr* instead comes to function as the conveyor of Muhammad's *sunnat*.⁵³

The analysis of the first part of the tract reveals Khan's view on history as well as his reformist approach: in resemblance to the wider reformist context of the early 19th century, Khan recognises a deviation from original Islam in his time. He thus distinguishes between the lived Islam of his contemporaries and an essentialised form of Islam. This pure and unadulterated Islam is, according to Khan's line of argument, found in the days of Muhammad. Hence, Khan calls for a return to the *sunnat* of Muhammad as the perfect set of guidelines for a pious Muslim's life. He calls for the unaltered restoration of the Islam of Muhammad's days, for any innovation or adjustment would imply deviation from the original, unaltered path of the Prophet.

On the other hand, in contrast to his self-denomination as "Wahhabi," Khan clearly maintains Sufi aspects in his thinking. Even though he criticises the attach-

52 Troll: *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 47 / Khan: *Maqālāt*, Vol. V, 284.

53 Khan: *Maqālāt*, Vol. V, 275, 283.

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ment to a *pīr*, he does not abandon this category, but (as mentioned above) describes Muhammad as the only true *pīr*. Khan thus merges the mystical sphere of Sufism with the juridical sphere of the *shariat* and claims Muhammad as the necessary role model for the ideal manifestation of both. Muhammad obtains the position of a spiritual master guiding the individual on his mystical way but at the same time serves as the ideal for mundane life, too. “In this sense,” as Soheb Niazi writes, “the spiritual mystical path (*tarīqah*) was identical with Shariah law.”⁵⁴ Khan thus bypasses the mediation of saints and *pīrs*, and aims to relate Sufi practice as well as worldly conduct to Muhammad. The conflict between contemporary Sufi practice and *shariat*, which Khan describes in the beginning of his *Kalimat*, is therefore refuted. Sufism is integrated into the legal sphere of *shariat*, combined under the umbrella of Muhammad. Khan argues that any need to exceed Muhammad’s *sunnat* for mystical insights is to disregard the Prophet, for his *sunnat* is the sole path to God – to which no addition is deemed possible or necessary. True Sufism is based solely on Muhammad’s teaching.

This struggle for the representation of Muhammad gains even more severity in the second half of the 19th century with the institutionalisation of varying reformist approaches in South Asian Islam. As Barbara Metcalf writes, “All the movements of this period focused on the importance of the Prophet, but there were subtle differences in the extent to which emphasis rested on him as object of devotion, or intermediary with God, or model of human personality.”⁵⁵ The most opposing stances were represented by the Ahl-i Sunnat wa al-Jamaat, commonly known as Barelwis, and the Ahl-i Hadis. The former movement aimed at largely maintaining a mystical conception of Muhammad as *nūr* as well as insisting on his knowledge of the Unseen (*ilm-i ḡaib*) to deny tendencies to degrade Muhammad as a mere human being:

Muhammad Isma’il’s prophet was a perfect but essentially human model for behaviour, while the Ahl-e Sunnat’s prophet was – and is – not. Muhammad Isma’il spoke of the prophets, imams, pirs, and martyrs as ‘brothers’ who ought to be honoured as ‘human beings, not as God’. In the same vein, he wrote that the Prophet had discouraged his followers from seeing him as more than a ‘servant’ of Allah who ‘one day ... would die, and return to the dust; and [who] could not therefore be

54 Soheb Niazi: “Revisiting Sir Syed’s Early Religious Writings,”

(<https://cafedissensus.com/2017/11/04/revisiting-sir-syeds-early-religious-writings/>).

55 Barbara Daly Metcalf: *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband 1860-1900* (Princeton: University Press, 1982), 272.

worthy of worship'. [...] this egalitarian portrayal of the prophet and other purveyors of religious authority was at odds with the Ahl-e Sunnat view. Whatever Muhammad was, he was not an 'elder brother', not an ordinary person [...].⁵⁶

The Ahl-i Sunnat, as the Barelwis are also called, emphasised the necessary mediatory role of Muhammad and thus sustained the idea of a hierarchy which the ordinary believer had to ascend in order to reach God. Still, the Barelwis evinced distinctive features of a reform movement in their abstention from excesses of saint veneration and folk traditions, and at the same time from Hinduism, as Sufism was often accused of syncretistic adoptions from Hinduism.⁵⁷

The Ahl-i Hadis can be localised at the other end of the spectrum. In his extensive study, Martin Riexinger states that we can locate the earliest representatives of this movement in the sphere of the Tariqah and, therefore, they were not entirely dismissive of Sufi tendencies and were oftentimes initiated in the Naqshbandiya order. Yet, their critical stance exceeded the Tariqah, not only in disregarding the concept of *nūr-i Muhammadī* but also in turning against the idea of the inner imagination of the disciple's spiritual master in order to control his soul – a concept Khan also discusses and denies in his *Namīqah dar bayān-i mas'alah-i taṣavvur-i šaiḥ* (1854). Still, they did not deny the reversed spiritual hierarchy that a disciple had to ascend, the master being maintained as the first mediator on the spiritual journey to God.⁵⁸ Nonetheless, they vehemently discounted several claims of the Barelwis, such as Muhammad's knowledge of the Unseen, an attribute they saw as belonging solely to God. Likewise, they denied the assertion of a spiritual presence of prophets and *auliyā* in their graves. While later generations of the Ahl-i Hadis accepted some Sufi dependencies, they directed their critique first and foremost at contemporary Sufis. Yet, not all adherents of the Ahl-i Hadis consented to this allowance, and strictly denied any Sufi impact. In general, the Sufi impact declined to a merely marginal aspect, whereas early Ahl-i Hadis still based their thought fundamentally on Sufi concepts.⁵⁹

The Deobandi school takes up an interim position through their claim for, as per Metcalf:

[A] synthesis of the two main streams of the Islamic tradition, that of intellectual learning and that of spiritual experience. They themselves understood this unity of *shari'at* (the Law) and *tariqat* (the Path) to be firmly within the bonds of Islamic

56 Usha Sanyal: *Devotional Islam and Politics in British India: Ahmed Riza Khan Barelwi and his Movement 1870-1920* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996), 255.

57 Martin Riexinger: *Šanā'ullāh Amritsarī (1868-1948) und die Ahl-i Ḥadīṣ im Punjab unter britischer Herrschaft* (Würzburg: Ergon, 2004), 252.

58 Ibid., 246f.

59 Ibid., 244-246, 258-60.

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orthodoxy, for they took the Law and the Path to be not opposed but complementary.⁶⁰

With this understanding, the Deobandis saw themselves in the tradition of Shah Waliullah. In relation to the aforementioned reform movements, they set themselves apart by adhering to the four legal schools of Islam, while the Ahl-i Hadis positioned themselves strictly against *taqlīd*. The Deobandis viewed the Ahl-i Hadis' emphasis on individual responsibility as exceeding the capability of an ordinary Muslim and thus their approach was restricted merely to a small elite. On the other hand, they distanced themselves from the Barelwis in restricting the latter's devotion to Muhammad with attributes reserved for God only, namely the knowledge of the Unseen.⁶¹ Furthermore, they opposed the celebration of Muhammad's birthday "on the grounds that it encouraged the belief that a dead person was actually present."⁶²

The Aligarh Movement, which Khan would establish in his later career, is usually viewed as outside of this spectrum and degraded as a mere adoption of European ideas.⁶³ The crucial aim of the preceding discussion of Khan's Sufi back-

60 Metcalf: *Islamic Revival*, 139.

61 Ibid., 140f, 150.

62 Ibid., 150, 265.

63 Khan's religious thought is frequently dismissed on two grounds which can only be discussed concisely here. First, his religious reforms were dedicated merely to mundane benefit: "Sir Syed's main interest was not in religion but in culture and education. But he realized that religion, in this case Islam, was basic to the issue and no significant questions could be posed and answered without looking at things from the religious point of view" (A. A. Suroor: "Sir Syed's View of Islam," in *Reason and Tradition in Islamic Thought*, ed. Mahmudul Haq (Aligarh: Institute of Islamic Studies, Aligarh Muslim University, 1992), 171f.; cf. also Zafar Hasan: *Sir Saiyid aur Hālī kā nazārīyah-i fitrat* (Lāhaur: *Idārah-i Ṣaḡāfat-i Islāmīyah*, 1990), 114). This approach rejects Khan's entire religious thought as motivated solely by the desire to improve the education of Muslims in British India. Here-with, his authority as a serious religious thinker is contested and his influence is reduced to his position as a social reformer.

The second commonplace point disclaims his thought as "Westernised": "The only contemporary documentation of this stay states that while in India Afghānī associated chiefly with modernizing reformists, especially followers of the westernized Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khān" (Nikki R. Keddie: *An Islamic Response to Imperialism: Political and Religious Writings of Sayyid Jamāl ad-Dīn 'al-Afghānī'* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 21; Italics added by the author). Irfan Habib describes Khan's approach even as aping the West: "Syed Ahmad was a reconstructionist who tried to reinterpret the Quran to assimilate modern scientific knowledge. Afghani, on the other hand, was a pragmatist. Though he [i.e. Afghani] stood for the cultivation of modern sciences, he did not approve of the aping of the West [like Khan]" (S. Irfan Habib: "Reconciling Science with Islam in 19th century

ground, which shall be returned to in the following chapters, is thus meant to re-integrate Khan and the Aligarh Movement within this spectrum and question the extent of the impact of European ideas on his thought.

In order to further consolidate this argument, I conclude this short excursus here and will now return to the discussion of the last of Khan's early texts wherein he examines the concept of *bid'at*.

2.3 *Rāh-i sunnat aur radd-i bid'at*

In his *Rāh-i sunnat aur radd-i bid'at* (1850), Khan aims to present a sophisticated description of different types of innovation. He bases his description of *bid'at* on Shah Muhammad Ismail's Persian *Īzāh al-ḥaqq aṣ-ṣarīḥ fī aḥkām al-mayyit wa az-zarīḥ* (*Elucidation of the Plain Truth Concerning the Rules About the Dead and the Tombs*).⁶⁴ In his review of the *Rāh-i sunnat*, Khan describes the

immediate cause for writing this tract [as] an interesting exchange of views Sayyid Ahmad Khan had (in one of the meetings at the house of Ṣadr al-sudūr Maulānā Muḥammad Ṣadr al-dīn Āzurdah), over the licitness of eating mangoes. Sir Sayyid

India," *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 34, no. 1 (2000): 53). On this basis, Khan is excluded from the realm of "orthodox" Islam: "His [i.e. Khan's] demythologizing [*sic*] attitude and his naturalistic appropriations of the supernatural realm were justifiably rejected by the orthodox" (Muhammad Maroof Shah: *Muslim Modernism and the Problem of Modern Science* (Delhi: Indian Publ, 2007), 7).

Even though the few studies focusing on a thorough analysis of Khan's religious thought do not ascribe Khan's thought to a mere adoption of European ideas, they fail to illustrate a continuation of Khan's early background in his later writings and rather subscribe to the assertion of a radical break in his thought (cf. Johannes Marinus Simon Baljon: *The Reforms and Religious Ideas of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khān* (Lahore: Ashraf, 1964); Bashir Ahmad Dar: *Religious Thought of Sayyid Ahmad Khan* (Lahore: Institute of Islamic Culture, 1957)). Those emphasise a Mutazili affiliation for Khan, calling him a Neo-Mutazili. This assertion is, according to M. Reza Pirbhai, "based on the close relationship between Ahmad Khan's 15 *usul* and the Mu'tazila's 5 *usul*, sharing in particular an understanding of Reason, and the conception of God as uncompromisingly 'transcendent'." (M. Reza Pirbhai: *Reconsidering Islam in a South Asian Context* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2009), 240f.) Yet, as Pirbhai further states, Khan does not indicate any references to the Mutazila.

Solely, Troll refers in a footnote to the possibility that Khan maintained some of his Sufi background in his later writings, while, however, his general perspective reinforces the assertion of a rupture: "In view of Sayyid Ahmad Khan's intensive contact with Sufism in his early life, it is remarkable to note how little he refers to Sufi thought in his writings after 1857" (Troll: *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 220).

⁶⁴ Khan: *Maqālāt*, Vol. V, 427; Troll: *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 40f.

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had defended his views, saying that to eat mangoes – though not a blameworthy action – was a matter of doubt, since the Prophet had not decided upon it explicitly, having himself never eaten them.⁶⁵

With this in mind, Khan felt the necessity to write a tract on *bid'at*.

In his introduction, Khan bemoans the wide spread of customs and practices in conflict with the *sunnat*, while the defender of *sunnat* is pejoratively called Wahhabi or Mutazili:

What a pity, what time was it when once people gave everything [*jān dete the*] to follow the *sunnat* of the Messenger of God; and if one nowadays follows the *sunnat*, he is called [a Wahhabi].⁶⁶

Khan proceeds to cite the tradition of Muhammad presenting a gradation of his followers, beginning with his nearest companions, and followed by their followers, etc. With every step, the distance to Muhammad increases, the respective status decreasing. Thus, Khan concludes that a pious Muslim must make an effort to increase his proximity to Muhammad as much as possible, by emulating his and his companions' conduct.⁶⁷ As stated above, Muhammad acquires the position of an exemplary symbol of Muslim life. History, however, is perceived as a gradual distancing from this purity of Islam, as symbolised by Muhammad. Khan experiences his own time, with both its innovations and neglect of Muhammad's *sunnat*, as an entire deviation from pure Islam as was present only in Muhammad's days.⁶⁸

Thus, he concludes that “only those customs, habits [*ḥaṣṣatēn aur 'ādātēn*] and religious services which were prevalent among them [i.e. Muhammad's companions and their followers] are meritorious and the remaining futile.”⁶⁹ Hence, only the *sunnat* of Muhammad and the habits of his companions are valid.

With reference to the famous tradition that the Muslim community (*ummat*) will be split into 73 sects, of which only one is on the right path, Khan reinforces his view on history as one of continuous decline. He identifies adherence to the *sunnat* as the one right path and calls on Muslims to adopt the *sunnat* and abandon

65 Troll: *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 41; Khan: *Maqālāt*, Vol. V, 427.

66 Khan: *Maqālāt*, Vol. V, 359.

67 This line of argument bears some resemblance to the reversed hierarchy of mediation in Sufi thought that one has to ascend to reach God. It will not be possible, however, to discuss this assertion within this project's scope, as this would require a careful diachronic investigation of this call to return to the *sunnat* of Muhammad, which can by no means be called an innovation by Khan.

68 Ibid., 360.

69 Ibid., 360.

bid'at. In the following paragraphs, Khan aims to distinguish three types of *bid'at*.⁷⁰

In describing the first type, Khan simply defines *bid'at* as the introduction of anything new (*na'ī cīz*). But he hastens to add a qualification for what exactly can be described as new – for a new hat or a new pan cannot be described as *bid'at*, as those things had existed already in Muhammad's days, if perhaps in different shapes.⁷¹ Hence, Khan defines *sunnat* as anything “which either Muhammad did himself, or ordered to do, or anything, done by someone else, which he did not prohibit, when he heard about it.”⁷² Khan defines any religious service, custom, or habit which did not conform to the conditions described in the time of Muhammad, his companions, or their followers as pure (*theṭ*) *bid'at*.⁷³

The second type of *bid'at* refers to a quantitative change of the *shariat*: even though a practice is in itself praiseworthy in front of God, if its prescribed limit is increased or decreased with the intention of gaining special merit, then this is defined as *bid'at* as well.⁷⁴ The third type of *bid'at* refers again to practices which are themselves believed to be meritorious: when this act is fixed on a particular day or occasion and perceived as a religious service, it is equally described as *bid'at*.⁷⁵ In his discussion of both the second and third types of *bid'at*, Khan criticises the innovation of practices which are subsequently performed as if they were prescribed and contained in the *shariat*.

Does Khan, consequently, condemn any kind of innovation? Is innovation perceived as negative *per se*? Can good innovation also exist? Khan asks in return, how can we know of any innovation whether it is good or bad? Man does not have any faculty to determine the character of an innovation, for the only potential faculty would be ratio (*'aql*). But Khan unequivocally denies the reliability of ratio:

According to the fundamental doctrines of Islam [*uṣūl*], it has been laid down that the people of truth evaluate the merit of any act only on the basis of *ṣar'*. By means of ratio, this cannot be measured. Thus, anything which has been ordered in the *ṣar'* is meritorious and which has been prohibited in the *ṣar'* is vicious.⁷⁶

Likewise, Khan denies the categorisation of experience (*tajribah*) as a licit criterion, as experience cannot determine the merit of any act of a man that does not stand before God. Thus, the only lawful criterion can be the *shariat* because of its

70 Ibid., 361f.

71 Ibid., 364f.

72 Ibid., 365.

73 Ibid., 371f.

74 Ibid., 378ff.

75 Ibid., 382, 385.

76 Ibid., 408.

divine origin. Khan perceives the *shariat* and *sunnat* (i.e. the former's lived realisation) as complete guidelines. He defines anything not comprised in them as innovation, being in itself negative, as he views the *sunnat* and *shariat* as perfect, not requiring any innovation. Still, he states that scholars are qualified to "establish practices to be implicitly contained in the *shar'*, [...] by critically employing analogical reasoning to Qur'ān and Tradition."⁷⁷

Conclusion

Early in his career, Khan had already developed an interest in history. In his pre-Mutiny writings, he penned two eminent historical studies, his *Āṣār aṣ-ṣanadīd* and his edition of the *Ā'īn-i Akbarī*. In his revision of the former in particular, his sense for critical historiography became increasingly obvious, as Troll states.⁷⁸ But his early religious writings also prove a certain sense for critical historiography: in his biography of Muhammad, *Jilā' al-qulūb*, Khan aimed to present Muhammad's life as bereft of the various myths and legends that had spread because of the use of unreliable sources. He acknowledged the necessity of reviewing traditional sayings about Muhammad and aimed to present a biography relying only on affirmed sources. Although Khan had here already shown an uncommonly critical awareness, considering his context and time, he had not yet developed any methodology.

The three religious tracts of his early period discussed in this chapter allow us to draw crucial conclusions about Khan's conception of history. *Bid'at* can perhaps be described as the most significant and frequently recurring concept of Khan's early religious writings. In fact, he dedicates his entire *Rāh-i sunnat va radd-i bid'at* to the elucidation of *bid'at*. In these tracts, Muhammad and his conduct become the central points of reference for original Islam. The past and in particular the days of Muhammad are perceived as the guarantor of authenticity. Muhammad becomes the perfect example for a pious Muslim life in any regard, which the ordinary Muslim should aim to emulate. This emphasis on individual responsibility is an essential feature of early reformist approaches in South Asian Islam, which can be traced back to Shah Waliullah. These tendencies gained greater impact with the increased utilisation of print. Religious elites abandoned

⁷⁷ Troll: *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 55.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 40. Yet, Troll does not specify the differences between the two editions (1. edition 1846; 2. 1852).

their monopoly on the access to knowledge by translating and printing religious texts that enabled the individual to fulfil this newly enjoined responsibility. Khan was a product as well as a supporter of this process, and argued equally for a return to original Islam – one bereft of its erroneous adulteration.

History, furthermore, is viewed as a continuous distancing from the days of Muhammad. The link to original Islam moves steadily into the past. Thus, in Khan's view, history implies an inevitable decline, a deviation from Islam which can be stopped only by restoring Muhammad's *sunnat* and applying it in contemporary life. This restoration is of a verbatim character, disregarding any adaption or adjustment as *bid'at*. The example of Muhammad is to be transferred into contemporary times without alteration. Khan thus sees Islam as a constant which does not require any adjustment. Its divine origin provides its universal applicability.

This preservative stance has frequently been termed Wahhabism. As I have demonstrated, this denomination can be traced back to a generalisation of the British, conflating Arabian as well as South Asian tendencies under the same term. This generalisation was even adopted by Khan, who later describes his own early writings as "Wahhabi." The preceding analysis of Khan's early religious writings has shown that this denomination is misleading, as it veils the Sufi aspects of the South Asian thought described as "Wahhabism." From Shah Waliullah to the Tariqah, Sufi inclinations do not disrupt or conflict with this preservative approach. Khan does not see this conflict either and presents Muhammad not only as the ideal of conduct and mundane life, but also as the single valid *pīr*. Khan thus positions himself in two respects: first, he criticises a mediation via *auliyā* and cuts the spiritual hierarchy, thus allowing an unmediated relationship with Muhammad as mediator to God; second, he merges the spheres of *sharia* and *tariqa* in the ideal of Muhammad. Sufi practice is, therefore, equated with Islamic law.

In this chapter, I have examined Khan's intellectual background in order to lay the foundation for questioning the frequently presented or implied assertion of a total break with his earlier thought framework. This question will be discussed in further detail in Chapter 3. For the moment however, the following chapter will discuss the next step in the development of Khan's thought wherein he engages in a Muslim commentary of the Bible. The philosophical thought framework he develops herein will be the foundation for all of his later periods.

II. The Bible from an Islamic Perspective

In the preceding chapter, I discussed a selection of Khan's earliest writings on religious matters and carved out his philosophical framework within the context of his biography. While the first period of Khan's writings is characterised by a variety of topics, his subsequent writings center on religious topics. Furthermore, his early religious texts are confined to inner-Islamic debates, while his later writings (after 1857) present a broader perspective, also engaging with other religions. Above all, his *The Mohomedan Commentary of the Holy Bible*, which I will discuss in this chapter, presents a Muslim perspective on the Bible. But what made Khan elect to broaden his perspective and even pen a commentary on the Bible – the only one by a Muslim to date? To fully grasp this shift, one has to take the drastically changed situation after 1857 into consideration. The aftermath of the so-called *Mutiny* compelled the Muslims of South Asia to eventually accept the British as the ruling power and somehow align with this situation.

In his *Asbāb-i baḡāvat-i hind (The Causes of the Indian Revolt, 1859)*, Khan discusses the reasons for the upheaval of 1857. His main concerns were to present a more differentiated picture and to rehabilitate South Asian Muslims. After 1857, Muslims were increasingly discredited as the main initiator of the *Mutiny*. The administration of the East India Company suspected Muslims of being disobedient because of their religion. Their position in society was at stake.¹ This was the turning point for Khan which induced a shift in his writing. The works of his first phase which had dealt with historical topics and, to some extent, religious topics contrast with the broader perspective exhibited in his second, post-*Mutiny* phase. His *Asbāb* clearly represents this rethinking: the nostalgia of several of his early works, like the *Āṣār aṣ-ṣanadīd* (1847-52), which documents the historical architecture of

¹ The most famous example is perhaps William Hunter's *The Indian Musalmans* (1871), which bears the very telling subtitle, *Are they Bound in Conscience to Rebel Against the Queen?* Khan wrote a review of Hunter and criticised Hunter's equation of Islam or Wahhabism with rebellion. Furthermore, Khan stresses the fact that Hunter was acquainted solely with the context of Bengal. Cf. William Wilson Hunter: *The Indian Musalmans* (Delhi: Indological Book House, 1969); Sayyid Ahmad Khan: *Review on Dr. Hunters Indian Musalmans: Are They Bound in Conscience to Rebel against the Queen?* (Benares: Medical Hall Press, 1872).

Delhi or his edition of the famous *Ā'in-i akbarī* (1855), is replaced by a shift to urgent, contemporary issues. The *Asbāb* is the first work to tread this path.²

In the *Asbāb*, Khan argues that:

This was not a conspiracy by a 'community' [qaum] to overthrow the rule of a 'foreign community' [ghair-qaum]. Nor ought it to be thought that this agitation came about because of a feeling of longing and regret that foreigners had taken control of the Hindustanis' ancient land – that the whole 'community' [qaum] united in revolt.³

He worked to refute the assertion that the upheaval of 1857 was a reaction to the decreasing influence of Muslim rule in India. According to Khan, the *Mutiny* must not be understood as a Muslim revolt. Khan negates even the adherence to Islamic conduct on behalf of the instigators of the *Mutiny*. On the contrary,

the people who raised the banner of jihad were such wretched and ill-conducted and badly-behaved men that besides drinking wine and watching spectacles and seeing dances and shows, they had no other profession. [...] In that turmoil nothing at all took place according to religion.⁴

So, the *Mutiny* is perceived as fundamentally conflicting with Islam.

Although Khan condemns the *Mutiny*, he is still not ready to blame Indians alone or even Muslims as the single instigators. He equally blames the government of the East India Company and identifies five causes for the rebellion. In short, they can be summarised as the government's unacquaintance with the habits of the people of India. Khan first of all mentions that Muslims insinuated – albeit erroneously, as much research proves – that the government had missionary intentions. The “biggest cause of this revolt,” however, was the assertion that the East India Company aimed “to bring everybody, whether Hindu or Muslim, around to the Christian religion and the customs and traditions of their [the government's] land.”⁵ He describes a strained situation provoked by increasing missionary activities as one important reason for the *Mutiny* of 1857. Disputes (*munāzarah*) between Christian missionaries and representatives of Indian religions were the order of the day and contaminated relations across traditions. Bitter disputes were in part

2 Pernau: *Ashraf into Middle Classes*, 207f.

3 Sayyid Ahmad Khan: *The Causes of the Rebellion of India*, translated by Frances Pritchett.

<http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00urdu/asbab/translation2005.html>

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

caused by aggressive missionary activities and their harsh critique of Indian religions.⁶ The representatives of the respective religions aimed to convince their opponents and prove the superiority of their own religion. Khan identified this constrained atmosphere of constant confrontation and critique as being perhaps the most crucial reason for the *Mutiny*, as this situation was perceived as a serious threat for the cultural survival of the respective religious communities.

One highly influential dispute between the Christian missionary Karl Gottlieb Pfander⁷ (1803-1865) and the Muslim Rahmatullah Kairanawi (1818-1891) will be discussed in more detail in the following passage. This debate also influenced Khan and shaped his religious thought and the terminology used in his transitional phase. Besides the *Asbāb*, Khan’s second important publication of this period is his bilingual commentary on the Bible in English and Urdu, entitled *Tabayīn al-kalām fī tafsīr at-Tūrāt va al-Injīl ‘alā millat al-Islām* or *The Mohomedan Commentary of the Holy Bible*. Khan herein develops a terminology which serves as the foundation for all of his subsequent thought. But in order to understand what caused him to pen a commentary on the Bible, it will first be necessary to examine the dispute between Pfander and Kairanawi.

1. “The Mohammedan Controversy”

1.1 Karl Gottlieb Pfander

Karl Gottlieb Pfander was born in 1803 near Stuttgart in Germany. Although he was born as the son of a village baker, the pietist orientation of the family provided him with a solid education. Pietism was an influential tendency of Protestantism, which originated in late 17th century Germany, reaching its zenith during the 18th century. The emphasis on individual piety and his education in Pietism allowed Pfander to enter a Latin school and, later, to proceed to the local Pietist college. Subsequently, he was nominated for the newly established Missionary School in Basel. His four-year training in Basel had a tremendous impact on Pfander and his views on Islam.⁸

6 Avril A. Powell: “Maulānā Raḥmat Allāh Kairānawī and Muslim-Christian Controversy in India in the Mid-19th Century,” *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 1 (1976): 42f.

7 Some sources also spell his name as *Carl* Gottlieb Pfander.

8 *Ibid.*, 44.

The curriculum of the Basel Missionary School was unique in two respects: first, the Basel School provided its students with a profound knowledge of Islam and Arabic. In comparison to other missionary schools, this was unparalleled. Avrill Powell points out in her article “Maulānā Raḥḥmat Allāh Kairānawī and Muslim-Christian Controversy in India in the Mid-19th Century” that “English missionaries of this period were sent overseas with little, if any, knowledge of other religions [...]”.⁹ The curriculum of most missionary schools in the 19th century merely emphasised the study of the Bible, while Pfander had the opportunity to gain a good knowledge of the Quran and Arabic:

Inspector Blumhardt, the head of the seminary, lectured five hours a week on the Qur’ān, and Professor Hengstenberger, of the University of Basel, taught Arabic for three hours each week. [...] their inclusion in the curriculum suggests that a Basel missionary would have a more scholarly point of contact with the people whose religion he sought to overturn than had most of his fellow missionaries.¹⁰

Besides this preparation for the confrontation with other faiths, the Basel curriculum, of course, also contained intensive study of the contents of the Bible. However, Biblical criticism was almost entirely avoided. This new approach to the Bible, which increasingly gained importance in German universities, originated in discoveries in other fields of study. The Bible came to be questioned for its equation with divine revelation. Equally, the rationalism of the 18th century had affected perceptions of the Bible: “Radical changes in historical thinking, accompanied by important discoveries in the fields of geology, archaeology, and anthropology now seemed to threaten the traditional chronology of the Bible.”¹¹ However, the Pietist orientation of the Basel Missionary School prevented any far-reaching contact between their students and the theses of Biblical criticism. Pietism was characterised by its rejection of the otherwise prevalent rationalism in other Protestant churches. Instead of logical evidences, Pietism emphasised the importance of the individual and his piety. Thus, Pfander, too, did not come in further contact with Biblical criticism and had rudimentary knowledge of this approach at best.¹²

9 Ibid., 45.

10 Ibid., 45.

11 Ibid., 45.

12 Christine Schirmacher: *Mit den Waffen des Gegners: Christlich-muslimische Kontroversen im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert; dargestellt am Beispiel der Auseinandersetzung um Karl Gottlieb Pfanders “Mizān al-ḥaqq” und Raḥmatullah Ibn Halīl al-‘Utmānī al-Kairānawī „Izhār al-ḥaqq” und der Diskussion über das Barnabasevangelium* (Berlin: Schwarz, 1992), 30.

Equipped with this comparatively profound knowledge of Islam and the Quran, Pfander was sent to Georgia, where he resided from 1825 until 1835 working among Muslims and Armenians. During this period, Pfander repeatedly travelled to Persia in order to learn Persian and to establish a mission centre. Furthermore, he completed his most famous book on Islam and Christianity, *Mīzān al-Ḥaqq*, which was first published in German, and then also in Armenian and Persian editions.¹³

In 1835, the mission centre in Armenia was closed by order of the Russian Tsar and Pfander was compelled to return to Basel. Over the following years, he struggled to find a mission aligning with his specialisation in Islam. In 1839, he was finally sent to India. After a stay in Calcutta where he prepared an Urdu translation of his *Mīzān*, he was sent to Agra in 1841, where he would reside for the following years and become part of what was perhaps the most influential dispute between Muslims and missionaries in 19th century South Asia.

When Pfander began to circulate his book in Agra in 1841, he provoked serious reactions among the Muslims of the city. Muslims had not been the object of missionary activities in South Asia until the 1830s. Missionaries initially focused on Hinduism, as several of their practices seemed disturbing for Protestant missionaries in particular. Furthermore, the East Indian Company was initially reluctant towards the Christian mission, a stance which changed only with the Charter Act of 1833. This act loosened restrictions in favour of missionary expansion by permitting missionary settlement without the requirement of a residence licence. Only in the wake of this act did the focus of missionaries shift also to Muslims and their cultural centres in northern India. Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that Pfander, who had made a name for himself as a specialist of Islam acquainted with several Muslim languages, be sent to Agra, which had formerly been the capital of the Mughal empire and was still an important centre of culture and religious learning.¹⁴

In order to understand the severe reactions by Muslims upon Pfander’s arrival and the dissemination of his books, one has to consider the broader situation: missionary schools with Bible-based curricula were established as orphanages, in which Indian children – in particular after a famine in 1837 – were brought up as Christians; presses were established to print publications denouncing Islam and Hinduism; and bazaar-sermons that attacked the two faiths were the order of the day. All in all, this environment fuelled Muslim fears of a collaboration of the government of the East India Company with missionary agencies.¹⁵

13 The German manuscript was completed in 1829 and titled *Waage der Wahrheit*. During the following years, Pfander prepared Armenian and Persian versions.

14 Powell: “Muslim-Christian Controversy,” 42.

15 *Ibid.*, 47.

In this strained situation, Pfander's missionary approach was perceived as an even more severe threat. His writings, however, lacked the aggression of previous missionaries: he did not apply a merely derogatory refutation of the Muslim faith, but rather conceded Islamic sources a legitimate position in his line of argument. In contrast to previous missionaries who had entirely dismissed the Quran's claim for divine revelation, Pfander utilised his knowledge of Arabic and Islam to build his argument on Islamic sources.¹⁶

1.2 *Mīzān al-Ḥaqq*

In his *Mīzān*, Pfander conceives of religion as a "universal craving" of man. In the introduction, he hastens to distinguish religion from reason. The former is conceived of as a desire and longing, while the latter's scope is limited to a rather thin, rational conclusion to the acknowledgment of God's existence:

But how shall we know and find the incomprehensible and invisible God? Can it be by the power and guidance of our reason only? No, indeed! How can human reason grasp that infinite, eternal, most glorious Being? [...] Reason can understand and judge of only those things which it has reached through the agency of the senses; and the world which it has grasped is but that which is visible: it can never reach the invisible world. On this account, man can understand by his reason, only so much of the invisible being of God as He has made known by the world which He has created.¹⁷

Reason, in Pfander's view, is thus limited to merely visible knowledge cannot grasp the complexity of God, while religion surpasses this observable sphere. Thus, religion cannot be grasped in its entirety by reason. In particular, reason cannot assist in comprehending the will of God. This, according to Pfander, necessarily requires the assistance of the Word of God, which explains "His will and purpose concerning man, and also His commandments and prohibitions to them."¹⁸ But since there are multiple and conflicting claims for the true religion, Pfander concludes that only one can be true:

¹⁶ Schirmacher: *Waffen des Gegners*, 83, 85; Powell: "Muslim-Christian Controversy," 47f.

¹⁷ Carl Gottlieb Pfander: *The Mizan Ul Haqq: or Balance of Truth* (London: Church Missionary House, 1866), iii.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, v.

Now, there are many and conflicting religions [*mazhab* in the Urdu version] in the world, and every nation considers its own religion true; but it is impossible that all should be of divine origin; indeed, only one can be true and of God.¹⁹

Religion therefore comes to be perceived as a universal craving implanted in man’s nature. However, the various religions in the world are not understood as equal, as only one can inhere divine inspiration.

Since Pfander addresses Muslims, he assumes that only three books, which Muslims consider to be divine, need to be discussed in his *Mizān* in order to identify the true religion: those are the Old and New Testament as well as the Quran. He writes:

But it is not necessary for the Mohammedan inquirers after truth to examine the religions of the heathen: the duty incumbent upon them is to search the three books which they already believe, viz. The Old and New Testaments, and the Koran. And the question, the settlement of which is necessary for their peace of heart, is this: “Is the Koran the Word of God, or are the books which the Christians use His Word: or are all three books confirmed and established revelation?”²⁰

The last question is subsequently negated by Pfander, as

[...] all those who are acquainted with the three books well know, [...] many of the matters contained in the Koran do not agree with the contents of the Old and New Testaments; and so it is impossible that both can be the divine word: only one must be true.²¹

While Pfander suggests a conflict between the Koran and the Old and New Testaments, the latter are both described as consistent. In a later chapter, he discusses this topic in more detail and argues that there is no abrogation of parts of the Old Testament in the New Testament. External rites and ceremonies have been substituted for spiritual practices: the New Testament is not imagined as an annihilation, but rather as an affirmation and completion of the Old Testament.²² This assertion is part of the larger discussion on the adulteration of the Bible: Pfander argues that the Bible is an entirely consistent and unaltered text. He dedicates the first of the three parts of his *Mizān* to this discussion, in fact. This can be read in part as a response to the common Muslim critique of the abrogation of the Bible. In quoting

19 Ibid., v.

20 Ibid., ix.

21 Ibid., ix-x.

22 Ibid., 7.

from the Quran, Pfander aims to establish the Bible as a legitimate source of equal value to Muslims:

According to the evidence which has been adduced in this Chapter, it has been fully ascertained that all these assertions of the Mohammedans are without foundation, and that the Old and New Testaments have, neither in the time of Mohammed nor before his time, – in fact have never at any time been changed or altered. Thus the Mohammedan truth-seeker will clearly comprehend that the Sacred Scriptures are unabrogated and uncorrupted Word of God, and that obedience to the precepts and doctrines contained therein is a duty incumbent upon every people and nation. And it is imperative that sincere and conscientious Musulmans should earnestly labour to acquaint themselves thoroughly with the doctrines and precepts of the Law and the Gospel [...].²³

In the second part of his work, Pfander describes the tenets of Christianity as based on quotes from the Bible. Herein, he also argues why the Bible has to be seen as the Word of God – and not the Quran. He defines several requirements that a book claiming divine inspiration has to meet. These qualities are not discussed further or justified, but rather appear to be generalised properties of the Bible. Besides these requirements, Pfander also equates the conditions of a nation with the legitimacy of its religion and scriptures. Thus, with reference to what he saw as the desolate situation of other peoples, he argues that their books cannot be the Word of God, for a religion and its scripture have to affect the conduct and morals of its adherents:

The fact that the doctrines of these religions have no influence to renew and purify the heart, is evident from the present condition of their votaries, and this, again, is a distinct testimony to the falsity of those books as professed revelations.²⁴

The third part of his work discusses Muhammad's prophethood and the Quran's claim of divine inspiration. Pfander aims to refute Muhammad as God's prophet and, consequently, also the legitimacy of the Quran as the Word of God.²⁵ Pfander continues his strategy from part one and bases his arguments on Islamic sources already accepted by Muslims. Although previous missionaries had already published tracts which more vehemently and pejoratively denounced Muhammad, the *Mizān* was perceived as a tremendous threat to Islam. This was because, in contrast to previous publications, the *Mizān* argued with Islamic sources and could thus have a huge effect. In order to enhance the impact, Pfander furthermore intended

23 Ibid., 22.

24 Ibid., 64.

25 Schirmacher: *Waffen des Gegners*, 93f.

for the style and appearance of his book to imitate the fashion that was currently *in vogue* for Urdu or Persian publications in South Asia at his time. This was an attempt at “orientalisation” meant “to convince the less learned Muslims that he knew their religion as well, or better, than they did themselves.”²⁶

1.3 Early Controversies

When Pfander began to circulate his *Mizān* in Agra, reactions did not take long to appear: he received several letters and pamphlets in response. But one name stood out from the rest: Al-i Hasan, who is described as “an officer of some standing in the Suddar Dewany Adalat, N.W.P. ... a man of very superior abilities, [who] holds a high place in Mohammedan society for attainments and learning.”²⁷ When he eventually encountered a debate of some ‘*ulamā*’ discussing Pfander’s *Mizān* and Muslim responses to it, his interest was aroused and he began to engage in the controversy. In a long correspondence with Pfander, he argued mostly on the basis of logic. Al-i Hasan aimed to refute the Christian doctrine of the Trinity by proving its irrationality. Their correspondence continued for several years and Al-i Hasan lastly prepared an 800-page volume in response to Pfander. But when public interest in the debate began to rise and letters of the correspondence and books surrounding it began to see publication in 1845-46, Al-i Hasan suddenly left Agra – most probably for a promotion. This interrupted the debate at once and public interest declined. In the following five years, no local ‘*ālim*’ took interest – or was sufficiently well versed, as Avril A. Powell suggests – in reviving the debate.²⁸

1.4 Rahmatullah Kairanawi

Only in the 1850s was the controversy resumed, this after Rahmatullah Kairanawi, founder and teacher of a small *madrasah* in Kairana, had visited Agra in the 1840s. Kairanawi was born in 1818 in Kairana and was educated in a *madrasah* in Delhi from the age of twelve on, and in Lucknow at a later time. He was employed as a *mīr munšī*, but after the deaths of his wife and son, he left the post and established

26 Powell: “Muslim-Christian Controversy,” 52; Schirmacher: *Waffen des Gegners*: 83, 85.

27 William Muir: “Mohammedan Controversy,” *Calcutta Review*, IV, 1845, quoted from Powell: “Muslim-Christian Controversy,” 49.

28 Powell: “Muslim-Christian Controversy,” 49f.

a *madrasah*. His visit to Agra and encounter with Muhammad Wazir Khan then caused him to engage in an effective refutation of Pfander. Not much is known about Wazir Khan, except that he studied at Calcutta Medical College and later came to England for medical studies in the 1830s. During his stay, he undertook “extensive research on the Christian religion” – perhaps as urged by contact with missionaries preaching in his student days in Bengal.²⁹ Besides English books on Christianity, Wazir Khan also studied German books on Biblical criticism. During his time in England, he could acquire significant knowledge about Christianity. He even went so far as to study Hebrew and Ancient Greek. Having finished his studies, Wazir Khan returned to India and eventually obtained a post in Agra. Even though he observed the controversy surrounding Pfander, and although he had considerable knowledge of Christianity, he lacked deeper insight into Islamic sources, as would have been necessary to refute Pfander’s attacks.

After his visit in Agra, Kairanawi felt a responsibility to prepare a counterattack against Pfander, which was supported by his friend Wazir Khan, who provided Kairanawi with his knowledge of Christianity. In the following years, Kairanawi prepared several books in Persian and Urdu. He employed two lines of argument in these works: the first argument repeated the refutation of the doctrine of Trinity on rational grounds, while the second contested Pfander’s assertion of the unchanged state of the Bible. As indicated above, Pfander based his argument on the equal legitimacy of the Bible for Muslims and on the Bible’s uncorrupted transmission, thus denying its abrogation. Kairanawi utilises Wazir Khan’s knowledge of Biblical criticism to prove “that the Christian scriptures had been altered at various times in history and therefore were not divinely inspired.”³⁰

Strictly speaking, the second argument – the logical refutation of the Trinity – was less innovative than the first. The charge of *tahrīf* (corruption) had appeared already with regard to this topic since the early period of Islam and was not new in and of itself. However, in Kairanawi’s counterattack, this particular argument could unfold a tremendous effect, for Kairanawi did not merely reason with reference to the Quran, but rather referred to the discourse of Biblical criticism, prevalent in Christianity itself, thus making no external charge. He writes:

But the reason why the second of these categories, *tahrīf-i lafẓī* [corruption of the actual words, in contrast to *tahrīf-i ma’navī*, corruption of meaning], provided a real platform for discussion between the ‘*ulamā*’ and the missionaries in mid-19th century India in a way which the Trinity argument had failed to do, was because the age-old charge that the Scriptures had been corrupted was revived by Raḥmat Allāh

29 Ibid., 46.

30 Ibid., 51.

at a time when the Protestant churches of Europe were themselves in turmoil over the same issue.³¹

Kairanawi quotes several authors of Biblical criticism in his book, without presenting any one position as superior. His aim is rather to demonstrate the tremendous dimension of disunity even within Christianity itself. In presenting the sheer abundance of mutually irreconcilable opinions on virtually any aspect of the Bible, Kairanawi aimed to refute the claim that the Bible is divinely inspired. In contrast, he depicted the Bible as merely a human creation.³²

In 1854, Pfander reluctantly agreed to a public debate (*munāzarah*) with Muslim representatives. He was initially not in favour of a public debate, as he doubted its benefit in convincing opponents of his views. When his reluctance was interpreted by the Muslims as withdrawal, Pfander was eventually obliged to accept the invitation. At the time of the debate, Kairanawi's books had been published only recently. Pfander was not acquainted with the books, and neither did he suspect their line of argument when he agreed on the debate.

Only during the two-day debate did Pfander become aware that Kairanawi had studied and utilised the European debate on Biblical criticism, a discipline which Pfander was virtually unacquainted with. One of his fundamental creeds, which had also been reinforced during his study in the Basel Missionary School, was belief in the uncorrupted state of the Bible and its divine inspiration. This lack of knowledge proved to be a disaster for him during the debate: almost the entire discussion centred on this issue. The order of the debate gave initiative to the Muslims. The topics to be discussed were chosen as follows: abrogation and corruption of the Christian scriptures, the doctrine of Trinity, Muhammad's claim to prophethood, and the inspiration of the Quran. This set-up provided the Muslims with the opportunity to utilise Kairanawi's "new and crucial advantage of being able to employ arguments derived from [the] study of recent Biblical criticism."³³ This plan also made it impossible for the missionaries to reverse their position from the defensive.

When Pfander initially admitted "copyists' errors," the Muslims utilised his admittance to show fundamental errors in the text of the Bible. Pfander was then

31 Ibid., 52.

32 Cf. Schirrmacher: *Waffen des Gegners*, 170: "Er [Kairanawi] vergleicht Bibelübersetzungen, verschiedene Revisionen und Übersetzungen und zitiert vorwiegend Kommentare von Vertretern der historisch-kritischen Textexegese wie z.B. Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher oder Adam Clarke und kommt immer wieder auf die Uneinigkeit zwischen Katholiken, Protestanten und den vielen anderen christlichen Gruppierungen in zahlreichen Lehrfragen zu sprechen." Cf. also Powell: "Muslim-Christian Controversy," 52f.

33 Powell: "Muslim-Christian Controversy," 54.

compelled to admit "that a few mistakes had actually been made of a kind more significant than mere copyists' errors."³⁴ Lastly, when he replied to question posed by Wazir Khan quoting from John's first epistle, Pfander said, "Yes, this passage has been altered, and there are one or two other places like it."³⁵ Thus, the stage was lost, not to be regained. Similarly, the second day of the debate, which actually gave the initiative to the missionaries, still did not allow them to resume counter-offensive. The discussion returned to the charge of corruption. The outcome of the debate was declared by the Muslims to be a clear victory and received wide publicity throughout India.

Pfander was compelled to leave Agra in the aftermath of the debate and was sent to Peshawar. However, the upheaval of 1857 prevented the maintenance of missionary activities in India. Thus, Pfander was asked to establish a new missionary centre in Constantinople.

Although the exchange came to an abrupt end with Pfander's departure, the debate had significant repercussions in the Indian setting. The strategy which characterised the approach of both Pfander and Kairanawi was applied by later authors as well. The sources of an opponent were acknowledged. The line of argument was then rested on the sources of the opponent, thus aiming to refute the opponent within his own discourse and invalidate his argument.

2. *The Mohomedan Commentary on the Holy Bible*

One important protagonist who resumed the encounter between missionaries and Muslims was Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan. The aforementioned debate had a significant influence on him and caused him to prepare *The Mohomedan Commentary on the Holy Bible*. This three-volume book, published during 1862 and 1864, remains an uncompleted commentary on the Bible from the perspective of Islam and the Quran. His commentary is commonly described as an attempt to improve the mutual understanding and relations between Muslims and Christians in the aftermath of 1857. Muslims lacked any thorough knowledge of Christian sources. Thus, the commentary is perceived as Khan's effort to provide Muslims with an approach to the Bible from a Muslim perspective. The commentary emphasises the agreement of the main beliefs of Islam and Christianity.³⁶ Moreover, he proposes

34 Ibid., 56.

35 Ibid., 56f.

36 Robinson: *Islam and Muslim History*, S. 82.

a very unconventional position regarding the Bible and its legitimacy as divinely inspired scripture.

2.1 *tahrīf*

As discussed above, Kairanawi argues that the Bible had been corrupted. He perceives the corruption as a verbal one (*tahrīf-i lafẓī*). He claims that several passages had been altered and do not exist in their original version. This charge cannot be described as Kairanawi's innovation, and instead can be traced to the early period of Islam. His innovative achievement is rather the linking of this long-established Muslim claim with the European discourse of Biblical criticism.³⁷

While Kairanawi utilises the charge of literal *tahrīf*, Khan presents a rather moderate version of corruption in his commentary: he describes eight types of corruption which he distinguishes as verbal corruption (*tahrīf-i lafẓī*) and corruption of the sense or meaning (*tahrīf-i ma'navī*). Within the first category, he describes the adding, striking out, and substitution of words in the text or the changing of words while reading out the text. Khan argues that only the meaning and interpretation of the text had been corrupted. Khan denies the presence of verbal corruption, however, stating only that the sense of the text had been altered, not the text itself. The categories of the corruption of sense or meaning comprise the omission of parts of the text while reading it out, wrong instruction of the people which runs contrary to the text, the application of improper meanings to ambiguous words, and the misinterpretation of allegorical passages.³⁸

Khan sees this kind of critique as having been already confirmed by the Quran and other early writings. But he adds two further arguments for the corruption of the Christian canon. The first regards the existence of many varying manuscripts, which he astonishingly de-emphasises in such a way that

[...] all the principles and articles of faith, (the deliverance of which to us commenced with Moses and was continued by the succeeding prophets till the time of our prophet) tend to the same object, and differ in no way from one another, we should abstain from entering upon this useless discussion.³⁹

37 *EI*: "Tahrīf."

38 Sayyid Ahmad Khan: *Tabayīn al-kalām fī tafsīr al-taurāt va al-injīl 'alā milat al-Islām* (Lāhaur: *Maktabah-i Ahūvat*, 2006), Vol. I, 78.

39 *Ibid.*, 167.

However, his second critique is directed at the ambiguity caused by the countless translations of the Bible. He asserts that to entirely translate a text from one language to another, in all its subtleties, is “an impossible task.”⁴⁰ Khan lists various translations and manuscripts in countless languages, and describes variances and translation errors. But despite this 100-page exposition, Khan again weakens his own argument by stating:

It should, however, be understood that the various interpretations of the same subjects, or other similar errors (if such are to be found among the received versions) are to be ascribed to the inaccuracy of translators, and not to the original, from which those versions have been rendered, and the authenticity of which can, no way, be injured by them [...].⁴¹

Khan emphasises the view that the authenticity of the original Bible is not affected by variances in manuscripts or misinterpretation in translations. The original thus retains its authenticity and legitimacy. This assertion is striking, for it reinforces Kairanawi’s argument about the corruption of the Bible. Why does Khan invalidate any kind of verbal corruption and rather emphasise the authenticity of the Bible? What causes Khan to make such far-reaching concessions to the missionaries’ claims?

Mushirul Hasan interprets Khan’s commentary as part of his greater project of uniting “the Crescent and the Cross” by “strengthening mutual knowledge and respect between the Muslims and Christians.”⁴² Although Khan deviates from several terms set forth in the Bible, Hasan emphasises Khan’s effort to illustrate the similarities between Christianity and Islam: both religions teach the same faith in the unity of God and believe in the same prophets.⁴³

This assertion seems to be affirmed by contemporary responses to Khan’s commentary. Alan M. Guenther discusses such responses in his article, “Christian Responses to Ahmad Khan’s Commentary on the Bible,” and concludes that Khan’s commentary was appreciated by missionaries and wider Christian communities. Instead of an effort toward reconciliation between British and Muslims, however,

40 Ibid., 168.

41 Ibid., 171.

42 Muhsirul Hasan: *A Moral Reckoning: Muslim Intellectuals in Nineteenth Century Delhi* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005), 102.

43 Ibid., 102ff. Cf. also Iqbal Sabir: “Sir Syed and Christianity,” in *Sir Syed Ahmad Khan: Vision and Mission*, ed. Shahabuddin Iraqi (Aligarh, New Delhi: Centre of Advanced Study Department of History Aligarh Muslim University; Manohar, 2008), 265–300.

Khan's text was seen as "evidence that the British colonial project at bringing civilization and learning was finally yielding fruit."⁴⁴ Khan's commentary and his acknowledgement of the Bible as a legitimate source were praised as a first step towards the recognition of the superiority of Christianity.⁴⁵

Yet, in presenting the similarities between Christianity and Islam, was Khan's single aim to reconcile the British with Indian Muslims? Apart from Khan's far-reaching concessions to Christian claims, the above-mentioned assertions seem to ignore the fact that Khan's commentary still views the Bible from an Islamic perspective. Khan's intentions behind his acknowledgement of the Bible's legitimacy seem to be overlooked entirely. In the following section, I aim to problematise this reading of Khan's commentary as a mere conciliatory effort.

2.2 The Bible from a Muslim Perspective

In this introductory chapter, entitled "On the necessity of the coming [*sic*] of Prophets to save mankind,"⁴⁶ Khan introduces his main terminology and foundational hypotheses. It is significant that this chapter does not provide a parallel translation in English, while the entire commentary is otherwise structured in such a way that every page is divided into two columns with Urdu and its parallel translation in English. Only this first chapter lacks – apart from the title – a translation in English. Was Khan's choice not to translate this chapter therefore intentional, so that it solely addressed Muslim readers? Considering the content of this chapter, this assertion appears not unlikely, given that the introduction raises serious doubts about the solely reconciliatory aim of the commentary and its concessions to Christianity.

Khan commences by briefly proposing his doubts on the ability of reason (*'aql*) to act as the means of faith. He argues that reason does not allow any further insight than to conclude the existence and unity of God. Much reminiscent of Pfander, Khan also denies the sufficiency of reason for deep insights. He then proceeds to describe the necessity of prophets:

Now, can anyone know (*pahchānā*) such an essence by reason? Many very intelligent men have applied their reason to this task, have observed again and again the workshops (*kārkhānē*) of the wonders (*'ajā'ib*) of nature and exercised their mind

44 Alan M. Guenther: "Christian Responses to Ahmad Khan's Commentary on the Bible," *Comparative Islamic Studies* 6, 6.1-6.2 (2011): 96.

45 Ibid.

46 The parallel Urdu title: "Insān kī nijāt ko nabiyōṅ kā ānā zarūr hai."

in much repeated reflection upon it. Surely we can know this much, namely that there is someone who does these most wonderful and diverse works. But more than that one cannot know, and if one knows one is mistaken. [...] It is not in the power of man to know Him as He is, by mere reason.⁴⁷

Khan criticises reason as misleading and instead emphasises the importance of God's revelation through prophets. To gain more knowledge about God, mere reason is, according to Khan, insufficient. The coming of the prophets is considered to be inevitable for the guidance of man. Through revelation (*ilhām*), they alone can teach man who his Master is and what His will is. As it is impossible to gain these fundamental truths with reason, Khan concludes that a prophet must have been sent to every *qaum* (nation), for how could men be responsible for their deeds if they were not made aware of God and His will? With reference to different Quranic verses, he concludes that God has sent a prophet to every people (*qaum*) to admonish them.⁴⁸ On this foundation, Khan continues to unfold his terminology.

Every *qaum* received its own law and way of worship (*ṣarī'at*) in accordance with its respective time and place. According to Khan, all *shariats* of the various prophets are derived from the universal message, *dīn*. They are conceived of as the current manifestation of *dīn* in alignment with the respective circumstances:

There is also no doubt that the religion [*dīn*] of each one of the prophets that came to pass was one and the same. They came to teach this one truth, and went teaching this alone – God is One and there exists none except Him. He alone deserves to be worshipped.⁴⁹

Khan assumes that all of the prophets in the world who brought their varying *shariats* – according to the context of time and place of the respective *qaum* – are still related to the super-category of *dīn*. All *shariats* are linked through *dīn*. The latter teaches a universal message which is shared by all of the *shariats* (regardless of their varying emphases), the most fundamental being the oneness of God. The differences in the *shariats* pertain only to adjustments of this universal message. Today's present religions, however, are distinguished from the *shariats* and termed *mazhab*. They are perceived as distorted interpretations of the original *shariat*:

In short there is no doubt that wherever religions [*mazhab* in the original] have spread they have all in the first place been given in by prophets. The teaching of all

47 Troll: *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, S. 237 / Khan: *Tabayīn*, Vol. I, 14.

48 Khan: *Tabayīn*, Vol. I, 15f.

49 Troll: *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 239f. / Khan: *Tabayīn*, Vol. I, 16.

of them was one and the same [...]. But when these people corrupted this [basic] content (*maṭlab*) there arose the necessity for another prophet to come. For this reason thousands of prophets came, brought their books with them and propagated the unity of God and His precepts among the people.⁵⁰

The repeated distortion of the messages brought by the prophets required the restoration of the original message by a new prophet. But, according to Khan, Islam was eventually sent to break this circle of distortion and restoration. Islam is described as the final *shariat* with universal aspirations:

When these precepts (*ahkām*) had spread far and wide and become known in all [possible] ways and nothing had remained hidden and was able to fall into error again, then, after this prophet [through whom this situation had been brought about] no further prophet was needed. This final prophet is the Seal of the prophets. This work [of prophethood] was completed in Muḥammad, the Messenger of God, peace be upon him!⁵¹

The necessity to send messages according to varying circumstances lapsed because Islam was sent as a universal religion conforming to any environment. Furthermore, Khan denies the possibility of its corruption. Thus, no further prophets need be sent.

Khan's concept of religion, as developed in this introduction, is split into two levels. On the lower level, *mazhab* can be described as religion in the plural. Despite their diversity, religions are thus linked through their relation with the universal *dīn*. This is a super-category which links the various *shariats* as its manifestations and can, thus, be termed as religion in general. With the *shariats*, Khan implements an intermediate level which maintains a link between *mazhab* and *dīn*, implying, however, that the former is a mere corruption of an original manifestation of the latter. The latter thus lacks the aspect of plurality found in *mazhab* and functions as an immaterial concept. The *shariats* are the connective link between both. All of them resemble the central message of God's unity as the only one to be worshipped. Only the manifestation and realisation of these fundamental messages varied in such a way that it was appropriate to meet the demands of the respective *qaum*:

50 Troll: *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 239f. / Khan: *Tabayīn*, Vol. I, 17.

51 Troll: *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 240 / Khan: *Tabayīn*, Vol. I, 17.

When man's spirit is afflicted by a spiritual illness the *sharī'at*, the method of service (*ibādat*) by which this spiritual illness disappears is given to the prophet of that age.⁵²

If one considers Khan's use of *dīn* and *shariat* as well as his view about the revelation which God gave to every single *qaum*, his terminology appears to be very traditional. It will not be possible to thoroughly examine the entire history of such broad concepts as *dīn* and *shariat* within the scope of this discussion, but in order to provide a point of reference, I will concisely contrast Khan's terminology with Shah Waliullah's (1703-62).

As mentioned in the preceding chapter, Waliullah and the continuation of his thought through his sons, in particular in the *Tariqah-i Muhammadiyah*, were important influences on Khan. Thus, Waliullah's terminology and conceptualisation of religion and Islam shall justly serve as an exemplary point of reference for the present argument. At first glance, both appear to be in general conformity. Both distinguish between a universal *dīn* and the various *shariats* in which it is manifested.⁵³ But, by introducing the category of *mazhab* in this context, Khan gives this term an entirely new meaning. *Mazhab* was traditionally applied only with reference to the four schools of law in Sunni Islam. In Mughal India, however, *mazhab* had acquired the meaning of a synonym for *dīn*, both roughly translating as religion.⁵⁴ Khan's usage twists this terminology, however, and introduces a clear distinction between *mazhab* and *dīn*. He uses *mazhab* in the sense of comparative religion or religion in its plural form. *Mazhab* denotes the now acknowledged religious belief systems like Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, etc. On the other hand, *dīn* refers to the particular religion's abstract points of reference.

If one scrutinises Waliullah's terminology – or, equally, the non-uniform terminology in the Quran – it becomes very obvious that the plurality of religion was never unfamiliar to Islam. However, here plurality is denoted with *dīn* and its plural *adyān*.⁵⁵ Khan deviates from this terminology and instead construes *dīn* as a singular concept, while its plural is disallowed.⁵⁶ When the plurality of religious

52 Troll: *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 239f. / Khan: *Tabayīn*, Vol. I, 16.

53 Troll: *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 90.

54 *EI*, "madhhab. Cf. also the *Dabistān-i mazāhib* (ca. 1655), thematising various religious traditions of South Asia. Its title documents the use of *mazhab* in the sense of religion.

55 Shah Waliullah: *Ḥuḡḡat Allāh al-bāliḡa* (Bairūt: Dār al-Ḥīl, 2005), 210; Smith: *The Meaning and End of Religion*, 81, 86f., 101f. Hans-Michael Haussig: *Der Religionsbegriff in den Religionen: Studien zum Selbst- und Religionsverständnis in Hinduismus, Buddhismus, Judentum und Islam* (Bodenheim, Berlin: Philo, 1999).

56 There are, however, very rare instances of the plural *adyān*. Yet, in general, Khan remains by and large consistent in his terminology. Cf. for instance Khan: *Maqālāt*, Vol. III, 13.

belief systems can be seen in Waliullah or the Quran on the level of *dīn*, Khan shifts the plurality to a lower level which retains inextricable dependence on the super-category of *dīn*. As we have seen in the preceding chapter, Khan was well-versed in Sufi thought and must have been well acquainted with the concept of *nūr-i Muḥammadī*, which implies the assertion of a pre-existence of Muhammad as light, i.e. in an uncreated form.⁵⁷ All prophets are perceived as merely particular manifestations of this light – with Muhammad, however, being the final messenger who exceeded his predecessors’ particular *shariats* with his universal message. Thus, one might perceive Khan’s conception of *dīn* as an adoption of *nūr-i Muḥammadī*, however it might be detached of its Sufi connotations.⁵⁸ Khan abandons the hierarchical aspect, as taught in its Sufi interpretation, implying the transfer of this light further on saints and *pīrs*. Rather, Muhammad is presented as the unmediated conveyor of God’s message, much reminiscent of Khan’s thesis in his *Kalimat al-Ḥaqq*.⁵⁹

This distinction of the immaterial super-category *dīn* and its related manifestations, the *shariats*, allows Khan to presume a singularity of truth. The plurality and clashes of the various religions are thusly disregarded as mere corruptions of formerly true messages. Every *maḏhab* is linked to *dīn* as its corrupted derivative. Islam, however, is described as the last and universal message sent to restore the original message of *dīn*. Previous *shariats* – as well as their corruptions in the form of the present religions – are declared unnecessary, if not altogether wrong. Islam

57 Troll: *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 31f. In reference to the famous verse *āyat an-nūr* in the Quran, which is deemed the impetus for the development of the concept of *nūr-i Muḥammadī*, Khan does not quote any representative of this concept, but suggests that he knows about the interpretations of this verse, cf. Khan: *Maqālāt*, Vol. III, 284f.

58 In one of his later texts, Khan even uses the term *nūr-i islām* more or less synonymously with *dīn* and states that “Islam is an imperishable light [*nūr*] which was always alight and will always remain. Islam is God’s light [*Islām ḥūd ḥudā kā nūr hai*] [...]. This *nūr-i Islām* was in the breast of Adam and this *nūr-i Islām* enlightened the hearts of Noah, Shuaib, Jacob, Abraham, Moses, John the Baptist, Jesus and all the prophets” (Khan: *Maqālāt*, Vol. XII: 146). Interestingly, Khan does not mention Muhammad in this list, thus leaving open the questions of whether he perhaps obtains a different position. On the other hand, Khan relates his concept of light directly to God, thus apparently skipping Muhammad’s role as conveyor of this light. Khan seems to refer to the doctrine of *nūr-i Muḥammadī*, but detaches it of any venerating aspect, apparently even of Muhammad, and links the entire authority solely to God. Still, significant parallels to the *nūr-i Muḥammadī* cannot be ignored.

59 “Muhammad is also described as light from light, and from his light all the prophets are created, constituting the different aspects of this light. In its fullness such light radiated from the historical Muhammad and is partaken of by his posterity and by the saints; for Muhammad has the aspect of sanctity in addition to that of prophecy” (Schimmel: *Rhine to Indus*, 117). Cf. also Chapter 1.

as the final message unites all of them under its umbrella. Regional variety is replaced with Islam's universality. Universality, in Khan's view, as it obtains the position of the exemplary manifestation of *dīn*. Islam is, therefore, more or less equated with *dīn* and receives a double position: Islam is described on the lower level as a *mazhab* comparable with other religions. It is not, however, perceived of as a corruption—as is the case for the other religions—but rather as a universal manifestation of *dīn*. Islam is represented on the concrete level of *mazhab* as well as on the abstract level as an equivalent of *dīn*.

Considering that this first chapter introduces Khan's commentary on the Bible, the assertion of a merely conciliatory purpose of this work appears to be very dubious. The introduction closes with an assertion of the finality and singularity of truth in Islam. Taking this presupposition into account, it becomes obvious that Khan does not aim to merely present the Bible in order to familiarise Muslims with the teachings of Christianity – for he refutes a Christian perspective on the Bible. Instead, he reads the Bible from the perspective of the Quran and Islam. Khan's strong presuppositions thus prevent an unbiased examination of the Bible. His perspective conceals the Christian faith behind the assumption of the Bible's corruption. Khan's commentary applies a rather apologetic view of the Bible, so that the purpose of a mere familiarisation with Christian sources is clearly exceeded.

The assertion that Khan's commentary is merely explicatory thus becomes rather questionable. His commentary cannot be read only in the context of the upheaval of 1857 and the effort for reconciliation. One must also take into account the context of missionary activities, and the debate of Pfander and Kairanawi in particular. Khan was personally acquainted with Pfander and referred to several books by Kairanawi.⁶⁰ We can therefore assume that he was familiar with the arguments presented in their dispute. We also know that, since 1855, Khan had defended Islam against missionary critique – thus doing so even before the rebellion of 1857. Yet, only after 1857 did he disseminate his commentary on a broader scale.⁶¹ Thus, it is reasonable to assume that a conciliatory intention – if at all present – was rather a later addition to Khan's original purpose.

The missing translation of the introductory chapter might therefore be read as an intentional omission made in order to keep up the appearances of a conciliatory effort towards the British government, while apologetic intentions are explained only in Urdu. Khan appears to assume that each language is respectively linked with distinct speech communities and separate audiences: Urdu with Muslims, and

⁶⁰ Schirmacher: *Waffen des Gegners*, 191; Avril A. Powell: *Muslims and Missionaries in Pre-Mutiny India* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 1993), 231.

⁶¹ Troll: *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 69f.

English with Christian missionaries. Potential overlaps through bilingualism are apparently denied or ignored. In leaving the introduction untranslated, Khan hence seems to address only his Muslim audience at this point in the text. But what prompted him to divide his audience? The bilingual character of the remainder of Khan's text emphasises his conciliatory efforts in appreciating the relevance of the Bible for Muslims and thus aims to familiarise them with the Bible from the perspective of the Quran. The goal of mutual acquaintance is stressed, while critique of Christian belief appears only as a marginal feature, as Khan's theoretical framework is missing. His critique of doctrines such as the Trinity only make complete sense, however, within his project of restoring the original message of the Bible.

On the other hand, Khan's introduction seems to first address his Muslim readership, to whom he perhaps felt it necessary to explain his project of commenting upon the Bible from a rather different perspective than conciliatory aspirations – for his Muslim audience might question his intentions in that case, suspecting his conversion to Christianity. One has to bear in mind the fierce reactions to his *Aḥkām-i ta'ām-i Ahl-i kitab*, published only a few years later in 1868, wherein Khan argues for the licitness of dining in the company of Britons. Thereafter, rumours about his conversion circulated. Hence, his introduction may also be read as a legitimation for his commentary as a whole, dismantling potential insinuations in advance. Thus, in order to not obfuscate any conciliatory aspirations, Khan delimits this introduction to his Muslim audience by refraining from providing its translation.

2.3 “What faith have Mohomedans in the Scripture?”

In a subsequent chapter, Khan discusses the question of the status of the Bible in Islam. Elsewhere, he refutes the idea of *nash* and *mansūh*, the abrogation of a divine message and its replacement by another. Khan instead argues for a renewal of the same message:

Thus it is that no commands of God are, in truth, ever cancelled or corrupted. To call them cancelled is merely a way of expressing that they are no longer required; because the commands which are now cancelled, may still be readopted: suppose the wants of the present time assume the form of those of the past, when those commands were originally promulgated.⁶²

62 Khan: *Tabayīn*, Vol. I, 278

Khan refutes the assertion of abrogation and rather emphasises the universality of the general implications of God's message. However, these general principles require an adjustment to the respective context. With changing circumstances, particular laws may become obsolete in their particular instantiation. Still, the general implication of the law need not be abrogated, but rather readjusted to a new context. Accordingly, Khan opposes the abrogation of the Bible. The latter is rather acknowledged as a relevant and legitimate book for Muslims as well. He writes:

Those who imagine it to be part of the Mohomedan creed that one law has totally repealed another, are utterly mistaken, and we do not believe that the *Zuboor* (Book of Psalms) abrogated the *Toureit* (Pentateuch); that the *Toureit* in turn gave way to the *Injeel* (New Testament); and that the New Testament was suppressed by the Holy Koran. We hold no such doctrine, and if any ignorant Mohomedan should assert to the contrary, he simply knows nothing whatever about the doctrines and articles of his faith.⁶³

In particular, the last sentence seems to refer to the dispute between Pfander and Kairanawi: the former was criticised for presenting a completely misrepresented understanding of abrogation which assumed "that Muslims believed that the Qur'an had nullified the whole *Injil* (gospel), just as the Gospel had nullified the Psalms, and the Psalms the Torah."⁶⁴

Khan adopts Kairanawi's opinion and refutes Pfander's assertion. He thus acknowledges the Bible, properly contextualised, as a legitimate source for Muslims. In presenting a long list of Quranic quotes affirming the divine inspiration of the Bible, Khan adopts Pfander's position. Pfander likewise aimed to convince Muslims of the legitimacy of the Bible by arguing from the perspective of the Quran:

Now, we Mohomedans believe from our heart that the *Toureit*, *Zuboor*, the writings of all the prophets, and the *Injeel*, are all true and sacred records, proceeding primarily from God; and we believe further, that the Koran is the last message which came down from heaven, and that, without doubt, it was delivered to our prophet, Mohomud. It is in fact the Koran that teaches us to believe faithfully, that the Scriptures above named have originated from God [...].⁶⁵

In line with Pfander, Khan first aims to refute the assertion of abrogation based on a Quranic argument. As has been discussed earlier, Khan furthermore negates Kairanawi's strong argument of a verbal corruption of the Bible. Thus, at first

63 Ibid., 280.

64 Powell: *Muslims and Missionaries*, 246.

65 Khan: *Tabayīn*, Vol. I, 44f.

glance, Khan seems to make far-reaching concessions to missionaries and accept several crucial arguments, while abandoning forceful counterarguments. This view discounts the powerful theoretical approach Khan develops in his introduction, however, for the inextricable linking of any religion to the universal *dīn* permits Khan to also integrate Christianity under this umbrella. All religions (*mazāhib*) are therefore integrated under the shelter of the single true *dīn*, and the Bible is established as a legitimate, divinely inspired text. But with reference to the universal implications any *shariat* shares, Khan can also argue that the Bible has been misinterpreted, resulting in the misconceptions of Christianity. The Bible is thus acknowledged as uncorrupted in respect to its text, but not in respect to its interpretation.⁶⁶

2.4 Parallel Inclusivist Approaches

This inclusivist move, which allows Khan to degrade the status of Christianity, shares striking similarities to the reformist approaches of “Neo-Hinduism.” Inclusivism was a crucial strategy in countering the Christian mission. The emphasis on Hinduism as the single religion upholding a tolerant stance towards other traditions “provided an effective means whereby the long-established Hindu inferiority complex could be overthrown and a considered response be made to centuries of Christian polemic.”⁶⁷ In his *India and Europe*, Wilhelm Halbfass mentions Ramakrishna (1836-86) and his pupil Vivekananda (1863-1902), who came to fame as the first Hindu to speak at the World Parliament of Religions in 1893 in Chicago. He thus obtained the prominent position of representative of Hinduism, and as the most eminent proponent of inclusivism. Ramakrishna presented his concept of *sanātana dharma* (eternal “religion”) as an umbrella category of its various particular expressions: “[...] the various religions were all paths to the same goal. The

66 Khan further reinforces the assumption of Christianity’s deviation from *dīn* by questioning the authenticity of the Christian canon of divine texts. In the first place, he negates the divine character of a part of the canon which does not consist of revelations to prophets, but rather to “private individuals.” In comparison to prophets, ordinary people cannot receive revelations “without any suspicion of error in either of the fact of the revelation itself, or of its interpretation.” Although “the apostles of Christ [are acknowledged] to have been inspired men, and their writings, so true, holy and worthy of respect that they may be used as religious guides, we cannot still be disposed to include or embody them in the Injeel, for according to our religion the Injeel is held to be that sole revelation of God which was made to Jesus Christ himself [...]” (Khan: *Tabayīn*, Vol I, 42).

67 Richard King: *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and ‘The Mystic East’* (London, New York: Routledge, 1999), 136.

metaphor of the different expressions for the one water which all drink [...] illustrates the Unity of God in the diversity of forms of worship.”⁶⁸ This universal tolerance and openness is thus turned against the Christian critique of Hinduism as superstitious and backward.⁶⁹ Ramakrishna inverts any critique and includes it within the realm of *sanātana dharma*. As Halbfass writes:

Instead, Neo-Hindus tend to claim that their tradition accepts, includes, and transcends all religions, by providing them with a limited and preliminary legitimacy. In this sense, the “Hindu Dharma” does not compete with the special *dharma* of the Christian missionaries. In the Hindu self-understanding, it does not even share a common border, and no area of potential conflict, with Christianity. Instead, it claims to represent the *dharma* per se, a higher unity of all specific religions: Unlike the religions, and regardless of all differences in interpretation, *dharma* itself is one (*dharma eka*).⁷⁰

The critique of Hinduism thus becomes obsolete, as it inevitably bounces off the inclusivist claim of *dharma* as an umbrella for the various particular religions. Vivekananda argues:

Ours is the universal religion. It is inclusive enough, it is broad enough to include all the ideals. All the ideals of religion that already exist in the world can be immediately included, and we can patiently wait for all the ideals that are to come in the future to be taken in the same fashion, embraced in the infinite arms of the religion of the Vedānta.⁷¹

According to Vivekananda, then, any critique is included per se within the realm of *sanātana dharma*. Thus, Halbfass concludes that “*dharma* [...] serve[s] as [the translation] for, but also as devices of self-assertion against, the Western⁷² concepts of religion and philosophy.”⁷³ Parallel to *dharma*, Khan’s *dīn* serves as a means to counter the arguments of the Christian mission and degrade its claim of truth to a mere subordinate branch of one’s own tradition.

68 Wilhelm Halbfass: *India and Europe: An Essay in Understanding* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 227.

69 King: *Orientalism and Religion*, 136.

70 Halbfass: *India and Europe*, 341f.

71 Vivekananda as quoted by Halbfass: *India and Europe*, 238.

72 Halbfass’s terminology for a Western concept has to be viewed critically, for it is dubious to what extent it is reasonable to assume religion as a Western concept – in particular in the mid-19th century, a time when processes of negotiation regarding the conception of religion were already in full swing. At this time, the “originally” Western concept of religion was already standing in contact with South Asian religious traditions and presumably being transformed due to this encounter.

73 Halbfass: *India and Europe*, 219.

In fact, Khan goes even further and questions the reliability of the contemporary understanding of Christianity. Although Khan acknowledges the status of the Bible in Islam, he simultaneously presupposes its misinterpretation as an uncontested fact. Apart from his concessions, Khan thus does not pen the commentary as a merely conciliatory work, but first and foremost as an apologetic one: in the actual commentary following the first, merely introductory volume, Khan sets out to restore the original message of the Bible. The Quran, as the last and single uncorrupted message, provides him with the proper perspective.⁷⁴

2.5 Restoring the Original Message of the Bible

Having established the theoretical foundation and terminology to be applied in his commentary, Khan continues in the second and third volume of his commentary with an actual examination of the Biblical text. In order to reveal any misinterpretations based on imprecise translation, which had been discussed as one important reason for the corruption of meaning (*tahrīf-i ma'nī*), Khan refers to the Hebrew original.

Starting with the book of Genesis, Khan questions central tenets of Christian belief and aims to restore the original Hebrew interpretation. In this context, a few topics recur frequently: one of them is the doctrine of Trinity, discussed in his commentary on the first verses of Genesis. Here, Khan doubts that “spirit” refers to a third person, as seen in the interpretation of Trinity:

Christian divines, in opposition both to us Mohomedans as well as to the Jews, apply a different sense to the aforesaid expression. They affirm that the word *spirit* here represents the third person of the Trinity, viz the Holy Ghost. But we Mohomedans and the Jews likewise do not concur with them in this opinion: because, in the first place, it is to be observed that according to our views the doctrine of the Trinity cannot be deduced from all the Scriptures. Again, independently of this opinion, the word *spirit* as here used can, by no means, be made to represent one of the persons in the Trinity; for, it is here used as a *noun governed* by the *governing* or *possessive noun God* [...].⁷⁵

Returning to this topic in another example, Khan declares a calculatedly wrong translation to be responsible for the corrupted reading of a verse in conformity with the doctrine of the Trinity:

74 Khan: *Tabayīn*, Vol. I, 17.

75 Khan: *Tabayīn*, Vol. II, 484.

Consequently, because the English Translators have rendered the expression in a manner calculated evidently to show that God took some other being besides Himself into consultation on the subject of the creation of man, Christian divines have been led to deduce therefrom the supposition of a plurality of persons in the God-head, or in other words, the doctrine of the Trinity.⁷⁶

Besides the topic of the Trinity, Khan additionally reveals corruptions concerning fundamental tenets of Christian belief: among them the doctrine of original sin. Khan questions this doctrine in referring to “the perfect justice of God,”⁷⁷ and doubts that God has, as he writes:

[...] visited all the succeeding generations of Adam with the fatal consequences of this transgression of their first parents; – since according to our own finite and imperfect notions of what is just and what is unjust, we do not hold the son responsible for the guilt of the father.⁷⁸

Instead, Khan presents the Muslim perspective, which negates the sin committed by Adam. He does not interpret the ordinance of God as “strictly incumbent and obligatory,” but rather as “a caution prompted by a regard for man’s well being, and not as a peremptory command which must necessarily be implicitly obeyed.”⁷⁹ Khan affirms this position in referring to the result of Adam and Eve’s transgression: “God merely pointed out to them the harm they had brought upon themselves, without expressing Divine indignation or visiting them on the spot with any mark of displeasure – We would not therefore hold Adam and Eve guilty of a transgression of law in this instance of their disobedience to God.”⁸⁰

In respect to the Sabbath, Khan concludes a general conformity among Jews, Christians, and Muslims. All acknowledge the Sabbath as a holy and sacred day. Nevertheless, the way of observance varies among the three religions. More relevant, however, is Khan’s discussion of the fixation of the Sabbath. Khan argues that the Sabbath is to be taken on the seventh day, according to the Bible, but that no particular day had been fixed: the Jews had confused the day “in the course of time as they were accustomed to enlarge and diminish, for certain purposes, the proper number of their weeks in the month, and that of months in the year, and sometimes to exchange one month for another.”⁸¹ The Christians, however, changed the Sabbath to Sunday, as “it is the day on which Christ rose from the

76 Ibid., 511.

77 Ibid., 586.

78 Ibid., 586.

79 Ibid., 586.

80 Ibid., 586.

81 Ibid., 535f.

dead; and no other day can therefore be more happy and hopeful.”⁸² Khan thus aims to show human interference and the corruption of God’s commandments in a relocation of the original Sabbath. According to his argument, the original day of Sabbath cannot differ in the three religions, as they are all related to the same origin. However, only the Muslim perspective is acknowledged as legitimate:

We learn from our religious Records, that our Prophet informed us that the day appointed by God to be the Sabbath, was *Friday*; that the Jews and Christians had differed among themselves in receiving it; that to us Mohomedans God had been pleased to point to *Friday* for the Sabbath; and that the Mohomedans were therefore to solemnize the Sabbath on Friday.⁸³

In particular, the example of the refutation of the Christian doctrine of Trinity clearly demonstrates Khan’s approach: he seems to make far-reaching concessions to Christian claims, as with the claim of the uncorrupted transmission of the Bible, which is recognised as a legitimate source in Islam. Yet, in the same breath, these apparent concessions are undermined and reversed in Khan’s inclusivist approach. He acknowledges the Bible as an uncorrupted and legitimate source for Islam, and thus argues from within the Bible itself. His perspective on the Bible is, however, Quranic.

This is the reason why Khan insists upon the uncorrupted status of the words of the Bible in his introduction. The Christian canon itself is utilised to prove that Christianity is a mere misinterpretation of the originally true message. By refuting Christian doctrines, and in particular the Trinity, Khan utilises an impactful theoretical framework which presumes an essentially immutable message of *dīn* expressed in varying *shariats*. This inclusivist move permits him to refer to a fundamental commonality in the implications of the various *shariats*. The Quran, as the last and uncorrupted message to restore and eventually maintain the implications of *dīn*, serves as a basis upon which to derive God’s oneness in its most fundamental principle. On this basis, Khan utilises the Quran to restore the original message of the Bible, which had been distorted by the “Christian doctors.” Thus, Islam is identified and equated with *dīn* and serves as the fundamental reference point for the measuring of other religions.

82 Ibid., 536.

83 Ibid., 536f.

Conclusion

The dispute between Pfander and Kairanawi was a turning point in the encounter of Muslims and Christian missionaries in South Asia. While Hindus had hitherto been the main focus of the Christian missions, Muslims increasingly came under missionary scrutiny from the 1830s onwards. Disputes between Muslims and missionaries, public preachers, and the publication of pamphlets were the order of the day, but the dispute between Pfander and Kairanawi stands out with respect to their approaches and engagement with their opposition's sources. Pfander had acquired a significant and hitherto unequalled knowledge of the Quran and Muslim languages. The latter permitted him to present his theses in Urdu, the prevalent language of South Asian Muslims. Urdu, in contrast to Persian, was not restricted to graduates of higher education. Furthermore, his acquaintance with Arabic allowed him to rest his argument on the Quran: on this basis, Pfander argued for the legitimacy of the Bible as a source in Islam. Referring to obvious contradictions between both texts, Pfander negated the possibility of both being divinely inspired. Having established several principles upon which to measure the validity of a divine scripture – principles derived, however, from a generalisation of the Bible – he concluded that only the Bible could be acknowledged as a divine revelation.

Pfander, however, had a weak point, which was utilised by his opponent Kairanawi: he insisted vehemently on the uncorrupted transmission of the Bible, as supported by his Pietist upbringing as well as the Pietist orientation of his missionary school in Basel. He lacked any thorough knowledge of the contemporary discourse of Biblical criticism, and thus could not counter Kairanawi's argument, which was based on exactly this discourse. Kairanawi referred to the charge of corruption presented in the early period of Islam against Judaism and Christianity. However, the strong impact of this old charge lies in its link with the intra-Christian controversy: Kairanawi argued that not even Christians themselves agreed upon the authenticity of the Bible.

Khan, who was acquainted with this dispute and its arguments, develops a differing approach in his commentary on the Bible. He neglects Kairanawi's charge of the verbal corruption of the Bible and emphasises its uncorrupted state. Reminiscent of Pfander, he argues through quranic quotes for the legitimacy of the Bible for Muslims. These concessions to Christian claims have been interpreted by contemporary Britons as the first fruits of their civilisatory politic. In a similar vein, recent studies also read his commentary as a mere conciliatory work in the aftermath of 1857. I have argued in the preceding pages that this assertion – if appro-

priate at all – requires a contextualized view: although the commentary was published only from 1862 onwards, Khan had already started to prepare it in the early 1850s. This fact alone raises serious doubts about a restriction of the commentary to a merely conciliatory purpose that was aimed at presenting commonalities between Islam and Christianity. Thus, this goal appears to be no more than an additional aim added *a posteriori*.

But these concessions must be read in respect to Khan's vast introductory apparatus, this consisting of the entire first volume of his work. Herein, Khan develops an inclusivist approach which presumes a universal message (*dīn*) that was manifested in particular *shariats* according to their respective circumstances. But Khan does not stop here, he adds a further level denoting the present religions (*mazhab*) which are perceived as corrupted derivatives of the original *shariats*. This inclusion adds a crucial footnote to his inclusivist approach, as the present religions are, despite their link to a shared, universal message, *a priori* presumed as corruptions. The only exception is Islam, which is presumed to be the last message, sent to eventually restore the preceding religions.

With this in mind, Khan's concessions to Christian claims appear as something of a tactical move, as they allow him to reverse Pfander's argument regarding the authenticity and legitimate state of the Bible into a thesis of corruption. Khan emulates Pfander's emic approach and argues from within the Bible. His view is nonetheless overlaid by a Quranic perspective. Islam and the Quran thus serve as a means to discover the corruption in the Bible and are applied to restore the original message of the Bible, which is in conformance with the general implications of *dīn* and, thus, equally in conformity with Islam as its final, uncorrupted manifestation.

This commentary on the Bible is the first step in the broadening of Khan's perspective on religion. While we have seen a restriction to merely inner-Islamic debates in his first phase, we observe here an engagement with the holy text of Christianity. On this basis, Khan develops a new philosophical framework in his introduction to the commentary that allows him to deal with a plurality of belief systems – an aspect entirely ignored in his first phase. This framework forms the basis for all later developments in his thought. While we have seen in Khan's commentary only a introductory engagement with the positioning of Islam towards other religions, Chapter 5 will discuss Khan's explicit approach toward the plurality of religions and the position of Islam in the context of this plurality.

Khan's commentary, furthermore, is his first attempt to defend Islam against foreign critique. While the commentary was triggered by a confrontation with Christian mission, Chapters 4 and 5 will present an engagement with the newly emerging discipline of Orientalism and their approach to the history of Islam. I

The Bible from an Islamic Perspective

will contrast Khan's newly developed philosophical framework with his early writings and further question the assertion of a total break.

III. From Restoration to Reinterpretation

The first chapter of this project discussed Khan's the engagement of Khan's early religious writing with the debate surrounding the representation and role of Muhammad for the individual. We have seen that Khan developed a negative stance towards the progression of history, assuming a general decline related to the increasing distance from the time of Muhammad. This period was perceived as the shelter of original Islam.

In this chapter, I aim to contrast Khan's first phase with his *Al-Huṭbāt al-Aḥmadīyah* (1870), an extended Urdu version of his original *A Series of Essays on the Life of Muhammad and Subjects Subsidiary Thereto* (1870). Since Khan was only insufficiently acquainted with English – his knowledge being restricted to reading – the English version was translated from Khan's records by his son while the Urdu version was published afterwards. In this work, Khan discusses different topics related to the biography of the Prophet Muhammad and aims to refute charges against him; the biography can be described as a reaction to William Muir's *The Life of Mahomet* (1861) which presented several statements that were unbearable for Khan.

Equipped with the background of Khan's early writings, my discussion here will examine whether it can be reasonably argued that there was a rupture between his pre- and his post-1857 writings. In particular, I will consult second and more extensive biography of Muhammad as a contrasting point of reference in order to question the assertion that the new approach applied here can be traced only to his engagement with critical historiography as he found it in Muir.

1. William Muir

As I have discussed above, Khan imagined history as a gradual distancing from the days of the Prophet Muhammad, implying a deviation from pure Islam. He interprets the alarming dissemination of innovations he observed in his time as a corruption of pure Islam. He recognises that the sole possibility of restoring una-

dulterated Islam is the abandonment of any kind of innovation. Innovation is described as inherently vicious, for the *sunnat* of Muhammad does not require any addition or adjustment. It is the perfect guideline for a Muslim of any and all times. Khan calls for a total restoration of the customs and practices of the days of Muhammad and for an eradication of all innovations. Hence, Khan's early texts clearly reflect the early 19th century's reformist discourse – and Khan himself can be described not only as a participant, but at the same time a product of these developments.

From the early 1850s onwards, however, we can observe a shift. Khan relinquishes his focus on merely inner-Islamic issues and begins to confront the Christian mission, as has been discussed in the preceding chapter. In the following paragraphs, I will shift my focus to William Muir, who was also present at the *munāẓarah* between Pfander and Kairanawi.

When Pfander was compelled to leave India as the result of the debate that was perceived to be a resounding defeat for Christian missionaries, Muir continued the debate with Muslims through an approach reminiscent of Pfander's. In fact, when he penned *The Life of Mahomet* (1861), he followed the suggestion of Pfander, as he explains in the preface:

The work was undertaken, and the study of Oriental authorities first entered upon, at the instance of the Rev. C. G. Pfander, D.D., so well known as a Christian apologist in the controversy with the Mahomedans, – who urged that a biography of the Prophet of Islam suitable for the perusal of his followers, should be compiled in the Hindoostanee language, from the early sources acknowledged by themselves to be authentic and authoritative.¹

The Life of Mahomet is characterised by its utilisation of only such sources recognised by Muslims. The underlying aim of apologetic intentions stood in stark contrast to the initial claim of providing a reliable biography of Muhammad in a vernacular language. Yet, while the biography was published only in English, the “Hindoostanee” version remained incomplete. Hence, his targeted audience was primarily made up of Christian readers. Muir's apologetic intention can hardly be denied, as will be elucidated in the following passage in detail. But, keeping in mind Pfander's apologetic approach argued on the grounds of Islamic sources, his request that Muir compile a biography based on authentic Islamic sources already suggests that Muir's biography would constitute Christian apologia.²

1 William Muir: *The Life of Mahomet: and History of Islam to the Era of Hegira* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1861), Vol. I, iii.

2 Avril A. Powell: *Scottish Orientalists and India: The Muir Brothers, Religion, Education and Empire* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2010), 127f.

In the following paragraph, I will first discuss Muir's educational background in order to more thoroughly comprehend his historical approach for *The Life of Mahomet*.

1.1 William Muir and Critical Historiography

1.1.1 Educational Background

William Muir was born in 1819 in Glasgow. He was the youngest son of the merchant William Muir senior, who died only two years afterwards. Left alone with eight children, all younger than eleven years old, his widow returned to her hometown of Kilmarnock, where she educated her four sons in the newly established educational institutions of the town. The Muir brothers grew up in a time that saw significant evangelical missionary activities in Scotland, these being targeted against the Catholic Church. Since the Muir brothers' mother retained the strong evangelical aspirations of their deceased father, she arranged the brothers' education very carefully. Thus, their early education reflected the evangelical orientation of their environment.³

In her extensive study of the Muir brothers, Avril A. Powell calls for a differentiated view of Evangelicalism, which scholars have perceived as a synonym for anti-rationalism. She emphasises a radical shift in Evangelicalism from the 17th to the 18th century, recognising a strong tendency toward rationalism and learning:

Usually considered antithetical to intellectualism in its firm emphasis on the biblical 'word' over other claims to truth, followers of Evangelicalism have seemed to inhabit a completely different world from the eighteenth-century 'men of reason'. But some recent re-evaluations have brought some of Evangelicalism's influential adherents in Scotland into the orbit of Enlightenment thinking to inflect the relationship rather differently. [S]ome Scottish evangelicals are now seen rather as advocates of a form of 'rational Calvinism', embracing 'an increased respect for learning, including the "new learning" of the Enlightenment' [...].⁴

Powell describes the general curriculum of the Muir brothers' early education as merely secular at first glance. Explicitly religious instruction was not given in the academies. That said, "the teachers were ordained clerics, and no doubt sought to

3 Ibid., 27-32.

4 Ibid., 14.

reinforce the Christian message in informal ways.”⁵ Powell states that, despite an obviously secular curriculum, “religious and moral values were indirectly reinforced.”⁶ The extent of these religious and moral instructions depended considerably on the individual teacher, however. In discussing the example of an English and history master, Powell notes significant religious stances, as the teacher states in his textbook that: “the Bible, ‘the best of all histories’, was literally true, that what they studied in natural history confirmed the ‘argument from design’.”⁷

During his early education in Kilmarnock, as well as his university days in Glasgow and Edinburgh, Muir absorbed a conception of history that emphasised the value of classical Mediterranean civilisations as a referential golden age. As Powell writes, “[...] the renaissance idea that the ‘classical era’ in the Mediterranean provided the single and sufficient paradigm of ‘civilization’ remained virtually unchallenged.”⁸ In the course of this approach, philosophy was taught through classics, and comprised of moral philosophy as well as logic. Influenced by this education, William Muir also retained – into his later years – a perception of history structured by a past standard, with regard to both his own and other civilisations. The classical period was perceived as the single and authentic point of reference for all subsequent historical developments.⁹

Leaving his studies in Glasgow and Edinburgh uncompleted, Muir received the opportunity to begin an administrative career in the East India Company. In 1804, the Company had decided to establish Haileybury College in Hertfordshire in order to improve the preparation of its administration personnel. The college was divided into two departments, these being the European and the Oriental departments. Both were compulsory parts of the curriculum. The European department again emphasised classical learning: “[...] like the Scottish curriculum, the learning of history [was conveyed] through the classics, thus, reinforcing their [i.e. the Muir brothers’] strong induction into Hellenic and Roman civilization.”¹⁰ On the other hand, the Oriental department was intended for the acquisition of the “classical and vernacular languages of India.”¹¹ Powell notes a significant shift between the early and later teachers of the college’s Oriental department. While the first generation consisted of exceptional scholars and language instruction by Indian teachers, the generation of teachers of William Muir’s time in the 1830s lacked this exceptional learning, and Indian teachers were no longer employed

5 Ibid., 36.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid., 37.

8 Ibid., 39.

9 Ibid., 40f.

10 Ibid., 60.

11 Ibid., 62.

because of “their domestic complications, often following marriages in Britain, having involved huge expenditure.”¹² But apart from this change, there was also a shift in attitudes towards Indian civilisation.

At this time, the classical languages – Sanskrit and, in particular, Arabic – experienced a loss of influence in the college. While Sanskrit was required only to a certain extent from 1826-36, dependent upon the area of the students’ future employment, it was made compulsory from 1838 on. Arabic, however, was taught only as a voluntary class in the 1820s and 1830s, and participants were few. Still, William Muir decided to learn Arabic, and “was a prize-winner in a class of only two.”¹³

In 1837, Muir entered civil service through the administration of the East India Company. After initially being stationed in smaller district towns like Kanpur, Bundhelkund, and Fatehpur Sikri, as was usual for a young civilian’s early years, he obtained the post of secretary to the governor of the North-West Provinces in Agra. There, he had the opportunity to follow the controversy between Pfander and Kairanawi. During his initial time in rather remote district towns, Muir had devoted his leisure time, like many would-be scholar-administrators, to language-learning, reading, translating, and writing. Moreover, his studies were bolstered by the dearth of British colleagues in these remote places. He benefitted, however, from the exchange with local, religious authorities, this time further being enhanced by the fact that those *qasbahs* were often centres of scholarship and religious learning. Nevertheless, Powell emphasises Muir’s text-based approach: “Not that the Muirs would necessarily choose to frequent the temples, mosques and shrines on their doorsteps in search of insights into ‘popular’ religious practice for both John and William opted for a narrowly ‘bookish’ encounter with textual Islam and Hinduism, showing little interest in temple and shrine practices.”¹⁴ In 1876, William Muir eventually retired as Lieutenant-Governor after nearly forty years of service.

12 Ibid., 63.

13 Ibid., 65.

14 Ibid., 78.

2. The Life of Mahomet

During 1857 and 1861, Muir published his four-volume magnum opus, *The Life of Mahomet*. He had previously published a series of articles in the *Calcutta Review* and compiled them in his *The Life of Mahomet* in a consistent and revised format. The book starts with an extensive introduction discussing the original sources which Muir utilised for the preparation of his work, and addresses their authenticity and reliability. In the following paragraphs, I will analyse the implications of this introduction with regard to Muir's approach to the sources and his historical approach in general. I will also examine how his conception of history influenced his views on Islam.

Having described the impetus to compile this biography in the preface with regard to Pfander, Muir proceeds to discuss the referenced sources and their reliability. He introduces a categorisation of historical material in "legendary tales," "tradition", and "contemporary material." The first category is compared to the stories of Hercules and described as being less reliable. Legendary tales are rather read with regard to their underlying, abstract principles, their origin in "real facts" being doubtful. Tradition, however, may be related to "actual or supposed events." But its fashion of transmission distorts its reliability. It is the task of the historian to derive the factual parts of the traditions with reference to context, as it may be presented in reliable contemporary or historical material.¹⁵

Concluding this concise description of his historical approach, Muir states that the sources of the history of Islam cannot be exclusively associated with any one of these categories:

It is *legendary*, for it contains multitudes of wild myths, such as the "Light of Mahomet," and the cleansing of his heart. It is *traditional*, since the main material of the story is oral recitation, not recorded until Islam had attained to a full growth. But it possesses also some of the elements of *History*, because there are contemporary records of undoubted authority, to which we can still refer.¹⁶

Muir emphasises the difficulty of deriving a reliable biography of Muhammad due to the inconsistency and heterogeneity of the material available. But, in the following passage, he sets out to classify the present sources and develop an approach for how to utilise this material. He recognises two main sources, the Quran and the

¹⁵ Muir: *The Life of Mahomet*, Vol. I, i.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, i-ii.

ḥadīṣ-tradition. Besides these, Muir also recognises Arab poetry and other unspecified contemporary material, but rejects its reliability, as this material is also transmitted via the tradition of *ḥadīṣ*.

First, Muir discusses the Quran and its reliability as a historical source. Here, he negates the Muslim stance of holding the Quran as divinely inspired:

The Coran consists exclusively of the revelations or commands which Mahomet *professed*, from time to time, to receive through Gabriel, as a message direct from God; and which under an *alleged* divine connection, he delivered to those about him. At the time of *pretended* inspiration, or shortly after, each passage was recited by Mahomet before the companions or followers who happened to be present [...].¹⁷ (Italics added)

Muir denies any divine character of the Quran and rather recognises Muhammad as its author. Nevertheless, Muir acknowledges the uncorrupted state of the Quran as it was compiled during the reign of the first caliphs: first, the memory of the companions was still fresh at this time and, secondly, various transcripts prepared by the companions existed. Any deviation in the early editions of the first caliphs would thus have been identified, as Muir argues. He acknowledges the reliability of the Quran regarding its transmission, yet once again denies its divine inspiration:

[W]e may upon the strongest presumption affirm that every verse in the Coran is the genuine and unaltered composition of Mahomet himself, and conclude with at least a close approximation to the verdict of Von Hammer – *That we hold the Coran to be surely Mahomet's word, as the Mahometans hold it to be the word of God.*¹⁸

This acknowledgment of the reliability of the Quran may reflect Muir's intention to fashion his biography as a psychological study of Muhammad, thus utilising the Quran as crucial insight:

The Coran becomes the ground-work and the test of all inquiries into the origin of Islam and the character of its founder. Here we have a store-house of *Mahomet's own words recorded during his life*, extending over the whole course of his public career, and illustrating his religious views, his public acts, and his domestic character. By this standard of his own making we may safely judge his life and actions, for it *must* represent either what he actually thought, or that which he desired to appear as thinking. And so true a mirror is the Coran of Mahomet's character [...].¹⁹

17 Ibid., ii-iii.

18 Ibid., xxvii.

19 Ibid., xxvii.

In Muir's biography, Muhammad is humanised and studied as an ordinary man, rejecting Islamic claims for his prophethood and divine inspiration. Still, acknowledges the Quran as a crucial source, providing a reliable record of Muhammad's words, which may be utilised to study his personality.

Of even more relevance for the present study is, however, Muir's approach to the tradition. He views the *ḥadīṣ* far more critically than the Quran. The time of early Islam, following the death of Muhammad, was, according to Muir, characterised by "arms." The intervals of long marches between fights were filled with, as he writes:

calling up the past in familiar conversation or more formal discourse. On what topic, then, would the early Moslems more enthusiastically descant than on the acts and sayings of that wonderful man who had called them into existence as a conquering nation, and had placed in their hands "the keys both of this World and of Paradise?" Thus, the converse of Mahomet's followers would be much about him.²⁰

Muir describes this environment as encouraging not only the growth of the tradition, but, in the course of time, its exaggeration:

[A]s time removed him [i.e. Muhammad] farther and farther from them [i.e. the companions], the lineaments of the mysterious mortal who was wont to hold familiar intercourse with the messengers of heaven, rose in dimmer, but in more gigantic proportions. The mind was unconsciously led on to think of him with supernatural power, and ever surrounded by supernatural agency. Here was the material out of which Tradition grew luxuriantly. Whenever there was at hand no standard of fact whereby these recitals might be tested, the Memory was aided by the unchecked efforts of the Imagination; and as days rolled on the latter element gained complete ascendancy.²¹

When, furthermore, the growing territory required a more sophisticated jurisdiction, the Quran alone could no longer suffice. The *sunnat* of Muhammad, as transmitted via the *ḥadīṣ*, came to be consulted as an additional source. As a consequence, tradition received a hitherto unknown status, and Muslims perceived Muhammad as infallible:

The recitals regarding the life of the Prophet now acquired an unlooked-for value. *He* had never held himself to be infallible, except when directly inspired of God;

20 Ibid., xxviii.

21 Ibid., xxviii-xxix.

but this new doctrine assumed that a heavenly and unerring guidance pervaded every word and action of his prophetic life.²²

Muir describes both the gatherings of the companions as well as the addition of the conduct of Muhammad as sources for jurisdiction crucial for supernatural exaggerations as well as the fabrication of tradition:

The prerogative now claimed for Tradition stimulated the growth of fabricated evidence, and led to the preservation of every kind of story, spurious or real, touching the Prophet.²³

Since these traditions were not preserved in written form until the later part of the first century of Islam, and were transmitted only orally, Muir furthermore adds his suspicion of error in remembrance, on the one side, and intentional distortion due to political circumstances as well as bias and prejudice on the other.²⁴

In Muir's view, the collectors of tradition had to rely on this orally transmitted material, partially partially fabricated as it may have been and partially distorted by superstition, to provide evidence for particular Muslim convictions. Still, the collectors developed a critical approach to this material:

It is evident then that some species of criticism was practised by the Compilers, and that, too, so unsparingly that out of a hundred traditions not more than *one* was accepted, and the remaining ninety-nine entirely rejected.²⁵

Yet, Muir refers to significant shortcomings in their approach, which was based on the authority and reliability of the chain of the transmitters (*isnād*). A tradition had to be traced back without interruption to a companion, including the name of every single transmitter. His criticism of the collectors consisted of investigating their character and reliability.²⁶ In this regard, Muir criticises the lack of any examination of the transmitted content:

But the European reader will be grievously deceived if he at all regards such criticism, rigorous as it was, in the light of a sound and discriminating investigation into the credibility of the traditional elements. It was not the *subject-matter* of a tradition, but simply the *names* attached thereto, which decided the question of credit.

22 Ibid., xxxi.

23 Ibid., xxxi-xxxii.

24 Ibid., xxxvi.

25 Ibid., xlv.

26 *El*: "ḥadīth"

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[...] No inherent improbability, however glaring, could exclude a narration thus attested from its place in the authentic collections.²⁷

Thus, in identifying a contradiction in the spirit of Islam that suppresses “free inquiry and real criticism,” Muir explains the reason that the collectors’ maintained a merely superficial level of criticism:

The blind faith of Mahomet and his followers spurned the aids of investigation and evidence.²⁸

Muir thus aims to develop a critical approach that utilises the vast material of tradition, as the Quran alone cannot suffice for a biography due to its disordered arrangement. The collectors’ criticism cannot provide a certain basis of tradition – despite their rigorous exclusion of material – for any inquiry into content or “internal probability” is lacking. Muir therefore proposes the Quran as a reliable and authentic point of reference:

And here we are fortunate in having at hand, as a standard of comparison, the Coran, which has been already proved a genuine and contemporary document.²⁹

On these grounds, Muir proceeds to reject any aspect of superstition to be found in the tradition, as this implies a direct contradiction made against the statement of the Quran that Muhammad had never performed any miracle. Still, Muir does not recognise much practical applicability for this method apart from the aforementioned refusal of miracles in the *ḥadīṣ*.³⁰

Since the *ḥadīṣ*-tradition is entirely “*ex parte*” – i.e. the material of tradition is completely self-referential, lacking any external verification by any opposing position – Muir concludes that the biographer of Muhammad must rely on internal criteria:

In this view, the points on which the probability of a tradition will mainly depend, appear to be *first*, whether there existed a bias among the Mahometans generally respecting the subject narrated; *second*, whether there are traces of any special interest, prejudice, or design, on the part of the narrator; and *third*, whether the narrator had opportunity for personally knowing the facts. These topics will perhaps best

27 Muir: *The Life of Mahomet*, Vol. I, xlv.

28 *Ibid.*, xlv.

29 *Ibid.*, l.

30 *Ibid.*, l-li.

be discussed by considering the *Period* to which a narration relates, and then the *Subject* of which it treats.³¹

In breaking the lifetime of Muhammad into separate periods, Muir thus aims to distinguish the certain knowledge his companions could have had regarding any particular period. In analysing the subject of the tradition, he aims to disclose “*personal, party, and national, bias*” as motives for fabricating false *ḥadīṣ*. He mentions the merely personal interest in being associated with Muhammad as well as the purpose of increasing the position of one’s own party, tribe, family, etc. Finally, he discusses the impact of national bias, i.e. prejudices which are not confined to a particular faction, but which had obtained a universal character among Muslims. Muir assigns any glorification of Muhammad to this category, as well as the attribution of miraculous powers to him. The latter can be disclaimed with reference to the Quran, while any other glorification remains impossible to be checked and verified. Muir describes the narrators as blind toward rational thinking regarding Muhammad, as they readily believed even irrational, miraculous stories in their faith:

On a subject so impalpable to sense, so readily apprehended by imagination, it may be fairly assumed that reason had little share in controlling the fertile productions of fancy; that the conclusions of his susceptible and credulous followers far exceeded the premises granted by Mahomet; that even simple facts were construed by their excited faith as pregnant with marks of supernatural power and unearthly companionship; and that, after the object of veneration had passed from their sight, fond devotion perpetuated and enhanced the fascinating legends.³²

Still, Muir states that those traditions may contain a true core which had been adorned with superstitious exaggerations. Moreover, the lack of an external perspective meant that traditions unfavourable to Muhammad fell into disrepute or were rejected “because they appeared to dishonour Mahomet [...]”³³

On the other hand, Muir identifies a set of principles that may be applied to verify a tradition as reliable, including: agreements between independent traditions, agreements between portions of independent traditions, verbal coincidence, pointing to a common written original, and correspondence with the Quran. Strikingly, he also acknowledges the “disparagement of Mahomet” as a reason for credibility:

31 Ibid., lii-liiii.

32 Ibid., lxiii.

33 Ibid., lxxii.

When a tradition contains statements in disparagement of Mahomet, such as an indignity shown to him by his followers; or an insult from his enemies after his emigration (for then the period of his humiliation had passed, and that of his exaltation arrived); his failure in any enterprise or laudable endeavour; or, in fine, anything at variance either in fact or doctrine with the principles and tendencies of Islam, there will be strong reason for admitting it as authentic: because, otherwise, it seems hardly credible that such a tradition could be fabricated, or having been fabricated, that it could obtain currency among the followers of Mahomet.³⁴

Thus, any tradition that describes an incongruence in Muhammad's acts in comparison to the doctrines of Islam is perceived as credible, as Muir sees such an invention and its subsequent preservation as highly unlikely.

Hence, Muir concludes with an assertion of the general credibility of the tradition, without, however, accepting all traditions unquestioned. Instead, he believes that Islamic traditions require further investigation and verification, for the Muslim criticism of merely judging the credibility of the transmitters does not suffice, as aspects relating to the content of a tradition are ignored entirely. Muir suggests principles of internal verification which situate a particular tradition within its historical context as well as an analysis of its congruity in relation to other traditions as well as the Quran.

Muir's approach to history is thus characterised by two main aspects: first, a preference for a textually based view on Islam and, second, source criticism. In the conclusion of his later *Annals of the Early Caliphate* (1883), Muir explains his view of history with regard to Islam more explicitly and describes Islam as a static system which is incapable of even slight change:

As regards the spiritual, social, and dogmatic aspect of Islam, there has been neither progress nor material change since the third century of the Hegira. Such as we found it to have been then, such it is also at the present day. The nations may advance in civilisation and morality; but Islam stands still.³⁵

Any reform is incompatible with Islam, as "a reformed Islam, which should part with the Divine ordinances on which they rest, or attempt in the smallest degree to change them by a rationalistic selection, abatement, or variation, would be Islam no longer."³⁶ Thus, Islam can be studied only by investigating its early history, this being the essential, immutable Islam. As Powell argues, Muir was influenced

34 Ibid., lxxxii.

35 Muir: *Annals of the Early Caliphate* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1883), 459.

36 Ibid., 458.

by his educational background to the extent that he perceived the past as an irretrievable point of reference that cannot be regained, and transferred this approach to his study of Islam. Islam is viewed as a fixed system with immutable precepts and rules, disallowing even the slightest deviation or adaptation. Any further development is denied, thus informing Muir's lack of interest in contemporary, lived Islam. Instead, his perspective focuses on the early history of Islam, with Muhammad and his lifetime providing a crucial point of reference in identifying essential Islam. Nasir Abbas Nayyar describes this attempt to recover an original historical essence as a general trend in 19th century historiography and traces this back to etymology, which had been universalised as a general methodological approach in historical studies. As Nayyar writes, "No matter how different the meanings of a present word appear in comparison to its origin, they cannot evade their origin [...] Thus, in understanding the present meanings of a word, it is inevitable to refer to its origin."³⁷ This universal approach came to be utilised in historiography as well, thus mandating the recovery of an origin to which the present form of a religion etc. is inextricably bound.³⁸

Muir took a generally positive stance towards Islamic sources that, to a certain extent, resembled the arguments of Pfander. Muir recognised the Quran as a certain and uncorrupted source, albeit one that does not provide much material for a biography due to its inner structure. In order to gather such material, Muir had to rely on the *ḥadīṣ*-tradition, a vast collection of rather uncertain material. For Muir, its critical standards did not suffice, however, as criticism was restricted to the mere verification of a chain of transmitters and their credibility. Muir bemoaned the Muslims' failure to take into account the subject matter of a particular tradition. He thus developed his own critical approach which depended crucially on contextualising tradition internally as well as referencing the Quran as a verified source.

To a certain extent, Muir's approach to history also resembles the view of early reformist approaches in South Asian Islam as well as the Wahhabism of the Arabic peninsula, which have been described in chapter one. Muir, like other British officials, did not distinguish these practices as distinct tendencies, but designated both as Wahhabism. Powell argues that Muir initially had a very positive attitude to Wahhabism, as he hoped:

that meaningful 'reform' might be emerging from a group he described as the 'Protestant Moslems' or 'Delhi Wahabies', regarding them at first as critics of Sunni tradition, revivers perhaps of a modern form of Mu'tazilite rationalism. When he first became aware of their existence he hoped that

37 Nasir Abbas Nayyar: *Urdū adab kī taškīl-i jadīd: nau ābādiyātī aur pas-i nau ābādiyātī 'ahd ke urdū adab ke muṭāla 'āt* (Karācī: Oxford University Press, 2016), 61.

38 Ibid., 61f.

their reformist agendas might open them to an appreciation of his own criticisms of the sources of Islam, and hence to an interest in Christianity.³⁹

With this positive attitude towards “Wahhabism” in mind, it appears to be reasonable that Muir found his historical approach reinforced in early South Asian reformist thought. The reformers likewise perceived history as a continuous distancing from the pure Islam of the days of Muhammad. Both approaches emphasise the *origin* as a crucial point of reference, presuming an immutable essence that is to be derived from this “original” referential period.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, I do not aim to overemphasise these parallels as an adoption on Muir’s part, but rather to suggest that his interest in and support of “Wahhabism” appeared to reinforce his educational background.

2.1 Criticism of Islam

Having discussed Muir’s historical approach and his conception of history in detail, some aspects of his views on Islam shall be discussed in the following passage. As has been mentioned above, Muir compiled *The Life of Mahomet* upon the insistence of Pfander for openly missionary purposes. Likewise, Powell has identified his support and interest in Wahhabist reformist thought with the unexpressed purpose of eventually converting Muslims to Christianity. Thus, it is not surprising that this apologetic attitude is also mirrored in his biography of Muhammad. In the concluding volume of his biography, Muir sums up the three main evils of Islam, while disregarding its benefits as being “of minor import”:

Setting aside considerations of minor import, three radical evils flow from the faith [i.e. Islam], in all ages and in every country, and must continue to flow *so long as the Coran is the standard of belief*. First: Polygamy, Divorce, and Slavery, are

39 Powell: *Scottish Orientalists*, 166. However, when it became apparent that “Wahhabist” reform tendencies would not lead to a conversion to Christianity, Muir instead began to emphasise the resistance to reform in Islam as being linked to an essentialised understanding of the latter. Still, Muir retained a positive stance towards “Wahhabism.”

40 Muslim reformist tendencies perceived the Quran and *hadīṣ* as ends in and of themselves, and identified them as mirroring the “original” Islam which was to be restored in order to stop an otherwise inevitable decline. Muir, however, introduces one more twist and distinguishes between the “origin” and its presentation in the sources. The latter are already perceived as part of the decline and as deviating from the historical “origin”. Muir believes that sources lose their unquestioned status and must be reviewed critically in order to uncover veiled indications of the “origin”.

maintained and perpetuated; – striking as they do at the root of public morals, poisoning domestic life, and disorganizing society. Second: freedom of judgment in religion is crushed and annihilated. The sword is the inevitable penalty for the denial of Islam. Toleration is unknown. Third: a barrier has been interposed against the reception of Christianity. They labour under a miserable delusion who suppose that Mahometanism paves the way for a purer faith. No system could have been devised with more consummate skill for shutting out the nations over which it has sway, from the light of truth.⁴¹

Muir acknowledges these evils as irreformable because Muslim belief in the Quran as the word of God closes any path to reform. Strikingly, Muir recognises Muslims' unwillingness to abandon Islam for the sake of converting to Christianity as an evil of Islam. He clearly presumes the superiority of Christianity.

When Khan read Muir's *The Life of Mahomet*, it is said that he became enraged and shortly thereafter set out for England in order to gather materials to respond to Muir. His *A Series of Essays on the Life of Muhammad and Subjects Subsidiary Thereto* – wherein he addresses the first volume of Muir's *The Life of Mahomet* discussing in detail the history of Arabia and Islam until the birth of Muhammad. Besides this, Khan dedicates chapters to defending the reliability of his sources, presenting their exacting response to the above quoted evils that Muir discerns in Islam. In the following section, I aim to analyse Khan's historical approach in comparison to his early texts which have been discussed in Chapter 1. I will examine how his conception of history changed and in what way this transformed his view of Islam.

3. Joining the Threads

A.H. Ḥālī in *Ḥayāt-i Jawēd* describes how in 1868 [...] they found Sayyid Ahmad Khan in a restless and agitated state of mind over Muir's work and the attacks it made on Islam.⁴²

Khan identified the great danger posed by Muir's *The Life of Mahomet* because it circulated tremendous misrepresentations of Islam, unsettling young Muslims who were not yet established firmly in their faith. Thus, Khan made the decision to travel to England. During his stay there from 1869 to 1870, he spent the entirety of

41 Muir: *The Life of Mahomet*, Vol. IV, 321.

42 Troll: *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 113.

his free time on gathering Islamic as well as European material for his response to Muir's biography. As mentioned above, his focus was on the first volume of *The Life of Mahomet*. Hence, his discussion of the reliability and criticism of Muslim sources became a crucial topic of his response.⁴³ Since Troll gives a very detailed description of Khan's reply to Muir's source criticism, I will not reproduce every detail here, but will instead delineate its implications for Khan's conception of history and Islam.⁴⁴

In the first place, Khan appreciates Muir's generally affirmative stance towards the reliability of the present state of the Quran. However, Khan obviously does not accept Muir's view that the Quran is Muhammad's word rather than divine inspiration. Apart from this point, only minor disagreements distinguish their views regarding the reliability of the Quran, such as Muir's assumption that a part of "Muhammad's 'revealed words may possibly have been lost, destroyed or become obsolete.'"⁴⁵ Thus, their works do not pose any substantial difference in interpreting the credibility of the Quran as a reliable source.

The situation is different when it comes to the *hadīṣ*: Khan does not agree with Muir's general assumption regarding the dishonesty of the collectors and transmitters of traditions. Instead, he warns that one should not draw the hasty conclusion of "inventions and fabrications of the narrators" as a sole explanation for variety among the traditions, "since, besides the fabrication of hadeeses, there are also other natural causes which might occasion such differences."⁴⁶ He mentions the real possibility of misunderstanding the original sense of a saying, of a failure of memory, or differences which occur "naturally" during continuous oral transmission.⁴⁷

Still, Khan acknowledges the insufficiency of criticism as demonstrated by the collectors and agrees with Muir that a mere verification of the *isnād* (chain of transmitters) is not adequate source criticism. That said, he argues that this procedure was due to the vast amount of narrations:

Persons who undertook the task of collecting hadeeses had neither time nor opportunity for examining and investigating all the above particulars, and some of them

43 Ibid., 113, 127.

44 For a detailed discussion of the sources referred to in his *Essays*, cf. Gulfishan Khan: "A Critical Review of the Biographical Literature (Sira) of the Prophet Muhammad by Syed Ahmad Khan," in *Sir Syed Ahmad Khan: Vision and Mission*, ed. Shahabuddin Iraqi (Aligarh, New Delhi: Centre of Advanced Study Department of History Aligarh Muslim University; Manohar, 2008), 105–42.

45 Troll: *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 129.

46 Sayyid Ahmad Khan: *A Series of Essays on the Life of Mohammad and Subjects Subsidiary Thereto* (Premier Book House, 1968), 200.

47 Ibid.

collected together all the hadeeses whatsoever that came under their notice, while others collected only those hadeeses whose narrators were acknowledged to be trustworthy and honest persons, leaving entirely upon their readers the task of investigating and examining all the above-mentioned particulars, as well as of deciding their comparative merits, their genuineness, and the quantum of credit due to them.⁴⁸

Khan refutes Muir's assertion of an inability for critical thinking, as the latter argued regarding his second evil of Islam: Islam is viewed as inherently prohibiting the freedom of judgment. Khan rather describes a lack of time vis-à-vis the vast amount of material as the sole reason for this procedure, arguing that further criticism had to be left to later recipients. Thus, Khan argues, albeit with only marginal reference to Muir's critique, that there is no inherent and essential oppression of critical inquiry in Islam, but rather an abundance of material was the sole reason for this preliminary source criticism by the collectors.

Despite his reference to natural reasons for differences among the traditions, Khan does not ignore the fabrication of certain traditions, and thus presents a catalogue of his critical approach to the *ḥadīṣ*. Like Muir, Khan first enlists several personal motives for inventing traditions. He mentions persons who aimed to introduce particular practices among Muslims that they considered to be praiseworthy. Khan sees this type of fabrication as being restricted to traditions, suggesting the benefits of reciting quranic verses for curing disease, etc. Secondly, Khan recognises preachers who invented traditions in order to amuse their audiences. He sees this point as being restricted to the descriptions of heaven and hell. Thirdly, he notes those people who "made alterations in the pure religion of the Prophet [...] in order to favour their own interested views."⁴⁹ Lastly, Khan mentions infidels who deliberately disseminated spurious traditions.

Scholars of Islam were always aware of this issue, and thus developed critical rules in order to identify unreliable traditions:

Such persons examined the very words employed in such hadeeses, as well as their style of composition; they compared the contents [*sic*] of each hadees with the commands and injunctions contained in the Koran, with those religious doctrines and dogmas that have been deduced from the Koran, and with those hadeeses which have been proved to be genuine; they investigated the nature of the import of such hadeeses, as to whether it was unreasonable, improbable or impossible.⁵⁰

48 Ibid., 203.

49 Ibid., 201.

50 Ibid., 201f.

Strikingly, Khan describes a list of critical guidelines which virtually reproduces Muir's rules of *ḥadīṣ*-criticism in a condensed form. He hence aims to refute Muir's assertion of an uncritical stance of Muslims towards Muhammad and his utterances. Muir had argued that any criticism of a tradition which has been qualified through mere formal verification of the *isnād*-chain of narrators could not be criticised, as this would equal an act of disrespect for Muhammad. However, Khan adopts Muir's catalogue of source criticism almost verbatim and recognises these principles as being a common practice among scholars of Islam since long before Muir. Since Khan does not provide any references, nor does he elucidate his rules further, it remains questionable to what extent Khan's approach may be an adoption of Muir's critique. His emphasis of reason is striking, however. It cannot be observed in Muir in such an explicit form nor does it appear in Khan's earlier writings wherein he rather presents an outspokenly reluctant or even hostile stance towards this topic. The following section will address this issue of Khan's developing stance towards reason.

3.1 The Position of Reason

The last three criteria Khan presents, in order to evaluate whether a tradition "was unreasonable, improbable or impossible," herald a new phase in Khan's thought. He emphasises reason as a crucial means in this respect: the identification of spurious traditions is based on examining "whether the origin and content of traditions [*aḥādīṣ ke manṣā' aur bayān kī taḥqīq aur tadqīq*] contains any reference to an event unverifiable in history [*aisā tāriḥī vāqi'ah [...] jo az rū-i tāriḥ ke ḡalaṭ ho*] or any such miracles and wonderful incidents which reason would not accept [*aise 'ajā'ibāt [...] jin ko 'aql taslīm nah kartī ho*]," as Khan describes the very passage in Urdu with a bit more detail.⁵¹ This passage raises the question of how reason ('*aql*) becomes such an essential criterion in Khan's critical approach, for Muir does not mention reason as a distinct criterion in his own approach to source criticism: Muir refers to reason only tacitly when he criticises the faith of early Muslims blindly accepting any irrational narrative about Muhammad.⁵² Thus, Muir's critique does not provide considerable evidence for the relatively prominent position reason takes in Khan's source criticism. In particular, if compared to his early

51 Ibid., 202; Sayyid Ahmad Khan: *Al-Ḥuḍbāt al-Aḥmadīyah fī al-'Arab va as-sīrat al-Muḥammadiyah* (Alīgarh: Sar Saiyid Akaidamī, 2003), 229.

52 Muir: *The Life of Mahomet*, lxiii.

stance towards reason in his pre-Mutiny period, we can see that Khan had an utterly hostile attitude toward reason and rejected its licit position in religious issues entirely. Only *shariat* and Muhammad's *sunnat* were allowed a referential position, for reason was seen as a merely human faculty that could not provide any access to divine truth.⁵³ Likewise, in Khan's second-phase Biblical commentary, he does not attribute reason any decisive character or capability for inquiry into religious matters. But his initially hostile attitude changes: Khan here acknowledges reason as capable of recognising God's existence and acting in the world; however, he emphasises that any further insights into the nature of God can only be gained through the mediation of prophets.⁵⁴ Furthermore, he frequently emphasises the conformity of the Word of God with His Work, the creation. Khan seems to have adopted this idea of natural religion from J. H. Pratt, to whose *Scripture and Science not at Variance* (1856) he repeatedly refers. This reference to natural religion shall be discussed in Chapter 5 in detail.

Regarding the question of the increasingly prominent position that Khan allows reason in his works, it is not possible to trace this shift back to a particular origin, as could be accomplished so far with other points of critique which Khan adapts or refutes. Neither Pfander, who had a rather hostile stance towards reason, nor Muir, who criticises the blind acknowledgment of irrational traditions, but still does not take reason to be a distinct criterion in his source criticism, can provide sufficient evidence for Khan's approach to reason. For Khan, reason rather seems to acquire an omnipresent position resulting from the increasing level of influence given to science. This new controversy, which, in contrast to those discussed thus far, cannot be identified in any single author, instead seems to be a sign of a general shift of paradigm that poses a tremendous contest for Khan and other contemporary reformers. Almost the entire last phase of Khan's work is dedicated to the question of how to reconcile religion and science, and shall be discussed in a separate chapter below. That said, we can trace the initial indications of this development in Khan's commentary as well as in the work discussed here, *A Series of Essays on the Life of Muhammad and Subjects Subsidiary Thereto*. But despite its elevation to a distinct criterion of source criticism, reason is not applied so much in practice and remains restricted to rejecting superstitious and miraculous traditions.

53 Khan: *Maqālāt*, Vol. V, 408.

54 Khan: *Tabayīn*, Vol. I, 14; cf. also Troll: *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 237.

3.2 The Second Evil: Freedom of Judgment in Religion

The principal aim of Khan's inclusion of reason in this context seems to be, first of all, to refute Muir's critique of a lack of free judgment in Islam, as Muhammad came to be perceived as infallible over time. Thus, Muir argues that any tradition acknowledged according to the formalistic verification through the *isnād*-chain was exempted of a content-related critique, as this would dishonour the exalted status of Muhammad. In describing content-related critiques as common practice in the *uṣūl-i ḥadīṡ*, Khan rejects Muir's claim and asserts that Muhammad was not viewed as infallible, but rather as an ordinary human being in general, unless he received a divine message:

But the Prophet himself has informed us that (leaving the Holy Koran out of question) all his sayings are not to be considered as revelations; but that the two following kinds only are to be taken as such: First, those, which have reference to religious dogmas, to morals, or to the state and condition of the soul in the world to come.⁵⁵

Khan thus introduces a strict distinction between the sayings of Muhammad concerning mundane matters and those concerning religious matters. Only the latter can claim relevance for religious concerns, while "the rest of the sayings and actions of the Prophet are looked upon by us in the same light as those of any other holy, virtuous, and truly pious personage."⁵⁶ Khan finds this assertion supported by a tradition of Muhammad:

'Verily, I am nothing more than a mortal. Accept and act according to what I say relative to your religion, but when I order you anything on my own account, then, verily, I am also a man.'⁵⁷

Khan highlights Muhammad as an ordinary human being, disclaiming Muir's assertion that Muhammad was perceived as infallible by Muslims. This, in combination with his aforementioned insistence on the rational and contextual judgment of traditions, allows him to critically review Muir's charge of the suppression of critical thinking in Islam. Because Khan does not view Muhammad as infallible, critical questioning does not dishonour him, and content-related tests of traditions are thus allowed.⁵⁸

55 Khan: *Essays*, 190f.

56 *Ibid.*, 191.

57 *Ibid.*, 191.

58 Khan quoted this or a reminiscent tradition already in his *Rāh-i sunnat va al-bid'at* when arguing that *bid'at* relates only to matters of religion (*dīn*) (Khan: *Maqālāt*, Vol. V,

But Khan does not end his critique here. He takes this issue much further than a mere discernment between religious and mundane issues. When establishing the Quran as an ultimate point of reference to identify spurious traditions, Khan introduces a distinction between explicit commands of the Quran vis-à-vis implied principles:

From the earliest times of Mohommedan history the Holy Koran has always continued to be, as it will for ever remain, a real and abundant source of Mohammedan law; and it is the belief of every Mussulman that the Prophet himself always acted conformably to the Koran - that is, in perfect obedience to the commands contained in that holy book, both when expressly enjoined or only tacitly implied.⁵⁹

Khan emphasises that Muhammad always acted according to the commandments of the Quran, and hence aims to demonstrate the Quran as the ultimate, certain source. Any tradition implying a contradiction to the Quran must, therefore, be recognised as wrong. At first glance, this point may be viewed merely as a counter to Muir's general acknowledgment of any tradition *contradicting* traditional Muslim dogma. But a closer examination reveals his introduction of "only tacitly implied" commands in the Quran. Thus, the Quran does not contain only explicit commands, but also implicitly uttered principles: principles which must not be understood as perennial like the explicit commandments, but rather as requiring continuous adaption, as Khan elucidates in further detail in his introduction.

Khan cautions the reader against misunderstanding religion (*mazhab*) as a mere compendium of precepts and rules (*majmū'ah-i aḥkām*), however. Instead, he develops a distinction between perennial commands and inherent principles:

[I] hope that every lover of truth [...] will candidly and impartially investigate the truth of Islam, and make a just and accurate distinction between its real principles and those which have been laid down for the perpetual and firm maintenance and observance of the same, as well as between those that are solely the perfections of those persons whom we designate as learned men, divines, doctors, and lawyers. It is the want of such an accurate discrimination as this, between all these different descriptions of principles, which has caused men to rush headlong into all sorts of mistakes, a want or deficiency, on the part of a Mohammedan, which is called Takleed (a blind belief in the opinions of others), and which, when exhibited in that of foreigners, is known by the name of partiality, bias, prejudice or bigotry.⁶⁰

368f.). It seems that his understanding of religion was apparently broader, as he included customs, habits, and religious services likewise in the category *dīn* (Ibid., 360).

59 Khan: *Essays*, 190.

60 Ibid., vi.

Khan emphasises an urgent necessity to distinguish between the “real principles” of Islam, and those which are the mere interpretations of Muslim scholars, in order to prevent misrepresentations of Islam like Muir’s. Unfortunately, as Khan argues, this discrimination has been ignored by Muslims themselves: *taqlīd* is condemned as an outcome of this uncritical thinking, which triggered the foreign view of a suppression of free thinking in Islam. Khan identifies Muir’s view of Islam as a result of this misconception of *taqlīd* among Muslims. Muir’s perspective is refuted with reference to an intra-Islamic discourse. Khan translates Muir’s critique into an Islamic context and rejects it by re-activating and transforming the Muslim understanding of *taqlīd*.

While still in his early period, Khan held an affirmative position towards *taqlīd*, but he has here changed his view and now perceives it as a blind following of established doctrines of the Sunni legal schools, instead calling for an unbiased perspective on the tradition.⁶¹ In his early works, Khan propagates a return to a purified, original Islam, as it can be found in the four legal schools which represent Muhammad’s *sunnat*, the single, licit point of reference for a pious Muslim life. The legal schools provide the practical application of the *sunnat*, while disagreements among the schools are traced to differences of opinion among the companions and interpretations (*qiyās*) of the founders of the schools. These differences are negligible, however, as all of them can be followed.⁶²

This restorative approach of a return to an original, uncorrupted Islam in Khan’s early works is contested by the perspective presented in his *Essays*. The static character of Islam that Khan finds in his early approach is therefore replaced by flexibility and adaptability. To put it pointedly, while Khan initially viewed the eating of mangoes, if not as *bid‘at*, as at least a dubious act because Muhammad is reported not to have eaten mangoes, the concept of *bid‘at* becomes irrelevant for his later texts. His approach is no longer based on mere retrospection, aiming to restore an origin, but rather implements a forward-looking, prospective position. Khan develops an analytical approach to Islam and its sources that allows for their contextualisation. He conceives of particular aspects as general and perennial while others remain merely tacit implications that require adaption. Muhammad and, thus, tradition are no longer viewed as verbatim points of reference, but rather provide a historicised realisation of Quranic implications. Thus, aspects of the Prophet’s habits and conduct, unless they explicitly refer to religion (i.e. tenets, etc.), lose their compulsory character.

In his “Islam and the Impact of Print in South Asia,” Robinson describes this as a shift in the conception of history from a “negative vision of Islamic history as

61 Khan: *Maqālāt*, Vol. V, 422.

62 Ibid.

a process of constant effort to hold back the inevitable decline since the time of the Prophet” towards a “positive vision which saw that the essence of Islam could be kept vital and pertinent.”⁶³ The adaptation of critical historiography, induced through the controversy of Muir’s *Life*, allows Khan to develop a distanced view of Islam, the Quran, and the *hadīs*, which Robinson describes as “an understanding of Islam as an object, which might be analysed, conceptualized and even presented as a system.”⁶⁴

But Khan surpasses the approach of Muir’s, who merely aimed to discover essential Islam through inquiring into its early history. Muir’s goal largely resembled early Muslim reformists’ efforts to restore uncorrupted Islam, much like Khan in his early works. Any developments after this early period of Islam are perceived as a deviation, while only the origin could provide a glance at the essence of Islam. Muir’s methodology differs tremendously, however, as he reads the Quran not as a divinely inspired book, but as authored by Muhammad, thus questioning the reliability of tradition on the basis of contextualisation. He perceives Islamic sources as historical sources which can be analysed and scrutinised. The Muslim claim of its divine inspiration does not constitute any obstacle for Muir, who reads the sources from an external perspective.

In combining both approaches, Khan develops a new perspective on history: a reading irrespective of interpretations (*taqlīd*) which views Muhammad’s life and the early period of Islam as a crucial point of reference, but not as a static one. Khan’s introduction of a distinction between eternal commands in the Quran and the temporary interpretations of men, as well as the discrimination of Muhammad as generally being an ordinary man vis-à-vis his role as a prophet restricted to occasions of inspiration, allows him to abandon the view of Islam as static and immutable. History no longer means a continuous distancing from original Islam, which can only be stopped by a complete emulation of Muhammad’s and his companions’ conduct. Development and change are no longer viewed as mere deviation, but rather as a necessary process of preserving the essence of Islam, which is not restricted to a fixed catalogue of commands and precepts but abstracted to adaptable implications and principles alongside eternal commands. Khan no longer propagates mere imitation, aiming to restore and preserve an immutable essence with a verbatim outlook, but instead proposes a reinterpretation. Thus, his conception of history shifts away from inevitable distancing and deviation towards a progression with changing circumstances, implying the adaptation of the abstract essence of Islam with implicit principles.

63 Robinson: *Islam and Muslim History*, 90.

64 Ibid., 91.

In his study of Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Harder describes a noticeably parallel strategy in Bankim's view of the *Bhagavad Gita*, on which he penned a commentary. When Bankim describes the *Gita* as no divine word, however, he pronounces a thesis Khan could not utter with such distinctness, for the orthodox Muslim doctrine of the verbatim inspiration of the Quran prohibited such theses. This is demonstrated vis-à-vis the fact that Khan had to face attacks on his integrity as a Muslim for even minor issues, starting with his social intercourse with the British.⁶⁵ The fronts further hardened when Khan published his commentary on the Bible and a translation of Mountstuart Elphinstone's *History of India*, wherein the author speaks of the "false prophet" in reference to Muhammad, which Khan faithfully translates as "*paigambar-i bāṭil*." Though Khan discusses Elphinstone's position in a footnote as illegitimate, this was an affront for Muslim orthodoxy: "In this controversy Sir Sayyid was called a *kāfir* (unbeliever)."⁶⁶ His later engagement with education and establishment of the Muhammedan Anglo-Oriental College in Aligarh – the predecessor of the Aligarh Muslim University, founded in 1875 – even brought upon him the procuration of *fatvās* (legal decisions) "from ulama of various Indian cities and also from Mecca and Medina, declaring Sayyid Ahmad Khan, 'officially,' among other things, 'the *khalīfah* (representative) of the Devil himself who is intent upon leading Muslims astray,' whose 'perfidy is worse than that of the Jews and Christians.'"⁶⁷ This might explain Khan's cautious approach, which is always backed up with rather orthodox positions, while unorthodox positions are uttered inexplicitly, and become obvious only inherently. Thus, Khan could not propagate conclusions as bluntly as Bankim, saying for instance that "all *books* of *dharma* are of human origin."⁶⁸ Nonetheless, Bankim's implication heads in a very similar direction to Khan's. In Bankim's view, the "*Gītā* continues to be regarded, ultimately, as a divine utterance, but only on a level of sub-textual content; as a text, by contrast, it belongs entirely to the human sphere."⁶⁹ As Harder explains, Bankim perceived the text as "time-bound" due to its grounding in the restricted human knowledge in order to be comprehensible to its contemporaries. Thus, the text inevitably had to refer to this restricted knowledge. Consequently, the text required continuous adaptations:

65 "According to Hali, open attack on Sayyid Ahmad Khan's integrity as a Muslim started when he began a social intercourse with the English, i.e. in the early 1860s when he accepted their dinner invitations and invited them to his home" (Troll: *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 21).

66 Troll: *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 20.

67 Ibid., 21.

68 Harder: *Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay's Śrīmadbhagavadgītā*, 172.

69 Ibid.

Knowledge of the Absolute, according to his [i.e. Bankim's] concept, is transmitted together with the surrounding 'customary beliefs' or science, i.e. in the epistemic frame of the respective age, and both merge in the verbal representation. The perishable, time-bound part of that representation then needs updating; the knowledge of the Absolute has to be contextualised anew.⁷⁰

This continuous adaption of the inherent, universal implications of the *Gita* reminds one significantly of Khan's approach, which I will discuss in the following passages with respect to its application to particular examples.

3.3 Refuting the First Evils of Islam

Khan devoted a great part of the first volume of his *Life* to his response to Muir, primarily discussing his historical approach and the reliability of Islamic sources. I have illustrated Khan's own counterapproach in detail above. Yet, in addition to this methodological discussion, Khan also responded to the fourth, conclusive volume of Muir's *Life*, wherein he criticises Islam for three evils it either introduced or reinforced. Those are, as mentioned above: first, polygamy, divorce, and slavery; second, the suppression of free thinking; and, third, interposing an obstacle in the "reception of Christianity."⁷¹

Khan criticises Muir for an inherent inconsistency in his study: having extensively illustrated his source criticism, noting strong doubts about the reliability of a great part of the *ḥadīṣ*-tradition, Muir relies on an eminent part of a source, which is itself viewed as less reliable among Muslims themselves.

The best [of] all the biographies of Mohammed from the pen of foreign authors, and the one which is executed in the most learned and masterly manner, is the "Life of Mahomet," by Sir William Muir. [...] The extensive and intimate acquaintance of this talented author with Oriental literatures is highly esteemed and justly appreciated by all educated Europeans. As regards the merit of the work itself, besides the defect of its subject matter being almost entirely based upon the authority of Wackedee – an author who, as I have before remarked, bears the least reputation in the Mahommedan literary world, and who is the least entitled to claim our belief as to his assertions – the intention and animus with which the work was written are to be deprecated as having been the fruitful source of error and deficiency.⁷²

70 Ibid., 177.

71 Muir: *The Life of Mahomet*, Vol. IV, 321.

72 Khan: *Essays*, x-xi.

Khan's initial critique of a double standard among European authors in their application of source criticism, which was most likely pointed particularly at Muir, becomes even more explicit in a later reference:

Persons, therefore, who may be inclined to comment upon the principles of our religion; to write concerning our ecclesiastical history; or discuss various points of our sacred literature, must not be content, as many critics are, with quoting such Hadeeses as those just described [i.e. apocryphal] for their authorities in support of their opinions and convictions, but should, first of all, patiently and carefully investigate the truth of the source whence such Hadeeses are said to have been derived. It is either from being unacquainted with, or from neglecting, the above essential rules, that several foreign writers have – unconsciously it is to be hoped – been guilty of great injustice when writing either the Prophet's biography, or history, especially when, for the fair and legitimate arguments of a sound and liberal criticism, they substitute invective, ridicule and sarcasm.⁷³

Khan criticises an indiscriminate utilisation of uncertain and unreliable traditions by European scholars to affirm their positions, as in his view the *sīrat*-literature (biographical literature on Muhammad) must be reviewed very critically – in comparison to the *hadīṣ*-literature, which, in his view, was based on a highly elaborated critical approach. By contrast, the *sīra*-literature integrated several fabulous stories from Jewish and Christian traditions.⁷⁴ As a result of this unacquaintance or neglect of source criticism by Muslim authors, Khan argues that misrepresentations like Muir's three evils emerged. Thus, Khan aims to refute these evils in the remaining chapters of his *Essays*.

Following the model of Muir's *Life*, Khan describes the geography, manners, customs, as well as the various religions of pre-Islamic Arabia. In discussing the evils of Islam, Khan's illustration of the customs of the pre-Islamic Arabs will be

⁷³ Ibid., 181.

⁷⁴ “[T]he author expressed dissatisfaction with the existing [T] books of *Sira* and questioned their authenticity as compared to the books of *Ahadith*, given the differences in the methodology of collection and compilation of the two historical sources, the *Hadith* and *Sira*. Consequently, the author sought to argue, that the Prophetic traditions were more reliable, and more authentic as a source of information for the purposes of a biography of the Prophet than the extant biographical literature on the subject. [...] [S]ir Syed pointed out that it is difficult to separate facts from fables in almost all these books of *Sira*. Moreover, he suspected that many of the stories which would have been current amongst the Jews in those days crept into the text of these compilations. Therefore, he stressed the fact that none of the above-mentioned works [i.e. *Sira*] should be utilized uncritically.” cf. Khan: “A Critical Review of the Biographical Literature (*Sira*) of the Prophet Muhammad by Syed Ahmad Khan.”

of most interest. He bases his description mostly on Arabic poetry in order to depict general living conditions, habits, and customs. Nevertheless, two topics occupy a central position in his illustration: the idolatrous practices of most Arabs and the status of women in pre-Islamic Arabic society. Regarding the latter, Khan notices an unblushing practice of “adultery, fornication, and incest.”⁷⁵ In a concise way, Khan summarises the situation of women as follows:

The fair sex was in a very wretched and degraded condition indeed. Persons had entire liberty to marry as many women as they pleased.⁷⁶

Khan states that the pre-Islamic Arabs knew and adhered to a law of marriage. But he bemoans an imbalance of rights which granted a woman almost no rights, while men could make unlimited use of divorce. The woman was prohibited to marry after divorce for a fixed period of time:

Persons very cruelly and inhumanly took advantage of this custom. They married a woman, divorced her on some pretext, the poor woman had to wait for the fixed period without marrying anyone; when, however, the time was about to expire, her former husband again reconciled her to himself and renewed the marriage, but after a very short time he would once more divorce her, and again marry her at the close of the appointed term, and this he would repeat for any number of times. The Arab practised this merciless custom, because every person considered it a reproach that the woman who had been once his wife should marry another man.⁷⁷

Khan bemoans the asymmetry of power between men and women in pre-Islamic Arab society, this having granted almost all rights to men while women were dependent and impotent.

Khan applies this understanding as the background for his discussion of Muir’s evils of Islam in a subsequent chapter, “On the Question Whether Islam has been Beneficial or Injurious to Human Society in General and to the Mosaic and Christian Dispensations.” First, he discusses Muir’s critique of polygamy and hastens to clarify that polygamy is by no means made compulsory in Islam:

[O]n the contrary, the general practice of it is not even recommended, the privileged use of it being reserved for such physical reasons as may stand in need of it, but in the absence of such an excuse the indulgence in it is wholly contrary to the virtues and morality taught by Islam.⁷⁸

75 Khan: *Essays*, 111.

76 *Ibid.*, 120.

77 *Ibid.*, 121.

78 *Ibid.*, 147.

Khan does not deny the permission for polygamy in Islam, but he diminishes its unpleasantness with regard to the inherent morals of Islam. He proceeds in arguing for the necessity of polygamy from three perspectives – nature, society, and religion – of which his argument regarding nature shall suffice here as an example. One has to inquire, in the will of God, whether “He intended man to be universally polygamic or not.”⁷⁹ Khan views nature as the point of reference, reflecting His intention and will, “for it is evidently impossible that His will should be at variance with the productions of it.”⁸⁰ He continues his argument stating that only those beings which give birth to their young in pairs, while polygamic beings give birth to one or more than two, thus, creating an inequality of the sexes.⁸¹ But even though man is of the second category, he has been endowed with the exclusive property of reason. Thus, Khan tacitly argues that man occupies an exceptional position: despite being naturally compelled to polygamy, man’s endowment with reason allows him to surpass otherwise natural proclivities.

Thus, Khan argues that Islam is in fact aimed at limiting this natural necessity with stringent restrictions, “such as the observance of perfect equality of rights and privileges, love and affection, among all wives, etc. etc.”⁸² Polygamy is inherently ruled out in Islam, as these strict regulations rather suggest that a pious Muslim abstain from it. In fact, polygamy is made nearly impossible, if all regulations are observed:

These restrictions and regulations materially serve to prevent truly pious and religious persons from indulging in polygamy, for they almost immediately discover that the availing themselves of this privilege, without fulfilling its conditions and observing its regulations, which are so strict as to be extremely difficult to be complied with, is incompatible with the due and faithful discharge of their religious duties.⁸³

Khan therefore aims to establish a prospective implication of the Quran, pointing beyond its explicit prescripts. Khan cannot deny the permission of polygamy in the Quran, but he tries to view this permission as a context-specific concession, while the stringent regulations tied to its permission, reveal inherent implications of the Quran that highlight the higher moral inclination in man. Polygamy is permitted, but it is also impeded to a great extent.

79 Ibid.

80 Ibid.

81 Unfortunately, Khan does not further elucidate this point nor does he give any examples which could clarify his argument.

82 Ibid., 148.

83 Ibid., 148f.

Khan locates this permission, first, in biological or climatic differences between Europe and Asia. He refers to the opinion of Godfrey Higgins, arguing that:

Biologists and natural philosophers have found other reasons which might serve as some apology for this allowance [polygamy], which will not apply to us cold-blooded, frog-like animals of Northern climates, though they may be applicable to the descendants of Ishmael, natives of the scorching sands of the desert.⁸⁴

For, according to Higgins, both sexes age and decay equally, while in the warm regions of Asia “it is given to man alone to arrive at a green old age.”⁸⁵ This, Khan continues, might be perceived as a sufficient excuse for the permission of polygamy.

Subsequently, Khan contextualises the allowance of polygamy with reference to the general position of women in pre-Islamic Arabia as well as surrounding countries:

Nor should we be justified in leaving out from our impartial consideration the deplorable morals that were in general practice shortly previous to the advent of Mohammed. Persia stood foremost in the corruptness of her morals. The laws of marriage were set aside. [...] When we turn our attention to a little north-west of Persia, a locality mostly inhabited by Jews, we find that polygamy was a general practice, without any restrictions. Arabia, again, affords us a perfect combination of the customs of the Persians and the Jews, where there was no end to the number of wives, and where no law guided the people in their choice. All women, without any distinction of rank, age, or relation, served alike to the brutal appetites of the male sex. When we look upon the Christianity of that age [...] we see many of her professors pursuing a course diametrically opposite to the above-mentioned one; we mean that somewhat general practice of celibacy.⁸⁶

Within this general disregard for women, deprived of any rights and without protection by law, “Mohammed’s genius codified a law, so perfect in its nature, so consistent with reason and propriety, so conducive to the health and prosperity of society, and so beneficial to the matrimonial existence of both the parties’ interest.”⁸⁷

Khan describes the commandments and laws, as stated explicitly in the Quran, as progress and a crucial improvement in women’s situations within the historical

84 Ibid., 149.

85 Ibid.

86 Ibid., 150.

87 Ibid.

context, be it with regard to pre-Islamic Arabia or Persia, the Jews or the Christians.⁸⁸ However, the confrontation with missionary rhetoric, and in particular Muir's assertion of the evils of Islam, compelled Muslims to develop a new response, for the progress and improvement brought by Islam with regard to societies of the 7th century could no longer provide an answer to this new critique. Muir disregards the Islamic allowance of polygamy not as an improvement, but rather as a reinforcement of the existing conditions. Khan's response is characterised by a historicisation of Islam and its explicit commandments, which have to be appreciated but read within their historical context. Nevertheless, Muir's critique triggers Khan to instead highlight implications of the Quran pointing far ahead of a mere allowance of polygamy – namely to its link to several stringent restrictions which make its practical application almost impossible. The temporary improvement of a restricted and regulated allowance of polygamy in the days of Muhammad is therefore replaced by the far-reaching, implicit, and superior aim of Islamic morality.⁸⁹

By the close of this chapter, Khan eventually turns the tables and points out crucial stimuli in the development of Christianity which were triggered by Islam. When Khan discusses the “advantages derived from Islam by Christianity particularly,” he describes Luther's Protestant reforms in overthrowing the “exorbitant power of the Popes” as being stimulated by Islam:

[L]uther, who, when he came in contact with the above-quoted passage of the Koran [admonishing “that the one of us take not the others for Lords (the High Priests and the Popes) besides God”⁹⁰], at once comprehended the truth it inculcated, and, clearly perceiving the slavish and degrading position in which his co-religionists

88 Yet, Christians rather seem to be criticised for their “unnatural” and repudiating stance towards women, as apparent in celibacy.

89 Closely resembling Khan's arguments, the prominent TV preacher, Zakir Naik, who founded the Indian TV channel Peace TV in 2006, regularly engages in discussions about the compatibility of Islam or the Quran and science. His “ideology mostly corresponds to *Salafi* and *Wahhabi* ideals.” (Ronie Parciack: “Brahmanic Codes and Sanskrit Vocabulary in the Political Language of Islamic Preaching in Contemporary India” *ROSA (Religions of South Asia)* 8, no. 3 (2015): 327). In a video, he presents the argument that the inequality of men and women is the crucial reason to permit polygyny in Islam (cf. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=axOIGrL4M_s). In another video, he emphasises the necessity of keeping complete justice between one's wives (cf. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_IUQd6DtmE8). Apparently, the first video seems to adopt Khan's argument. Yet, no direct reference is drawn and perhaps one is deliberately avoided. On the other hand, this argument has perhaps experienced a repeated sedimentation, veiling its link to Khan. This, however, would require further scrutiny on a much broader basis of material.

90 Khan: *Essays*, 174.

were plunged, at once stood up to preach publicly against that servile practice, and although some of his adversaries denounced him as being a Mohammedan at heart, he never desisted from his endeavours, and, at last, succeeded in affecting the grand reform generally known as Protestantism, or the Reformation; and for this emancipation of the human mind from the worst of all slavery – a priestly one – Christianity should for ever remain thankful to Islam.⁹¹

Protestantism is, thus, claimed as a mere result of the universal message of Islam. The authenticity of Christian critique is eventually questioned, as its ideals are in the end traced back to Islam. However, Khan does not further elucidate this assertion and merely seems to denigrate the authority of critique founded on a Christian perspective. A very reminiscent inclusivist approach will be discussed in Chapter 6 with the example of Shibli Nomani.

In the following passage, I will only briefly discuss Khan's response to Muir's remaining two critiques of divorce and slavery. His discussion of the former is an advocacy for the advantages of divorce, without overvaluing its disadvantages for society, and is thus not of much interest for the present study. With regard to slavery, however, Khan reproduces the argument presented in his discussion of polygamy, and his approach of historical contextualisation in general. While again, he cannot deny its permission, he argues with a higher goal tacitly implied:

According to his order, no act upon earth is more meritorious, more deserving of God's favour and blessing, than the granting of liberty to slaves [...].⁹²

Khan diminishes the explicit permission of slavery by emphasising a higher implication in Muhammad's acts, saying: "Muhammad did almost entirely abolish slavery."⁹³ Khan did not counter the general allowance, but aimed at infusing the superior goal of an entire abolishment of slavery in society.⁹⁴

Furthermore, Khan also offers proof of some positive intentions, which could be practised by means of the maintenance of its allowance:

91 Ibid., 175.

92 Ibid., 161.

93 Ibid.

94 Khan's prospective argument of an intended abolition of slavery is repeated in a video by Zakir Naik. He argues that slavery was so much "engrained" in society that its immediate abolition was impossible, while, however, its future annulment was intended (cf. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-15no-m0jn4>).

It will be evident from the above passage that the order for making captives of the unbelievers, when overpowered, was with the intention of saving their lives.⁹⁵

Thus, the practice of “making captives” in war was rather practised for the purpose of redemption.

3.4 Continuous Reinterpretation

This flexible approach to origin and the Quran, with its tacit implications transgressing the temporary character of its explicit instructions, lays the foundation for Khan’s *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān* (1880-1904). His concept of knowledge is of essential importance in this respect. In his article “*Ittiḥād-i bāhamī aur ta’līm*” (Mutual Unity and Education), Khan discusses his view of knowledge:

Time continually progresses [*taraqqī kartā jātā hai*]. If time was finite, the idea that knowledge is finite would be correct. But everyone knows that time does not stop [for progress], it keeps going on. Therefore, to imagine the ancestors’ achievements as sufficient is wrong at all.⁹⁶

Knowledge comes to be perceived as infinite and limitless. It continually progresses over the course of time.

This point has significant implications for the interpretation of the Quran, as Khan asserts that the standard of knowledge of his time must not be perceived as ultimate knowledge. As former knowledge has been refuted by the findings of science, so too those discoveries will perhaps be shaken by future findings. Thus, his interpretation of the Quran must not be misunderstood as final:

Its [i.e. the Quran’s] words have been revealed in such a miraculous way that however much our sciences [*‘ulūm*] progress [*taraqqī*], if we reflect on it [i.e. the Quran] from the perspective of these progressed sciences [*taraqqī-yāftah ‘ulūm*], it will become obvious that its words prove to be true from this perspective, too. We will realise that the meaning which we formerly attached to it and which is now proved wrong is only related to our [limited] knowledge, and not to the words of the Quran. Thus, if our sciences progress in future in such a way that today’s researches [*umūr-*

95 Khan: *Essays*, 161.

96 Khan: *Maqālāt*, Vol. XII, 164.

i muhaqqiqah] prove to be wrong, then we will turn to the Quran anew and will surely realise its accordance with truth.⁹⁷

According to Khan, the continuous progress of knowledge and science therefore requires a continuous reconsideration and reinterpretation of the Quran. Its meaning cannot be fixed but remains in a state of constant change, Ashraf writes:

Sir Syed leaves open the possibility that scientific developments in the future, too, even while contradicting many of our present-day scientific postulates, will provide us with a newer and more profound understanding of the *Qur'an*. This, to say the least, was not only a highly unorthodox but also a very dynamic way of *Qur'anic* interpretation.⁹⁸

The formerly stable point of reference found in origin thus no longer guarantees a solid, invariable grounding. Origin rather comes to be instrumentalised as a means for innovation. Marilyn Robinson Waldman describes this in her article "Tradition as a Modality of Change: Islamic Examples":

Traditions can be part of the ideology of modernity as well as of the ideology of tradition; and not all things from the past have to be recognized as tradition, just as not all traditions originated in the premodern past.⁹⁹

Thus, tradition, or in Khan's view the immutable, original understanding of Islam, cannot be equated with a standstill, but rather serves as a legitimation for change. Waldman thus views "tradition as a process rather than as a stage or type."¹⁰⁰

It should be noted, however, that the idea of progressive revelation can be found already in Shah Waliullah's work, as I have discussed in Chapter 2 with reference to the latter's equivocation of *shariat* with the prophets' varying manifestations of Divine will, revealed according to the conditions and requirements of each particular context. This can be found also with regard to the concept of *nūr-i Muḥammadī* assuming varying manifestations of Muhammad's light. These manifestations of his pre-existing light are perceived as adaptations of the Divine message in accordance with the respective time and space of occurrence. These concepts remain, however, limited up to the appearance of Muhammad, with whom

97 Sayyid Ahmad Khan: *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān: Ma' uṣūl-i tafsīr* (Lāhaur: Dost Aisosiyaṭs, 2004), 59f.

98 Ali Ashraf: "Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and the Tradition of Rationalism in Islam," in *Reason and Tradition in Islamic Thought*, ed. Mahmudul Haq (Aligarh: Institute of Islamic Studies, Aligarh Muslim University, 1992), 159.

99 Marilyn Robinson Waldman: "Tradition as a Modality of Change: Islamic Examples," *History of Religions* Vol. 25, No. 4 (1986): 322.

100 Ibid., 327.

the circle of revelations ended. On the other hand, saints are also perceived as having a share of Muhammad's light, thus sustaining a link to Divine knowledge even after Muhammad.

Moreover, the idea of a contextualising the Quran as a message revealed according to the capability of Muhammad, cannot be described as an invention of Khan nor as a mere adoption from European historians: its message is perceived as uncreated. That said, Khan believes that the Quran assumes a particular manifestation in the heart of Muhammad in a human language. This idea traces back to the Quranic reference to the *lauḥ mahfūz*, the safely preserved tablet. This tablet is interpreted in Sufi exegeses as the tablet of the original Quran, also termed *umm al-kitāb* (the “mother” of the book). It is kept in heaven and viewed as the cumulative message of all prophets – their message, thus being united under the umbrella of a universal, but uncreated message.¹⁰¹

Khan does not explicitly refer to any of the given concepts – understandably, as in the case of the *nūr-i Muḥammadī*, Muir explicitly describes this as a legendary attribution to Muhammad so that Khan would presumably disguise any reference.¹⁰² Yet, his earlier discussions and dependencies on these ideas make it plausible to assume that Khan reactivates these ideas and rearranges them in order to answer Muir's critique.¹⁰³

Conclusion

In his analysis of *The Life of Mahomet*, it could be shown that Muir takes up a significantly analogous perspective of history, as could be found also in Khan's early religious writings and in early South Asian reformist thought in general. Shaped by his educational background, but perhaps also reinforced by the “Wahhabi” stance towards history whose reformist tendencies he appreciated, Muir's approach equally suggests a classical time, which is deemed as an unrivalled and unparalleled point of reference for subsequent history. With regard to Islam, he likewise aims to recover an essential Islam which can be traced only in the days of Muhammad. This early period is perceived as a guarantor of authenticity and

101 *ET*: “lawḥ”; “Umm al-kitāb”.

102 Muir: *The Life of Mahomet*, i-ii.

103 Johannes Marinus Simon Baljon: *The Reforms and Religious Ideas of Sir Sayyid Aḥmad Khān* (Lahore: Ashraf, 1964), 109f., 136f.; Schimmel: *Rhine to Indus*, 117. Cf. also Chapter 2.

can be scrutinised only through the study of early Islamic sources, in particular the Quran and the *ḥadīṡ*. Muir perceives later developments to be in conflict with these sources as deviations from essential Islam. Thus, through his text-based approach, Muir perceives Islam to be an immutable constant. That said, Muir applies source criticism to scrutinize these texts from an external perspective, concluding that the Quran is not the word of God, but is rather the word of Muhammad. He also views the *ḥadīṡ* very critically, stating that traditional criticism entirely ignored its content and focused merely on the transmitters and their reliability. While his stance towards the Quran is generally affirmative, he presents a critical catalogue for the verification of the *ḥadīṡ*. In Muir's view, then, the traditions of the *ḥadīṡ* have to be reviewed in terms of their conformity with the Quran as well as through their internal conformity with other related traditions. Apart from this point, he further states that an external contextualisation also has to be performed with other contemporary sources.

As a result of his study, Muir presents three evils of Islam that overshadow any minor improvements the faith has brought about. He criticises the reinforcement of polygamy, divorce, and slavery, as well as a suppression of critical thinking in Islam. These evils are perceived as irreformable, as "a reformed Islam [...] would be Islam no longer."¹⁰⁴

When Khan came across Muir's text, he felt compelled to respond and present a refutation of its theses, as he acknowledged the work's danger in misleading young Muslims. In his resulting *A Series of Essays on the Life of Muhammad and Subjects Subsidiary Thereto*, he revised several of his earlier positions. Khan's response consists of an adaption of several aspects of Muir's approach which are conjoined with some general implications of his own earlier position. Khan's *Essays* must therefore be read as a crucial turning point in his historical approach, but must not be misunderstood as a complete break from his earlier writings. For, as demonstrated here, Muir's essentialist approach was preceded by early Muslim reformists, and to some extent remains consistent with it. This made it easy for Khan to transform and integrate Muir's argument.

Muir's most significant innovation was his aforementioned external perspective on Islamic sources, allowing for a reading that was not restricted by traditional interpretation. However, the aspects of contextualisation and progressive adaption of the uncreated Divine message were by no means unfamiliar concepts in the history of Muslim thought, and in particular Sufi thought, and Khan's discussion of related topics in his earlier writings allows for the distinct probability that he was well acquainted with these ideas. Thus, it would be falling short of the truth to describe Khan's response to Muir as a mere adoption of the latter's approach.

104 Muir: *Annals*, 458.

Rather, Khan seems to reactivate and reinterpret the ideas of *nūr-i Muḥammadī*, implying a progressive and adaptive revelation closely linked with the idea of the uncreated Quran that takes a particular shape only in the heart of Muhammad.

Although Khan could not accept Muir's stance towards the Quran as Muhammad's word, he acknowledges Muir's proposed set of guidelines for source criticism, yet attributes them to the traditional approach of *ḥadīṣ*-criticism. Khan thus recognises the necessity of relating traditions to the Quran and other important sources. Transgressing Muir's approach, he furthermore argues for a rational review of tradition – a point which Muir mentions, but does not develop as a distinct part of his catalogue of source criticism. This positive stance towards reason stands in sharp contrast to his earlier writings, although his commentary on the Bible foreshadowed a shift in his formerly hostile position.

The Quran is perceived as the last anchor for Muir as well as for Khan. The latter argues that the Quran can always be applied as the ultimate point of reference. If any tradition should contradict the Quran, the *ḥadīṣ* must be rejected, as Muhammad would not act in contradiction with the Quran and – this is a point of tremendous importance for Khan's newly established conception of history – its *implications*. In general, the importance of the *ḥadīṣ* appears to have decreased in his *Essays* in comparison to his earlier writings. While the latter abundantly quote traditions in support of Quranic quotes, his *Essays* argue comparatively less reference to the *ḥadīṣ*. Tradition, in Khan's view, thus experiences a general loss of reliability.¹⁰⁵ Even though references to tradition are by no means dispensed with entirely, Khan increasingly utilises other means of authority – in particular, his refutation of Muir's evils is based to a great extent on historical, natural, and social grounds. Nevertheless, Khan's depiction of the revelation of the Quran and its early transmission, for example, is described to a large extent with reference to the *ḥadīṣ*.

105 In his *Essays*, Khan distinguishes three types of *ḥadīṣ*: *mutavātir*, *maṣhūr*, and *ḥabarī aḥād*. The first, Khan states, comprises such “hadeeses only that have always been, from the time of the Prophet, ever afterwards recognised and adopted by every associate of the Prophet, and every learned individual, as authentic and genuine, and to which no one had raised any objection” (Khan: *Essays*, 203). However, in point of fact, only the Quran and perhaps five *ḥadīṣ* apply to this category. *Maṣhūr* are those traditions which “in every age, have been believed to be genuine, by some learned persons” (Khan: *Essays*, 203), while *ḥabarī aḥād* “is an appellation given to hadeeses that do not possess any of the qualities belonging to the hadeeses of the first two grades. Opinions of the learned are divided on whether or not they can form the basis of any religious doctrine” (Khan: *Essays*, 203). Thus, Khan perceives that, except for perhaps a small amount of traditions, only the Quran is an unrestrictedly reliable source, while most of the *ḥadīṣ* are perceived as contested. Cf. Troll: *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 137f.

Khan also introduces a new attitude towards the immutability of Islam. The fossilisation of the interpretation of the Islamic sources in traditional, unquestioned readings (*taqlīd*) is challenged. Rather than seeing Islam as immutable, then, Khan comes to view it adjustable and flexible. On this basis, he distinguishes between general, universal commands of the Quran and ossified interpretations offered by men, concluding that religion must not be perceived as a mere catalogue of fixed regulations. Consequently, Khan opens Islam up for the recognition of subsequent developments, which must not be understood as deviations from an unchanging essence. Nevertheless, Khan does not develop a full-fledged elaboration of Islamic law. His view of Islam remains on a rather abstract level and discusses only select examples in his critique of Muir. Perhaps Khan even recoiled from applying this methodology on a more concrete level, for fear of critique.

Moreover, Khan combines his refutation of the Quran as merely a human interpretation with his approach of contextualisation gleaned from *hadīs*-criticism. By positioning the Quran as a historical document that must be related to its context, Khan is then able to historicise the commandments of the Quran and ultimately overturn Muir's assertion of the three evils of Islam. He views the Quran as a historical document which must be related to its context. Within this context, Khan acknowledges the progressive attitude of the Quran's explicit commandments, while its inherent implications even transcend these and point towards further innovation. Polygamy is thus perceived as permitted by the Quran, for example, due to natural and social requirements. Thus, historical circumstances prohibit a complete abandonment of polygamy. Khan therefore argues that, Islam initially introduced several improvements by regulating and rigidly restricting this very permission, with the inherent, higher goal of abandonment.

For Khan, the early period of Islam is thus historicised and related to its context. It loses its character of being an unparalleled point of reference in history and becomes flexible, providing only a historical expression of the essence of Islam. Because Islam no longer remains fixed to its original form, Khan argues for a maintenance of the essence of Islam within a completely changed context, as 19th century South Asia confronted a loss of power, missionary activities, and science. Within this context, it must, however, be questioned how far Khan's interpretation of Islam's higher goals, only tacitly implied in the Quran, is influenced by foreign criticism. Is Muir's critique the implicit higher goal which is imposed on Khan's interpretation of the Quran? Did he counter Muir's critiques by presenting them as inherent implications in his interpretation? This question will be discussed in detail in the following chapter.

Instead, Khan's approach, as presented in his *Essays*, can be described as a conjunction of his earlier "Wahhabist" tendencies with Muir's external perspective. Thus, Metcalf states that "Sayyid Ahmad's 'modernism,' as it is often called, was not a simple imitation of Western ideas but had its roots in indigenous movements of reform. Indeed, it was largely as 'Wahhabi' or *ghair-muqallid* that he was seen – and opposed – at the time."¹⁰⁶

Fazlur Rahman describes Wahhabism as a predecessor for later modernist tendencies, and states:

But the most important aspect of Wahhābism was its normal motivation: it was a violent reaction at the moral degradation into which the Community had allowed itself to fall gradually over the centuries during which popular Šūfism had become the overwhelming factor. This moral motivation survived as a general legacy of the Wahhābī revolt after its first intolerant and fanatical phase had passed, and, combined with the general liberation of the mind and the spirit, paved the way for Modernist Muslims to overcome the literalism and fundamentalism of the Wahhābīs themselves and to allow for the scriptural text itself to be treated and interpreted on moral liberal lines.¹⁰⁷

Khan does not abandon his "fundamentalist" approach, aiming for the restoration of an origin, however. He rather combines it with Muir's critical perspective. This methodology allows Khan to develop a distance from the Quran and *ḥadīṣ*, which, again, are treated as historical sources that have to be read within their particular contexts – even though Khan would refuse to accept this terminology, as he had to be very cautious in his approach. The violation of the doctrine of the Quran's verbatim inspiration would not have been tolerated by Muslim orthodoxy. Thus, Khan upholds orthodox positions, as we see in the above-mentioned example of polygamy, while letting his reformist positions seep through implicitly. In fact, his methods of approaching the sources and their contextualisation implicitly affirms his assertion of viewing the Quran and *ḥadīṣ* as historical sources. The essence of Islam is therefore flexible, in Khan's view, with only certain universal commands, while its major part consists of mere implications which require adjustment to a particular context. Origin must not only be restored literally, but has to be reinterpreted. Thus, the restrictive concept of *bid'at*, disallowing change, becomes obsolete in Khan's *Essays*. History is transformed from a continuous distancing from an unparalleled classical time to a steady progression that presents various expressions of the inherent implications of Islam.

106 Metcalf: *Islamic Revival in British India*, 323.

107 Fazlur Rahman: *Islam* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1966), 199.

That said, these inherent implications remain bound to the intentions of the prototypical golden age. Drawing from the examples of Khwaja Altaf Husain Hali and Ameer Ali, the following chapter discusses aspects of transferring contemporary topics to the projection surface of this golden age. I will interrogate the extent to which the conception of early Islam is influenced by present-day confrontations. In other words, can the golden age be perceived as a shelter of the unadulterated essence of Islam?

IV. (Re)constructing the Origin

The critique of South Asian religions by European missionaries as well as orientalists, and increasingly by science in the second half of the 19th century, triggered the establishment of several religious reform movements. A very common approach to refuting European critique was the reconstruction of an unadulterated, original form of the respective religion, as the colonialists viewed the present state of the respective religions as decayed in comparison to a former golden age. We have seen this approach already in the preceding chapter on Khan's *Essays* wherein the author aimed to refute Muir's critique with reference to the inherent implications of the Quran to inherent implications of the Quran beyond its explicit commands. Khan aimed at reconstructing these implications on the basis of early Islam. The preceding chapter thus raised the question of how this golden age of early Islam is understood, which will be discussed in this chapter in detail. The two primary authors I will discuss here aim to rediscover original Islam through historical studies of its early period. I will examine how these authors position their historical reconstruction of Islam in relation to the dominant discourse of science and rationalism as a marker of European influence, and in what sense Europe is perceived as an explicit or implicit *telos* of history. The overarching question is therefore how this positioning affects the authors' conceptions of the reconstruction of origin.

The authors under discussion will be divided roughly into two groups. The first group will be represented principally by Khwaja Altaf Husain Hali and his historical poem, *Madd va jazr-i Islām (The Flow and Ebb of Islam)*. This group can be described as comprising the first generation of the close associates of the reformer and founder of the Aligarh movement, Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan. The second group, represented primarily by Ameer Ali, is characterised by the choice of English as the language of the authors' works, which enabled them to address another audience. Authors within this group are distinctive with respect to their attempt to abolish Europe as the *telos* of history and to present Islam self-referentially, without reference to Europe.

In the following discussion, I will first give an introduction to Hali and summarise the content of his poem. In the subsequent section, I will then present an analysis of this poem that incorporates Hayden White's theory of historiography.

1. Reconstructing the Origin

1.1 Hali (1837–1914)

Thus, if one people has progressed and another stays behind, then the people remaining behind [*pas-māndah*] should not lose hope. For, if not on the way then finally at the destination both will meet. And it is also not impossible that the lagging caravan draws level with the leading caravan still on the way.¹

In this quote from his article “Kyā Musalmān taraqqī kar sakte haiṅ?” (“Can Muslims Progress?”), Hali concisely summarises the wide-ranging problem of progress (*taraqqī*) with the metaphor of two caravans travelling on the same route. Obviously, he compares the second caravan with the current state of decay in Islam. In emphasising, however, the possibility that the second caravan, having set out later, may still catch up with the first, he instills hope for the improvement of South Asian Muslims’ situation.

Khwaja Altaf Husain (1837-1914), better known by his *nom de plume* (*taḥalluṣ*), Hali, was born in Panipat in southeast Punjab, roughly 100 km north of Delhi. He received a traditional education in Arabic and Persian. During a period of unemployment in the aftermath of the upheaval of 1857, Hali began to compose poetry in Urdu and then came to be acquainted with the famous poet Ghalib (1797-1869), who became his teacher. In 1871, Hali left for Lahore and started to work in the Government Book Depot as a corrector of English books translated into Urdu. Through this employment, he became acquainted with European thought despite his lack of knowledge of English. During his time in Lahore, he organised – in cooperation with Muhammad Husain Azad – literary assemblies (*muṣā‘irah*), which aimed to establish a new literary style of *necarī* poetry (Urdu-ised of English *nature*) emphasising realistic and moral themes. Hali also participated in these assemblies, but most of his poetry did not attain long-lasting recognition. What made him famous was his preface to his *Dīvān*, a collection of poetry. The preface was later reprinted separately several times as *Muqaddamah-i ṣī‘r va ṣā‘irī*, wherein he outlines a detailed vision of this new literary style. When he left Lahore in 1874/75 for Delhi, he came to be closely associated with Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817-1898), whose ideas deeply impressed him. In the following years, Hali supported Ahmad Khan’s writing on social and educational reforms.² His articles

1 Altaf Husain Hali: *Kulliyāt-i naṣr-i Ḥālī* (Lāhaur: Majlis-i Taraqqī-i Adab, 1967), 172.

2 Christopher Shackle: *Hali’s Musaddas: The Flow and Ebb of Islam* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), 1; *EL*, “Ḥālī”.

on religion and Islam, however, lack originality and mostly resemble the work of Ahmad Khan.

Hali's poem *Madd va jazr-i Islām* (*The Flow and Ebb of Islam*, 1879), popularly known as *Musaddas-i Hālī*, had a major impact and brought him several admirers. It created a whole tradition of poetic imitations in the same vein.³ The form of *musaddas* differs from the most popular genre of Urdu poetry of his time, the *gazzal*, in both its length and the consistency of its theme. While the *gazzal* consists of a certain amount of half-verses which are usually not connected through a shared theme but only through rhyme, the *musaddas* has a total of six lines with the first four rhyming with one another and the remaining two rhyming amongst themselves (*aaaa bb, cccc dd*, etc.).⁴ At the time of Hali, the *musaddas*-form had acquired much popularity in the *marṣīyah*, a genre first and foremost related to the bemoaning of the events of Karbala. While Hali's *Musaddas* incorporates the theme of bemoaning to some extent, ho it is not with respect to the Karbala but to Muslim civilisation in general.

After recognising the immense success of his *Musaddas*, Hali revised the poem in a second edition in 1886 and added a *zamīmah* (supplement) of 162 verses to the 294 stanzas of the original *Musaddas*.⁵ The 1902 edition was issued with an additional supplement, the *Arz-i hāl* (Petition), of 63 verses. Both supplements, however, could not reach the expectations raised by the *Musaddas*. The *zamīmah* was "regarded as a somewhat pale postscript to it [i.e. the *Musaddas*], and the Petition [...] is a still less organic addition thereto."⁶

1.2 *Musaddas*

The *Musaddas* is a historical poem which "contrasts the past glory of Islam with the current status of Muslims to arouse their sense of honour and shame."⁷ The dichotomy of the two concepts, *taraqqī* (progress) and *tanazzul* (descent, decay or degradation), is the main theme of this poem. After some introductory stanzas, Hali begins to depict the pre-Islamic period, the so-called period of ignorance

3 Shackle: *Hali's Musaddas*, 1, 36-48.

4 *EL*, "musammat."

5 The *Musaddas* was reduced to 294 of originally 297 stanzas in its second edition (Shackle: *Hali's Musaddas*, 11).

6 Shackle: *Hali's Musaddas*, 12.

7 Christina Oesterheld, "Campaigning for a Community: Urdu Literature of Mobilisation and Identity", *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 54: 1 (2017), 47.

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(jāhilīyat). This era is unequivocally described as a dark chapter of the history of Arabia:

No shadow of civilization had fallen upon it [i.e. Arabia]. Not even one step of progress had come there.⁸

The following stanzas proceed in listing the evils and coarseness of pre-Islamic Arabian society. Hali starts with the inhospitality of the climate of the desert, which had not been cultivated by the Arabs, and continues with the likewise unploughed state of their minds. He goes on criticising the ubiquitous idol worship, which had even occupied the Kaaba in Mecca. He then bemoans the disunity and continuous quarrelling of the Arab tribes, and denounces their disrespect of women while emphasising the evils of gambling and alcohol.⁹

According to Hali, only the appearance of the Prophet Muhammad brought the Arabs out of this period of ignorance and showed them the truth of the monotheism of Islam. Hali states that Muhammad taught them essential moral and social lessons, which he does not further concretise:

His teaching so prevailed over habit that those who had been addicted to falsehood came to be seekers of the true God.

All their vices were changed into virtues. Their frames were endowed with the spirit.

The stone which the masons had rejected came at last to be set at the head.¹⁰

Hali thus idealises the early period of Islam as a time when the entire Muslim society lived according to the message of Muhammad, and when all of the previous evils of pre-Islamic society had been abolished:

When the community had received all God's bounty, when the apostleship had discharged its function,

When there remained among men no argument to advance against God, when the Prophet decided upon departure from the world,

Then he left behind as heirs of Islam a people which has few parallels in the world.

All men were obedient to Islam. All men came to the aid of Muslims.

Men were true to God and the Prophet. Men treated orphans and widows with compassion.

8 Shackle: *Hali's Musaddas*, 105.

9 *Ibid.*, 105-109.

10 *Ibid.*, 121.

All were disgusted with the way of unbelief and falsehood. All were drunk with the intoxicating wine of truth.¹¹

The Muslim community had been perfected during the time of Muhammad to the point that, during the reign of the first Caliphs, Muslim society was also unparalleled. Hali herein constructs a sharp dichotomy between the pre-Islamic period and the early period of Islam, with both being presented as mere black and white depictions lacking any differentiated representation. He contrasts the pre-Islamic period with the early period of Islam and describes it as a time of degradation in every way, be it with respect to social or moral conditions, etc. On the other hand, the early period of Islam is depicted as a perfect society. Thus, only after the spread of Islam did progress appear in Arabia, upon which “no shadow of civilization had fallen [...] [and where] [n]ot even one step of progress had come [...]”¹²

In the following stanzas, Hali proceeds to describe the “general darkness” (*‘ām tārīkī kā zamānah*) which spread over the whole world, thus referring to the Dark Ages in Europe and likewise in India and Persia:

At the time that the idea of progress came to them, a darkness was spread over the inhabited quarter of the world.

Over every people lay the shadow of decline, which had caused them all to fall from the heights.

Those nations which are the stars of heaven today were all hidden in the twilight of degradation.¹³

In describing at length the ignorance and state of degradation of all civilised countries at the time of the appearance of Islam, Hali applies this idea as a contrasting point of reference for the “advances of the Muslims” (*musalmanoṅ kī taraqqīyāt*). The following stanzas then describe the various aspects of progress of Islam’s early period. It is not possible to quote all of the stanzas of the different *taraqqīs* but a brief glance at the headings Hali added to the poem will suffice as a concise overview. He begins by describing the “revival of learning” (*iḥyā-i ‘ulūm*) through the resurrection of ancient Greek philosophy and lauds the “quest for knowledge” (*ṭalab-i ‘ilm*) in every science and artform. In the following passage, the Arabs’ achievements in the fields of architecture and agriculture are elucidated to contrast with their former inability in the pre-Islamic period. Wherever the Muslims appeared – in Spain or Baghdad, India or Egypt – they left monumental buildings

11 Ibid., 123.

12 Ibid., 105.

13 Ibid., 125.

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and flowering gardens. Hereafter, Hali praises the Muslims' achievements in the fields of astronomy, history, rhetoric, and medicine:¹⁴

In short, all those arts which are the basic stock of religious and worldly prosperity, The natural, divine and mathematical sciences, and philosophy, medicine, chemistry, geometry, astronomy, Navigation, commerce, agriculture, architecture – wherever you go to track these down, you will find their footprints there.¹⁵

But then Hali discontinues this description of the various aspects of Muslim progress and recognises a “decay of the people of Islam” (*tanazzul-i Ahl-i Islām*). It remains uncertain as to when Hali sets the beginning of this decay. After bemoaning the Muslims' devastated state, he abruptly praises the “efficiency of the Europeans” (*Ahl-i Yūrap kā zabt-i auqāt*), and shows an appreciation for the prosperity and the nobility of the manners and habits of the Hindus, who inhabit the same land as South Asian Muslims.¹⁶ Yet, only the Muslims are incapable of progressing in their current state. Hali compares them to a devastated garden “which in no way bears even the name of freshness, whose green sprays have been scorched and have fallen off.”¹⁷ On the other hand, all of the other nations are compared with gardens which are already flourishing: “although their plants have not put forth leaf and fruit, they do appear ready to bloom”.¹⁸

Thus, again, Hali gives an entirely undifferentiated, black and white depiction of the state of the different religious communities. Here, however, the dichotomy of decay and progress is completely reversed. This time, Islam is attributed the label of decay, whereas the Europeans are unequivocally identified with progress.

Hereafter, the Europeans' progress is not further elucidated. In the remaining stanzas of his *Musaddas*, Hali addresses what he sees as the various reasons for the decay of Muslim society. He criticises the aristocratic and prosperous Muslims' lack of interest in social and political affairs. Hali finds them occupied with the idle pastime of flying pigeons or addiction to opium, etc.¹⁹ However, his criti-

14 *Ibid.*, 127-14.

15 *Ibid.*, 141.

16 Hindus apparently play a subordinate role in this context and are not mentioned further after the few stanzas given above. For Hali, rather seem to serve as admonishers for the Muslims, with regard to the possibility of progress for non-Europeans, as well.

17 *Ibid.*, 143.

18 *Ibid.*, 143.

19 *Ibid.*, 195. These are typical tropes of the so-called decadent Nawabi-culture of South Asia, which is criticised by virtually all Muslim reform movements. They are also found in early novels such as Nazir Ahmad's famous *Taubat an-Naṣūh* or Bengali satires.

cism is not restricted to the elite class, but likewise includes the general degeneration of Muslim society and its loss of the qualities and values which the Muslim *shariat* teaches. According to Hali, no respect for or interest in learning remained in the Muslim community. Neither books nor real learned men and religious scholars existed. Instead, he sees those who claim to be learned as fraudsters lacking any knowledge. Others are criticised for their dissemination of hate against both Muslims and non-Muslims. In Hali's view, these Ulama ('*ulamā*') brand one another as infidels and, thus, disunite the Muslim community. They complicate the originally simple religion of Islam and overemphasise outward aspects:²⁰

The commands of the Holy Law were so agreeable that Jews and Christians were filled with love for them.

The entire Quran is witness to their mildness. The Prophet himself proclaimed, 'Religion is easy.' [*ad-dīn yusr*]

But here they [i.e. the Ulama] have made them so difficult that believers have come to consider them a burden.²¹

For Hali, Muslims have abolished the Holy Law and gone astray from the teachings of Islam. Conversely, he considers the progress of Europe to be a result of its acknowledgement of the very principles which Islam teaches:

Those who act on the basis of this weighty utterance today flourish upon the face of the earth.

They are superior to all, high and low. They are now the central axis of humanity.

Those covenants of the Holy Law which we have broken have all been firmly upheld by the people of the West.²²

This raises the question of how exactly Hali defines Holy Law. Is it the *sharia* in today's common notion as religious law that, for example, prescribes dietary regulations, the practice and timing of prayer, etc.? The overarching issue at stake here thus becomes Hali's conception of Islam and religion in general. The above quoted stanzas proclaiming the simplicity of Islam give a hint in this regard, but the *Musaddas* does not provide an explicit answer. However, in his article "*Ad-Dīn yusr*" ("Religion/*dīn* is Easy"), Hali emphasises that the tenets of Islam are not absurd or incomprehensible (*muḥāl*), and nor are its regulations a burden to men. Instead, he depicts Islam as an essentialised framework which is free of any bigotry or overemphasis of regulations on outward rituals. But in the progress of time, this "true *dīn*" has been distorted, and its essential purpose veiled:

20 Ibid., 169-171.

21 Ibid., 171.

22 Ibid., 163.

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In short, as long as this pure *dīn* maintained its original form [*apnī aṣlīyat par bar-qarār*], there was nothing which restricted man in his joy, his pleasure, and his freedom. But, alas, over time, additions [*ḥāṣīye*] began to be connected with it. Over time, the additions increased to such an extent that it became difficult to distinguish between the addition and the original [*matn aur ḥāṣīye meṅ tamīz karnī duṣvār ho ga ī*]. The original began to disappear.²³

In his article, Hali thus sets out to describe the various types of additions which led Muslims astray from the essential principles and purposes of their religion. In turn, he considers these additions to be the central reason for Muslim decay:

The mundane achievements [*duniyavī taraqqīyāt*] did not only cease in the course of this [i.e. the additions] but they were exchanged with the state of decay [*tanazzul ke sāth mubdal*] [...].²⁴

I will not reproduce all of the additions here in detail. It will suffice to discuss Hali's main argument. He distinguishes between two types of statements by Muhammad: the first type of statements relate to the Divine regulations (*ahkām-i ilāhī*), which are perceived as sharia. The second type of statements are described as mere *rā'e* (opinion):²⁵

The first of these two types of teachings [*ta'līm*] was his [i.e. Muhammad's] official duty [*manṣabī farz*] which he has been sent for. [...] This [type of teaching] was named *sharia* and its violation has been described as going astray. The second type of teaching, which pertains to the way of life [*mu'āṣ*], was completely separate from his official duties; neither has this type been declared as binding for the community, nor is its contravention prohibited.²⁶

This line of argument is very common and applied abundantly in this time period. Chiragh Ali, a close associate of Ahmad Khan, also argued in a similar vein and thus provides insights into determining Hali's views on Islamic law, as well as his conception of Islam and religion in general. In his *The Proposed Political, Legal, and Social Reforms in the Ottoman Empire and other Mohammadan States* (1883), Ali outlines a programme of certain reforms in Muslim Law. In his introduction, he points out that his book is to be understood as an answer to European critique claiming the utter inflexibility of Islam. In European representations, Islam is depicted as a fossilised system. Chiragh Ali in particular mentions Malcolm McColl's article, "Are Reforms Possible under Mussulman Rule?" (1881). In the

23 Hali: *Kulliyāt-i naṣr*, 7.

24 Ibid., 23.

25 Ibid., 10.

26 Ibid., 7.

subsequent pages of his introduction, Ali sets out to refute this critique in two ways: on the one hand, he aims to counter the view that Islam is inflexible and, on the other hand, he envisages a reinterpretation of the concept of religion. He argues against an equivocation of the religion of Islam and the social system associated with Islam. He then proceeds by distinguishing between the essential part of Islam and its social system. In his opinion, the latter has often been equated with Islam, thus wrongly implicating their inseparability. Chiragh Ali argues with reference to the abundantly quoted “date-*ḥadīṣ*”:

There is a tradition related by the Imám Moslim to the effect that Mohammad the Prophet while coming to Medina saw certain persons fecundating date-trees. He advised them to refrain from doing so. They acted accordingly, and the yield was meagre that year. It being reported to him, he said, “He was merely a man. What he instructed them in their religion they must take, but when he ventured his opinion in other matters he was only a man.”²⁷

Based on this reference, Chiragh Ali concludes a distinction of two spheres intended by the Prophet himself. Thus, Muhammad’s acts and statements must not be understood as being divine *per se*, but rather must be distinguished with respect to the pertaining sphere (religious or societal/mundane):

This shows that Mohammad never set up his own acts and words as an infallible or unchangeable rule of conduct in civil and political affairs, or, in other words, he never combined the Church and State into one. [...] It is incorrect to suppose that the acts and sayings of the Prophet cover all law, whether political, civil, social, or moral.²⁸

Hence, Muhammad’s acts must not be supposed to be inherently of divine character. The Prophet is depicted first and foremost as a human being, bereft of an infallible status. His deeds are denied any religious character *per se*. This understanding paves the way for Chiragh Ali’s argument to disclaim the critique of an inflexibility of Islam. He rejects the characterization of Islam as a social system and acknowledges Muslim law as a common law originating in the variegated context of the appearance of Islam:

[I]slam as a religion is quite apart from inculcating a social system. The Mohamadan polity and social system have nothing to do with religion. Although Mohamadans in after days have tried to mix up their social system with the Korán, just

27 Chiragh Ali: *The Proposed Political, Legal, and Social Reforms: in the Ottoman Empire and Other Mohamadan States* (Bombay: Education Society’s Press, 1883), xxxvi.

28 Ibid.

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as the Jews and Christians have done in applying the precepts of the Bible to the institutions of their daily life, they are not so intermingled that, "it is hard to see they can be disentangled without destroying both."²⁹

Chiragh Ali, therefore, aims to restore the original form of Islam as being free from any linkage to a social system with a canonical law. Instead, he describes a concept of religion fundamentally differing from the one presupposed by the European critics scrutinising Islam. This presupposition of an entanglement of religion with a social system in Islam results, according to Chiragh Ali, in a misrepresentation.

The reference to the "date-*ḥadīṣ*" allows Chiragh Ali to contextualise and historicise certain aspects of Islam and Muslim law, thereby dismissing some as being unrelated to the essence of Islam. In this essentialisation, he presupposes a concept of religion which neglects a concrete, inflexible, canonical law. Hence, he abolishes the assertion of an entanglement of religion with social affairs with respect to Islam:

Islam exists as a religion distinct from a social system, though Muslims in various phases of their history confused the individual or cumulative experience of their social systems with the Quran.³⁰

Returning from this discussion of Chiragh Ali, it becomes obvious that Hali likewise applies this argument of essentialisation. As has been shown above, he too acknowledges a distinction between a religious and a secular sphere, thus denying an entanglement of Islam with social affairs:

Now that government has performed its proper function, Islam has no need for it left.

But, alas, oh community of the Glory of Man, humanity departed together with it. Government was like a gilt covering upon you. As soon as it peeled off, your innate capacity emerged.³¹

Hali therefore does not acknowledge governance as an essential part of Islam. It was rather a requirement of former circumstances. Its abolishment, however, does not mean any essential damage to Islam as religion. For, as he further elaborates in his "*Ad-Dīn yusr*", the essential purpose of religion is rather "the refinement of morals and the perfecting of the soul" (*aḥlāq kī taḥzīb aur naḥs-i insānī kī*

29 Ibid., xxxiv.

30 Aziz Ahmad: *Islamic modernism in India and Pakistan: 1857 - 1964* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 61.

31 Shackle: *Hali's Musaddas*, 145.

takmīl).³² Thus, both Hali and Chiragh Ali present a concept of religion claiming inwardness and, hence, emphasising the distinction of religion from a social system with concrete regulations and prescriptions.

But still, even if not explicitly stated, Hali's concept of religion does not appear to be implicitly restricted to inward reality and morality. If the *Musaddas* is read closely, it becomes clear that Islam is – in its unadulterated early period – also described in relation with progress: thus, in Hali's view, Islam is not merely limited to morality. As Hali writes in the introduction to the first edition of the *Musaddas*:

[I] have given a sketch of the miserable condition of Arabia before the appearance of Islam, in the period known in the language of Islam as the Jahiliyya. I have then described the rising of the star of Islam, how the desert was suddenly made green and fertile by the teaching of the Unlettered Prophet, how that cloud of mercy at his departure left the fields of the community luxuriantly flourishing, and how the Muslims excelled over the whole world in their religious development and worldly progress [*dīnī va duniyavī taraqqīyāt*].³³

Chiragh Ali goes even further, and describes Islam as inherent progress:

Islam is capable of progress, and possesses sufficient elasticity to enable it to adapt itself to the social and political changes going on around it. The Islam, by which I mean the pure Islam as taught by Mohammad in the Korán, and not the Mohamadan Common Law, was itself a progress and a change for the better.³⁴

Thus, both Hali and Chiragh Ali essentialise Islam, which allows them, on the one hand, to reject the critique of an inflexibility and inadaptability of Islam and, on the other hand, to present the inherently progressive character of Islam. This move, however, results in a linkage of Islam with *worldly* progress, which transcends the border of the allegedly separate spheres of religion versus social affairs, and instead merges them. Religion is, hence, not restricted to inward aspects of morality, but is perceived to enable progress: the teachings of Islam being a crucial requirement for the same. Consequently, religion as a general principle appears to transcend its essential sphere, reaching also into the mundane sphere of worldly progress.

32 Hali: *Kulliyāt-i naṣr*, 3.

33 Shackle: *Hali's Musaddas*, 95.

34 Ali: *The Proposed Political, Legal, and Social Reforms*, 10.

1.3 Progress and Decay

Both Hali and Chiragh Ali discuss the dichotomy of progress and decay in relation to the essence of Islam. The latter, states that “the pure Islam as taught by Moham-mad in the Korán, and not the Mohammadan Common Law, was itself a progress and a change for the better.”³⁵ Ali thus aims for a disentanglement of the common law from essential Islam. In its essence, Islam is perceived as being progressive. However, Ali’s equivocation of the common law with Islam and, thus, its sacralisation to a divinely inspired, inflexible code of law proved to be an obstacle for progress. He argues that the decay of Islam is unequivocally related to the adulteration of this essential Islam. Subsequently, this shift was accompanied by an incapacity for discerning the purpose of the teachings of Islam:³⁶

This [in reference to a quoted *ḥadīṣ*] makes clear that neither *vuḏū* [ritual ablution] nor *ḡusl* [ritual bath], neither *namāz* [prayer] nor *rozah* [fasting], neither *ḥajj* [pilgrimage] nor *zakāt* [alms] and likewise any external orders were an end in itself [*maqṣūd bi-aḏ-zāṭ*] but were rather tools for purifying the (esoteric) inner [*taṣfīyah-i bāṭin*], healing the soul [*mu’ālahah-i nafs*] and the perfecting of morals [*tahzīb-i aḥlāq*].³⁷

Furthermore, both authors emphasise that Islam in its unadulterated form never proved to be an obstacle to progress. As has already become obvious from the long description of the significant enumeration of achievements Muslims made during the early period in Hali’s *Musaddas*, Islam was rather perceived as a stimulating factor for progress.³⁸ Chiragh Ali even equates Islam with inherent progress.³⁹

35 Ibid.

36 Hali: *Kulliyāt-i naṣr*, 23.

37 Ibid., 16.

38 Ibid., 162-163.

39 This trope of decay is very common in virtually any reformist approach of 19th and early 20th century South Asia, not only in the context of Islam or Hinduism. With respect to the former, the preceding chapter has already discussed various declarations of a Muslim decay, reaching back even to the 18th century. With respect to Hinduism, first of all Ram Mohan Roy has to be mentioned who similarly called for the return to the sources of tradition in order to rediscover original Hinduism, freed of its various misinterpretations: “Ram-mohan repeatedly states his conviction that reason and common sense go hand in hand with the true meaning of the sacred texts. [...] The Brahmins have usurped the study and the transmission the Vedic texts as one of their prerogatives. They have tried to conceal the sacred tradition behind the ‘dark curtain of the Sungscrit language,’ although they themselves have long since lost access to its real meaning” (Halbfass: *India and Europe*, 205). In a similar vein, also later reformists, first and foremost Vivekananda, argue for a rediscovery of “original” Hinduism. Likewise, Dayananda Sarasvati states that the proper un-

But how is this progress to be understood? To answer this question, it will be necessary to concisely discuss the concept of progress and its implications for historiography. In the following section, I will discuss Hayden White's approach to historiography in order to provide a theoretical framework for my analysis of the concept of progress and the structure of a historical narrative.

Progress is a concept which presupposes a linear succession of events. According to Georg Henrik von Wright, progress inevitably requires a *telos*, a destination of the successive chain of events in history. Wright puts the *telos* in "a distant future," thus implying a striving towards a distant destination.⁴⁰ This distant destination serves as point of reference for identifying an event as progress or decay. This conclusion then forms a referential axis for measuring the chain of successive events with three crucial stages: the past, the present, and the future destination of perfection. An event of the present is measured with respect to its approximation to the future *telos* in comparison to the past. While Wright describes the *telos* as a universal destination of all history, Hayden White's analysis of historiography makes this universality very questionable. In his *Metahistory*, he describes a three-stage structure which shapes the interpretation of history:

First the elements in the historical field are organized into a chronicle by the arrangement of the events to be dealt with in the temporal order of their occurrence; then the chronicle is organized into a story by the further arrangement of the events into the components of a "spectacle" or process of happening, which is thought to possess a discernible beginning, middle, and end.⁴¹

White distinguishes a historical story from a chronicle insofar as the latter is open-ended while the former is the extraction of a three-stage compound of events. Events, however, do not have any self-referential meaning, acquiring it only through their arrangement within a historical story:

It is sometimes said that the aim of the historian is to explain the past by "finding," "identifying," or "uncovering" the "stories" that lie buried in chronicles; and that the difference between "history" and „fiction" resides in the fact that the historian "finds" his stories, whereas the fiction writer "invents" his. This conception of the historian's task, however, obscures the extent to which "invention" also plays a part

derstanding of the Vedas had not been preserved, which culminated in tremendous misconceptions and the loss of the originally Indian knowledge of science, which is "ultimately dependent upon India and the Veda" (Halbfass: *India and Europe*, 245).

40 Georg Henrik von Wright: "Progress: Fact and Fiction," in *The Idea of Progress*, ed. Arnold Burgen and Peter McLaughlin (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1997), 2.

41 Hayden V. White: *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1975) 5.

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in the historian's operations. The same event can serve as a different kind of element of many different historical stories, depending on the role it is assigned in a specific motific characterization of the set to which it belongs. [...] The historian arranges the events in the chronicle into a hierarchy of significance by assigning events different functions as story elements in such a way as to disclose the formal coherence of a whole set of events considered as a comprehensible process with a discernible beginning, middle, and end.⁴²

White thus makes a clear distinction between a chronicle and a historical story. The former is a mere register of events. The events subsequently follow each other without implying any obvious mutual link. The chronicle can be continued *ad infinitum*. The historical story, however, is always divided in a tripartite structure with the crucial parts of beginning, middle, and end. This implies the integration of some events and the omission of others in this structure and, thus, assigns them a meaning within a coherent narrative that they do not possess inherently. Rather, meaning is acquired only through its integration in the tripartite structure of history. Events by themselves do not have any self-evident meaning. Only within the contingent framework of the historical narrative are chronicled events presented as allegedly self-evident. The introductory event is deemed to predict the subsequent events, finally resulting in the end of the story. The end of the story is presupposed as an inevitable result which was already indicated by every event of the story. Every event is read with respect to its destination, the end of the story.

Nevertheless, the mere chronicle of events does not imply this allegedly self-evident meaning. The identification of the conclusive reference point predetermines the selection of the preceding events and their organisation in the tripartite structure. The beginning, thus, does not in fact predict any necessary subsequent chain of events. Rather, the conclusive point of reference affects the selection of events from the chronicle, which assumes the self-evident meaning of events. That said, none of its individual parts can claim self-evidence. Only within this tripartite structure are the elements arranged within a referential system. Neither the beginning nor the end of the story can be found in the elements themselves. The assertion of one single, universal *telos* therefore becomes questionable, as every story establishes its own contingent *telos* which fundamentally structures the perception and selection of the preceding events. *Telos* is a plural concept, created within the structure of every story. It cannot be reduced to a singularity, but is rather a contingent creation, differing with every story. History is merely a construct of the tripartite structure.

In the same way, the origin cannot claim any authenticity or genuineness. In his article "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," Foucault describes the search for the

42 Ibid., 6-7.

beginning as the shelter of authenticity and genuineness as a myth. The historian's quest for origins, Foucault argues, does not reveal any essence which facilitates an originality, an authentic point of reference. In the beginning, no timeless, inviolable identity can be found.⁴³ Rather, he argues, the beginning is likewise characterised by multiplicity and diversity:

What is found at the historical beginning of things is not the inviolable identity of their origin; it is the dissension of other things. It is disparity. [...] The lofty origin is no more than "a metaphysical extension which arises from the belief that things are most precious and essential at the moment of birth." We tend to think that this is the moment of their greatest perfection, when they emerged dazzling from the hands of a creator or in the shadowless light of a first morning.⁴⁴

Foucault recognises an insurmountable diversity present already in the beginning. He thus refutes the attempt of historiography to reveal authenticity as an attempt to veil this disparity. Historiography aims to establish one hegemonic trajectory. Hence, the search for authenticity must always remain a construction, as origin itself is already varied. It does not refer to any singular essence.

The historical practice is rather a universalising project of the present. The historian imposes the present on the past: the past is interpreted from the perspective of the present. The chronology of history, which pretends that the origin is the starting point, is instead reversed in the historian's practice. As Foucault states:

The final trait of effective history is its affirmation of knowledge as perspective. Historians take unusual pains to erase the elements in their works which reveal their grounding in a particular time and place, their preferences in a controversy – the unavoidable obstacles of their passion.⁴⁵

The present therefore fundamentally shapes the perception of the past. It is the inevitable starting point of any historical scrutiny.

This adds an important aspect to White's structural analysis of historiography. The latter focuses on the tripartite structure within a story which shapes the interpretation of the past. Foucault goes one step further and recognises the present context of the historian in addition to the internal structure of a story. For Foucault, the historian and his context become part of the analysis. White, however, exam-

43 Michel Foucault: "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. D. F. (Bouchard. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 142.

44 *Ibid.*, 142f.

45 *Ibid.*, 156-157.

ines the implications of the tripartite structure, emphasising the referential character of the end of the story. Events receive meaning only within this structure and through their reference to the end. None of the parts of this structure can have a claim for self-evidence. The beginning as well as the end of the story are a contingent choice and, thus, may differ with every story. Likewise, the *telos* cannot claim any singularity, but is a decision of the historian. This is precisely where Foucault comes into play: he exposes the limitation of the historian's viewpoint according to his present context. Past circumstances and views cannot be revived and, thus, are reread from the from the historians' present socio-cultural perspective. The parts of the historical story are, hence, subject to a retroactive process of projection. The present is projected onto the past.

In the following discussion, I aim to apply this theoretical approach to Hali's *Musaddas* and his presentation of two stories of the history of Islam. I will interrogate the ways in which the rearrangement of events and the relocation of the end of the story culminate in a reinterpretation of their meaning. How is the original, unadulterated Islam conceived of, and how does Hali utilise the structure of historiography to propose his interpretation?

When Hali as well as Chiragh Ali reject European critiques of Islam as inflexible and immutable, they instead aim to present an abstract interpretation of Islam which is characterised only through a few principles – namely *tauḥīd* (unity of God), which is described as fundamental teaching with all fundamental rites and regulations emerging from this.⁴⁶ This permits them to present Islam as highly adaptive and flexible, adjusting to any circumstances. Hence, both authors describe Islam – in its “original,” unadulterated form – as inherently progressive. In the following section, I will analyse this claim taking into account my examination of historiography above. This discussion will address how Islam is presented as progressive, while European critique explicitly states the contrary. Furthermore, it asks, how is progress perceived? What is the referential *telos* of progress?

Hali's *Musaddas* can be divided into two narratives. The first describes, in a nostalgic vein, the various achievements of Muslims in the early Islamic period. To understand the claim for Islam's progressive character, it is crucial to read Hali's two historical stories in the context of White's tripartite structure. Hali's glorification of early Islam rejects the approach of European critique which, firstly, presupposes Islam to be an immutable, canonical complex of laws and regulations, and, secondly, measures this fixed view of Islam against contemporaneous Europe. Hali as well as Chiragh Ali refute this approach as being unjustified. They state that the Islam which European critics take as their point of reference

46 Shackle: *Hali's Musaddas*, 114-117.

must not be understood as eternal, but rather must be read within its historical context. They set out to compare this Islam not with modern Europe, but instead with pre-Islamic Arabia. While “[n]o shadow of civilization had fallen upon it [i.e. Pre-Islamic Arabia]” and “[n]ot even one step of progress had come there,” I will situate Muslim achievements during the early period of Islam within a historical continuum.⁴⁷ The *telos* of this first historical story is set in the early period of Islam. This restriction of the continuum to the structure of the tripartite historical story permits Hali and Chiragh Ali to present Islam as a distinct break from the past, thus constructing a dichotomy between pre-Islamic and Islamic times.⁴⁸

Both authors, however, emphasise that this particular expression must not be perceived as final and immutable, as European critique assumes.⁴⁹ On the contrary, the essential principles of Islamic teachings must be examined, for only those demonstrate the inherently progressive character of Islam. Both Hali and Chiragh Ali present a rather abstract definition of Islam, focussing on its core essence.⁵⁰ Christopher Shackle states in his introduction that Hali attempts “to disentangle a culture’s self-perceptions from its historical involvements with worldly power, so that the kernel of its identity might become self-dependent and insulated from the revolutions of political fortune”.⁵¹ This distinction of a core essence of Islam signified through certain overarching principles permits the rejection of the charge of immutability, instead permitting the characterisation of Islam as progressive.

But the *Musaddas* does not end with this nostalgic glorification of a former golden age in Islam. This golden age is rather instrumentalised to disentangle the progressive essence of Islam from the overarching point of reference that is Europe. The second story, however, has to include the European *telos*. It reverses the preceding one and bemoans the present decay of Muslim society, thus having a clearly different referential continuum. The *telos* of European achievements serves as the reference point for the contemporaneous situation of Muslims. While Hali praises the Europeans, he depicts the state of Muslim society as one of devastation:

Neither their wealth remained intact, nor their prestige. Their fortune and prosperity forsook them.

Sciences and arts took leave of them one by one. All their virtues were destroyed by degrees.

47 Ibid., 105.

48 Ibid., 127-129; Ali: *The Proposed Political, Legal, and Social Reforms*, 10.

49 Ali: *The Proposed Political, Legal, and Social Reforms*, i-ii.

50 Ibid., 10.

51 Shackle: *Hali’s Musaddas*, 52.

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Neither religion nor Islam was left. Only the name of Islam was left.⁵²

The protagonists of both stories – the first presenting a nostalgia for the golden age of Islam, the second its decay – are the Muslims. But in terms of White’s analytical framework, they differ in the extent to which the protagonist corresponds with the *telos* of the story. Because the teleological reference point is identified with the protagonists, the first story culminates in a golden age narrative of progress. Thus, the *telos* and protagonists correspond in Hali’s first historical narrative. The preceding state of pre-Islamic Arabia serves as a negative example, as it is measured on the grounds of the *telos* of Islam. The latter can thus be distinguished as progressive. The second story, on the contrary, begins with this golden age of Islam, but ends with the progressive state of modern Europe: thus, the protagonists and *telos* diverge. Consequently, this second story reads as a story of decay, for the Muslim protagonists are measured not against their own *telos* but against modern Europe. Because the *telos* of Europe is presupposed as the reference point for the universal conception of progress, Muslims thus face the inevitable characterisation of lack. Moreover, Europe’s progress is universalised, disallowing a multiplicity of possible progresses. Progress in general is equated with the particular progress of Europe.

This train of thought takes us back to Hali’s above-mentioned metaphor of different caravans travelling on the road of progress:

Thus, if one people has progressed and another stays behind, then the people remaining behind [*pas-māndah*] should not lose hope. For if not on the way then finally at the destination both will meet. And it is also not impossible that the lagging caravan draws level with the leading caravan still on the way.⁵³

Significantly, Hali describes the singularity of the destination of progress in this metaphor. It is not obvious whether he equates the Europeans with the destination or whether they are understood as likewise travelling on this same road as another leading caravan. The latter would imply a distinction between Europe and progress. The preceding lines, however, make clear that, at least within this metaphor, the leading caravan is deemed to refer to the other peoples of South Asia (*ham-waṭan qaumen*).⁵⁴

In Hali’s *Musaddas*, it thus becomes obvious that Europe and “Western science” are perceived as *telos*:

52 Ibid., 143.

53 Hali: *Kulliyāt-i naṣr*, 172.

54 Ibid., 172.

The results of Western science and art have been apparent in India for a hundred years,

But bigotry has put such blinkers on us that we cannot see the manifestation of Truth.

The theories of the Greeks are implanted in our hearts, but we do not believe [*īmān*] in the revelation [*vaḥy*] presently granted us.⁵⁵

It is important to take his choice of words here into consideration, for the last stanza applies key religious terminology to western culture. It is first significant that Hali applies the quranic *īmān* (belief) instead of the general term *yaqīn* (belief).⁵⁶ Furthermore, he terms the distribution of Western science as *vaḥy* (revelation), a *terminus technicus* otherwise restricted to the divine revelations of prophets.⁵⁷ This wording puts Europe and European knowledge in an unequivocally religious setting and suggests that Hali literally equates the narrative structure of the two stories. The Europeans, thus, take up the role of the Muslims who brought progress to pre-Islamic Arabia.⁵⁸ Therefore, in the second story, the Europeans are

55 Shackle: *Hali's Musaddas*, 187.

56 Platts gives the following meanings for *yaqīn*: "Certain of sure knowledge, certainty, assurance, confidence, conviction, belief, opinion; truth, true faith, infallibility, evidence" while *īmān* is first and foremost related to God: "Belief (particularly in God, and in His word and apostles, &c.); faith, religion, creed; conscience; good faith, trustworthiness, integrity," (John T. Platts: *A Dictionary of Urdū, Classical Hindī and English* (New Delhi: Manoharlal, 1993), 115, 1250).

57 According to Platts, the following are the meanings of *vaḥy*: "Revelation; anything (divine) suggested, inspired, or revealed (by vision or otherwise); inspiration," (Platts: *A Dictionary of Urdū, Classical Hindī and English*, 1183).

58 In his *Urdū adab kī taškīl-i jadīd*, Nasir Abbas Nayyar reads Hali's *Musaddas* as nationalist poetry and interprets it as an attempt to identify the muslim nation's *origin* or *essence* in Islam. According to Nayyar, Hali introduces or rather acknowledges a dichotomy of East and West, respectively representing religion versus reason and science. Thus, Hali based his interpretation of nation on Islam. However, this reading by Nayyar seems to be quite questionable in view of the above given analysis wherein Hali deliberately blurs this strict bifurcation. Hali links Islam to the hegemonic discourse of science and, thus, introduces a lineage of Muslim philosophy and science. This of course does not imply that he revokes a dichotomy between East and West. Yet, he links Islam to essential elements which are associated with the West. Hence, does Nayyar not omit a crucial aspect of the *Musaddas* in reducing it to a text of nation-formation instead of reading it as a lament on the present situation of Islam, having lost its link to its own essence? To put it in other words, is the *Musaddas* in the first instance discussing Islam as a category of identity or rather redefining Islam and its relation to the hegemonic discourse of science and reason? Even though the aspect of identity cannot be denied with regard to Hali's attempt to link Islam with crucial aspects of the category of the "West", the question of identity seems to be secondary, as it is not a demarcation of the category of Islam that stands at the forefront, but rather its linkage to the hegemonic discourse. Cf. Nayyar: *Urdu adab kī taškīl-i jadīd*, 68-71.

described as the “prophets” of their time and “Western science” as their revelation. This second story emulates the structure of the first, but diverges, as mentioned, with respect to its teleological reference point. Here, Hali acknowledges the Europeans and their knowledge as *telos*, thus putting Muslims in the position of the pre-Islamic Arabs who are in need of divine revelation. The revelation of Islam is, thus, equated with Western science as a modern form of revelation. The progressive position is inhabited by the inheritor of the respective *telos*. Consequently, this positioning is of crucial importance for the interpretation of historical events. As per White, they do not inherently possess any self-evident meaning, but receive their meaning only through their positions within the tripartite structure of historical stories, with their relation to the end of the story serving as the point of reference which structures the whole story. Thus, the golden age of Islam receives two different interpretations. While this golden age signifies Islamic progress when it is equated with the *telos* of the first story, when placed at the beginning of the second, it becomes the starting point for the decay of Muslim society. Hali now depicts the Muslim protagonists as being detached from *telos*, and henceforth measured on a basis other than themselves.

The second story still acknowledges the progressive character of a golden age, albeit one born in classical Greece. However, its regulations, which were perceived in the first story in comparison to the preceding period as being progressive, are perceived negatively – as exhibiting a fixation of temporary regulations and a loss of the inherent, eternal principles. This shift in the teleological reference point, again, implies the comparison of an external conception of progress with a self-referential insufficiency. That said, progress is not a universal and self-evident concept, but necessarily requires a particular, an exemplary point of departure, to be abstracted into an allegedly universal concept. Consequently, the particular *telos* applied as a point of reference is raised to a perfect manifestation of the concept, a *genus*-category, as the concept is perceived as preceding the particular. As Michael Bergunder writes:

[T]he point of comparison usually has a privileged relationship to one of the two or more elements that are to be compared, and the other is predicated on that relationship. [...] if the general term A', which serves as the point of comparison, is only an abstraction of element A, then A is the prototype for A'. Prior to the comparison, B (or C, D, etc.) must be declared similar to A via A' in order to make the comparison possible.⁵⁹

59 Michael Bergunder “Comparison in the Maelstrom of Historicity: A Postcolonial Perspective on Comparative Religion,” in *Interreligious Comparisons in Religious Studies and Theology: Comparison Revisited*, ed. Perry Schmidt-Leukel and Andreas Nehring

This is a process of abstraction in disguise, as – in my discussion of White’s approach above – the *genus*-category pretends to be prior to the particulars. In point of fact, a singular particular is applied as archetype for the whole *genus*-category. Only in this way does the particular acquire the position of *genus*. This culminates in a self-referential relation of one particular with the abstract concept, whereas other elements of comparison inherently possess a lack of distinctness with regard to the referential particular and, thus, to the *genus*, as well. The self-referential relation of the exemplary particular with the abstract concept provides the former’s compliance of all specificities of the *genus*. The other particulars inevitably lack this self-referential relation and, hence, the compliance of all specificities of the concept: they are measured instead against the exemplary particular, the representor of the *genus*.

At this stage of discussion, it is crucial to take Hali’s distinction between Muslims and Islam into account, for this will explain the relation of the two stories in further detail. As discussed above, he emphasises a separation of historical developments and an essence of Islam. While the Muslims of the early period of Islam acted entirely in accordance with this essence, later Muslims became incapable of discerning this essence and did not recognise the deeper meaning of religious practices. They rather insisted on an empty shell, according to Hali, and became detached from the essence of Islam. These later Muslims of the second story deemed the practices of the early period of Islam to be divinely inspired, eternal and immutable universals, thus losing touch with the overarching principles. He blames the Ulama for illegitimately leading the people astray from these simple principles:

It is a shame that our Ulama have discussed the outward commands in such depth and accuracy that the subject of sharia has changed entirely [...].⁶⁰

Hali misses the importance of faith (*īmān*) in those discussions, however, and bemoans the fact that the actual purpose of Islam has been forgotten behind this overemphasis of outward practices, namely “the refinement of morals and the perfecting of the soul” (*aḥlāq kī tahzīb aur naḥs-i insānī kī takmīl*).⁶¹ This note, as has been discussed, has to be read as an attempt to construct an essence of Islamic principles which is distinct from historical developments and fixations. In Hali’s

(London, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, an imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016), 37.

60 Hali: *Kulliyāt-i naṣr*, 20.

61 Ibid., 3, 20.

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view, this essence has been adopted by Europe, whereas Muslims fell prey to bigotry and conservatism, rejecting any adaptations and insisting on the unmodified preservation of early practices, thus abandoning the deeper principles of Islam.⁶² Consequently, by equating the *teloi* of the first and the second story, Hali identifies both as being the essence of Islam. In the second story, however, Muslims have gone astray of this *telos* while the Europeans adopted it, hence having progressed. This allows Hali, on the one hand, to present the Europeans' dependence on Islam as well as, on the other hand, the Muslims' ability to progress again if the essence of Islam is discerned and separated from contemporaneous bigotry:

Those covenants of the Holy Law which we have broken have all been firmly upheld by the people of the West.⁶³

If, however, Hali equates the *teloi* and assumes them to be essentially the same – namely, the essential principles of Islam – the question of their relationship, or perhaps interdependence, arises. Is the *telos* of the second story a mere adoption of essential Islam?

In point of fact, Hali's description of the "original" Islam rather appears as a retroactive relocation of the *telos* of Europe to the early period of Islam: a closer examination of the proposed achievements and aspects of progress which Muslims attained in comparison to the pre-Islamic period reveals striking resemblances to the points of critique put forward by European critics. Although Hali's *Musaddas* does not refer to any particular critic, the preceding chapter on Muir's critique of Islam showed several crucial points which are repeated here in a very reminiscent way. The most prominent aspect in this respect is, of course, the previously discussed accusation of the immutability of Islam, which Hali rejects in his reference to the simplicity of Islam, denouncing the Ulama's overemphasis on outward practices and regulations. Hali and likewise Chiragh Ali instead point out that the actual purpose of religion as being faith and morality.⁶⁴ This permits them to concurrently reject the second big critique of the entanglement of religion and social affairs as a requirement of historical circumstances, as they do not pertain to the essence of Islam.⁶⁵ The third crucial point of critique refers to the rights of women,

62 Ibid., 7.

63 Shackle: *Hali's Musaddas*, 163.

64 Chiragh Ali refers in his response to Malcolm McColl's article, "Are Reforms Possible under Mussulman Rule?", as has been discussed before.

65 Shackle: *Hali's Musaddas*, 145. This argument has been observed in the same vein in Khan's *Essays*. Khan stresses the necessity to distinguish between religion and a *majmū'ah-i ahkām* (a catalogue of commands) and calls attention to the time-bound character of the latter. Those are human interpretations which superpose the eternal principles

which is a ubiquitous concern of 19th century South Asia.⁶⁶ Hali tackles this charge with help from the progressive depiction of Islam in the first story, which sets it in comparison to the pre-Islamic period in order to point out a progressive improvement in women's rights. Thus, in abandoning modern Europe as point of reference, the same circumstances which are criticised by European critics are presented in this transformed context as being rather progressive. Hali, however, is cautious in his historicisation of those circumstances, restricting them to their respective contexts. He emphasises only the progressive spirit of Islam without aiming to universalise its historical circumstances: the regulations of the early period of Islam must not be perceived of as immutable. Rather, the intentions of the early Muslims must be comprehended and reapplied.

But even within this recontextualising historicisation, by relating women's situation in Islam only in reference to the preceding circumstances, for example, Hali cannot evade the ubiquitous *telos* of modern Europe. Thus, even the first story is interpreted with reference to this *telos*. For how is progress defined? Progress remains inseparably tied to the *telos* of the second story, which is reimagined and recognised in the "original" Islam. Hali's ordering of history is consequently no revivification of an origin, but rather has to be understood as a reconstruction originating in the *telos* of Europe. European critique thus forms the perception of "original" Islam.

2. Abolishing the *telos*

This analysis of Hali's *Musaddas* can therefore be said to reveal that this abstract essence of Islam is rather a retroactive projection of the *telos* of Europe – despite the author's reference to an "original" Islam which has to be recovered and revived with respect to its eternal principles. This obvious linking and adaption of the dominant discourse has been opposed by the second group of authors, as shall be discussed in the following paragraphs. Their most prominent representative among them is perhaps Ameer Ali, whose texts whose texts I will primarily examine. This analysis will be complemented by texts of Salahuddin Khuda Bakhsh (1842-1908)

and implications of the abstract essence of Islam. Khan developed this approach in response to Muir's critique of an ossified Islam, assuming an incapability to reform. Cf. Chapter 3.

66 Cf. Pernau: *Ashraf into Middle Classes*, 124-26. This aspect has been called upon by Khan in his *Essays*, too. In response to Muir's "evils" of Islam, Khan stresses the improvement of the situation of women in Islam. Cf. chapter 3.

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and Abdullah Yusuf Ali (1872-1953), who are generally in conformity with Ameer Ali's ideas.

Ameer Ali (d. 1928) was born in 1846 in Chinsura, Bengal, in a twelver-Shia family. His father acknowledged the necessity of a European education, so all of his sons received a Western education. Nevertheless, his father also insisted on a Muslim education for his sons. Thus, a Maulwi was employed to teach the children in Urdu and Persian in the evenings after school.⁶⁷ Ameer Ali received his college education at Hooghly Collegiate School. During this time, Maulwi Karamat Ali Jaunpuri became a significant influence on Ameer Ali. Karamat Ali had composed the *Māḥaz-i 'ulūm*, which Ameer Ali together with Ubaidullah later translated as *Makhaz-i Uloom*, or *A Treatise on the Origin of the Sciences* (translation published in 1867, original unknown). The author therein discusses "the transmission of knowledge between Greek, Islamic and European societies" and outlines the theory that all sciences originate from Arab peoples.⁶⁸ Science seems to be perceived here in a Neo-Platonic vein which is reminiscent of natural religion, which presupposes an emanation from a First Being structuring the world in natural laws.⁶⁹

From 1869-73, Ameer Ali resided in London for his studies. During this time, he also published the first edition of his most influential book, *The Spirit of Islam*, initially entitled *A Critical Examination of the Life and Teachings of Mohammed*. In 1873, he started a career as an advocate when he was employed in the High Court of Calcutta. In 1890, he eventually became a judge of the Bengal High Court. Aside from this, Ameer Ali was politically active and in 1877 he founded the National Muhammadan Association.⁷⁰ Though he resided mostly in London during his retirement, Ameer Ali actively engaged himself in supporting Islamic causes and the advancement of South Asian Muslims. In 1906, he co-founded the Muslim League and became president of its London branch. Subsequently, he also supported the Khilafat Movement and began to renounce his support for the British government in India. However, his major achievements were not made through his political engagement, but rather through his publications on the history of Is-

67 Martin Forward: *The Failure of Islamic Modernism? Syed Ameer Ali's interpretation of Islam* (New York: Lang, 1999), 20.

68 Avril A. Powell: "Ali, Syed Ameer." http://en.banglapedia.org/index.php?title=Ali,_Syed_Ameer.

69 "[S]cience and learning were first introduced into Greece through the instrumentality of the Syrians, the Phoenicians and the Egyptians. All these people are extinct Arabs, whose traces and detailed accounts do not exist," (Syed Keramat Ali: *Makhaz-i Uloom: or A Treatise on the Origin of the Sciences* (Calcutta: Baptist Mission Press, 1867), 46); "As almost all things in nature are regulated by general laws, therefore there must be a Perfect Wisdom governing the same &c." (Syed Keramat Ali: *Makhaz-i Uloom*, 5).

70 Forward: *The Failure of Islamic Modernism*, 23-24.

lam and his long-term stance on the need for a reinterpretation of Islam. He furthermore rejected several “misconceptions” of Islam and prejudices levied by European critics.⁷¹

2.1 Ameer Ali

In terms of language, the second group of authors have written their works entirely in English. Most of the works of Hali, Chiragh Ali and Ahmad Khan are written in Urdu.⁷² This shift to English by the second group addressed a different and rather smaller audience of Europeans and Western educated Muslims, the latter constituting a minority within the Muslim community of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Perhaps the authors of this group deliberately chose English as their medium in order to avoid the critique of the traditional Ulama, which Ahmad Khan and others in the Aligarh movement had to face. English and Western education, which the Aligarh movement advocated, was still a topic provoking fierce reactions on behalf of several Ulama at this time: acquaintance with English was thus restricted and only a small audience could read books written in English. Hence, English could serve as a medium allowing authors to express quite radical thoughts without having to fear heavy reactions, given that their audience was like-minded. This was presumably the case, however, as those able to comprehend their works had likely received an education that laid the foundation for critical interpretations of traditional Islam as advocated by the Ulama.⁷³

Ameer Ali’s perhaps most crucial effort was his disregard of Europe’s claim of a universal standard of progress and the implicit compulsion to measure Islam against these European societal standards. Like the authors of the first group, he too assumes it is necessary to historicise Islam and to measure it within its context of origination. In his *A Critical Examination of the Life and Teachings of Mohammed* (1873), Ali states:

71 Powell: “Ali, Syed Ameer.”

72 Only some exceptions such as Chiragh Ali’s *The Proposed Political, Legal, and Social Reforms in the Ottoman Empire and other Mohammadan States* and Ahmad Khan’s *Tabyin al-kalām fī tafṣīr at-Tūra va al-Injīl ‘alā millat al-Islām* or *The Mohomedan Commentary on the Holy Bible* and *A Series of Essays on the Life of Mohammad and Subjects Subsidiary Thereto* were written in or translated into English.

73 Forward: *The Failure of Islamic Modernism*, 116.

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No religion of the world, prior to Islām had consecrated charity, the support of the widow, the orphan, and the helpless poor—by enrolling its principles among the positive enactments of the system.⁷⁴

This quote clearly resembles the argument of the first group: Islam has to be measured by its achievements with respect to the preceding conditions. In Ali's argument that Islam be taken as the reference point of *telos* in comparison with pre-Islamic Arabia, Islam proves to be a progressive force which brought unprecedented improvements. This argument is also repeated by other authors of the second group and shall not be discussed here further, as its structure has been analysed in detail above with respect to Hali's *Musaddas*.⁷⁵

Furthermore, this second group of authors also seeks to ensure the flexibility and adaptability of Islam. They emphasise the temporal and contextual character of the regulations of early Islam and emphasises the necessity of their adaption to contemporary circumstances. Salahuddin Khuda Bakhsh, who – according to Wilfred Cantwell Smith – is first and foremost remembered for his translation of German orientalis in English, states in his lengthy essay, “Thoughts on the Present Situation:”⁷⁶

Islam, stripped of its theology, is a perfectly simple religion. Its cardinal principle is belief in one God and belief in Mohamed as his apostle. The rest is mere accretion, superfluity. The Qur'an, rightly understood and interpreted, is a spiritual guide, containing counsels and putting forward ideals to be followed by the faithful, rather than a *corpus juris civilis* to be accepted for all time. It was never the intention of the Prophet – and no enlightened Muslim believes that it ever was – to lay down immutable rules, or to set up a system of law which was to be binding upon humanity apart from considerations of time and place and the growing necessities arising from changed conditions.⁷⁷

Abdullah Yusuf Ali (1872-1953) argues in a similar vein. He was born in Bombay, a barrister in British India and the author of several books on Islam. He is most prominently known for his translation of the Quran into English. In his article, “Moral Education: Aims and Methods” (1930), he rejects any overarching code of

74 Sayyid Ameer Ali: *A Critical Examination of the Life and Teachings of Mohammed* (London, Edinburgh: Williams and Norgate, 1873), 182.

75 Cf. Abdullah Yusuf Ali: *Abdullah Yusuf Ali's Articles and Reviews* (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 2009), 133; Salahuddin Khuda Bukhsh: *The Islam of Mohamed* (s.l.: s.n., 1909), 1.

76 Wilfred Cantwell Smith: *Modern Islām in India: A Social Analysis* (Lahore: Ripon Print. Press, 1947), 60.

77 Salahuddin Khuda Bukhsh: *Essays Indian and Islamic* (London: Probsthain, 1912), 284.

morality: “There is no such thing as a universally accepted moral code, good at all times and among all nations or sets of people.”⁷⁸ For the author, early-period Islam likewise cannot make a claim for such universality. Rather, the underlying principles of those regulations must be comprehended and, subsequently, translated according to the respective context:

Through all the phases of his life, he [i.e. Muhammad] showed an example of living faith, unflinching courage, and uniform gentleness and kindness. [...] But how do we translate all these precious gifts into our everyday lives? Unless we do so, they are without meaning as far as we are concerned.⁷⁹

Thus, Khuda Baksh as well as Yusuf Ali, much like Hali and other members of his group, refer to the essential principles of Islam which must not be wrongly equated with the juridical regulations of the Islam from the early period.

While this thought process conforms to ideas presented in the previous chapter, Ameer Ali introduces an even more radical interpretation as follows:

There is no doubt that in the suras of the intermediate period, before the mind of the Teacher [i.e. Muhammad] had attained the full development of religious consciousness, and when it was necessary to formulate in language intelligible to the common folk of the desert, the realistic descriptions of heaven and hell, borrowed from the floating fancies of Zoroastrian, Sabaeen, and the Talmudical Jew, attract the attention as a side picture, and then comes the real essence - the adoration of God in humility and love. The *hooris* are creatures of Zoroastrian origin, so is paradise, whilst hell in the severity of its punishment is Talmudic.⁸⁰

This quote reveals two crucial aspects of Ameer Ali’s reformist ideas, which set his argument apart from those previously discussed. First, unlike all of the authors discussed above, Ameer Ali assigns a divine character to early Islam’s regulations rather than placing them within a confined historical context referring only to an overarching, abstract essence. Instead, Ameer Ali extends the argument of historicisation even further: he describes certain concepts in the Quran as being inherited from other religions. According to Ameer Ali, Muhammad referred thusly to different traditions, which were popular in the Prophet’s time in Arabia and could be referenced in order to communicate Islam’s ideas. Thus, he terms Muhammad’s

78 Ali: *Abdullah Yusuf Ali’s Articles and Reviews*, 322.

79 Abdullah Yusuf Ali: *Abdullah Yusuf Ali’s Lectures, Speeches and Addresses* (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 2009), 113.

80 Sayyid Ameer Ali: *The Spirit of Islam: A history of the Evolution and Ideals of Islam with a Life of the Prophet* (London: Methuen, 1965), 197.

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an “eclectic faith.”⁸¹ This foreshadows the second and even more striking aspect of this quote: Ameer Ali implies a spiritual development of Muhammad, during which Muhammad also draws on the concepts of other religions. This, consequently, he illustrates a personal involvement of Muhammad in the composition of the Quran:

A careful study of the Koran makes it evident that the mind of Mohammed went through the same process of development which marked the religious consciousness of Jesus. [...] The various chapters of the Koran which contain the ornate descriptions of paradise [...] were delivered wholly or in part at Mecca. Probably in the infancy of his religious consciousness, Mohammed himself believed in some or other of the traditions which floated around him. But with a wider awakening of the soul, a deeper communion with the Creator of the Universe, thoughts, which bore a material aspect at first became spiritualised. [...] Hence, in the later *suras* we observe a merging of the material in the spiritual, of the body in the soul.⁸²

Here, Ameer Ali makes clear that Muhammad’s spiritual development is not merely a passive process: instead he argues that a “careful study of the Koran” will show that this development is also reflected in the spiritual depth of the message. This assertion differs tremendously from the traditional concept of the revelation and composition of the Quran. While the classical understanding of revelation is perceived as being the passive reception of a message transmitted by God, in Ameer Ali’s conception, God does not appear as an active participant in this process.⁸³ Rather, Muhammad is described as the active composer of the Quran.⁸⁴ Thus, the depth of the message increases according to Muhammad’s development of religious consciousness. Ali comprehends this consciousness as the “awakening of the soul, a deeper communion with the Creator of the Universe.”⁸⁵ He does not perceive God as having any active part in the composition of the Quran. In Ameer Ali’s view, then, the Quran is rather a human product of an outstanding man, distinguished through his conscious connection of God.

Accordingly, Ameer Ali rejects, again in concordance with Khuda Bakhsh and Yusuf Ali, a universality in the interpretation the early period of Islam. He instead

81 *Ibid.*, 192.

82 *Ibid.*, 200f.

83 *El*: “wahy.”

84 Ameer Ali’s work does not explicitly develop a concept of revelation, but it refers to ideas similar to those we have seen already in Khan, namely that the uncreated message takes a particular manifestation in the heart of Muhammad. Thus, God remains the originator of the message. Yet, only according to Muhammad’s personal comprehension and spiritual development does this message take shape in a human language, further restricting the Divine message to the limits of human language. Cf. Chapter 3.

85 Ali: *The Spirit of Islam*, 200.

identifies two classes of prohibition pronounced by Muhammad: first, quantitative prohibitions, as for example the “prohibition against excess in eating and drinking and others of the like [...] were called forth in part by the peculiar semi-barbarous epicureanism which was coming into fashion among the Arabs from their intercourse with the demoralised Syrians and Persians.”⁸⁶ Such are conceived of as contextually related and, thus, not of eternal character. On the other hand, qualitative prohibitions as the “absolute prohibition of swine’s flesh [...] arose, as is evident, from hygienic reasons and this prohibition must remain unchanged as long as the nature of the animal and the diseases engendered by the eating of the flesh remain present.”⁸⁷ Thus, Ameer Ali’s argument is very much reminiscent of the previously discussed authors: the contextualisation and historicisation of certain regulations of early Islam, which had been perceived as immutable and eternal, are criticised as being untimely for the present circumstances. Hence, the effort to essentialise Islam and reduce it to mere principles is a common feature in this discourse on the history of Islam. While Yusuf Ali denies the universality of moral codes so that they must always be contextualised in their application, Khuda Bakhsh rather repeats the first group’s assertion in acknowledging Muhammad merely as a spiritual leader. The regulatory principles are not perceived of as an essential part of Islam, thus reproducing the distinction of two spheres which are not to be equated, as thoroughly discussed above.⁸⁸

Ameer Ali’s approach transcends this discourse of the essentialisation of Islam through history insofar as he not only historicises and contextualises the message of the Quran, but he also deprives the Quran of its divine character. Instead of God, Muhammad is perceived as its composer. This permits Ameer Ali to freely contextualise the message of the Quran not only with respect to the capability of the audience, to which the message had to be adjusted in order to be comprehensible, but but equally with respect to Muhammad’s spiritual development. Revelation comes to be conceived of as a rather active compositional process which is dependent on the religious consciousness of the composer while God stands in the background. For Ali, the message of the Quran is thus less divine than human. This radical idea violates the traditional perception of the Quran as being literally revealed by God: “The orthodox view of the dramatic form of the *Ḳur’ān* is that God is the speaker throughout, Muḥammad is the recipient, and Gabriel is the intermediary agent of revelation [...]”⁸⁹ However, while Ahmad Khan had to face

86 *Ibid.*, 187.

87 *Ibid.*

88 Cf. above & Ali: *Abdullah Yusuf Ali’s Articles and Reviews*, 322-323; Khuda Bukhsh: *Essays Indian and Islamic*, 284.

89 *El*: “*Ḳur’ān*”.

heavy criticism from the Ulama for ideas violating traditional concepts of Islam, comparable reactions cannot be found against Ameer Ali, which is perhaps linked with his choice of language. Thus, English allowed him to communicate quite radical ideas more freely since his audience was confined to a limited readership that was rather sympathetic to reformist thoughts. That said, critical reactions were not lacking, but came rather from Europeans – mostly criticising Ameer Ali's conception of Islam as unrealistic.⁹⁰

We have seen a humanisation in Ameer Ali's interpretation of the concept of revelation, which dissociates it to a great extent from a transcendent influence that is external to the human realm. Ali does not confine human influence merely to the composition of the Quran, however, emphasising it in his conception of Islam more broadly. He acknowledges a human influence in the successive development of Islam: his history of Islam is not restricted to the structure of the two stories of Hali's *Musaddas*, with one glorifying a golden age of "original" Islam and the second focused on present decline. In all of his monographs, Ameer Ali rather presents the history of Islam within one continuous story. He is, thus, the first – at least in the sphere of the Aligarh movement – to present a pluralisation of Islam which recognises different tendencies. In his *Spirit of Islam*, identifying various spirits of Islam related to different factions. Some are also described under the heading of "The Political Divisions and Schisms of Islam," which refers primarily to the schism between Sunni and Shia and its various sub-branches. The following three chapters of his book, however, concern the literary and scientific issues, covering the rationalistic-philosophical as well as the idealistic-mystical spirits of Islam. This structure is more or less repeated throughout Ali's historical monographs.⁹¹

Focusing specifically on *The Spirit of Islam*, however, Ameer Ali's findings in the chapters entitled "The Literary and Scientific Spirit of Islam" and "The Rationalistic and Philosophical Spirit of Islam" can be very concisely summarised as a pronounced endorsement of scientific investigation and rational reasoning. In the first chapter, Ameer Ali highlights this endorsement with reference to several traditions of Muhammad and other influential figures of the early period of Islam:

We have already referred to the Arabian Prophet's devotion to knowledge and science as distinguishing him from all other Teachers, and bringing him into the closest affinity with the modern world of thought. [...] He preached of the value of knowledge: 'Acquire knowledge, because he who acquires it in the way of the Lord

90 Forward: *The Failure of Islamic Modernism*, 117-122.

91 While his *A Short History of the Saracens* gives a more detailed account of the successive caliphs without discussing religious tendencies in depth, the concise book *Islam* resembles the structure of *The Spirit of Islam* in a very abridged way.

performs an act of piety; who dispenses instructions in it, bestows alms; and who imparts it to its fitting objects, performs an act of devotion to God. Knowledge enables its possessors to distinguish what is forbidden from what is not [...].⁹²

These introductory lines of the chapter situate Muhammad within a universalised conception of science. Muhammad is described as an advocate of knowledge, proven on the basis of the following *ḥadīṡ*. His examples do refer directly to science, however, but only to knowledge, which Ameer Ali apparently equates with science in order to verify his hypothesis. The quoted *ḥadīṡ*, furthermore, presents the acquisition of knowledge not as a merely mundane task, but describes it as having a moral aspect enabling one to distinguish between good and bad. He thus puts the acquisition of knowledge in a broader setting that reaches into the religious sphere, describing the transmission of knowledge as religious service. Science seems to be proposed as a type of knowledge which is likewise being related to divine knowledge. This assertion is further confirmed by Ali's later identification of God as the "Fashioner of the Universe" and the law of nature governing the same.⁹³

In the following, Ameer Ali enlists several scientific achievements of Muslims in the fields of astronomy, mathematics, architecture, etc. in order to verify the "scientific spirit" of Islam. He identifies Islam as a crucial impetus with respect to science in disseminating rationalism:

The impetus which Islām gave to the intellectual development of mankind is evidenced by the fact that the Arabs were joined in the race for progress by members of nationalities which had hitherto lain absolutely dormant. Islām quickened the pulse of humanity and awakened new life in communities which were either dead or dying [...].⁹⁴

Ameer Ali thus emphasises the "intellectual liberty" proposed by Islam. He further recognises a particular method of reasoning inherent in Islam, which endorses scientific investigation and rationalism. In fact, this reasoning was essentially the same as that of modern science:

92 Ali: *The Spirit of Islam*, 360.

93 Ibid., 405f. This argument of a natural religion is very common in the Aligarh movement. The universe, perceived as Work of God, is viewed as an obvious indication and evidence of His existence. The scrutiny of nature and its laws is, thus, argued to be likewise of religious value. Cf. Chapter 5.

94 Ali: *The Spirit of Islam*, 397.

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A body of thinkers sprang up, who received the generic name of *Hukamâ* (pl. of *hakîm*, a scientist or philosopher), whose method of reasoning was analogous to that of modern science.⁹⁵

This “intellectual liberty” was upheld as long as the essence of Islam remained unadulterated:

Islâm inaugurated the reign of intellectual liberty. It has been truly remarked, that so long as Islâm retained its pristine character, it proved itself the warm protector and promoter of knowledge and civilisation, – the zealous ally of intellectual freedom. The moment extraneous elements attached themselves to it, it lagged behind the race of progress.⁹⁶

Ameer Ali recognises the adulteration of the essence of Islam with alien elements as one crucial origin of the loss of freethinking in Islam and, subsequently, its decline. The most prominent reflection of this loss can perhaps be found in *taqlîd*, which Ameer Ali (like virtually all Muslim reformists in South Asia since at least Shah Waliullah (1703–62)) takes as an object of criticism. *Taqlîd* refers to the four juridical schools (*mazhab*, Pl. *mazāhib*) of Sunni Islam and the preservation of the teachings of their founders.⁹⁷ Reformists since Shah Waliullah criticised the unquestioned acceptance of their authority and thus a standstill in juridical matters. Like all of the authors discussed above who adhered to the reformist tradition, Ameer Ali demands a continuous reinterpretation of the sources (*ijtihād*) according to present circumstances, and apart from the fossilised *mazāhib*. The idea of *ijtihād* can be perceived as quite popular and to a certain extent accepted in 19th century South Asia, and appears also in the texts of Ahmad Khan, Shibli Nomani, Hali, etc.

Apart from this argument, Ameer Ali furthermore blames two tendencies of Islam in particular for the decline of Islam in his time. In the third chapter on the spirit(s)⁹⁸ of Islam, after having presented the scientific, rationalistic, and philosophical spirits of Islam, he proceeds by describing the idealistic and mystical spirit:

95 Ibid., 424.

96 Ibid., 399.

97 Ibid., 185.

98 Ameer Ali does not elucidate whether he assumes the spirit of Islam to be a singular entity or whether Islam unites several spirits. The title of his book, *The Spirit of Islam*, prompts the assertion of a singular spirit whereas the table of contents presents different spirits of Islam.

But Sûfism in the Moslem world, like its counterpart in Christendom, has, in its practical effect, been productive of many mischievous results. In perfectly well-attuned minds mysticism takes the form of a noble type of idealistic philosophy; but the generality of mankind are more likely to unhinge their brains by busying themselves with the mysteries of the Divine Essence and our relations thereto.⁹⁹

Mysticism, which is not perceived of as being appropriate for the majority, is blamed as a philosophy that paralyses the rational faculties of the greater part of men. Ameer Ali does not confine his critique to Sufism, however. In likewise blaming Ashari theology (*aš'arīyah*), he criticises the two most prominent schools of contemporaneous Islam:

The responsibility for the present decadence of the Moslem nations must be shared by the formalism of the Asha'ri and the quietism of the Sûfi. Mystical teachings like the following:

The man who looks on the beggar's bowl as a kingly crown
 And the present world a fleeting bubble,
 He alone traverseth the ocean of Truth
 Who looks upon life as a fairy tale.

can have but one result – intellectual paralysis.¹⁰⁰

Asharism is the most prominent theological school of Islam, more or less synonymous with orthodoxy. Asharism and likewise Mysticism are, thus, rejected as tendencies which paralysed Muslims' intellectual faculties.¹⁰¹ Both lead Muslims astray of Islam's essentially progressive and rational spirit, as he has described in the two preceding chapters.

Asharism, established in the eleventh century, was a compromise between the positions of the Qadariyya (*qadarīya*) and the Jabiriyya (*jabrīya*). Qadariyya (*qadarīya*) was to a certain extent recognised as the Mutazila (*mu'tazila*). It emphasised man's freewill (*qadar*), while Jabiriyya (*jabrīya*) stood in conflict with man's freewill, insisting on God's omnipotence. According to the Jabiriyya, God's omniscience implies predetermination. Ashari theology aimed for a reconciling of these conflicting positions in presenting a *via media*: God is conceived of as hold-

99 Ali: *The Spirit of Islam*, 477.

100 Ibid., 472.

101 Ameer Ali does not condemn Mysticism in general. But he criticises it as inappropriate for the greater majority. In particular, the "vulgar" mysticism is criticised, cf. Ali: *The Spirit of Islam*, 477.

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ing a conveying position in human action. Only through His intervention and mediation can man act.¹⁰² Ameer Ali argues that Asharism adopted the Mutazila's rational reasoning, however, in a rather restricted manner:

In order to meet the Mu'tazilas on their own ground, Abu'l Hasan invented a rival *science of reason* – the real scholastic theology of the Moslems, which, though supposed to be an offshoot of the *'Ilm-ul-kalâm* founded by the Mu'tazilas, is in many essential features different from it.¹⁰³

Ali presents Mutazili rationalism as the inherent spirit of Islam, which Muslims had abandoned for the sake of Asharism and Mysticism, culminating in an intellectual paralysis, fossilised regulations in *taqlīd*, and general decline.

The historical pluralisation of Islam was, thus, merely aimed at discrediting and rejecting certain branches of Islam which were in conflict with Islam's "original" essence or spirit. Ameer Ali's pluralisation of Islam does not seek to present a differentiated picture of Islam with schools of equal authority. He instead reproduces a line of argument referring to an original Islam and its eternal essence. Ali's conception of pluralisation, then, amounts to a removal of the schools of thought conflicting with this essence. In a short discussion of Ernest Renan's (1823-92) lecture, *L'Islamisme et la science*¹⁰⁴ (1883), Ameer Ali complains about Renan's practice of comparing "the lowest form of Islâm with the highest form of Christianity."¹⁰⁵ Hence, Ameer Ali's emphasis on the plurality of branches in Islam appears to serve merely to discredit certain branches as "debased form[s] of Islâm," deviating from the rationalistic essence of Islam.¹⁰⁶ But although he does not recognise them as equally authentic forms of Islam, he assumes an underlying "origin" as the reference point for measurement, and thus does not completely exclude them from the realm of Islam.

Ameer Ali describes rationalism and the inclination toward scientific investigation as the crucial elements of the highest form of Islam. But how are they seen

102 *EI*: "Ash'ariyya"; "Kadariyya"; "Mu'tazila."

103 Ali: *The Spirit of Islam*, 447.

104 Ernest Renan was an influential historian, in Europe mostly known for his *Vie de Jésus*. In the Islamic world, his *Averrôes et l'Averroïsme* was widely received. This text was often referred to by Muslim reformists in order to counter European criticism regarding the irrationality of Islam. Interestingly, Renan himself was a strong advocate of this thesis, and in particular in his above mentioned *L'Islamisme et la science*, which provoked several reactions by Muslim authors, cf. Birgit Schäbler: *Moderne Muslime: Ernest Renan und die Geschichte der ersten Islamdebatte 1883* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2016); Keddie: *An Islamic Response to Imperialism*; cf. also Chapter 6 for a discussion of Shibli Nomani's engagement in Renan's thought.

105 Ali: *The Spirit of Islam*, 484.

106 *Ibid.*

in relation to Europe? In Hali, we observed a reference to Muslims' past achievements in the sciences. While Muslims subsequently abandoned the *sharia* and the progressive principles of Islam, the *sharia*, i.e. the progressive principles inherent in Islam, was adopted by Europeans leading them toward progress. While progress becomes closely linked to Europe by the first group of authors, Ameer Ali vigorously denies this connection. He, instead, vehemently rejects this *telic* connection along with assertions of European progress. Rather, European progress is depicted as fundamentally dependent on Islam:

The first outburst of Rationalism in the West, occurred in the province most amenable to the power of Moslem civilisation. Ecclesiasticism crushed this fair flower with fire and with sword, and threw back the progress of the world for centuries. But the principles of the Liberty of Thought, so strongly impressed on Islam, had communicated their vitality to Christian Europe.¹⁰⁷

Ameer Ali thus conceives of progress as a concept disseminated by Islam. He asserts that the progress of Muslims is dependent upon their dissociation from European influence, while Hali—by contrast—ascribed a divine-like character to Europe and its progress. Ameer Ali, instead, associates progress directly with Islam, discrediting European progress as a mere imitation:

So the two failures of the Moslems, one before Constantinople, and the other in France, retarded the progress of the world for ages. Had the Arabs been less remiss at Tours, had they succeeded in driving before them the barbarian hosts of a barbarian chief, whom the ecclesiastics themselves afterwards condemned to everlasting perdition, the history of the darkest period in the annals of the world would never have been written. The Renaissance, Civilisation, the growth of intellectual liberty would have been accelerated by seven hundred years.¹⁰⁸

Hence, any aspect of intellectual liberty having appeared in Europe can traced back to Islam. In fact, according to Ameer Ali, Islam could have prevented several misfortunes in European history if its conquests had been successful.

Thus, Ameer Ali denies Europe its role as *telos*. Rather, Islam in its original, rationalistic form takes up this role, and Europe is described as merely continuing the Islamic legacy. Consequently, Islam functions as the teleological point of reference and *genus*-category of comparison.

This line of argument does not stop with progress, but is applied to the concept of religion, as well. Ameer Ali implicitly criticises the European concept of religion with reference to Christianity as unfinished and deficient. In Ameer Ali's

107 Ibid., 339.

108 Ibid., 343.

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views, the early death of Jesus leaves Christianity incomplete, and thus merely an abstract faith:

The introduction of Christianity made little or no change in the views entertained by its professors concerning international obligations. War was as inhuman, and as exterminating as before; people were led into slavery without compunction on the part of the captors; treaties were made and broken just as suited the purpose of some designing chieftain. Christianity did not profess to deal with international morality, and so left its followers groping in the dark. Modern thinkers, instead of admitting this to be a real deficiency in the Christian system, – natural to the unfinished state in which it was left, – have tried to justify it.¹⁰⁹

Here, Ameer Ali vigorously rejects the continuously repeated critique of Islam which intermingles religion with politics or social affairs. This European concept of religion is discredited as being founded on Christianity, a deficient and incomplete religion. This view clearly rejects Christianity's and Europe's authority to establish the *genus*-category of religion. Rather, the European critique is reversed and turned positively toward Islam. Thus, Ameer Ali aims not to measure Islam against an alien *genus*, but self-referentially with Islam as a *species* coinciding with its *genus*. Islam once again functions simultaneously as the teleological point of reference as well as the particular to be measured against it.

In a similar vein, Yusuf Ali also criticises the abstract character of the Christian concept of religion:

People are often found saying that Islam has been too much mixed up with politics, is too much concerned with wars and invasions, and that Islam makes no difference between secular and religious matters. What appears at first sight to be a charge and a taunt is that to us our God is not only the God of heaven but also the God of this earth. Our book tells us this in express terms, and it further teaches that our religion is not for one day in the week, be it Sunday, Saturday or Friday, but that it goes with us through every day of the week and every hour of the day.¹¹⁰

Religion is essentially conceived of as a guide for one's life. In accordance with this view, Ameer Ali argues that a religion must contain unequivocal regulations, as a merely inward faith does not appeal to the majority of men. He writes:

109 Ibid., 203.

110 Ali: *Abdullah Yusuf Ali's Lectures, Speeches and Addresses*, 136. Interestingly, M. A. Sherif interprets Yusuf Ali's texts as "distancing Islam from the political realm" and "limiting religion to the spiritual 'inner'." However, the above given quote vehemently contradicts this assertion, cf. M. A. Sherif: *Searching for Solace* (New Delhi: Adam, 2004), 182-183.

Religion ought to mean the rule of life; its chief object ought to be the elevation of Humanity towards that perfection which is the end of our existence. The religion, therefore, which places on a systematic basis the fundamental principles of morality, regulating social obligations, and human duties, which brings us nearer and nearer by its compatibility with the highest development of intellect, to the All-Perfect – that religion, we say, has the greatest claim to our consideration and respect. It is the distinctive characteristic of Islam that it combines within itself the grandest and the most prominent features in all ethnic and catholic religions, compatible with the Reason and moral Intuition of man. It is not merely a system of positive moral rules, based on a true conception of Human Progress, but it is also “the establishment of certain principles [...]”¹¹¹

In this quote, it becomes obvious that Ameer Ali construes a concept of religion which, in the end, is found to be implemented entirely within Islam. This apparently top-down argument is, in fact, a bottom-up process abstracting the *species* Islam to the presumably prior *genus*. Thus, the comparison of Islam and Christianity, which has been presented by European critics from the perspective of Christianity as the reference point, is reversed in this argument. Ameer Ali’s comparison of Islam to itself as a teleological reference point also allows for the reversal of the European critique, wherein Christianity is now depicted as deficient.

But does this reversed critique permit Muslim authors to abandon the *telos* of Europe? Khuda Bakhsh reproduces the first group’s line of argument in distinguishing an essential, religious sphere in Islam which is separate of a sphere of social affairs and, thus, takes up an intermediate position. While his ideas are more in conformity with the first group, he can be counted within the second group for his preference for writing in English. Yet, Ameer Ali and, to some extent, Yusuf Ali apply a distinct position and reject Europe’s claim for a universal *telos*. Because they positively reverse European critique, and criticise Christianity on the basis of this reversed critique, they therefore reject the necessity of distinguishing between two spheres of the religious and secular, as can be found in the views of the first group and Khuda Bakhsh. For the second group, however, religion as mere faith without effect on one’s life is opposed. Instead, Ameer Ali argues that the very purpose of religion must be the moral elevation of man. This requires several regulations, and the imposition of certain duties and restrictions, as the general human mind is incapable of comprehending abstract claims, instead demanding clear guidance.¹¹² But still, even Ameer Ali’s thought cannot be reduced to a mere distinction from Europe as *telos*. He, too, recognises the dominant discourse of

111 Ali: *The Spirit of Islam*, 184f.

112 Ibid., 3f.

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science and aims to establish a link of Islam with science: he emphasises the scientific spirit of Islam endorsing the quest for knowledge as well as the essentially rationalistic character of Islam in exhibiting the Mutazili tendency as the “original” form of Islam. This is a rather additive rapprochement in comparison to the negatively based definition of the concept of religion.

However, this reversal still links their counter-concept of religion to Europe: although Europe is not acknowledged as *telos*, it is referred to the negative image of Islam. European critique is not simply disclaimed, but still serves as a foundation for defining Islam – and the concept of religion in general – in utter distinction to Europe. The definition of Islam remains in dependence of Europe, yet with Europe being the anti-*telos*.

While the first group of authors aimed to re-read “original” Islam with the aim of rejecting European critique and presenting an origin fully in conformity with the demands of their own religion, albeit ultimately measured against European Christianity as a point of reference, Ameer Ali and Yusuf Ali entirely reverse European critique’s self-referential *telos*. Both approaches are thus linked to defining the progress of Islam against that of Europe and Christianity. None can refer to a self-referential origin of Islam. In sum, both interpretations of the origin of Islam are dependent upon European critique.

Conclusion

I have demonstrated two approaches to the history of Islam and its conception. With respect to the prime examples of Hali and Ameer Ali, two groups of like-minded authors could be identified. While the first group (inclusive of Hali) is characterised by its preference for Urdu as a medium, the group surrounding Ameer Ali wrote exclusively in English. This classification is, however, more or less arbitrary, as the content of their writings overlaps to some extent. Chiragh Ali and Khuda Bakhsh took up an intermediate position. While the former wrote his most eminent work in English, the latter rather resembles – despite writing solely in English – the ideas of the first group. Nevertheless, in general it can be said that the choice of the medium had significant implications first on the audience addressed, with Urdu reaching a wider audience while English limited the potential audience, and second on the freedom of expression. The choice of English allowed the authors to communicate more radical thoughts, as the limited audience excluded the greatest part of conservative Ulama who rejected Western education.

Writing in Urdu could not provide this liberty, as had become obvious based on the example of Ahmad Khan, who had to face hostility that escalated into *fatwas* declaring him to be a *kāfir*.¹¹³ The choice of language as well as the radicalness of thought were certainly also related to the differing locations and time periods. Hali and Chiragh Ali stem from north western parts of South Asia; Hali spent most of his life in Punjab, while Chiragh Ali – born in Meerut in what is today Uttar Pradesh – spent most of his life in both this region and the state of Hyderabad. By contrast, Ameer Ali hailed from Bengal, Khuda Bakhsh from Patna, and Yusuf Ali from Bombay. Furthermore, the authors of the second group – generally speaking – outlived the first group and, thus, experienced periods generally more critical of the British, particularly that of the Khilafat-movement.¹¹⁴ Thus, the authors of the second group grew up in regions which had faced colonialism over a longer period than those regions of the first group of authors.¹¹⁵ Apart from this distinction, the

113 Troll: Sayyid Ahmad Khan, 21.

114 The Khilafat movement, which lasted from 1919 until 1922, was a protest against the British plan to abolish the Ottoman Caliphate, initiated by Indian Muslims yet eventually acquiring a pan-Islamic character. On the other hand, the movement was not restricted merely to Muslims in India but appealed also to the Indian National Congress.

115 Yet, one must not overlook that Khan is often called the pioneer of Muslim thought leading to the partition of India and the consolidation of a separate Muslim identity: “Some of Sir Sayyid’s critics have held him responsible for exacerbating differences between Hindus and Muslims and thereby laying the foundation for the partition of United India. Anand K. Verma in his book *Reassessing Pakistan – The Role of the Two-Nation Theory* writes: ‘While on the one hand he influenced Muslims to come closer to the British to seek their patronage and goodwill, on the other hand he advised them to maintain a distance from the Hindus in order to create a distinct place for themselves’” (Tariq Hasan: *The Aligarh Movement and the Making of the Indian Muslim Mind: 1857-2002* (New Delhi: Rupa, 2006), 79). Lelyveld perceives a steady shift in meaning of Khan’s usage of *qaum* towards an equivalent of the Muslim *ummat* or the *Ahl-i Islām* (the people of Islam) (cf. Lelyveld: *Aligarh’s First Generation*, 143) – yet, it rather seems that Khan uses *qaum* only with regard to Indian Muslims and not in a pan-Islamic sense, as the term *ummat* implies (cf. Khan: *Maqālāt*, Vol. XII, 160f.; with regard to Hali’s usage of *qaum* cf. also Masood Ashraf Raja: *Constructing Pakistan: Foundational Texts and the Rise of Muslim National Identity, 1857-1947* (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2010), 59).

This is true inasmuch as Khan applied a communalist terminology, distinguishing between Hindus and Muslims as separate *qaums* (nations). Yet, this overlooks his vehement emphasis on the unity between both *qaums*. Both, Khan argues, have lived centuries in the same country and, hence, have to view themselves as a single *qaum*. As model, he refers to Europe where adherents of different religions are united in one nation (Khan: *Maqālāt*, Vol. XII, 160f.).

Thus, it would be farfetched to describe Khan’s views as nationalist with regard to Muslims, while a communalist perspective cannot be denied: “Such criticism is frequently too harsh and based on unfounded allegations and half-truths. Despite his utter frustration on his failure to cement Hindu-Muslim ties, Sir Sayyid was always a staunch votary of Hindu-

whole of the second group enjoyed higher education in Britain. This better acquaintance with European education, as well as their regions' longer experience with colonialism, might also have added to their more radical thinking and critical views of Europe.

The European claim of universality has proven to be a starting point for differing Muslim reactions. Both groups take as their general approach the attempt to reconstruct an original Islam. It could be argued, however, that the quest for an original Islam rather proved to be a projection surface upon which to illuminate present Muslim circumstances and their demands. The dominant discourse of Europe served in both cases as the crucial point of reference point against which to define the "original" Islam. Neither of the two approaches presented here could completely abandon its dependence on this dominant discourse. The origin of Islam, through its temporal distance, could nonetheless be instrumentalised as a legitimising reference point for reformist thoughts.¹¹⁶

The conception of the origin has proven to be contingent. It fundamentally depends on the respective point of reference within the tripartite structure of history. Only this relative structure conveys meaning, as events within the open-ended structure of chronology do not inherit any meaning *per se*. Any meaning is given merely through integrating a selection of events within the limited structure of a historical story or narrative, the beginning of which is then perceived as pointing inherently to the story's conclusion.

Hali's *Musaddas* is in itself a perfect example of this dependency on referential definition. He describes two stories depicting the golden age of Islam in differing contexts. The first story identifies the early period of Islam as the *telos*, comparing it with the preceding time of the pre-Islamic Arabia: thus early Islam can be presented as inherently progressive. This very period is perceived in the second story as the beginning of the story which is then compared to the alien *telos* of Europe. The regulations of the early period, presented in the first story as progressive, remain unchanged in this second story and come to be perceived as immutable and divine. According to Hali, the intentions and inherent principles of the early Muslims are no longer comprehended by the Muslims of South Asia. Thus, Hali criticises them as backward in view of the *telos* of Europe. This entire argument is fundamentally based on the referential character of historiography, which allows one to depict even the same period with contradictory meanings.

Muslim unity. He championed the need to preserve the Muslim identity but was never an antagonist of Hindus or Hinduism" (Tariq Hasan: *The Aligarh Movement and the Making of the Indian Muslim Mind*, 79).

116 Foucault: "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," 142-143.

The valuation of the origin depends heavily on its referential *telos*. It could, furthermore, be shown that the origin is rather a construction which reflects and recognises the present in the past. Hali's presentation of the dual story of the *Musaddas* aims first and foremost to reject the European critique of Islam by depicting an original Islam that is entirely in conformity with the demands of a universalised European concept of religion, the starting point from which his own critique originates., Ameer Ali's approach, by contrast, aims to present the history of Islam self-referentially – explicitly abandoning the *telos* of Europe. The latter deliberately accepts European critique and reverses it positively. But this move links his construction of the origin of Islam to the European concept of religion as well. While Hali accepts Europe as *genus*-category, Ameer Ali seeks to establish Islam as the *genus*-category against which other religions should be measured. Yet, the latter's *genus* is likewise a projection of the *telos* of Europe as an anti-*telos*. The *telos* of Europe being reversed serves as negative image against which to construe the original Islam.

Broadly speaking, in the 19th century, historiography becomes a strong instrument for South Asian reformers to counter European critique. In the context of Islam, it allows these reformers to link two parallel discourses: on the one hand, a tendency to retrace the “original” Islam in its early period had become a common approach since Shah Waliullah and was spread further by the Tariqah-i Muhammadiyah in late 18th and early 19th centuries This puritanical tendency recognised the present Islam as adulterated by Hindu traditions and aimed to restore the pure Islam of the time of Muhammad. Biographies of Muhammad became a popular genre and his person was increasingly emphasised as a Muslim role model. The aim of the reformists was to restore the Islam of the time of Muhammad without alteration. This type of preservationism remained popular also in several reform movements of the second half of the 19th century.¹¹⁷ On the other hand, European critics likewise focused on historiography in order to legitimise their critiques of Islam. The “original” Islam of the time of Muhammad was likewise their point of reference. This period was equated with the essence of the authentic Islam.¹¹⁸

Reformers of the wider sphere of the Aligarh movement, including the authors discussed in this chapter, have aimed to combine their recovery of an “original”

117 Robinson: *Islam and Muslim History*, 89-91.

118 It is probable that European focus on the “original” Islam of the time of Muhammad was, if not influenced, at least somewhat reinforced by the parallel Muslim attempt to recover this period as unadulterated Islam. However, this conclusion requires deep scrutiny which cannot be provided within the scope of this study. Cf. chapter 3.

Islam, which is common to both discourses, with critical historiography. This allowed them to historicise and contextualise this origin and, thus, to abstract the “original” Islam into an adaptive essence. Thus, the period of Muhammad is no longer meant to be restored, but rather supplies abstract principles. Several parts of Islam are declared as unessential and rather temporal, and can, thus, be reshaped or abandoned. European critique can be refuted as wrongly interpreting unessential parts of Islam as essential. While the discourse of the unchanged restoration of the period of Muhammad perceived Islam to be an inflexible and eternal system, the reformers discussed in this chapter share the effort to prove the flexibility and adaptability of Islam. They reinterpret the concept of origin as a surface upon which the demands of the present are projected.

This process of the essentialisation of Islam at the same time implies a uniformed representation of Islam. One can observe this development already in the shift in Khan’ thought from his early writings to his post-1857 writings. While we noticed a merely inner-Islamic debate in Khan’s early writings, discussing different tendencies and reformist approaches, this diversity of interpretation is renounced in Khan’s later representations of Islam. In response to external critique from Christian missionaries or orientalist, Islam is represented as a singular unit. This unity, however, varies across interpretations. Thus, as we have seen in the present chapter, Hali, Ameer Ali, Chiragh Ali, Yusuf Ali and Khuda Bakhsh present their views with reference to early Islam, however, in varying interpretations of this referential golden age. All of them represent Islam as a unified entity; only Ameer Ali made an effort to maintain some diversity in his historical outline of Islam. Yet, the different tendencies are either united under one essence of Islam, or rejected as adulterations of this very “original” essence.

Thus, we can observe a considerable shift towards a unified representation of Islam as a response to external critique. Internal debates are silenced so that even Ameer Ali, who has a Shiite background, adopts a rather Sunnite stance towards the history of Islam with the single aim of unifying Islam in its confrontation with external critique. Thus, by elevating the debate from a merely internal level towards an inter-religious level, the diversity and plurality of Islam is sacrificed for a unified representation of the faith. The following chapter will now discuss Khan’s continuation of this process of essentialising Islam as dynamic, which we have seen in the preceding as well as the present chapter. In the following chapter, I will analyse this development as well as its reflection in an expansion of Khan’s terminology from that laid out in his commentary on the Bible.

V. Translating Science – Comparing Religions

The preceding chapter examined the conception of early Islam as a point of reference for the reformist approaches of Khan, and eventually Hali, Ameer Ali and others. We can observe a shift from inner-Islamic debates towards a unification of Islam, as well as an extrapolation of the reconstructivist position of his early writings, towards an abstract essence of original Islam which must be recovered. This chapter will again refer to Khan's early writings in comparison to his post-1857 writings and analyse another significant change in Khan's position: his stance towards the position of reason and, by extension, science.

As illustrated in the preceding chapters, a gradual increase in the importance of reason (*'aql*) can be noticed in Khan's works. In his first period, his position towards reason was entirely rejective and denied it any legitimacy in religious matters. Khan perceives reason as a merely human faculty and thus limited in its capacity, while only revelation – and its realisation, as found in Muhammad's life – can provide access to the will of God:

According to the fundamental doctrines of Islam [*uṣūl*], it has been laid down that the people of truth evaluate the merit of any act only on the *ṣar'*. By means of ratio, this cannot be measured. Thus, anything which has been ordered in the *ṣar'* is meritorious and which has been prohibited in the *ṣar'* is vicious.¹

This position experiences a significant shift in his commentary on the Bible. In the introduction, Khan again mentions a limited capacity of reason. Yet, reason is acknowledged as enabling anyone to recognise the existence of God.² In his *Essays*, Khan therefore grants reason an even higher position and declares it a crucial principle in the criticism of the *ḥadīṣ*.³

This chapter aims to discuss the rationale for this gradual increase in the importance of reason in Khan's works. Subsequently, I will scrutinise the implications of Khan's integration of reason. The basis of this scrutiny will primarily be found in texts of his last period, mostly published in the form of articles in his

1 Khan: *Maqālāt*, Vol. V, 408.

2 Khan: *Tabayīn*, Vol. I, 14. Cf. also Troll: *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 237.

3 Khan: *Essays*, 202 / Khan: *Al-Ḥuṭbāt*, 229.

journal *Tahzīb al-Ahlāq*, which was launched only shortly after his return from London in 1871. The journal was published until 1897, but was discontinued twice. Lastly, I will discuss Khan’s approach to the comparison of religions, which changed tremendously in his last period after 1870.

1. Science and Religion

In his article “‘Science’ and ‘Religion’: Constructing the Boundaries,” Peter Harrison argues that science was invented only in the period of 1780-1850. Before this period, he states that it is impossible to distinguish science and religion as independent entities:

So inextricably connected were the dual concerns of God and nature that it is misleading to attempt to identify various kinds of relationships between science and religion in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁴

Aristotle’s work, for example, gave nature or the experiential world in general a central position in religious discourse. These texts, which were lost after the fall of the Western Roman empire in the 4th and 5th centuries, were rediscovered through Arabic translations in the 12th century. At this time, Aristotle’s appreciation of the material world resulted in a “reconsideration of how knowledge of the world related to knowledge of divine things.”⁵ Aristotle assumes that the world is organised as a chain of causality. Every occurrence in the world can be traced back to a cause which again must be caused by another prior cause. But this assumption of a causal chain must have, according to Aristotle, a primary cause as its starting point. Christian theologians – and in particular Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), one of the most prominent representatives of natural theology – identified the Aristotelian first cause with God. Consequently, natural theology bestows the material world with a relation to God. The material world allows one to deduce divine knowledge from it. Aquinas thus perceives this conception of “science” – albeit designated as natural philosophy – as a sub-discipline of theology, as knowledge

⁴ Peter Harrison: “‘Science’ and ‘Religion’: Constructing the Boundaries,” *The Journal of Religion* 86, no. 1 (2006), 86.

⁵ Peter Harrison: *The Territories of Science and Religion* (Chicago, [et al.]: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 67.

of nature and the material world rather complements divine knowledge. As Harrison writes:⁶

The systematic study of nature, exemplified in Aristotelian natural philosophy, plays the role of science, and in that role provides premises for a natural theology – that is to say, evidence of the existence and nature of God derived from the natural world alone.⁷

During the 17th century, however, this link between natural philosophy and natural theology begins to loosen. As a result of the Protestants' preference for a literal understanding of the Bible, philosophers like Francis Bacon (1561-1626) refused to interpret nature allegorically or symbolically as mirroring God. But this must not be understood as an attempt to break the link of natural philosophy with religion. Bacon rather aimed to present a genuinely Christian view on nature as purified of any foreign influences – or, in other words, “pagan philosophy.” He does not propagate a disjunction of nature from the divine sphere, but rather relocates the link:

[T]he works of God [...] do shew the omnipotency and wisdom of the maker, but not his image.⁸

While natural philosophy hitherto bestowed creatures with a symbolic divine meaning, nature comes to be imagined as consisting of natural laws that could be deduced only by experiment. The allegorical search for a meaning beyond the material world was replaced by nature as a self-sufficient research object. Nature increasingly acquired an independent position and was separated from the interpretation of the scripture.⁹ The assumption of laws governing nature compensated for this apparently loosened link between the material and the divine world, for God was imagined as the creator of these laws. Thus, any natural event could always inevitably be traced back to God's activity.

Still, Harrison identifies this loosened connection as the reason for a later disjunction of natural philosophy from religion, as the equation of natural laws with the actions of God implicates a lack of distinction – so that “the operations of nature could be understood as having either divine causes, or natural causes, but not both at once.”¹⁰

Harrison recognises this development as a result of an externalisation of religion. In the aftermath of the Reformation, the interior conception of *religio* in the

6 Ibid., 67f.

7 Ibid., 68f.

8 Francis Bacon as quoted by Ibid., 76.

9 Ibid., 77f.

10 Ibid. 80.

meaning of belief steadily ceased, as Christianity's exclusive claim for truth could no longer be sustained in the aftermath of the confessional wars. Consequently, *religio* – which was firmly identified with Christianity – lost its singularity, too, and came to be more and more reinterpreted as plural. This pluralisation of *religio* was accompanied by a reification implying a shift in the meaning of religion, which came to be perceived rather as system of belief.¹¹ Combined with the aforementioned disappearance of an allegorical reading of divine nature in natural philosophy, this understanding allowed for the new linkage of religion and natural philosophy. Nature came to be perceived as a “book” of natural theology. Thus, natural philosophy still had to be legitimised by its relation to and its utility for religion. Religion and natural philosophy were perceived as two different forms of reasoning which, nevertheless, depended on one other.¹²

But in the 19th century, Harrison observes a steady separation of natural philosophy from religion, which was most significantly illustrated by the change of nomenclature to science. Harrison recognises “the creation of a special professional identity (the scientist), the specification of a distinguishing set of methods (the scientific method), and the replacement of a traditional nomenclature” as indicators of this process, which was not fully completed until the 1870/80s.¹³ Religion lost its legitimating position since science was no longer bound to the presumption of God as the maintainer of natural laws. For, as shown above, God and nature are equated so that God becomes interchangeable with natural laws. The previous assumption of two types of reasoning which had allowed for a legitimisation of natural philosophy, on the basis of religion's supporting role, was reversed. Science no longer depended on legitimisation from religion, but conversely claimed to offer a unique access to truth and could even serve as legitimisation for religion itself. Religion was now defined on the basis of science: “Religion was what science is not.”¹⁴

In order to solidify this newly achieved independence, the emergence of the notion of science was accompanied by the argument of a “conflict myth” between religion and science. This new notion was imagined as universal and projected on the past in order to demonstrate the inherent incompatibility of religion and science.¹⁵

11 Ibid., 146, 187.

12 Ibid., 152, 155.

13 Ibid., 170.

14 Ibid., 187; cf. also Ibid., 169f.

15 Ibid., 171f.

There is no doubt, for instance, that Galileo was tried by the Inquisition and forced to recant the Copernican hypothesis. But to cite this as an instance of science-religion conflict is to misconstrue the context. For a start, the Catholic Church endorsed the scientific consensus of the period, which, on the basis of the available evidence, held that the earth was stationary in the middle of the cosmos. To this extent it might be better to characterize the episode as a conflict *within* science (or, more strictly, within astronomy and natural philosophy) rather than between science and religion.¹⁶

The reification and externalisation of religion firstly supported the emergence of natural philosophy as a discipline under the umbrella of a single area of knowledge with varying types of reasoning. But a simplified reading of Aristotle, which lacked an unequivocal distinction between God's action and the natural laws, aided a separation of natural laws from an inevitable acknowledgement of God, and thus paved the way for science steadily acquiring an independent position from religion. When religion lost its legitimating position for science, religion itself became dependent on science: "[...] 'religion' has now become a contrast case for modern science. Religion is what science is not: a kind of negative image of science [...]."¹⁷

1.1 Science Gaining Influence in Northern India

The Charta of 1813 states that the "introduction and promotion of knowledge of the sciences among the inhabitants of the British India" shall be promoted through education.¹⁸ Deepak Kumar, however, notes that the Charta was not specific about "which system of science, indigenous or European, was to be preferred."¹⁹ While, in the beginning, it was aimed at teaching "modern" science in Arabic or Sanskrit translations along with „indigenous" texts, this practice was abolished as a result of the Anglicist-Orientalist controversy. Kumar even comes to the conclusion that "[s]cience education thus did not fit into the exigencies of the Company Raj."²⁰

David Lelyveld states in his *Aligarh's First Generation* that education and its adaptation to European models was a task rather conferred to Indians of the *šarīf*-culture:

16 Ibid., 172f.

17 Ibid., S. 187.

18 Deepak Kumar: *Science and the Raj: 1857-1905* (New Delhi, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 48.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid., 51.

Although there were certainly Englishmen committed to establishing an extensive educational system and coordinating it to the allocation of political participation, the government was extremely parsimonious in providing financial support [...]. Indians had to come up with their own motivations for creating or taking advantage of educational establishments.²¹

Education was thus a matter of private initiative, not of governmental intervention. In particular with regard to North India, education of a European model was restricted primarily to missionary schools, which experienced severe hostility.²²

On the other hand, the British sponsored educational institutes of North India, such as the Sanskrit College at Benares or the Delhi College, initially promoted rather traditional learning with a focus on Sanskrit, Arabic, and Persian. Nevertheless, all of them eventually developed English sections. In this atmosphere, a new fashion of learning developed and increasingly impacted society. Yet, Bergunder describes this shift towards the preference for European science as the impact of the colonial perspective on Indian and Muslim traditions in science. He notes a lively interest in European science during the 18th century in South Asia. Indian scholars perceived Newton's findings to be fascinating, however, they did not perceive a contradiction with their own tradition and rather viewed Newton's ideas as sharing the same fundamental basis. Bergunder describes efforts to integrate Newton's system on behalf of Indian scholars while, on the other hand, British scholars were ignorant about these endeavours. They instead sought to investigate what they presumed to be lost or decayed indigenous scientific systems.²³ As a result, British scholars ignored the efforts of their Indian contemporaries, who were reformulating their own traditions. British assumptions of indigenous decline fostered the assertion that the contemporary tradition in South Asia lacked any potential link to European science and denied the possibility of a combination of the two. A bifurcation was thus deduced, which culminated in the negligence of traditional scientific knowledge and a preference for European science: "[r]eal science was henceforth solely European and was perceived in contrast to Indian traditions as foreign and entirely new."²⁴

This development was also mirrored in the curriculum of the Delhi College. It was the successor institution of the Madrasah Ghazi-ud-Din, which was founded

21 David Lelyveld: *Aligarh's First Generation: Muslim Solidarity in British India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 69.

22 *Ibid.*, 69f.

23 Michael Bergunder: "Die koloniale Ausgrenzung der indischen Astronomie. Überlegungen zum Verhältnis von indischer Gelehrsamkeit und britischem Orientalismus in der zweiten Hälfte des 18. Jahrhunderts," in *HerStory. Historical Scholarship between South Asia and Europe*, ed. Rafael Klöber, Manju Ludwig, 130.

24 *Ibid.*, 135.

in the first half of the 18th century. The Madrasah developed into a prominent centre of Islamic learning, but declined by the beginning of the 19th century and could not attract more than nine students in 1824. Then, in 1823, “the General Committee for Public Instruction in Calcutta called for a report from the local committees in Delhi, Agra, and some other north Indian towns on the state of the schools in their jurisdiction and for suggested measures to improve the educational standard of the population.”²⁵ The devastating conclusion drawn by the responsible representative in Delhi thus heralded the beginning of British patronage of traditional education in Delhi: the government decided to sponsor the Delhi College, the former Madrasa Ghazi-ud-Din. Instruction began in 1826.²⁶

By 1828, the college was divided into two sections: the Oriental and the English department. One particularity of the Delhi College was its insistence on Urdu as the medium of instruction for both of its sections. Consequently, textbooks had to be written in Urdu and many texts on scientific, social, and literary subjects had to be translated. In order to transgress the borders of the college and reach as many people as possible, the college also established its own press. Monthly academic periodicals were launched in order to publish articles on science and technology, as well as news and famous literary works in translation. This made new scientific approaches and theories accessible to a larger audience. The most eminent figure in this context was Master Ramchandar, professor of mathematics at the Delhi College, who “made Western innovations in science and technology available to the literate public of North India, but also articulated an ideology of reform that involved openness to knowledge from wherever it issued.”²⁷ He published two journals, the *Favā'id an-Nāzirīn* (Benefit of the Reader) and the *Qirān as-Sa'dain* (The Meeting of the Two Auspicious Planets) – their titles indicating the respective subjects of the journals. Both journals were launched in the mid-1840s with limited readership. Margrit Pernau mentions that, in 1850, the *Favā'id* “was published in an edition of just fifty-two copies, while the *Qiran* was even down to twenty-five copies.”²⁸ Both periodicals depended heavily on British support and were discontinued in the 1850s.²⁹

In the second half of the 19th century, science steadily gained ground as a form of cultural authority. Various academic societies arose in order to distribute scientific knowledge, culminating in its increased prominence. While Bengal was the first centre of this development, North India did not lag far behind. Among these

25 Pernau: *Ashraf into Middle Classes*, 106.

26 Ibid.

27 Gail Minault: “Master Ramchandra of Delhi College: Teacher, Journalist, and Cultural Intermediary,” *The Annual of Urdu Studies*, Vol. 18 (2003), 96.

28 Pernau: *Ashraf into Middle Classes*, 117.

29 Ibid., 116f.

groups was the Aligarh Scientific Society, which Khan founded in 1864, promoted science through the translation of English textbooks in Urdu in order to surmount Muslims' political weakness in the aftermath of the 1857 upheaval. The Aligarh movement saw Western education as a crucial means of removing this weakness.³⁰ This raises questions about Khan's shift towards a rather positive stance on both science and reason, which I will discuss in the following section.

2. Khan's Changing Stance Towards Reason

Khan must have been aware of the intellectual upheavals questioning the position of traditional learning, as he showed some interest in technical as well as scientific matters in the wake of his earliest writings. We learn from Troll that Khan was born in a family that showed exceptional interest in scientific and technological matters, particularly in math and physics.³¹ Through his grandfather Farid-ud-Din, himself an outstanding mathematician, and his maternal uncle Ahmad Zain al-Abidin, Khan acquired an avid interest in mathematics. It was his uncle who perhaps also connected him to the environment of the Delhi College.³²

This family background is reflected in his *Tashīl fī jar as-saqīl* (1844), wherein Khan presents a translation of an Arabic tract on the "lifting of very heavy objects, cutting of hard material, five methods of pressing and squeezing intractable matter and various methods of making and using tools for these purposes."³³ More importantly, in his tract titled *Qaul-i matīn dar ibtāl-i ḥarkat-i zamīn* (1848), he discusses the question of whether the earth revolves around the sun or whether the reverse is true, defending a Ptolemean worldview. This defensive stance clearly reflects Khan's awareness of the newly introduced position of modern science: "*Qaul-i matīn* mirrors the restless questioning which the teaching of the new sciences in the Government Colleges of Agra, Benares and Delhi, and its spread through educational books and periodicals, aroused among the educated of Upper India at that time."³⁴ On the other hand, his *Qaul* also demonstrates Khan's entrenchment and erudition in Greek and Muslim philosophy, as his defence is based

30 Gyan Prakash: *Another Reason: Science and the Imagination of Modern India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 60f.

31 Troll: *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 146.

32 *Ibid.*, 146f.

33 <http://www.sirsyedtoday.org/books/default.aspx?cid=64>

34 Troll: *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 147f.

on Aristotelian arguments discussing the possibility of the movement of the earth from the perspective of inherent forces:

[A]ny assumed movement of the earth would have to be conceived of as being naturally inherent (*tab'ī*) and as such could only be rectilinear. If the earth moves, it has to be postulated that there exists in it a power to move it (*qūwat-i muḥarrakah*).³⁵

But, irrespective of his keen interest in scientific and technical matters, Khan had an openly hostile stance towards reason in religious matters, as has been discussed above. In his view, neither reason nor experience were allowed access to religion.³⁶

2.1 Reason & Nature in *The Mohomedan Commentary on the Holy Bible*

This attitude changed significantly with his publication of *The Mohomedan Commentary on the Holy Bible* (1862). As mentioned prior, Khan dismissed the assertion of reason as providing further insight than the existence of God. However, a closer examination of Khan's commentary reveals that reason now acquires – at least in one instance – more importance in connection with religious scriptures. In discussing the question of “whether the successive courses of darkness and light were only twelve hours long [at the time shortly after creation],” Khan remarks on the specific character of the time of creation, as God directly intervened:

[T]hese nights and days were not the effects of such causes as produce those of our own time. They were effected [*sic*] by God Himself without any other apparent cause.³⁷

Khan therefore strictly distinguishes the period of creation from “our own time.” While the former is governed directly by God's actions, the latter can be viewed according to an established *law of nature*. Nature is thus imagined as a part of God's creation, ruled by a law as established by God. The law of nature is, hence, a subsequent product of God's creation, not yet governing the period preceding its

35 Ibid., 148.

36 Both concepts, *'aql* and *tajribah*, appear already in Khan's *Rāh-i sunnat*, yet with distinctive denial to their reliability. Perhaps one might read this as a first instance of an awareness of and response to a European understanding of science. Both concepts will obtain a central position in Khan's conception of science in his later texts, cf. Chapter 7.

37 Khan: *Tabayīn*, Vol. II, 491f.

establishment. Thus, Khan perceives the law of nature as part of God's creation, without however ascribing it a position independent of God. On this basis, he can dismiss the charge of an inconformity between nature and God's revelation, as the law of nature cannot be applied to the time of creation. While Khan proposes a distinction between nature and revelation, he also notes that both are the creation of God and, thus, cannot contradict each other:

We acknowledge that Nature [*necar**³⁸] is the Work of God [*hudā kā kām**], and Revelation his Word [*hudā kā kalām**]; that no discrepancy should ever occur between them for as much as both proceed from the same Source.³⁹

This is perhaps the first instance in Khan's work where the concepts of a Work and a Word of God appear. He perceives them as being related to one another through their origination from God so that a contradiction is inherently denied. While this concept gains crucial importance in Khan's last period, he does not fully integrate it into his Biblical commentary. He instead merely utilises it here as a marginal note to affirm this point. Nonetheless, it heralds a significant shift in his approach to the position of reason in religious matters – when compared with his first period and with a strict separation of religious and scientific issues. In Khan's commentary on the Bible, this dichotomy begins to fade and reason – via his reference to nature and the laws of nature – is permitted access to a religious argument. A rational position (in contrast to a revealed position) can thus be utilised as affirmation.

In the following section, I will examine what made Khan change his stance. An important indication can be found in his terminology: strikingly, Khan uses the English *nature* untranslated as *necar* in the Urdu column of his bilingual commentary. He does not state any reason for why he did not use an Urdu equivalent – for example, *qudrat*. Nevertheless, this demonstrates two implications: first, the idea of nature as the Word of God is derived from an English source and, secondly, it was adopted untranslated, as Khan perceived the underlying concept as exceeding a potential equivalent in Urdu. In order to clarify this divergence and unequivocal meaning, Khan employs the English original.

Troll observes significant parallels between Khan's approach and John H. Pratt's *Scripture and Science not at Variance* (1856), which Khan frequently quotes in his commentary. Pratt (1809-71) joined the East India Company as chaplain in 1838 and became Archdeacon of Calcutta in 1850. He worked simultaneously as a mathematician on problems of geodesy. In his *Scripture and Science*,

38 * indicating the Urdu equivalents in the parallel Urdu translation.

39 Ibid., 492.

he takes up a position against the thesis of a conflict between science and religion, and in his introduction states:

The assertion, not unfrequently made, that the discoveries of Science are opposed to the declarations of Holy Scripture, is as mischievous as it is false [...].⁴⁰

In order to assert this thesis, Pratt has to apply an interpretive approach to the Bible, which does not insist on traditional exegesis:

[I]t is *impossible* that Scripture can, when rightly interpreted, be at variance with the Works of the Divine Hand; and that therefore, if difficulties remain at any time not cleared up, they must arise from our ignorance, or from hasty interpretation either of the phenomenon before us or of the language of the Sacred Record.⁴¹

Thus, any inconformity between science and the Bible must be ascribed to a human incapability of understanding the real intent of the scripture. Only the adaptation of the interpretation permits us to reconcile the alleged variance and inconsistency, for:

The Book of Nature and the Word of God emanate from the same infallible Author, and therefore cannot be at variance. But man is a fallible interpreter; and by mistaking one or both of these Divine Records, he forces them too often into unnatural conflict.⁴²

Therefore, Khan, and Pratt before him, make a distinction between nature and revelation. Both elements, however, are viewed as sharing the same origin, so that any inconsistency between nature and revelation must be ascribed to human fallibility. Strikingly, they also share the perception of nature as a source for gaining knowledge about God. Nature and its investigation through science can thus be consulted as a corrective measure to revise and readjust interpretations of revelation.

With respect to Khan's commentary on the Bible, Troll states that Khan was initially only interested in finding a solution for obvious contradictions between the Bible and new scientific perspectives. This effort focusses on Copernican thought, which Khan acknowledges since the composition of his commentary:

40 John Henry Pratt: *Scripture and Science not at Variance: With Remarks on the Historical Character, Plenary Inspiration, and Surpassing Importance, of the Earlier Chapters of Genesis* (London: Hatchards, Picadilly, 1871), 1.

41 *Ibid.*, 6.

42 *Ibid.*, 10.

Once Sir Sayyid bowed to the Copernican revolution it became impossible to avoid a reassessment of the customary interpretation of many revealed passages. So from *Tabayīn al-kalām* onwards, Sir Sayyid practices the principles of interpretation by which he can resolve apparent discrepancies between the evidence of the text and the results of modern science.⁴³

This interpretative approach heralds Khan's abandonment of literal interpretation, which is fully developed only in his response to William Muir, as has been discussed in Chapter 3. Still Khan applies this approach in his commentary only with regard to the Bible and no other scripture.

In the introduction to the second volume of his commentary, Khan elucidates this interpretative approach: in the first instance, he rejects the assertion that the Pentateuch is perceived as “a narrative invented by Moses,” and, furthermore, “that even none of these accounts must be considered in the allegorical sense.”⁴⁴ Instead, Khan insists that some aspects of the Bible are of an allegorical character, even though, as he writes:

It is a standard principle with us Mohomedans to take a word in the strictest original and literal meaning which can possibly be derived from it; but we are at liberty to deviate from it, when the mode of expression used in the subject or some other circumstance may reasonably suggest that the real literal meaning of a word is not to be followed, but, on the contrary, what suits the sense of the subject. Such a meaning of a word is termed metaphorical [...].⁴⁵

Khan argues that limited human capacity required such a mode of expression in the divine scriptures, so that their universal implications would be graspable for any man. Moreover, this ability to grasp the meaning of the scriptures was present irrespective of his individual capability, his time period, or his stage of learning:

The doctrines which they [i.e. the prophets] taught, were so new and strange to us, that we had never dreamed of them before. Further those doctrines were of so mysterious and sublime a nature, that it was beyond the capacity of man to comprehend them and to reach to their real truth.⁴⁶

Thus, Khan argues, reminiscent again of Pratt, that words of revelation which apparently seem to contradict the results of modern science must not be perceived as a defect in revelation, but rather as the wrong interpretation:

43 Troll: *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 154f.

44 Khan: *Tabayīn*, Vol. II, 456.

45 Ibid., 456f.

46 Ibid., 457.

[S]uch words which seem to be opposite and contradictory in the sense conveyed by them when judged by the light of modern improvements in learning and discoveries in science, have much more led to their bewilderment and perplexity. But, on the other hand, the same light of advanced learning likewise shows use, that the fault lies in our own finite and imperfect capacities to comprehend the meaning of the words of God, and not that there is anything defective in those words intrinsically which prevents us from understanding them rightly.⁴⁷

Khan then proceeds to argue that the interpretation of divine scriptures requires continual adjustment and adaption according to the steady progression of science:

Some self-approving philosophers tauntingly say, that it would not be wise for us to ignore the formerly adopted meanings of the words of God in consequence of the late progress in science, [...] lest it may happen that the future progress in science might hereafter prove something still more damaging, and thus force us again to change our currently received interpretation [...]. [N]o matter what progress be made in our learning, yet whatever we will earnestly consider and reflect over its pages it will always be found in perfect harmony with the truth; and if we are unable to see clearly the existence of this harmony, it is the defect of our own understanding [...].⁴⁸

Khan therefore assumes a continuous progression of science. Scientific perspectives, which were recognised at his time, are not perceived as final conclusions. In fact, once recognised, scientific findings may be contradicted by later results. Nevertheless, Khan is not discouraged by this continuous shift of scientific opinion. Instead, he acknowledges the necessity of also taking up an interpretive approach to divine scriptures in order to reveal their universal message. Apparent contradictions between science and scripture are solved through an allegorical reading. Scripture thus becomes fluid, flexible, and is subjected to continuous adjustment. Khan thus views new scientific results as a means toward gaining a deeper understanding of the divine message. This perspective is provided through Pratt's distinction of the Work and the Word of God and their relationship to one another.

Science, as a distinct discipline independent of religious legitimation, as Harrison has argued, must have been transferred to South Asian society through its promotion by British supported institutions and journals. As a result, the thesis of the conflict between science and religion also seems to have been transferred. Nevertheless, this thesis was not a generally acknowledged fact in Europe. Authors like Pratt aimed at propagating a consistency and conformity between science and religion: they referred to the old tradition of natural religion, which assumed the

47 Ibid., 459.

48 Ibid., 461.

common attribution of revelation and nature to the same origin: God. Yet, this approach concedes a reverse order with science gaining the position of referential corrective: the interpretation of the scriptures therefore becomes adaptable to scientific findings. Science has to be acknowledged as directive in order to maintain the assertion of its conformity with revelation.

This assertion remains limited to the interpretation of the Bible in Khan's commentary and is developed only in his subsequent texts. In the following passage, I will discuss his application of this assertion to Islamic sources. In particular, the Quran will be of crucial interest, as Muslim belief in its verbatim inspiration by God poses the significant difficulty in terms of its adaptability.

3. Translating Science

Khan's *Essays* can be described as a turning point in his position towards reason and science in religious matters. From this time forward, he begins to apply the above described interpretative approach to Islam. In Chapter 3, I have already discussed Khan's utilisation of critical historiography to implement an adaptable view of Islamic sources. In the following passage, I will discuss this shift through the lens of reason and science.

In the preface of his *Essays*, Khan states that the abundance of religions requires a test to determine "the truth, or [...] the falsity of various religions."⁴⁹ Khan recognises a rational principle as a means of verification:

That true principle, as far as man's intellectual powers enable him to discover, is no other than Nature [...].⁵⁰

Nevertheless, Khan does not follow up on this assertion either in the preface or in the biography itself. Only in his 1884 *Lakkar Islām par* (Lecture on Islam) does he resume and further develop these ideas:

When somebody wants to corroborate or affirm the truth of his religion, be it Islam, Christianity or Hinduism, he must first prove its truth. To argue that this and this person is without any doubt holy, and that we believe in the word of this holy person, is not sufficient for establishing the truth of that religion because such a statement remains the realm of mere belief. [...] Every member of a religion holds the

49 Khan: *Essays*, v.

50 Ibid.

same firm belief in his religion as any member of another religion in his. [...] Given this state of affairs one must offer the reason for preferring the one to the other and one must be able to give a reason that satisfies, which is not based on some belief [only] [...]. [I]n order to arrive at the truth it is necessary that we discover a criterion (*mi 'yār*) and establish a touchstone which is related to all religions in the same manner and by which we can prove our religion or belief to be true.⁵¹

Khan discerns the necessity of identifying the one single true religion among the different existing faiths. Religions must be compared and their claims to truth must be tested according to an objective criterion. Khan distinguishes between two levels of conviction: the first is mere belief, which can be described as internal. Arguments on this level are merely based on personal conviction, and thus cannot be referred to for identifying true religion, as “[e]very member of a religion holds the same firm belief in his religion as any member of another religion in his.”⁵² Khan states that arguments will inevitably be circular within the discourse of the respective religion and lack a mutual basis of argumentation with other religions. Furthermore, this mutual basis is the factor that could allow for the transcendence of the inner discourse. Arguments of the internal level are incompatible for transcending convictions and beliefs, as they inherently include a truth claim, which unavoidably collides with other truth claims.

Khan realises this difficulty and comes to the conclusion that religions must be tested from an external perspective:

I shall not state my ideas precisely as a Muslim [...]. At this moment I shall adopt a way of speaking which a third person would employ in explaining the principles and tenets of Islam to people who have doubts about Islam or its principles.⁵³

Thus, as it were, the internal level of belief and conviction cannot be a basis for the search for the true religion. Instead, Khan attempts to establish a mutually accepted criterion (*mi 'yār*) that can transcend the inner discourses and serve as a *tertium comparationis* between the different religions. Khan recognises nature (*ne-car*) as this universal criterion and states that the true religion can be identified by its rational verifiability and its conformity with nature (*ne-car*):

51 Troll: *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 315f.

52 Ibid., 315.

53 Ibid., 315.

Thus the only criterion for the truth of the religions which are present before us is whether the religion [in question] is in correspondence with the natural disposition of man, or with *nature* (*fiṭrat-i insānī yā nēcar kē muṭābiq*).⁵⁴

At another place in his *Lekcar*, Khan interlaces *necar* with reason (*‘aql*), the latter perhaps being the faculty investigating in *necar*:⁵⁵

[P]roofs by simply adducing revealed texts without rational argument (*manqūlī* as against *ma‘qūlī*) will not do, because the doubter in religion, or the religious, will not accept such. Rather, it will be necessary to explain them in a manner corresponding with reason, *nature* or human nature so that the mind of the other person will be satisfied.⁵⁶

This emphasis on Khan’s use of an antithesis of *ma‘qūlāt* (“rational” sciences of Greek philosophy and *‘ilm al-kalām*⁵⁷) in contrast to *manqūlāt* (traditional sciences based on the revealed texts and the *ḥadīṣ*) is an addition by Troll which does not appear in the original. Yet, Troll does not get things wrong in this addition: Khan here expresses his reluctance, or at least his disinterest, in parsing the subtle differences between legal scholars on the basis of merely inner-Islamic sources. Instead, his focus is on a much more urgent topic – the encounter, first, the conflicting truth-claims of other religions and, second, with science. In order to view religions from an external perspective, transcending the various incompatible and incommensurable internal discourses, Khan feels compelled to abandon exclusionary truth claims and accept an external criterion deemed to be neutral. This second level can be described as comparative in addition to external. According to Khan, it foremost addresses outsiders or doubters of Islam.⁵⁸

54 Ibid., 316.

55 Khan’s use of *‘aql* in his *Lekcar* is highly inconsistent, with two contradictory notions being used in the same speech. The intended notion is only ascertainable in its context: on the one hand, *‘aql* is used in composition with analogy (*‘aqlī aur qiyāsi*), referring to the methodology and epistemology of Greek philosophy and, thus, applied in a negative sense. In this use, *‘aql* is contrasted against the methodology of modern science characterised by experience and observation (*tajribah aur mušāhadah*) (see Troll: *Sayyid Ahmad Khan* 312 / Khan: *Safar-nāmah-i Panjāb*, 192). On the other hand, *‘aql*, as used in relation to contemporary philosophy (*is zamāne kī ḥikmat va falsafah*), i.e. natural science, rather implies the faculty to gain knowledge based on the observational principles of science (see Troll: *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 329, Khan: *Safar-nāmah-i Panjāb*, 203; cf. also Khan: *Maqālāt*, Vol. III, 234). Khan, however, does not give any definition of this latter concept of *‘aql*. Cf. Chapter 7 for an attempt at excavating a definition of *‘aql* from Khan’s explanations on epistemology.

56 Troll: *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 329.

57 Cf. Chapter 6.

58 Ibid., 315.

3.1 Equalising Concepts

Khan aims to utilise nature as a means to establish comparability between the different religions. The otherwise incompatible discourses are grounded on a mutual basis of commensurability, in Khan's view. The mutually conflicting and incompatible truth claims of the internal discourses are thus bypassed by a translation in rational terms. This rational perspective provides a basis for comparability which itself allows Khan to identify the true religion on the basis of the central criterion of reason and nature.

Khan's work takes up this translative approach in two ways: on the one hand, he presents Islamic concepts and practices in terms of their intention and concordance with nature and reason, while on the other hand, he develops a terminology which attempts to link Islam with the discourse of science. In the following section, I will first discuss the second aspect of Khan's approach and analyse its implications for his conception of Islam.

In his terminological redefinition, Khan rejects the thesis of conflict between science and religion. He therefore demonstrates the inherent conformity of Islam and science by equating English terms with Islamic terminology. This process is accompanied by the merging of concepts associated with these terms, which results in an extension of their meaning. The central terms to be discussed in this context are *necar*, *fiṭrat*, and *qudrat*. *Necar* is the phonetic transcription of the English "nature" in Arabic script. *Fiṭrat*, derived from the Arabic *fiṭra*, is used in Arabic to signify the inner nature of man for which he was created by God, as in the following *ḥadīṭ*:

Its [i.e. *fiṭra*'s] theologically important usage is in the saying of Muḥammad, 'Every infant is born according to the *fiṭra* ('*ala 'l-fiṭra* ; i.e., Allāh's kind or way of creating; 'on God's plan' [...]); then his parents make him a Jew or a Christian or a Magian.'⁵⁹

This meaning corresponds with the common usage in Urdu.⁶⁰ However, *qudrat*, as derived from the Arabic *qudra*, is used in Urdu with the meaning of nature in the sense of "*Natura naturans*."⁶¹

In his last period, Khan uses these three terms, in particular *necar* and *fiṭrat*, synonymously – and regularly exchanges one for another. Quite frequently, he explicitly *synonymises* these three terms but does so in different ways. Sometimes

59 *EI*, "fiṭra."

60 Platts: *A Dictionary of Urdū, Classical Hindī and English*, 782.

61 *Ibid.*, 788; Khan: *Essays*, v.

they are aligned by conjunctions, as in “*necar ya 'nī qudrat aur fītrat*,”⁶² “nature, i.e. *qudrat* and *fītrat*”; or “*fītrat yā necar yā qānūn-i qudrat*,”⁶³ “*fītrat* or *necar* or the law of nature (*qudrat*).” Sometimes, one word is described as the translation for another, such as in “*necar jis ko ḥudā ne fītrat kahā*,”⁶⁴ “nature which God called *fītrat*.” In the first cases, the terms are *synonymised* with markers like “and” or “or,” which indicates an active creation of a formerly unestablished synonymy between these concepts. Khan mostly links the terms with the conjunction *yā* (or) or introduces an alternative term with *ya 'nī* (that is); *aur* (and) is used occasionally to connect Urdu words, yet not in linking English words with those in Urdu, as in “*necar ya 'nī qudrat aur fītrat*”, “nature, i.e. *qudrat* and *fītrat*.”

Khan suggests the interchangeability of the conjoined words and, in fact, actively defines a synonymy. The overarching term is *necar*, which transcends its possible Urdu equivalents, *qudrat* and *fītrat*. Thus, Khan represents *necar* with both Urdu equivalents in order to cover its entire semantic field. However, in other instances such as “*necar jis ko ḥudā ne fītrat kahā*”, *fītrat* seems to replace this holistic description and is presented instead as a sufficient equivalent for the entire semantic field of *necar*. When Khan speaks of “*necar ya 'nī fītrat aur qudrat*”, the convergence of *qudrat* and *fītrat* under the single term *necar* is still obvious. But the phrase “*fītrat yā necar yā qānūn-i qudrat*” presupposes a full equivalence of *necar* and *fītrat* and dismisses the former distinction.⁶⁵ Consequently, Khan merges *fītrat* with *necar* and integrates the latter’s surplus meaning. He includes the surplus meaning of the apparent synonym in the space of meaning of the initial term: *fītrat* is not restricted to the inner nature (of man), but is instead merged with the *natura naturans* of *qudrat*:

[W]hen we say *Nature*, we must not be understood to mean *Natura naturans* of the atheistical school, but only that *tout ensemble* of organic and inorganic existences, the production of [...] God [...].⁶⁶

This extension of meaning allows Khan to present a crucial reinterpretation of a Quranic verse. When Khan translates the Arabic *fītra* as *necar*, the extended concept of *fītrat* is projected onto the Quran. In a translation of a quranic verse, he thus translates *fītrat Allāh* as *necar ḥudā kā*:

62 Khan: *Maqālāt*, Vol. I, 13.

63 Ibid, Vol III, 242

64 Ibid., 17.

65 Furthermore, it is possible to imagine that the meaning of *necar* might have been extended to comparison to nature, as well. Thus, *necar* is perhaps not identical with nature. But this requires further scrutiny which cannot be provided within the scope of this project.

66 Khan: *Essays*, v.

Arabic:

Fa'aqim wajhaka li-d-dīni ḥanīfan fiṭrata Allāhi allatī faṭara an-nāsa 'alaihā lā tabdīla liḥalqī Allāhi dālika ad-dīnu al-qayyimu wa-lākinna akṭara an-nāsi lā ya'lamūna. (30:30)

English translation of the Qur'ān:

So [Prophet] as a man of pure faith, stand firm and true in your devotion to the religion [*dīn*]. This is the natural disposition [*fiṭra*] God instilled in mankind – there is no altering God's creation – and this is the right religion [*dīn*], though most people do not realize it.⁶⁷

Khan's Urdu translation:

Sīdhā kar apnā muḥ ḥālīṣ dīn ke līye jo necar ḥudā ka hai jis par logoṅ ko banāya hai, ḥudā kī paidā' īsh meṅ kuch tabdīl nahiṅ hai. Yehī mustaḥkim dīn hai, va-lekin akṣar log nahīn jānte.⁶⁸

Translation of Khan's Urdu translation:

Turn your face to the pure *dīn* which is the nature [*necar*] of God according to which He created man [lit. people], there is no change in God's creation. This is the stable/firm *dīn*, but most people do not know.

Quite strikingly, Khan translates *necar* as an equivalent for the Arabic *fiṭra*, while a translation with the Urdu equivalent *fiṭrat* would have seemed more likely. Thus, Khan transfers his equivalisation of *fiṭrat* and *necar* to the Arabic *fiṭra*. In his explanation of this verse, Khan extends the meaning of the Arabic *fiṭra* – the inner nature of man (as given in the English translation) – by implying a broader meaning of *necar* as equally signifying inner and outer nature. According to Khan, God names Himself as a *necarī* here (*ḥud apne ko necarī kahta hai*).⁶⁹ Hence, Khan does not read *fiṭrat Allah/necar ḥudā kā* as *genitivus qualitatis* in the sense of God's disposition, but rather as *genitivus auctoris*, implying the meaning of nature as a creation of God. This *necar*, encompassing man's inner nature as well as his outer nature, is true religion (*dīn*). Man is created in conformity with this religion: his inner nature as well as outer nature conform to *dīn*.⁷⁰

67 Abdel Haleem: *The Qur'an*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 258.

68 Khan: *Maqālāt*, Vol XV, 147.

69 Ibid., 147.

70 Cf. Nayyar: *Urdū adab kī taškīl-i jadīd*, 146

In the following clause, *necar* is described as immutable, for God does not change his creation (*ḥudā kī paidā'īs meṅ kuch tabdīl nahīṅ hai*). By employing *necar*, Khan interprets this constancy and immutability in God's creation with reference not only to the inner nature of man but equally to outer nature, too: neither inner nor outer nature are therefore subject to change. Both are perennially organised according to God's initial creation. On this foundation, Khan bases his assertion of an unchanging world order created by God, which is described as *qānūn-i qudrat* or *lā āf necar* (law of nature).

While the English translation implies only an immutable inner nature of man, Khan's Urdu translation encompasses the outer nature, as well. As a result of merging *fiṭrat* with *necar*, God's unchanging, eternal order in the creation (of man) is extended to outer nature. Thus, God has not only established the order in which he created man, but rather the order structuring the whole universe. Khan describes this world order as *dīn* (*yehī mustahkim dīn hai*), which creates one more equivalency – between *dīn* and *necar*.

Khan creates a long chain of equivalency between *fiṭrat*, *necar*, *qudrat*, *qānūn-i qudrat* or *lā āf necar*, and, lastly, *dīn*. All of these terms denote the world's eternal order, however, with slightly varying nuance. In particular, *dīn* has been discussed in the previous chapters in a significantly different context. In the following discussion, I will examine the implications of this last equivalisation of the concept of *dīn*.

It is beyond the scope of this chapter to discuss the vast field of meaning *dīn* has in Arabic. Still, in Khan's case, the English translation of *dīn* as "religion" is far too simplistic. As has been discussed above, Khan conceives of *dīn* as an abstract concept of religion. The different religions (*mazhab*) present in the world are perceived as manifestations of the eternal *dīn*, but in a deviated form: the various prophets brought their law codes (*ṣarī'at*), but none of these codes remained in their original form. These deviated forms of an originally universal message constitute the present religions – with the exception of Islam: Islam as the last message was sent to restore these deviated messages into a universal form.⁷¹

With Khan's integration of *dīn* in his chain of equivalency with *necar*, law of nature, etc., the term *dīn* additively obtains the meaning of eternal world order, that is the law of nature according to which God has created the world. But how does Khan link the abstract concept of religion with the idea of an eternal world order under the same umbrella category of *dīn*?

71 Khan: *Tabayīn*, Vol. I, 16f.

3.2 Integrating Science in Islam

The equating of *fiṭrat* with *necar* extends and broadens the human nature of *fiṭrat* to the *natura naturans* of *qudrat*, too. Through this extension of meaning in the above quoted Quranic verse, Khan argues that God created a law of nature. Occurrences in nature are thus not attributed to God's immediate and active intervention, but rather according to a God-created, eternal order. For Khan, nature therefore acquires an independent – albeit inseparable – position from God. Natural laws are acknowledged as a scientific entity. This breaks from (traditionally) the most common view in Islam, that of Ashari⁷² theology: the occurrence of rain, for example, would be perceived as an active intervention of God. Khan, however, introduces the law of nature as a mediating phenomenon: God's direct action is restricted to His role as maintainer of the once-established, eternal order and its laws. Consequently, events like rain are no longer imagined as God's action, but rather as being in accordance with the laws of nature.

On this basis, Khan rejects the assertion of a conflict between religion and science:

Those who imagine science [*necar al sā'ins*] and religion [*mazhab*] as contradictory and antithetical [*muqabil aur mutazād*] are misguided and errant. In fact, religion and science consider entirely different issues, which are mutually unrelated. Thus, both cannot be mutually contradictory and antithetical.⁷³

He thus denies the conflict thesis and argues that science and religion rather concern separate spheres. Hence, they do not clash but rather complement each other. On the basis of this acknowledgment of natural laws, then, Khan develops the assertion of an unbroken chain of cause and occurrence: every occurrence in the world is preceded by a cause. There can be no occurrence without any cause. The whole world consists of such chains of causes (*'illat*) and caused occurrences (*ma'lūl*):

⁷² Asharism is the most prominent theological school of Islam and was a compromise between the positions of the Qadariyya and the Jabiriyya. The former emphasised man's free will (*qadar*) while the latter stressed God's omniscience, which rather implied the pre-determination of man's fortune. Ashari theology was shaped as a *via media* between these positions: God has a conveying position in human action. Only through His intervention and mediation can man act.

⁷³ Khan: *Maqālāt*, Vol. III, 281.

A reason [*'illat*] is never, on no account, separate from its effected occurrence [*ma'lūl*], nor is an effect from its reason. According to this procedure, any occurrence in the world is effected and this is called *fiṭrat* or *necar* or *qānūn-i qudrat*.⁷⁴

Khan further argues that all of these chains must have an origin – a point of departure, so to speak. At the beginning, there must be a reason of reasons (*'illat al-'ilal*) which sets the chains in motion. Khan describes this as the “*Causa causarum*, that is, God.”⁷⁵ The acceptance of a creator is thus viewed as a natural as well as rational insight that no one can deny. God’s existence does not clash with the belief in scientific natural laws, but is rather its logical result. Khan aims to rationally demonstrate the acknowledgment of God’s existence with undeniable evidence.⁷⁶

Anything that exists is the effect [*ma'lūl*] of a [preceding] reason [*'illat*] and this reason is the effect of another [preceding] reason and this chain keeps on going. But from the perspective of *necar*, such a chain must come to an end in reason of reasons [*'illat al-'ilal*], which is proven by the *lā āf necar* itself [...].⁷⁷

And:

Someone or other is the Creator or the Final Cause of or the Cause of causes of all existing things. Allah is His name. [...] [S]ince we find every single thing to be caused by a cause how can we fail to consider the sum of these very things to be caused by some Cause of causes?⁷⁸

Khan consequently aims to rationalise belief, and religion in general, by detaching it from supernaturality: religion is therefore entirely in concordance with reason and nature. It does not evade but is rather firmly grounded on rational arguments, for nature and its law are viewed – again, much in reminiscence of Pratt – as *vark āf Gād* (work of God) which cannot contradict *ḥudā kā kalām* (i.e. the Quran), as both share the same origin. Science and religion are distinguished as separate spheres which are linked through the creation of God, thus ruling out the charge of contradiction.⁷⁹

74 Ibid., 241f.

75 Khan: *Essays*, v.

76 Khan: *Maqālāt*, Vol. III, 298, 302f.

77 Ibid., 303.

78 Troll: *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 258.

79 Khan: *Tafsīr al-Qur`ān*, 6. Akshay Kumar Dutt (1820-86) argues also in a very similar vein. He was a prominent exponent of the Brahmo Samaj, a Hindu reform movement founded in 1828 by Ram Mohan Roy, which propagated a monotheistic Hinduism and emphasised science and reason as characteristics of the “authentic” Hinduism, freed of the

The most famous case by which Khan exemplifies this assertion is his understanding of the *du`ā*, an informal type of prayer in Islam. In his pamphlet *Ad-du`ā` va al-istijābah* (1892), Khan doubts that prayers are answered by God (*istijābah*). He rather conceives of *du`ā* as a means to maintain a relationship between man and God. But those prayers are neither answered by God nor do they change the run of events. Khan imagines *du`ā* merely as a way to calm oneself.⁸⁰

Khan thus presents a rationalised interpretation of traditional Islamic belief which is completely detached of any supernatural powers and rejects a contradiction between the spheres of religion and science. Religion is thus positioned on the same level as science, and a distinction between the natural and the supernatural is relinquished. Instead, both spheres have to argue on the basis of the natural, i.e. experiential and observational knowledge. The previously vertical distinction between the natural (science) and the supernatural (religion) is turned to a horizontal distinction on the natural level. Hence, there are no truly distinct types of knowledge, but rather one body of knowledge which is approached in different ways:

The assertion that religious service [*ibādat*] in the field of knowledge can be conducted only by studying religious knowledge [*‘ulūm-i dīniyah*] has entrenched itself in the hearts of the Muslims. To study or teach any other type of knowledge [...] cannot be called religious service and, thus, will not be rewarded [by God] [*savāb*]. [...] To only have religious knowledge, is *per se* neither religious service nor will it be rewarded. Rather the intention [*nīyat*] to apply knowledge for religious purposes allows one to term its studying as a religious service and worth of [divine]

excesses found in its present status. Dutt's approach perhaps most expressly integrates rational arguments in his idea of Hinduism within the Brahma context. His argument to a great extent resembles Khan's approach when asserts that "[...] God resembled that of the eighteenth-century deists who saw the Almighty as the supreme watchmaker. Only an Absolute Being could possibly conceive something as intricately complex in its interrelationship between parts and whole as the clock-like earth. The world was therefore neither accidental in its creation nor purposeless in its operation. One can understand God's plan by discovering the laws of nature, which show how all things are harmoniously interrelated, and this knowledge can be used to improve human relationships and bring the kingdom of God on earth" (David Kopf: *The Brahma Samaj and the Shaping of the Modern Indian Mind* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 50). In his perspective, science and the study of the natural laws mirror "God's scripture," which "reveal[s] the total harmonious interrelatedness of the universal elements" (Ibid., 50). Much reminiscent of Khan, Dutt propagates the acknowledgment of God's existence as a rational insight based on the argument of a God-created world order which inevitably points to its creator. Cf. Ibid., 43f, 50; Halbfass: *India and Europe*, 338.

⁸⁰ Khan: *Ad-Du`ā` va al-istijābah* (Āgrah: *Mufīd-i Ām*, 1892?), 4, 7f.

reward. [...] [S]uch knowledge which we call worldly knowledge [*'ulūm-i duniyavī*], if it is taught properly, serves to strengthen the faith and is a medium to increase the love and acquaintance of God.⁸¹

Consequently, it is quite reasonable if, in this respect, we include this type of knowledge in the realm of religious knowledge.⁸²

Thus, Khan doubts a strict distinction between religious and scientific – or in his words worldly – knowledge. Although he does not discard a complete distinction between these two spheres of knowledge, he primarily views them as differing approaches to a unified knowledge: the creation of God. For Khan, science acquires an assistive position for religion, strengthening an individual's faith rather than fostering doubts. The contradiction between science and religion, which was Khan's point of departure, is thus transformed into an interwoven relationship. On the one hand, religion is *rationalised* and thus divested of its former supernatural arguments, which results in the necessity for religion to utilise the same evidence as science. Consequently, on the other hand, science is *sacralised* as an aid to religion. Reason becomes the central source of arguments for both spheres, for Khan perceives faith without comprehension as worthless. Hence, religion does not lay outside the realm of reason, but relies on the same observational type of knowledge as science.⁸³

For Khan, science is thus integrated as an inherent aspect of Islam: the convergence of *fiṭrat* with *necar* allows him to identify in the Quran a natural order (i.e. the laws of nature) created by God. This permits him to present his interpretation as nothing else but the restoration of pure and unadulterated Islam (*theṭh Islām*).⁸⁴

81 Khan: *Maqālāt*, Vol. I, 147f.

82 Ibid., 150.

83 Khan, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, 6.

84 Khan: *Maqālāt*, Vol. III, 277f.

Science is subordinated as a sub-category of *dīn*.⁸⁵ The whole discourse of science is presented as part of Islam.⁸⁶

3.3 Naturalising Immediate Knowledge

Another of Khan's crucial, rationalising interpretations reveals some hints about his conception of *fiṭrat*. With reference to al-Ghazali's *Al-Maḏnūn bih 'alā ǧair*

85 In his *Urdū adab kī taškīl-i jadīd*, Nayyar summarises Khan's work as an attempt to balance this feeling of being torn between a nostalgia for the lost past and the upheavals of the colonial situation, being torn between old and new learning, and between religion and science. Nayyar recognises Khan as the first one to discern this conflict and propose a solution. According to Nayyar, Khan presented both conflicting tendencies as strictly separate spheres. Yet, his thought shows crucial inconsistencies and contradictions in this respect, as Nayyar argues: "Sir Saiyid himself several times does not maintain the delimitation between both [spheres] and blurs the borders" (Nayyar: *Urdū adab kī taškīl-i jadīd*, 144).

Can what Nayyar describes here as a contradiction in Khan's thought and as a manifestation of his inner conflict (*duhrā šu 'ūr*), not instead be understood as a deliberative inconsistency? In the first instance, Khan strictly distinguishes science and religion in two distinct spheres, whereas on closer observation, *dīn* appears as an umbrella category, reshaped by his attempt to be consistent with science. In other words, science is integrated as a sub-category of religion, while this interpretation of religion itself can neither evade its dependency on science. Khan aims to reintroduce the superiority of science. Yet, in being recognised, this thesis has to refer to the hegemonic discourse of science. Thus, Khan is not inconsistent in his argument but rather has to balance two contradicting discourses. Cf. Nayyar: *Urdū adab kī taškīl-i jadīd*, 137, 144, 147.

86 Efforts to describe miracles, such as the Prophet's night journey (*mi 'rāj*) or the splitting of the moon, as allegorical – or at least in conformity with the course of nature – are already present in Shah Waliullah's work. He argues that the working of miracles is no necessary attribute to approving the truth of a prophet and his message: "Besides, various so-called 'miracles' that are thought to be occurrences infringing upon the customary course of things, turn out to be normal phenomena when observed more closely" (Johannes Marinus Simon Baljon: *Religion and Thought of Shāh Walī Allāh Dihlawī, 1703-1762* (Leiden: Brill, 1986), 105). He argues that the normal course of nature is neither disturbed nor interrupted: "You should know that when God in His rule of the world displays a breach in the course of nature, He nevertheless does this within the framework of the customary sequence of natural events, however unstable this may be. On this account breaches in the course of nature still have slight natural causes. It is as if these natural causes are always there whenever God's decree is executed" (Ibid., 105).

From this perspective, Khan's interpretations appear less radical in their outlook to some extent. Still, Khan goes a step further and not only argues away miracles, but even aims to integrate the effect of any metaphysical element in a rational framework.

ahlih (The Mysteries of the Human Soul⁸⁷), for example, Khan presents an interpretation of punishment (*'iqāb*) and reward (*ṣavāb*) which is not physical, but an effect on the soul. This on the soul is thus duly integrated into the order of causal chains. Just as deeds have an effect in the world, in the same way they also affect the constitution of the soul (*rūh*). This argument seems to be, at first glance, not of any further interest, as it fits into Khan's project of rationalising supernatural claims, hence, the validity of the hereafter. Yet, one might also read this as a continuation of his assertion of a synthesis between *shariat* and *ṭarīqat*. Both concepts are perceived as interdependent, with the outer law exerting its impact on inner injunctions. Thus, Khan perceives an individual's conduct to be mirrored in its impact on his soul.⁸⁸

However, Khan bases this rationalisation on a text by al-Ghazali wherein the latter presents highly speculative metaphysical claims. He describes the soul as an indivisible entity, thus denying the existence of an individual soul. Rather, man's individual soul is conceived of as a part of the Universal Soul. This link of the individual man with the Divine allows the soul to recognise "its Creator and His attributes through itself and its attributes unaided by senses."⁸⁹ Khan, who was

87 An English translation of this text is available online. However, the parts Khan quotes and translates in his article could not be identified in the translation. It is unclear whether this passage could not be identified due to any abridgements or a different interpretation in the English translation. Shibli quotes the same part in his biography and study of al-Ghazali's thought, and in a wording much reminiscent of Khan's: Shibli Nomani: *Al-Ġazālī: ya 'nī Imām Muḥammad bin Muḥammad Ġazālī kī savānīh-i 'umrī* (Kānpūr: Nāmī Pres, 1901), 168.

88 Cf. Chapter 1.

89 Ghazali: *Mysteries of the Human Soul*, <http://www.ghazali.org/works/soul.htm>. Troll describes a reminiscent understanding advocated by Khan's mother, Aziz an-Nisa Begum, who had a significant impact on him. In adherence to her Sufi master, Shah Ghulam Ali (1743-1824), who was a famous Shaikh of the Naqshbandi order, she took a strong stance against any kind of mediation, "advocating the soul's direct contact with God. 'God alone should be approached in everything, then He will do what He pleases to do,' she used to say" (Troll: *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 30; unfortunately, Troll does not give any reference for this assertion). In his *Change and Continuity in Indian Sūfism*, Thomas Dahnhardt states with regard to *rūh*: "[Mankind] is endowed with a composite nature consisting of a spiritual or 'heavenly' (*rūhānī*) and a physical or 'earthen' (*jismānī*), element. Man thereby participates in the formal creation of Allāh (*al-khalq*), represented by the clay, while maintaining a close link with the informal, purely transcendent dimension of his Creator (*al-Khāliq*) through the infusion of the spirit (*al-rūh*) into the physical frame" (Thomas Dahnhardt: *Change and Continuity in Indian Sūfism: a Naqshbandi-Mujaddidī Branch in the Hindu Environment* (New Delhi: DK Printworld, 2002), 113f.). Hence, Dahnhardt argues that, in Naqshbandi thought, *rūh* is assumed to be of Divine origin, and thus maintains an integral link between man and God.

Shah Ghulam Ali was the successor of Mirza Mazhar Jan-i Janan, who strongly emphasised the doctrine of *vahdat aš-ṣuhūd* of Sirhindi, as they saw themselves as his legitimate

obviously acquainted with this text, seems to transfer this idea to his concept of *fiṭrat* as man's inner guide which is implanted in him in a universally uniform model⁹⁰ and connects him to the universal *dīn*, as he implies in the discussed Quranic verse ("Turn your face to the pure *dīn* which is the nature [*necar*] of God according to which He created man"). Khan more clearly formulates this idea when he states that "this *fiṭrat-i insānī* [human nature] has been called by God [literally: the lawgiver, *ṣāri*] as guidance [*hidāyat*]"⁹¹. With regard to this point, he writes:

Many people are born by nature [*az rū-i fiṭrat ke*] as right-minded so that they trust in a true thing [*sīdhī aur saccī bāt*] and do not require any proof to believe in it. Although they are not familiar with this matter, their true, immediate knowledge [*vajdān*] testifies its truth.⁹²

Fiṭrat therefore acquires the position of an indestructible link to the Divine, maintaining the natural and undoubtable acknowledgment of God, independent of rational or empirical proof. Thus, Abraham's insight into God's existence is described as the recognition of his own *fiṭrat*.⁹³ The acknowledgment of God's existence is described as a natural act (*amr-i ṭib ṭ*), while the possibility of denying His existence is described as impossible.⁹⁴ Because Khan conceives of human nature as a God-given disposition, he maintains – despite his emphasis on reason and inductive knowledge – man's access to a source of immediate knowledge.⁹⁵

Khan's concept of *fiṭrat* thus combines two approaches to knowledge. On the one hand, he perceives human nature as a God-given disposition which mirrors God in man and allows for immediate access to Divine knowledge. This seems to be an adaption of al-Ghazali's concept of *rūḥ*. On the other hand, *fiṭrat* is extended with the meaning of *natura naturans* by equating it with *necar*. This linkage allows

heirs. Both attacked vehemently superstitious practices such as the use of amulets. Cf. Perna: *Ashraf into Middle Classes*, 39-41; Robinson: *The 'Ulama of Farangi Mahall*, 29.

90 Khan: *Maqālāt*, Vol. XIII, 248f.

91 Ibid., 104.

92 Ibid., 104.

93 Ibid., 391.

94 To deny God's existence is described merely as the denial to prove His existence rationally. One cannot deny God's existence, but only the existence of a proof for His existence; cf. Khan, *Maqālāt*, Vol. XIII, 18.

95 Khan even goes so far as to naturalise revelation and inspiration (*vahy* or *ilhām*) as a natural disposition in man, which is present, however, in varying degrees: "As other faculties are present in man, in the same way the faculty of inspiration [*vahy aur ilhām*] is present in man. [...] In the one person [one faculty is] more [present] and in the other less. In the same way, the faculty of inspiration is absent in some, in the other less, in the other more and in another even more present" (Khan, *Maqālāt*, Vol. XIII, 388).

Khan to equally establish outer nature as a mirror of God's nature permitting insights into Divine knowledge. Chapter 7, I will further discuss the extent to which 'aql can be perceived as a merely inductive access path to knowledge or whether it is equally permeated with deductive aspects.

This link between the inner and the outer nature under the umbrella of Khan's reading of *dīn* resembles Sufi views on the whole of reality: the concept of *vaḥdat al-vujūd* – commonly related to Ibn al-Arabi's position, although not termed by him in this way – assumes the unity of Being and finds a concise expression in the Persian phrase, *hamah ūst*: "All is He." This monistic perspective assumes that God is the only existence. The entirety of creation is merely an illusion disclosing its unity with God. When this doctrine gained great popularity during the reign of Akbar (1556-1605) in Mughal India, Ahmad Sirhindi (1564-1624) countered this perspective with his concept of *vaḥdat aš-ṣuhūd*. In his view, the pantheistic perspective of *vaḥdat al-vujūd* violated the doctrine of *tauḥīd* and the transcendency of God, as God's unity was not sustained if all creation was equalised with God. He stated that a correct interpretation of this matter does not imply an equation of God with His creation, but rather a witnessing (*ṣuhūd*) of God through His creation. Creation was perceived as a mere mirror of God, maintaining, however, a clear distinction between both: "he felt it necessary to insist that seeing God in all things goes back to the viewer and does not offer a final explanation of the nature of reality."⁹⁶ The idea of *vaḥdat aš-ṣuhūd* became popular in the Naqshbandi Sufi order to which Khan was related through his family, while the *vaḥdat al-vujūd* remained prominent in the other great Sufi orders of South Asia, namely the Qadiri and Chishti orders.⁹⁷

Khan's concept of *necar* seems to refer to the *vaḥdat aš-ṣuhūd* with respect to his perception of nature as mirroring God. As we have seen, Khan interprets the investigation of natural laws as a means to strengthen and verify religious beliefs.⁹⁸ Thus, the tracing back of causal chains in nature culminates in the necessary inference of God's existence as well as His unity. Nature is, for Khan, a mirror of God's *dīn*. While the idea of *vaḥdat aš-ṣuhūd* mirrors God's existence only from a top-down perspective, Khan furthermore assumes the possibility of inductive knowledge by means of nature, allowing for bottom-up insights.

Khan occasionally refers to the distinction between *vaḥdat al-vujūd* and *vaḥdat aš-ṣuhūd*, without, however, taking a particular stance. Thus, he was undoubtedly acquainted with these concepts. Whether his concept of *necar* is, however, a reinterpretation of *vaḥdat aš-ṣuhūd* must remain mere speculation, as he does not refer

96 *EI*: "waḥdat al-shuhūd."

97 Troll: *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 31; Robinson: *The 'Ulama of Farangi Mahall*, 41.

98 Khan, *Maqālāt*, Vol. I, 147-150.

to this progression in his elucidations on *necar* or *dīn*. Yet, resemblances cannot be denied.

4. Comparing Religions

I introduced the preceding discussion of the integration of science in Islam with Khan's acknowledgment of a universal standard allowing for the transcendence of mere, incommensurable opinions or beliefs. Perhaps this can be read as an estrangement from his own position, as expressed in his *Mohomedan Commentary*: his approach was rather apologetic and, as clarified previously in this study, Islam is presumed to be the single true religion. Conversely, Khan perceives Christianity and other religions to be mere adulterations of an originally divine message. In his last period, after the publication of his *Essays*, Khan realised that such an apologetic approach could not persuade others to abandon a counter-discourse, as two incommensurable ontologies inevitably clash. This is because both include an inherent truth claim which cannot be conveyed from one to the other ontology and nor can it be verified, as the arguments work only within their respective ontology. Mere beliefs and opinions thus collide without a means of verification.

Khan therefore argued for the acknowledgment of nature as a universal and 'natural' criterion to create a commensurability between otherwise incommensurable ontologies: only that religion which is in entire conformity with nature and reason can be identified as the single true faith. For Khan, religion, being equally the creation of God as nature, must fit in with natural dispositions of man and, thus, be rationally comprehensible from a scientific perspective as well. In order to test these requirements, Khan set out to translate Islamic concepts and practices into rational and scientific terms, as I have demonstrated using the example of his *Ad-Du'ā' va al-istijābah*. Khan expanded this project to a commentary on the Quran in his unfinished, seven-volume *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān* (1880-1904), wherein he aimed to present a rationalised interpretation.

In the following discussion, I will analyse Khan's claim that reason, nature, and science, taken together, constitute a neutral and universal criterion. I will discuss the principle of comparison in order to demonstrate its implications for Khan's claim of neutrality.

Khan presumes *dīn* as a universal concept that precedes the manifestation of its elements. When Khan extends *dīn* to a dual meaning as (1) an abstract, immaterial

concept of religion overarching the various messages (*shariat*) as well as (2) the material creation, he introduces nature as both a secondary sphere of knowledge and an additional aspect of *dīn*. Nature as well as its investigation through science become an essential part of Islamic piety. But, is *dīn*, in fact, a universal concept? Can it be observed as preceding its elements?

A closer look into the principles of Khan's *Tafsīr* raises doubts about his claim. From the 12th century philosopher, Ibn Rushd, he adopts a principle of interpretation which implicitly negates the possibility of an inconsistency between the Quran and the observation of nature and its laws:

Ibn Rushd has established an extremely acceptable, reasonable and true rule. He says with full conviction that whatever can be proved with evidence but appears to contradict the religious law [*šar'*], this [i.e. the Quran] must be interpreted according to the principles of interpretation in Arabic [...].⁹⁹

Khan presupposes the Quran as divine revelation while contradictions with nature are ascribed only to misinterpretations by men. Islam and the Quran are not examined on the allegedly neutral *tertium comparationis*, however. Their coherency is anticipated and inconsistency is negated in advance. Rather, Islam's inherent consistency with nature is generalised as a principle of interpretation. The *tertium comparationis* therefore loses its character of an objective point of reference and is instead integrated as a subcategory within Khan's terminology. Thus, *dīn* does not represent any prior truth by which religions are measured. It is inextricably linked to Islam, representing the presupposed truth.

As has been mentioned in the preceding chapter, Bergunder describes comparison as inevitably based on the fixation of a particular point of reference which is abstracted as a concept: he thus negates a universality of concepts. Concepts are rather perceived as a subsequent abstraction of a prototype. Only this abstraction defines a field of similar elements which can then be compared – however, always in relation to the prototype:

[T]he point of comparison usually has a privileged relationship to one of the two or more elements that are to be compared, and the other is predicated on that relationship. [...] if the general term A', which serves as the point of comparison, is only an abstraction of element A, then A is the prototype for A'. Prior to the comparison, B (or C, D, etc.) must be declared similar to A via A' in order to make the comparison possible.¹⁰⁰

99 Ibid., Vol. III: 253.

100 Bergunder: "Comparison in the Maelstrom of Historicity," 37.

The establishment of a field of similarity is perceived as a merely contingent link, which fundamentally depends on the choice of the particular point of comparison. This point of comparison is subsequently generalised in order to maintain the field of similarity via a general concept.

For Khan, though, *dīn* is both the generalised and universalised form of Islam. The abstract concept of *dīn* fundamentally depends on Islam as a point of reference. This approach covertly anticipates the search for the true religion and merely provides evidence for this uncontested claim by reinterpreting the Quran in a rationalised fashion, ruling out the mere possibility of an inconsistency between science/nature/reason and Islam. The argument is circular, as the assertion to be proved is inherently integrated in the approach.

Khan perceives nature and its investigation through science to be a mere subordinate category of the universal *dīn*, while Islam is presupposed as its prototype by principle of interpretation. The Quran is thus anticipated as divine revelation and Islam is indisputably presupposed as the single true religion. It is not that *dīn* constitutes Islam as its element, but that *dīn* is, in fact, defined through an abstraction of Islam. Islam is the prior category while *dīn* is its mere projection. The general concept of religion is therefore a derivative of Islam in Khan's model. The conception of *dīn* changes with the critique Khan aims to answer in his reinterpretation of Islam. Thus, in integrating science as a mere subordinate category, Khan can emphasise religion's consistency with science. Both spheres are linked through the umbrella category of *dīn* as two sides of the same coin. This guarantees religion's conformity with science.

This subordination and integration of the allegedly universal *tertium comparationis* problematises Khan's claim of establishing a neutral basis for the comparison of religions. In fact, Islam serves as the prototype for the definition of the general concept of religion. Science is integrated as an additional aspect of the conception of Islam. Other religions, however, are compared not on the basis of a neutral *tertium comparationis*, but rather on Khan's conception of religion (*dīn*), which, however, is merely a projection of Islam.

Halbfass describes a strategy very reminiscent of Khan's in "Neo-Hindu" reformist approaches, wherein "dharma [...] serve[s] as [translation] for, but also as [a device] of self-assertion against, the Western¹⁰¹ concepts of religion and philosophy."¹⁰² Hinduism therefore becomes the point of departure for a transformed notion of religion. *Dīn* or *dharam*, pretending to be mere translations or equivalents to religion, put forwards a notion of religion extrapolated respectively from Islam or Hinduism. On the example of Vivekananda, Halbfass thus states:

101 Cf. Chapter 2 for a problematisation of Halbfass's terminology.

102 Halbfass: *India and Europe*, 219.

Vivekananda preaches universal tolerance and openness, the harmony of the religions, and the synthesis of East and West. Yet at the same time, he finds in this program the essential confirmation and fulfillment of his own tradition – of the Hinduism identified with the Vedānta – which he considers to be not just a particular religion, but rather religion per se.¹⁰³

The particular religion of Hinduism is thus elevated as a touchstone of the abstract concept of the universal *dharma*. In a similar vein, Harder describes Bankim's approach in presenting the superiority of Hinduism:

Bankim's approach was, to put it in another way, caught up between two different procedures, an inductive and a deductive one: the results to be inferred from the text could also be deduced from various preconceptions regarding essential Hinduism; his *dharma* is an *a priori* construction. Bankim was in the contradictory situation that while moving towards a goal or a *demonstrandum*, he had to claim that this goal had already been reached long ago, i.e. that it was already a *demonstratum*.¹⁰⁴

The appropriated concept of religion, be it that which is seen in *dīn* or *dharma*, allows for an extrapolation of the respective, particular religion. That said, it is entangled with the concept of religion to which the particular author was confronting through European critique. The critique is therefore projected in an inverse vein upon one's own tradition, culminating in a reinterpretation that serves as a response to counter and refute the critique. In the second step, this reinterpretation is extrapolated as a universal concept of religion, and as a result of the adaption of the inversed critique, *dīn* and *dharma* respectively occupy crucial elements of the critics' concepts of religion, but link it to their particular traditions.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we see that an increasing inclination towards nature, science, and reason can be observed in the subsequent periods of Khan's work. Due to a British exertion of influence in educational institutions in North India, particularly at the Delhi College, European science discourse gradually gained importance in the mid-19th century. In addition to its educational efforts, the college furthermore supported the publication of periodicals, aiming at a broader dissemination of science.

103 Vivekananda as quoted by Halbfass: *India and Europe*, 238.

104 Harder: *Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay's Śrīmadbhagavadgītā*, 238.

Due to his familial background, Khan showed a keen interest in technical and scientific issues, even from his earliest writings. However, with his *Mohomedan Commentary*, Khan reflects upon the impact of European science on matters of theology. Khan not only substitutes his Ptolemean perspective for the Copernican, but also finds it necessary to reject the conflict thesis between science and religion as a side effect of this shift. Initially only confronted with a contradiction of the Bible with this shifted worldview, Khan gradually developed an interpretative approach – first to the Bible and subsequently also to the Quran. While, in his *Essays*, this interpretative approach was primarily based on critical historiography, his subsequent texts show an increasing emphasis on nature, science, and reason. This approach is backed up by a reference to the tradition of natural religion, which he came to know through Pratt's *Scripture and Science not at Variance*.

Khan further distinguishes between the Work and Word of God, which cannot contradict each other, for both are the creation of God: any apparent contradiction can be traced back to a misreading of scripture. The latter is thus opened to interpretation, transcending its fixation to a verbatim reading. He distinguishes between two spheres, the Work and Word of God, nature and divine message, which are nonetheless conjoined under the umbrella of *dīn*. The latter experiences a tremendous extension of meaning in the course of his writings. While the *dīn* of Khan's *Mohomedan Commentary* is conceived of as the single, abstract religion which found its expression in various prophetic laws, his later texts invest *dīn* with a second meaning: nature is integrated as another aspect of *dīn*. Nature and science, and reason along with them, are incorporated as another sphere of knowledge and aid in the affirmation of religious beliefs. Science is sacralised as another access path to the knowledge of divine creation, while religion, i.e. the Word of God, is rationalised, as it has to relate to science in order to demonstrate its conformity with nature, the Work of God.

By means of a concealed process of equating the English term nature with the Urdu/Arabic *fītrat*, Khan projects this terminological integration onto the Quran and thus identify science as purely Islamic (*theḥ Islām*). The emphasis on natural religion and the conflation of the distinct spheres of science and religion under the shared umbrella of *dīn* also enable Khan to link Islam with the discourse of science, reinforcing it as pure Islam. The interpretation of the Quran becomes fluent and has to adapt to recent results of science.

On this basis, Khan develops an approach for the comparison of religions in his *Lakcar āf Islām*. After concluding that an apologetic approach cannot convince an opponent, as opinions and beliefs in separate ontologies are incommensurable, he transcends these ontological limitations through a comparative approach with a universal criterion: nature. In order to establish commensurability and identify the

single true religion standing in full conformity with nature and science, he translates Islamic theology in rational terms. Thus rationalised, religion is deprived of supernatural claims. It has to argue on the same rational basis as science.

Khan thus attempts to establish an objective meta-level approach through nature and science. That said, his interpretation of the Quran nonetheless raises questions about his claim of the neutrality and universality of his criterion, for conformity between the Quran and science is anticipated as per the principle. The Quran is presupposed as the truly divine message, while Islam is indisputably presumed to be the single true religion. The apparently prior category of *dīn* is revealed as a projection of the prototype of Islam, and the apparently neutral criterion, nature, is integrated as its mere subcategory. Khan's meta-level of comparison therefore turns out to be an inherent presupposition of Islam.

In establishing Islam as *dīn*'s prototype, Khan presents a transformed and re-interpreted concept of religion, as well as science, for he acknowledges crucial aspects of both discourses. While he haltingly accepts science and religion as distinct types of knowledge, the latter is restricted first and foremost to moral issues, thus the two spheres do not clash.¹⁰⁵ Thus, Khan does not accept the thesis of conflict, which he evades through his roach to natural religion, namely through his overarching concept of *dīn*.

In his analysis of Ambedkar's interpretation of Buddhism, Martin Fuchs describes a similar process of translation with the concept of *third idiom*:

The participants undertake what can be called a "translation" of their claims and concerns into a new or "third idiom", which ideally is not owned by any one side and may even have previously been out of use or unfamiliar to the sides concerned, but which at the same time seems accessible for both sides. The idea of a third idiom is to overrule and replace the prevalent dominant language or ideology, using as an alternative platform not one's own local idiom but an idiom that transcends the two conflicted sides or discourses and provides space for both.¹⁰⁶

The *third idiom* is a language that allows one to create commensurability without entirely adopting the dominant discourse. Likewise, Khan adapts prior theological discourse on natural religion and integrates it into Islam in order to create a link with science. The dominant discourse is acknowledged, without, however, entirely adopting its inherent implications. The concept of religion Khan proposes through his *dīn* is a tremendous transformation of the discourses he was confronted with

¹⁰⁵ Bergunder: "'Religion' and 'Science' within a Global Religious History," *Aries – Journal for the Study of Western Esotericism* 16 (2016): 113f.

¹⁰⁶ Martin Fuchs: "Reaching Out, or, Nobody Exists in one Context Only: Society as Translation," *Translation Studies* 2, no. 1 (2009): 30f.

through the Christian mission and science. In accepting these dominant presumptions, Khan can re-signify them by establishing clear links to Islam.

In Khan's thought, Christianity loses its paradigmatic character for the category of religion. As Harrison writes, it held the position of "the paradigmatic religion because the 'other religions' were constructed in its image."¹⁰⁷ Religion is thus a contingent construction reified on the basis of an exemplary particular. Thus, Christianity is inextricably related to "religion" as its exemplar in colonialist thought, while other religions are construed on its particular principles.¹⁰⁸ Khan remodels this conception of religion: he translates and thus integrates Islam in its reification. By relating the concept of religion, or rather *dīn*, to nature, science and reason – allegedly neutral and universal instances – Khan can substitute Christianity with Islam as the paradigmatic religion. He thus presumes the *tertium comparationis* of nature to be an inherent aspect of his conception of Islam. The dichotomy between science and religion is thus resolved and Islam is presented as the true religion.

In sum, Khan seizes the concept of religion from European colonialists and reshapes it as *dīn* on the basis of Islam. However, Islam experiences a tremendous adaption to science in the process. Khan thus continues his project of essentialising Islam into a dynamic entity which first could be observed in his commentary of the Bible becoming more prominent in his response to Muir. Herein, Khan presents the Quran as a source for dynamically interpreting Islam. In the present chapter, we see that Khan's project is eventually also reflected in an expansion of his terminology: *dīn* is added a second, parallel layer in response to the critique of science. The following chapter will discuss a parallel effort in tackling this critique, which questions the nature of science and its relation to Islam.

107 Harrison: "'Science' and 'Religion': Constructing the Boundaries," 98.

108 For example, Chapter 3 discussed one of Muir's points of critique of Islam, which states: "a barrier [that] has been interposed against the reception of Christianity." (Muir: *The Life of Mahomet*, Vol. IV: 321) Muir evaluates Islam with reference to Christianity, presupposing the latter's superiority. His entire critique is based on a comparison, taking Christianity as the indisputable point of reference.

VI. Modern Science and its “Islamic” Foundations

The preceding chapters have discussed Khan’s changing approach to tackling the critique of Islam by missionaries and orientalists as well as a general encounter with science and its claim of a perennial conflict with religion. Khan develops a complex theoretical framework which allows him to resolve this conflict thesis by harmonising Islam in a rationalised fashion with science. On this basis, *dīn* is reified with Islam being its paradigmatic point of reference. Khan thus re-signifies the category of religion on the basis of Islam, while science is integrated as a mere subcategory. His approach rests upon seizing the concept of religion from European critique and reshaping it as *dīn* on the basis of a reinterpreted Islam. Science, however, has also been treated as a firm point of reference in the dichotomy of science and religion. In this chapter, I will discuss Shibli Nomani’s approach to resolving this encounter from another angle: instead of bluntly reformulating Islam. Science becomes the contested category while Islam is presented as an un-touchable point of reference.

1. Shibli Nomani’s Encounter with Science

In his early career, Shibli (1857-1914) was a close fellow of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan and a professor of Arabic and Persian at Khan’s Aligarh Muslim University. However, after Khan’s death in 1898, Shibli left Aligarh and finally became the principle of the Nadvat al-‘Ulamā in Lucknow in 1908. Like the Aligarh Muslim University, Nadvat al-‘Ulamā was founded as an institution to educate Muslims. Nevertheless, Nadvat al-‘Ulamā took up a rather critical stance towards the Aligarh Muslim University and Khan, both of which were blamed for a “westernised” orientation. Although Shibli’s writing shows some critique of Khan, it still cannot be denied that Shibli was significantly influenced and inspired by Khan’s reformist ideas. To a great extent, their ideas can be described as mutually compatible. Shibli’s approach was therefore fundamentally shaped by Khan’s work.

Shibli is mostly known for his historical and literary studies. His four-volume study of Persian poetry, *Šīr al-‘ajam* (1908-18), earned him much fame. His interest in history and critical historiography is reflected in several historical studies on eminent personalities within Muslim history – including his voluminous biography of Muhammad, *Sīrat an-nabī*, completed after his death by his pupil, Sulaiman Nadvi (1884-1953).

Nevertheless, his project of reviving *‘ilm al-kalām* is often overlooked in view of his historical and literary studies. Concisely summarised, *‘ilm al-kalām* is an Islamic theological tradition that developed in the course of its confrontation with Greek philosophy, which was very prominent in the newly conquered regions of early Muslim reign. This theological school is characterised by the adoption of the structure of argumentation found in philosophy: roughly generalised, *‘ilm al-kalām* takes the Quran as its touchstone, being substantiated only by philosophical arguments, while the philosophical tradition, which was also continued by Muslim philosophers, based its arguments first and foremost on authorities of Greek philosophy.¹ Shibli’s project of reviving this tradition consists of two volumes: in his *‘Ilm al-Kalām* (1903?), he presents a treatise of eminent Muslim philosophers and their philosophies. It should be noted that, strikingly, Shibli does not apply the above described distinction of *‘ilm al-kalām* as a discipline separate from philosophy. Both are rather treated as a single unity, which becomes obvious from his discussion of philosophers such as Ibn Sina or Ibn Rushd, the latter of whom explicitly and vehemently distinguished himself from *‘ilm al-kalām*.² This noticeable equation will be discussed later in detail. In contrast to the merely historical outlook of Shibli’s first volume, his second volume, *Al-Kalām* (1903), rather aims at appropriating *‘ilm al-kalām* to the modern South Asian confrontation with science – a situation reminiscent of early Muslims’ encounter with Greek philosophy, as Shibli argues.

Shibli, like Khan, was confronted with the challenge of science positioning itself as an antagonist of religion. As has been discussed earlier, science emerged only at the turn of the 19th century as a distinct discipline. Comparable investigations of nature had hitherto been designated as natural philosophy or natural history. These disciplines viewed nature as a source of the divine, as God’s “book” – equivalent to revelation. Natural philosophy and natural history were pursued with religious motives and received their legitimacy through their usefulness for religious issues.³ The assertion of natural laws which govern nature, however, led to a steady disjunction of natural philosophy and religion, as any event came to be

1 *EI*: “*‘Ilm al-Kalām*.”

2 *EI*: “*Ibn Rushd*.”

3 Harrison: “‘Science’ and ‘Religion’: Constructing the Boundaries,” 84-86.

perceived as caused either directly by God or by natural laws, finally resulting in the emergence of science as a discipline independent of the need for legitimation through religious doctrine.⁴ While natural philosophy was still dependent on legitimation through religion, scientists positioned themselves as the antagonists of religion. They accused religion of irrationality. The thesis of a perennial conflict between science and religion was therefore established.⁵ The legitimating point of reference was reversed and religion had to position itself as distinct from science: Religion was what science was not.⁶ It received an inward understanding of belief in contrast to questions of the sphere of science.⁷

1.1 Universalising Religion

When science gained increasing importance in North India in the mid-19th century, roughly two approaches could be distinguished: scholars either disclaimed science as a whole or presented their particular religious tradition as compatible with science. With the example of Khan, I have discussed a representative of the latter approach. He interpreted Islam as a religion which was entirely in concordance with nature and science. His argument is largely based on a terminological reformulation. He gives the Quranic term *fiṭra* (nature) an extension in meaning as the Work of God. On this basis, Khan argues that natural laws are encompassed within Islamic beliefs and concludes that Islam does not contradict science. He denies a conflict between the Work of God and His Word. Both are His creation. As has been discussed, Khan introduces *dīn* as a supra-category with its two sub-categories being particular religions (*mazhab*) and science. Science is thus subordinated to an abstract category of religion (*dīn*). This horizontal distinction of religion and science being covered by the umbrella category of *dīn* permits Khan to reject the thesis of conflict.⁸ With the example of Shibli, I will discuss a related approach, arguing, however, from a different angle. Instead of addressing the thesis of conflict from the angle of religion, Shibli aims to transform the Muslim conception of science.

In his *al-Kalām*, Shibli refers to the very same Quranic verse by which Khan legitimises his entire terminology. Shibli, however, presents a rather conventional interpretation of this verse:

4 Harrison: *The Territories of Science and Religion*, 79f.

5 Ibid., 171f.

6 Ibid., 169f., 187.

7 Bergunder: "'Religion' and 'Science'", 98.

8 Cf. Chapter V.

Turn your face only to *dīn*. This is God’s *fiṭrat* [nature] according to which He created man. There is no change in God’s creation. This is the true *dīn*. But most people do not know.⁹

In comparison to Khan’s interpretation,¹⁰ one first of all notices the different translations of *fiṭra*. While Khan equalises *fiṭrat* and *necar* in order to charge *fiṭrat* with an extended meaning, Shibli leaves the Arabic *fiṭra* untouched and uses its Urdu-equivalent *fiṭrat*, merely designating the inner nature of man. Consequently, Shibli does not retain Khan’s two-layered terminology with *dīn* as the supra-category. *Dīn* is rather perceived as synonymous with *mazhab*.

Shibli therefore quotes this verse with a rather different intent: he argues for the naturalness and universality of religion. In the chapter “Religion is Part of the Human Nature” (*mazhab insān kī fiṭrat meṅ dāḥil hai*), he argues that the human nature contains a specific power or faculty which produces a religious feeling in man:

[*Nūr-i imān* [light of belief], consciousness [*kānšans*], *ḥāsah-i aḥlāqī* [faculty of perception of morals] [...], this is the basis of religion [*mazhab*]. This power/faculty [*quvvat*] is part of the human nature [*fiṭrat*].¹¹

Shibli thus perceives religion as an inner feeling which guides and enables man to distinguish between right and wrong. It can be compared to consciousness, or *ḥāsah-i aḥlāqī* as he puts it in Urdu. This is an inborn faculty with which man is equipped and religion is viewed as a natural inclination in man. The idea of *nūr-i imān* as a natural faculty in man is not Shibli’s own invention, however, but can already be found in Khan’s writings. The latter introduces this faculty as untrustworthy. For, in Khan’s opinion, consciousness or *nūr-i imān* is no inborn guide of an unchanging truth, but rather depends fundamentally on an individual upbringing:

9 Shibli Nomanī: *Al-Kalām: ya ‘nī ‘ilm-i kalām jadīd* (Dihlī: Kutub Ḥānah-i Nazrīyah, s.a.), 18f. Arabic: *Fa ‘aqim wajhaka li-d-dīni ḥanīfan fiṭrata Allāhi allatī faṭara an-nāsa ‘alaihā lā tabdīla liḥalqi Allāhi dālika ad-dīnu al-qayyimu wa-lākinna akṭara an-nāsi lā ya lamūna*. (30:30).

10 Turn your face to the pure *dīn* which is the nature [*necar*] of God according to which He created man [lit. people], there is no change in God’s creation. This is the stable/firm *dīn*, but most people do not know.

Urdu: *Sīdhā kar apnā muḥḥ ḥālīṣ dīn ke līye jo necar ḥudā ka hai jis par logon ko banāya hai, ḥudā kī paidā ‘iš meṅ kuch tabdīl nahīn hai. Yehī mustaḥkim dīn hai, va-lekin akṣar log nahīn jānte*; Khan: *Maqālāt*, Vol. XV, 147.

11 Nomanī: *Al-Kalām*, 18.

[T]his faculty is described by all authorities of the religions [*ahl-i mazāhib*] as consciousness, i.e. *nūr-i īmān* and *nūr-i dharam*. But, in fact, it is not reliable and dependable. [...] As much as praying to an idol is against a Muslim's *nūr-i īmān*, as much it is according to an idol-worshipper's *nūr-i dharam*. Hence, one thing can evoke two contradictory perceptions.¹²

Khan remarks that consciousness may be a natural faculty, but one without any inborn link to truth. Consciousness cannot guarantee a uniform distinction of right and wrong, as it merely reflects an individual's background and the resultant perception of right and wrong.

Shibli, however, does not refer to Khan's critique of consciousness as a religious guide. His interest is not founded on the establishment of consciousness as an ultimate, inborn faculty that distinguishes between truth and misbelief. Shibli only aims to prove that morals (*ahlāq*) – in whatever variation they appear – are a natural human desire. Whether or not particular conceptions of morals are influenced by an individual's background and education – thus, not naturally given and, consequently, possibly misleading – is not of prime interest for Shibli. He only intends to present morals as a human predisposition which he recognises as the basis of religion.

In order to legitimise this idea of a natural faculty for religiosity, he quotes the aforementioned Quranic verse:

Turn your face only to *dīn*. This is God's *fiṭrat* [nature] according to which He created man.¹³

As mentioned above, Shibli treats the Quranic *dīn* synonymously with *mazhab* in his subsequent discussion. In contrast to Khan, Shibli does not distinguish between *dīn* and *mazhab*. This allows him to interpret the quoted verse as a proof for the universality and naturalness of religion (*dīn/mazhab*): he argues that God has implanted a natural faculty for religiosity in man. In Khan's notion of a world order, however, *dīn* is not understood as being organised according to natural laws.¹⁴ Khan's terminology acknowledges a distinction of the supra-category of *dīn* and its sub-category *mazhab*, which allows him to reject the assertion of a perennial conflict between science and religion. Shibli, on the other hand, cannot refer to this vertical axis as a response to science. How, then, does Shibli counter the conflict thesis?

12 Khan: *Maqālāt*, Vol. XIII, 251.

13 Nomani: *Al-Kalām*, 18f.

14 Cf. Chapter V.

1.2 Ernest Renan

Shibli recognises science as a critical threat to Islam, and thus devotes a significant part of his reformist works to the reconciliation of Islam and science. Over and over again, he mentions the critique of Islam by Orientalists, while an exact identification of these authors is complicated by a lack of references. Ernest Renan (1823-1892), a French historian and scholar of religious studies is however one exception. He wrote influential studies on early Christianity as well as on Islam and its philosophical tradition. Best known in Europe for his *Vie de Jésus* (1863), wherein he aimed to present Jesus as a historical person, his fame in the Muslim world was based on his dissertation on *Averroès et l'averroïsme* (1852), which triggered a rediscovery of the philosophical works of Ibn Rushd (Averroes) in various parts of the Muslim world. Shibli also utilises Renan's *Averroès* as an important source for the biography and philosophy of Averroes.¹⁵ No less influential was Renan's lecture on *L'Islamisme et la science* in 1883.

This lecture had immense repercussions in the Muslim world and caused several responses, most famously from Jamal ad-Din Afghani (1838-97). Despite significant similarities in his rationalistic reformist ideas, he was a strong critic of Khan. In her study, *An Islamic Response to Imperialism: Political and Religious Writings of Sayyid Jamāl ad-Dīn “al-Afghānī”*, Nikki Keddie that Afghani's disagreement with Khan was based less on their reformist ideas than their political motives. She writes: “His main role was rather to use Islam as an ideology – to strengthen its position as a focus of identity and solidarity against the attacks of the Christian West, and to use it as a rallying point for the repulsion of Western conquerors.”¹⁶ Thus Afghani's view vehemently conflicted with Khan's reconciliatory attitude towards the British, despite the fact that Khan fiercely rejected any charge of Muslim tendencies toward unrest.¹⁷

While Afghani's response to Renan was not printed in Arabic translation, the few who were able to read French fervently criticised him for his overly affirmative stance. Keddie thus describes a division in the respective audience's response to his position. She states that while the “masses are moved only by reli-

15 Shibli Nomani: *Maqālāt-i Šiblī* (Lakhna'ū: *Āsī Pres*, s.a.), Vol. I, 58; Shibli Nomani: *Maqālāt-i Šiblī* (A'zamgarh: *Ma'ārif*, 1938), Vol. V, 18.

16 Keddie: *An Islamic Response to Imperialism*, 97.

17 In contrast to Afghani's confrontational stance, Khan paid much attention to restoring the strained relationship between Muslims and the British in the aftermath of the 1857 upheaval, as Muslims were accused of being its main instigators, compelled to disobedience per creed – a charge Khan refutes time and again in his works, and most prominently in his *Asbāb-i baḡāvat-i Hind*, as has been discussed in Chapter 2.

gious arguments, [...] the more truthful rational and scientific arguments can appeal only to a small elite (and hence not be politically efficacious)."¹⁸ Thus, Afghani affirms Renan's critical stance towards religion as an obstacle in the development of rational and scientific thinking. Yet, he acknowledges religion as a necessary step in an evolutionary progression towards rationalism, which will, however, eventually be abandoned eventually.¹⁹

Apart from Afghani, in her study on the "first debate on Islam" as she terms the controversy triggered by Renan's lecture, Birgit Schäßler mentions further critical responses from Namik Kemal (1840-88), a Turkish poet who was influential in Turkish nationalism, and Ataulloh Bajazitov (1846-1911), a Russian Muslim intellectual. Beyond this, the controversy provoked at least one additional response: in the following discussion, I will present alongside Shibli another contributor to this debate who takes up a completely divergent position in comparison to Afghani. Nevertheless, I will first briefly present Renan's line of argument.

1.3 Construing a Conflict

In his lecture, Renan raises the question of whether there ever was a Muslim view of science:

Was there really a Mohammedan science, or at least a science recognised by Islam, tolerated by Islam?²⁰

Renan cannot entirely dismiss Muslim philosophy, however, and has to admit the existence of Muslim philosophers for 500 years during the period from the 8th to the 13th century. Yet, this statement, according to Renan, requires further historical examination. He argues that, during the first century of Islam, no instances of philosophy can be traced:

There is nothing more alien to all that can be called philosophy or science, than the first century of Islam. The result of a religious warfare which lasted for several centuries, and held the conscience of Arabia in suspense between the different

18 Keddie: *An Islamic Response to Imperialism*, 89.

19 Ibid., 63, 86f.

20 Renan: "Islamism and Science," in *Readings in Orientalism*, ed. Bryan S. Turner (London: Routledge, 2000), 200f.

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forms of Semitic monotheism, Islam is a thousand leagues from all that can be called rationalism or science.²¹

Thus, Renan asserts that only after the succession of the Abbassid caliphs did philosophy begin to prosper in Muslim countries. He attributes this delay to the weak convictions of the Abbasids in Islam. In his view, they were rather nominal Muslims:

All those brilliant caliphs, the contemporaries of our Carovingian monarchs, Mansour, Haroun al-Raschid, Mamoun, can scarcely be called Mussulmans. Externally they practise the religion [i.e. Islam] [...]; but in spirit they are elsewhere. They are curious to know all things, and chiefly things exotic and Pagan; they question India, ancient Persia, above all, Greece.²²

Renan further states that Muslim philosophy was solely derivative, of Greek philosophy in particular. Thus, the designation of Arabic philosophy was entirely unjustified:

Such is that great philosophical system which we are accustomed to call Arabic, because it is written in Arabic, but which is in reality Græco-Sassanian. It would be more precise to say Greek, for the really fruitful element of all this came from Greece. One's value, on those days of abasement, was proportionate to what one knew of ancient Greece. Greece was the one source of knowledge and of exact thought.²³

Renan therefore argues that, excepting the language, nothing about Arabic philosophy can be described as Arabic. Yet, he furthermore dismisses its characterisation as Muslim philosophy, as well, for this philosophy is anything but a part of Islam. Philosophy is rather an inherent antagonist of Islam in Renan's view. He then argues that the single reason for tolerating philosophy was an initial weakness of Islam, whereas Islam *per se* and by definition rather excludes and contradicts philosophy:

This science, then, is not Arabic. Is it at least Mohammedan? Has Islamism lent any tutelary aid to rational research? In no way. This splendid advance in learning was entirely the work of Parsees, of Christians, of Jews, or Harranians, of Ismaelians, of Mussulmans in internal revolt against their own religion.²⁴

21 Ibid., 201.

22 Ibid., 202f.

23 Ibid., 204.

24 Ibid., 207.

And:

Islam has been liberal in its day of weakness, and violent in its day of strength. Do not let us honour it then for what it has been unable to suppress. To do honour to Islam for the philosophy and science that it did not annihilate from the very first, is as though we were to do honour to the theologians for the discoveries of modern science. These discoveries are made in spite of the theologians.²⁵

Eventually, Renan draws the conclusion that Islam and rationalism imply an antagonism and contradiction:

But to the human reason Islamism has only been injurious.²⁶

Renan's line of argument is thus characterised by two fundamental assertions: first, he assumes essential entities to be fixed to an "original" shape, while, secondly, on this basis, he argues that the conflict thesis of science and religion is a universal and perennial controversy in history.

Based on his assertion of antagonistic relations between Islam and philosophy, Renan construes the essence of Islam as being defined by its "original" appearance. Thus, by this definition, Islam becomes an invariable entity. Furthermore, because Renan deduces a complete absence of philosophy in Islam, he views Muslim contact with Greek philosophy since the 8th century as a clash of two self-contained systems which are mutually incompatible. With reference to the absence of philosophy in the "original" Islam of its first century, Renan designs Islam as a self-contained entity. He conceives of Islam as immutable and thus unable to adjust to varying circumstances. It remains insolubly tied to its "original" appearance. The limitation of the essence of Islam being tied to a particular time period allows Renan to present Islam as an unequivocally definable object. In other words, the very term "Islam" refers unequivocally to a unique referent. This referent can be characterised by a finite set of properties. An alteration of these properties would obstruct the unequivocal association of the signifying term and its signified referent. An alteration of the defining properties would therefore obstruct the relation of the signifier, Islam, and to the invariable essence found in its origin. This inextricable link to a particular appearance as the representation of Islam as a whole results in the assertion of immutability and its insoluble association with particular properties. On this basis, Renan defines Islam as having an inherent irrationality and an incompatibility with philosophy. He proposes a strict bifurcation

25 Ibid., 208f.

26 Ibid., 209.

asserting that Muslims do not have the ability to fully comprehend Greek philosophy. Thus, Muslims can merely imitate Greek philosophy at best:

In default of the true and authentic Greek philosophy which was in the Byzantine libraries, it was incumbent to go to Spain, and seek there a Greek science translated badly and sophisticated.²⁷

Thus, Renan likewise conceives of Greek philosophy as a self-contained entity, tied to a paradigmatic origin. Consequently, Muslim philosophy cannot be more than a mere derivative of the original. Muslim philosophy is then seen as inherently lacking, as Renan’s paradigmatic point of reference is inextricably linked to the “original” Greek philosophy. Both Islam and Greek philosophy are therefore described as contradictory entities.²⁸

This rhetorical framework of the “origin” serving as a paradigmatic point of reference has been described already with regard to Muir, who based his assertion of an immutable Islam on the Muslim creed of the Quran being God’s word. While his critique was of a rather general outlook, Renan also focuses on the conflict between Islam and science. Renan’s dichotomy, of Greek philosophy and Islam’s lack of a true philosophical system, serves as a touchstone of a much broader claim: Renan deduces from this point the incompatibility of Islam with science and rationalism in general. His essentialist view denies Muslims any capacity for rational thinking.

Renan applies his terminology inconsistently, however: the title of his lecture already suggests a study of the relation of “Islamism and Science,” while his study is based entirely on the relationship between Islam and Greek philosophy, and the question of a development of the latter by Muslims. He uses the terms rationalism, philosophy, and science interchangeably, thus suggesting their synonymy. The argued incompatibility of Islam and Greek philosophy is reified as an antagonism between Islam and any kind of rationalism. Renan’s assertion of Muslims’ inability to comprehend Greek philosophy is thus transferred onto rationalism in general and science in particular.

²⁷ Ibid., 205.

²⁸ In a more recent publication, this view is formulated with even more sharpness: “In short, philosophical scepticism could not be genuine in Islam because philosophy itself – creative thought autonomously ranging everywhere and considering everything in the joy of perfect freedom – belonged to the Greek rather than to the Arab or Islamic genius” (Charles Malik: “Introduction,” in *God and Man in Contemporary Islamic Thought: Proceedings*, ed. Charles Malik (Beirut: s.n., 1972), 15). Significantly, in the same breath, a revival of Greek philosophy in the Renaissance is mentioned. Hence, Greek philosophy seems to be argued as inherent only to the “European genius.”

Renan universalises the conflict thesis of science and religion, projecting it onto Islam – as can be observed even more clearly in his *Averroès et l'averroïsme*. Standing outside of the area of specialisation which he became famous for in Europe, i.e. the history of the Old and New Testament, the closer investigation of his *Averroès* was neglected even by Renan specialists, and is often relegated to a mere side note.²⁹ Renan is described as an enthusiastic supporter of science, and in particular of human sciences and philology. Further, as a critic of any verbatim understanding of the Bible by religious authorities, he came “to have serious doubts about his faith – especially about the divinity of Jesus Christ.”³⁰ In his article, “Ernest Renan and Averroism: The Story of a Misinterpretation,” John Marenborn argues that Renan's fascination for Averroes was closely related to his biography:

By one of those sudden turns of fortune which form the daily history of Mahomedan Courts, Ibn-Rushd lost, indeed, the good graces of Almansour who banished him to the town of Ellisana or Lucena, near Cordova.³¹

Renan also describes this unexpected disgrace of the highly regarded Averroes, who had formerly held an influential position at court, as a triumph of religious orthodoxy over philosophy:

[I]t is impossible to doubt, that philosophy was the real cause of the disgrace of Ibn-Rushd. It had made him powerful enemies who made his orthodoxy suspicious to Almansour.³²

Renan therefore views Averroes' banishment as an instance of the perennial conflict of orthodoxy and religious fanaticism with the free-thinking of philosophy:

The Arab-Spanish philosophy hardly counted two centuries of existence when it was suddenly arrested in its further evolution by religious fanaticism, political revolutions, and by foreign invasions.³³

Marenborn argues here that Averroes' banishment was hitherto perceived merely as a matter of court intrigue while his philosophy served only as an excuse. Renan,

29 John Marenborn: “Ernest Renan and Averroism: The Story of a Misinterpretation,” in *Renaissance Averroism and Its Aftermath: Arabic Philosophy in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Anna Akasoy and Guido Giglioni (Dordrecht: Springer, 2013), 273.

30 Ibid., 275.

31 Renan: *The Life and Writings of Averroes* (Secunderabad: Checkoty Veerunnah & Sons, 1913), 13.

32 Ibid., 14.

33 Ibid., 2.

however, demonstrates this to be a conflict of “the ‘religious party’ over the ‘philosophical party’.”³⁴ This anecdote served him in construing a general oppression of philosophy by the orthodoxy of Islam. Averroes came to be perceived as “a champion of philosophy who contradicts religious orthodoxy and was persecuted for doing so.”³⁵ But when Renan broadens his study beyond the limits of Averroes, and also includes his reception in Christianity wherein he equally identifies an oppression on behalf of religious orthodoxy, he comes to the conclusion of there being a universal conflict between philosophy and religion.

2. Shibli Countering Orientalist Critique

Shibli’s works must be acknowledged alongside Renan’s texts. In an article on Ibn Rushd, he quotes Renan’s biography (titled as *Savānih-i Ibn Ruṣd*) as a fully reliable source and describes his own text as being entirely based on Renan. While this reference does not allow any further specification regarding the language of reception or to what extent Shibli was acquainted with the book, his speech *Islāmī ‘ulūm va funūn kī tāriḥ [va?] tartīb*³⁶ (The History and Order of Islamic Sciences), held in 1891, as well as his article, “Falsafah-i yūnān aur Islām” (Greek Philosophy and Islam), demonstrate his precise knowledge of Renan’s *L’Islamisme et la science*.³⁷ Both, apparently triggered by this lecture, discuss the question of whether philosophy in Islam was a mere imitation of Greek philosophy. Renan’s lecture is quoted in both texts and serves as a point of reference for his discussion. While

34 Marenbon: “Ernest Renan and Averroism,” 276.

35 Ibid.

36 The title as given in print is *Islāmī ‘ulūm va funūn kī tāriḥ tartīb*, which, however, seems to be an erratum perhaps for ... *tāriḥ va tartīb* or ... *tāriḥī tartīb*. In the original, the grammatical relation of *tāriḥ* and *tartīb* remains unclear.

37 According to David A. Lelyveld, the “British-Muslim friendship” between Shibli and T. W. Arnold (1864-1930), who taught at Aligarh from 1888 until 1898, was a mutually fruitful relation for both their scholarly activities. Arnold taught Shibli some French. Hence, Shibli might have known Renan’s texts in their original: “In this historical work, Shibli was aided by T. W. Arnold, who came to Aligarh as philosophy professor in 1888. Arnold was a man of shy, scholarly temperament. At Aligarh he shifted his interest from Sanskrit to Arabic, and studied under Shibli. The two men developed a close working partnership – Arnold helped Shibli locate European sources, taught him some French, and acquainted him with the conventions of European scholarship. Shibli was Arnold’s major guide to Arabic literature. This was the British-Muslim friendship of Sayyid Ahmad’s dreams, and he helped both of them obtain books and manuscripts for their research” (Lelyveld: *Aligarh’s First Generation*, 243).

Shibli's speech merely comes to the conclusion that this issue requires further investigation, his article elaborates further upon this topic from a historical perspective. He roughly distinguishes between a supportive and a rejective stance on the part of orientalist, while he has to admit that most of the former group lack any acknowledgment of primary languages. Their support is based merely on secondary sources (*taqlīdan*). With regard to the critics, however, Shibli finds their stance to be even more suspicious. He summarizes their point of view as a disregard of the philosophical tradition in Islam, without having any knowledge of Muslim philosophy.³⁸

Those people claim that Muslims did not do anything more than blindly imitate Aristotle [*Arisṭo kī kūrānah taqlīd*].³⁹

Quoting Renan, Shibli recognises a position that generally rejects the conformity of Islam and philosophy. He acknowledges Renan's accusation of Islam's irrationality, and his exclusion of philosophy in general from its realm:

Professor Renan gave a lecture wherein he stated that Islam and 'ilm [knowledge] cannot come together.⁴⁰

And:

Muslims are hundred miles away from anything which can be called rationalism/rational sciences [*'ulūm-i 'aqlīyah*].⁴¹

38 Nomani: *Maqālāt-i Šiblī* (A'zamgarh), Vol. VII, 1f. Interestingly, Shibli here applies a double standard to the work of Renan. We have seen that Shibli refers to the latter in his references to Ibn Rushd without any reservations, while the above described instance refuses him – along with all critics – any “knowledge of the peculiar works of Muslim philosophy” (Nomani: *Maqālāt-i Šiblī* (A'zamgarh), Vol. VII, 1f.). Renan serves, on the one hand, as a profound source in authorising his argument, while, on the other hand, Shibli's critique is attributed to his ignorance. Having a similar approach to European sources, Harder notices with regard to Bankim a contradictory dealing with European sources, serving in one instance to provide legitimacy, but in another instance denied of any capability to comprehend Indian sources. Harder describes this as establishing a “hermeneutical border” (Harder: *Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay's Śrīmadbhagavadgītā*, 228f.). Shibli does not deny Orientalists the capacity to understand the sources of Muslim philosophy, however, but he doubts their learning and acquaintance with Arabic.

39 Nomani: *Maqālāt-i Šiblī* (A'zamgarh), Vol. VII, 1.

40 Ibid.

41 Shibli Nomani: *Huṭbāt-i Šiblī* (A'zamgarh: *Darul Musannefin Shibli Academy*, 1941), 10. The original print gives *'alāmah-i 'aqlīyah*, which is in all likelihood an erratum for *'ulūm-i*

Renan’s lecture thus forms Shibli’s point of reference for orientalist critique. This critique can essentially be summarised with the following two points: on the one hand, Islam is accused of being irrational, and thus of being incompatible with and contradictory to science. On the other hand, Muslims’ participation in the philosophy based upon and evolved from Greek philosophy is denied. In fact, the Muslims’ role in philosophy is reduced to being, at best, an imitation of Greek philosophy.

While his speech does not develop a response to this critique, Shibli continues his article, “Falsafah-i yūnān aur Islām,” as a full series wherein he scrutinises the question of whether philosophy has been advanced by Muslims. The argument of the series is, however, presented in his *Al-Kalām* in more detail.

2.1 The Irrationality of Islam

In referencing his *Al-Kalām*, I will discuss how Shibli attempts to refute the charge of an incapacity for rationalism in Islam. In the chapter *‘Ulūm-i jadīdah aur mazhab* (Modern Science and Religion), he compares ancient (*falsafah-i qadīmah*) and modern philosophy (*falsafah-i jadīdah*). Ancient philosophy, synonymously deployed with Greek philosophy, is recognised as a compound body of different disciplines: natural science (*ṭabi ‘īyāt*), the knowledge of the primary elements (*‘unṣurīyāt*), theology (*ilāhiyāt*), and metaphysics (*mā-ba’d at-ṭabi ‘īyāt*).⁴² However, with the emergence of science and modern philosophy [*‘ulūm-i jadīdah aur falsafah-i jadīdah*], this body has been split up into two distinct spheres:

In Greece, philosophy was a compendium [of different disciplines] [...]. But Europe rightly has divided this body in two parts. Those matters which were perceived as exactly determinable by means of experience and observation [*tajribah aur mušāhadah*] were classified as matters of science.⁴³

Shibli thus defines the realm of science through an observational approach, while the remaining matters – which cannot be decided on the basis of observation – do not apply to science and are therefore assigned to the sphere of philosophy. In its modern appearance, philosophy undergoes a significant restriction in its range of meaning, according to Shibli. While ancient philosophy was once a conglomerate of several sub-disciplines, modern philosophy is defined through its distinction from science. Shibli argues that modern philosophy therefore remains only the

42 Nomani: *al-Kalām*, 7.

43 Ibid.

counterpoint of science. Both are distinguished as separate spheres of knowledge. Science, however, applies to the sphere of exact knowledge which can be verified through experience and observation.⁴⁴

Nevertheless, Shibli does not apply his terminology of a bifurcation between science and philosophy consistently. In a subsequent passage, modern philosophy rather comes to denote science.⁴⁵ When he compares ancient and modern philosophy, the former is criticised for its foundation on speculative knowledge (*qiyāsāt* [analogy] *aur* *ẓanniyāt* [opinion]), while the latter is distinguished by its observational approach: modern philosophy is thus deployed as a synonym of science. This synonymy is continued in the rest of his *Al-Kalām* as well as in subsequent texts.⁴⁶ Still, Shibli retains a bifurcation between modern philosophy/science vis-à-vis religion.

But what made Shibli establish modern philosophy as a synonym of science? In the following passage, I will discuss this move further with regard to Shibli's intent.

The claim for exact and certain knowledge (*qaṭ'ī aur yaqīnī*) in science was interpreted as a tremendous threat to religion:

In the whole world, tumult has risen: 'Modern science [*ulum-i jadīdah*] and modern philosophy [*falsafah-i jadīdah*] trembled the foundations of religion [*mazhab*].'⁴⁷

The speculative knowledge of ancient philosophy therefore could no longer provide legitimacy for religion vis-à-vis the observational and exact knowledge of science. Like Khan, Shibli proposes a full compatibility of science and religion in arguing that they encompass entirely different areas of investigation:

The truth is that the borders of religion and science are entirely distinct. The subject of science is divorced from religion and the subjects religion engages in are of no relevance for science.⁴⁸

This distinction of religion and science is mentioned repeatedly in Shibli's works. He argues that religion only refers to the *aḥlāq* (morals) of people. Religion is also inherently internalised. This notion is again argued with the help of the Quranic verse quoted at the beginning:

44 Ibid.

45 Nayyar: *Urdū adab kī taškīl-i jadīd*, 346.

46 Nomani: *al-Kalām*, 7.

47 Ibid.

48 Ibid., 11.

Turn your face only to *dīn*. This is God's *fiṭrat* [nature] according to which He created man. There is no change in God's creation. This is the true *dīn*. But most people do not know.⁴⁹

As has been shown, Shibli hereby aims to prove religion as a natural desire in man. Every man has been created with the inborn faculty of *nūr-i īmān* which Shibli recognises as the basis of religion. However, besides the faculty of *nūr-i īmān*, there is one more natural, inborn faculty in man: '*aql*. Both faculties enable man to face the difficulties of the world. If rationality enables man to substitute his physical weakness in comparison to animals, *nūr-i īmān* allows for the coexistence of man in society.⁵⁰ On this basis, Shibli asserts a natural distinction of two spheres represented by two inborn faculties: reason and religion. The approach and aim of both, however, are declared as distinct:

In short, if it be scrutinised, it will usually be confirmed that Muslims never understood scientific investigations and inventions ['*ilmī taḥqīqāt aur ijādāt*] as antagonistic to religion. Researchers rather stated clearly that the reasons of the cosmos [*asbāb-i kā'ināt*] or the matters of astronomy etc. do not touch the borders of prophethood [*nubūvat*] and prophets do not have any other task than the refinement of morals [*taḥzīb-i ahlāq*].⁵¹

Shibli thus argues for the introduction of two distinct spheres of knowledge on the basis of a natural distinction between two separate faculties: *nūr-i īmān* and '*aql*. While the latter corresponds to the sphere of science, the former is described as the source of religion. Thus, the European distinction of each as separate disciplines and spheres is correct and natural. Even though Shibli seems to recognise this bifurcation as an innovation in comparison to ancient and perhaps Muslim philosophy, he acknowledges that it has been rightly propagated and must be adopted.

In contrast to this, however, Shibli does not accept the conflict of reason and religion in Islam. In fact, Islam does not only not engage in scientific matters, it is also the single religion which is in complete concordance with science, as Shibli proposes in a next step. The Quran itself argues on the basis of rational arguments. The tenets of Islam are herein not propagated to be merely accepted without understanding. Instead, they are presented in a comprehensible and verifiable way.

49 Ibid., 18f.

50 Ibid., 16ff.

51 Ibid., 14.

Although, now, Shibli argues, virtually every religion is presented as being in conformity with reason and science, only Islam has integrated this mode of argumentation inherently in its scripture:⁵²

Thus, be it the “essence” of religion [nafs-i mazhab], be it Islam in particular, or be it any particular creed of Islam: whatever was propagated, was immediately proved with an evidence, while there is not even a single instance that one is supposed to believe in a creed without a proof.⁵³

In Islam, Shibli asserts, belief is therefore always tied to evidence.

Regarding the most crucial question – the existence of God – Shibli argues for His natural acknowledgment. He presents a concise summary of the different philosophical stances in Muslim philosophy and focuses on the mutually shared assumptions. The world is perceived as ordered by chains of *'illat* (cause) and *ma 'lūl* (caused, effect). Every occurrence is caused by a preceding cause. However, all of these chains inevitably require an initial point of departure, or in other words a final reason of reasons, which is identified with God. This general assertion is shared by all of the philosophers of Islam, such as Ibn Rushd or Ibn Sina – differing, however, in the details: they either disagree on the antecedence of the world, i.e. matter, or God.⁵⁴

Shibli does not favour any of the mentioned philosophers, but rather suspends judgement. Instead, he reduces the complexity of the subject and focuses on their agreement on the existence and singularity of God. His personal approach rather addresses contemporary atheist critique:

Their [atheists'] whole discussion can be reduced to the proposition: ‘There is no proof for the existence of God’, ‘except matter, nothing exists in the world’, ‘the order of the world can remain without accepting God’s existence’. Obviously, this is no line of argument but rather an admittance of a lack of knowledge.⁵⁵

Deliberately, Shibli does not disprove this claim with philosophical arguments. For, in his opinion, contemporary atheist critique has rather weak arguments in comparison to former atheist critique. In order to not unnecessarily complicate the debate and reawaken buried quarrels regarding matters of philosophy, Shibli attempts to keep the argument as simple as possible. Thus, he shortens the philosophical discussions to their points of agreement and proposes the necessity of an ordering power of the world as sufficient proof for God’s existence:

52 Ibid., 27-29.

53 Ibid., 29.

54 Ibid., 30-33.

55 Ibid., 40.

[H]undreds, thousands of laws of nature [*qavānīn-i qudrat*] exist, but if only one of them deviates from the order, the whole order of the world will be subverted. This proves that there must be one arranging higher power which created the harmony, relation and unity between all the laws of nature. Materialists may state that matter came into existence by its own and by movement [of the matter] they were mixed, in the end, gradually resulting in the formation of many laws of nature. But they cannot give any reason for the harmony, relation and unity of the laws of nature. Harmony and unity is no inherent property of the laws of nature. [...] This higher power which controls all the laws of nature and which created the harmony and unity between them is God.⁵⁶

Thus, Shibli reduces the philosophical subtleties to the main points upon which all of the different philosophers in Islam agree.⁵⁷ This is, first, the existence of laws in nature which arrange the world and, secondly, a higher power as creator and organiser of these laws. This allows Shibli, like Khan before him, to acknowledge a sphere of science which engages in questions concerning the material world while, on the other hand, including God as a higher power which, however, does not contradict science but rather is the maintainer of its subject. In this way, any contradiction between science and religion is eliminated and both are separated into distinct spheres. Religion engages only in moral questions, whereas science only investigates questions of the material world. Thus, the issue of God’s existence – as a power superior to the visible, material world – is not included in the realm of science. The acknowledgement of His existence is rather viewed as a natural insight.

2.2 Religion – Narrowed and Internalised

Shibli counters the charge of an inherent irrationality in Islam by reversing the argument and claiming that, instead, Islam is the single religion which is in complete accord with science. It is the single religion which claims to be verifiable by reason.⁵⁸ Shibli thus reverses orientalist critique and developing a counter-repre-

56 Ibid., 55f.

57 Another reason for this reluctance to expand on philosophical discussion is that the philosophical proof of God’s existence can only maintain an impersonal Reason of reasons, yet no personal godhead. Cf. Ibid., 34.

58 As has been indicated already, Shibli confesses that there is a general tendency in his time to prove religions on the basis of their conformity with science. Yet, he emphasises

sentation of Islam. This reversal, however, inevitably implies an acknowledgement of several crucial presumptions of the critics' conceptions of religion. Shibli therefore admits an attenuated notion of *mazhab* in comparison to the former realm of Islam, and present religion as fundamentally dependant on its separation from science. The confrontation with science apparently results in a restriction in meaning. In other words, the acknowledgement of science as a separate sphere reduces religion merely to the remaining matters not claimed by science – in particular, morals. Shibli himself describes this process as reductive. In a speech held in 1895, he criticised the 'ulamā' for narrowing their own responsibilities merely to the observance of ritual practices, and asked them to again take up more responsibility:

The present situation of the 'ulamā' [...] makes one believe that their remaining relation to the nation is only on a religious [*mazhabī*] basis, i.e. that they only teach the way of prayer and fasting etc.⁵⁹

Shibli clarifies here that, in former times, the 'ulamā' had had much more influence. But this situation is only a result of the British seizure of power:

Now, since the government has changed and mundane matters have become the responsibility of the [British] government, we have to see what relation between the nation and the 'ulamā' still remains.⁶⁰

Thus, in Shibli's view, this restricted influence of the 'ulamā' is rather a consequence of the British taking up several mundane matters. Consequently, even Shibli applies a very restricted notion of *mazhab* – apparently referring only to ritual practices. However, since he recognises a restriction in the rights and influence of the 'ulamā' as the representatives of Islam, it seems to be reasonable that the realm of Islam and the 'ulamā' was formerly understood in a broader sense before the emergence of science and their loss of power to the British.⁶¹

Consequently, *mazhab* appears to comprise a quite restricted realm when compared to former conceptions of Islam. On the one hand, *mazhab* undergoes an internalisation and becomes a counterpoint to science. On the other hand, juridical matters had to be relinquished to the colonial power. Shibli utilises this restriction

that these attempts are mere retro-active projections, while only Islam essentially inherited a rational line of argument in its scripture. Cf. *Ibid.*, 29.

59 Shibli Nomani: *Rasā'il-i Šiblī* (Amritsar: *Ahbār-i Wakīl*, s.a.), 114.

60 *Ibid.*, 114.

61 Reminiscent processes of narrowing could also be observed, for example, in Hali's *Musaddas*, arguing that governance is not an essential part of Islam and that its abolition would not violate the essence of Islam. Cf. Chapter 4, Shackle: *Hali's Musaddas*, 145.

to revert the orientalist critique of an incapacity for rationalism in Islam by dismissing any matter exceeding the sphere of morals from the realm of *mazhab*. Moreover, religion and the acknowledgement of God’s existence are naturalised and thus exceed the realm of science.

2.3 Criticising Essences

Having refuted the assertion of the inherent incapacity for rationalism in Islam, Shibli takes up the second critique that Muslim philosophy is, in fact, not Muslim, but solely an imitation of Greek philosophy without any innovation or advancement. As discussed above, this entire critique presumes an authenticity of Greek philosophy colliding with Islam. Greek philosophy is thus presented as a “Western” or European property which Muslims are genuinely incapable of permeating:

There is nothing more alien to all that can be called philosophy or science, than the first century of Islam. [...] Islam is a thousand leagues from all that can be called rationalism or science.⁶²

As discussed, Renan assumes an immutable essence of Islam deprived of any ability for philosophical interpretation. He thus establishes a deep-rooted antagonism between Islam and reason in any form.

Shibli, however, argues against this assertion by stating the reverse: that, in fact, Muslim philosophy prepared the ground for modern sciences. The latter is, in his opinion, by no means a radical change, but rather a continuation of Muslim philosophy. In his aforementioned series of articles on Islam and philosophy, he discusses the importance of Muslim philosophy and doubts the assertion that science is a self-contained discipline without any predecessor:

This article will make clear that Muslims brought ancient philosophy [*falsafah-i qadīm*] close to contemporary philosophy [*falsafah-i ḥāl*]. It is obvious that Greek philosophy and contemporary philosophy are in a relation to each other like the distance of east and west [i.e. the distance between sunset and sunrise: *bu’d al-mušriqain*]. According to the principles of evolution, nothing can progress all at once. Therefore, there must have been an intermediate stage between the Greek and contemporary philosophy and this stage was in fact Islam.⁶³

62 Renan: “Islamism and Science,” 201.

63 Nomani: *Maqālāt-i Šiblī* (A‘zamgarh), Vol. VII, 39.

As has been discussed above, when Shibli speaks of contemporary philosophy (*falsafah-i ḥāl*), which corresponds to modern philosophy (*falsafah-i jadīdah*) in other texts, he refers to science.⁶⁴ By presuming a synonymy of philosophy and science, Shibli presents a continuity of Greek philosophy which science which therefore denies a radical difference between the two. This move thus allows him to view Muslim philosophy as a catalyst for science. In one article, Shibli gives a lengthy list of innovative divergences from Greek philosophy by Muslim philosophers (*mutakallimīn*) – including, the dismissal of the basic elements for the sake of atoms (*dīmūqrāṭīsī*). However, this list shall not be discussed here in detail, for it refers to very subtle issues of Greek philosophy which cannot be examined within the scope of this project and are not crucial to the argument of this chapter.⁶⁵

For the present study, however, it is of primary importance to note that Shibli emphasises the innovative role of Muslim philosophers and their decisive position as a stimulus for the emergence of modern science. He further underscores the proximity of Muslim philosophy to modern science (i.e. philosophy) as follows:

[I]f Islamic philosophy is compared with Greek and contemporary philosophy, it will be apparent that Islamic philosophy is in greater proximity to contemporary philosophy than to Greek philosophy. Therefore, our ‘*ulamā*’ should feel more involved with contemporary rather Greek philosophy.⁶⁶

Emphasising the proximity of Islamic philosophy to modern philosophy (i.e. science), Shibli, on the one hand, presents modern science as more easily acceptable for the ‘*ulamā*’ than Greek philosophy. On the other hand, he again doubts the radical nature of science and, instead, integrates it in a long tradition which is influenced heavily by Muslims.

Shibli hereby dissolves the close association of rationalism in general with the “West,” as proposed by Renan. Instead, he presents a counter-representation of Islam which is not only in concordance with science as proposed in the first part of Shibli’s argument, but is additionally also a crucial stage for the emergence of science. Modern science, being viewed as only the recent chapter in a long tradition, is divested of its radical nature, and thus becomes more easily integrated into the sphere of Islam. Shibli does not argue this explicitly, yet it appears to be reasonable in that he presents science as a substitute for ‘*ilm al-kalām*. Science shall take up the latter’s position as a supplement or perhaps even as a latter part of the realm of Islam – as the position of science is not unequivocally clarified in Shibli’s explanations.

64 Nomani: *al-Kalām*, 7.

65 Nomani: *Maqālāt-i Šiblī* (A‘zamgarh), Vol. VII, 40f.

66 Ibid., 39.

Shibli freely plays with concepts and relocates their notions by creating synonyms. His entire argument is fundamentally based on two equalisations: first, he deliberately adopts Renan's equation of philosophy and science under the heading of science, and, second, *'ilm al-kalām* is equated with philosophy, and in fact viewed as denoting Muslim philosophy in general. As discussed in the beginning of this chapter, this equivocation is quite dubious from a historical perspective, as some philosophers vehemently distanced themselves from *'ilm al-kalām*. In presuming their synonymy, however, Shibli can argue that science has to be viewed rather as a part of the realm of Islam, as a mere development of *'ilm al-kalām*, thus replacing the latter in its position within Islam. This equivocation integrates science into Islam and, furthermore, inscribes Muslim philosophy as an integral part of a long tradition of science. Renan's thesis of perennial conflict of Islam with science, or rather rationalism and science, is reversed into a perennial conformity with Islam and, indeed, includes its crucial participation in the development of science.

This strategy has a noticeable resemblance to Dayanand Sarasvati's (1824-83) approach to tackling the challenge of science. In 1875, he founded his Arya Samaj in Bombay, which came to be most influential in north western India and was characterised by its engagement in the abolition of practices like idol worship, which were perceived as deviations from the original teachings of the Vedas. With respect to science, Sarasvati developed a peculiar stance and argued that, in fact, "India is the original homeland of science and technology and that Westerners ultimately owe their expertise in this field to Indian sources."⁶⁷ The adoption of science is thus described as a mere rediscovery of Hinduism's own roots. Reminiscent of Shibli's argument, science is presented as "dependent upon India".⁶⁸

Despite its universal claim, however, science was inextricably linked with Europe:

On the one hand, science was projected as a universal sign of modernity and progress, unaffected by its historical and cultural locations; on the other hand, science could establish its universality only in its particular history as imperial knowledge.⁶⁹

Science was presented as universal, and yet was inseparably linked with its development in Europe. Any shared development on behalf of Hinduism or Islam is neglected by the colonial power, and science comes to be perceived as a singularly European property. As a means to countering this claim, science is thus integrated

67 Halbfass: *India and Europe*, 399.

68 *Ibid.*, 245.

69 Prakash: *Another Reason*, 71.

into one's own religious community by pointing out its particular, influential developments. As Prakash argues, science is thereby dislocated:⁷⁰

Seizing on Orientalist research showing that ancient Indian culture could rightfully boast of significant achievements in fields ranging from mathematics to medicine, they declared that their ancient texts embodied scientific truths, that science was Hindu. The "corruption" and "irrationality" of contemporary Hinduism, they argued, were due to the loss of the ancient Hindu science.⁷¹

Similarly, Vivekananda integrates science's claim for universality by "rediscovering" its archaic roots as being found in Hinduism:⁷²

The Hindu reaction consisted in viewing Western progress as being independent of Christianity [and perhaps Europe in general] as well as in attempts to show that the Indian tradition does not merely provide a potentially equal or superior substratum for such achievements, but was actually their historical basis.⁷³

Thus, Shibli's approach of construing a continuous lineage of science from Muslim philosophy and Vivekananda's rediscovery of science in ancient Hindu texts both aim to divorce the strong link of science with Europe/Christianity and claim a crucial participation in its development. They argue that the dominant discourse of science could be separated from European intellectual hegemony and integrated into Islam or Hinduism in order to substantiate these religions' claim for rationality, a move which Prakash calls the "indigenization of science's authority."⁷⁴

The encounter of Shibli and Renan provides crucial insights into how the dichotomy of science and religion constitutes the conception of Islam. Renan presented an overdrawn dichotomy of rationalism and Islam. He presumed a universalised concept of science and demonstrated an inherent incongruence between Islam and rationalism: Islam, perceived as an entity essentialised as its earliest expression, did not know anything of philosophy. Based on this early absence, Renan construes an inherent hostility of Islam towards any kind of rationalism, be it philosophy or science. He views those areas as genuine categories belonging solely to Europe. "Renan furthermore establishes "original" Islam as a representative point of reference for its essence. On the basis of this restricted time period, Islam is represented as a whole that can be defined by means of the particular properties associated with it.

70 Ibid., 72.

71 Ibid., 88.

72 Ibid., 8.

73 Halbfass: *India and Europe*, 246.

74 Prakash: *Another Reason*, 64.

Shibli counters this view, first in rejecting the incapacity of Islam to incorporate rationalism and, second, by inscribing Islam in this universalised concept of science. First, he argues for a natural distinction of the spheres of religion and science, which has been upheld first and foremost in Islam. Second, Shibli adopts Renan’s universalised science, denying, however, a Muslim incapacity for the same. It is argued that, if science is a universal category, it cannot have appeared out of nothing, but required a preparatory tradition, which Shibli identifies with *‘ilm al-kalām*. Renan’s fixed ties of rationalism with Europe are thus dissolved and linked to Islam. While Renan describes science and philosophy as European properties, to which Muslims do not have any legitimate claim, Shibli de-essentialises rationalism (i.e. science and philosophy) as a solely European achievement. He counters this essentialisation by integrating Muslim philosophy as a crucial stage in the transition from Greek philosophy to modern science. Both areas are thus deprived of their sole association with Europe.

In comparison to Khan, Shibli negates the necessity of a reformation or reinterpretation of Islam and rather argues from the angle of science.⁷⁵ Hence, Shibli presents Islam as remaining untouched, while only the representation of science has to be revised in order to bring Islam equally into the right perspective. But can Islam, in fact, be perceived as an invariable touchstone in relation to science? In other words, does the acknowledgment of science as a distinct sphere of knowledge affect the conception of religion, and Islam in particular? Can Islam

⁷⁵ In his *Urdū adab kī taškīl-i jadīd*, Nayyar equally distinguishes between Shibli’s and Khan’s approaches as respectively revivalist and future-oriented or progress-oriented. While Khan aimed for a reclamation of the past (*bāzyāfi*), i.e. its reinterpretation according to changed circumstances, Shibli argued for the revitalisation (*iḥyā*) of “the old and original form [*qadīmī va aṣlī šakl*]” (Nayyar: *Urdū adab kī taškīl-i jadīd*, 321). Even though the analysis given above generally supports this argument by Nayyar, one has to be cautious about his wording as given in the last quote. For, Shibli doubtless calls for a revitalisation of an old tradition and argues that science is merely a continuation of this Islamic tradition. Yet, one also has to be careful to not adopt this thesis unquestioned. The above-given analysis could also demonstrate that Shibli’s revitalisation can by no means be described as a simple restoration of an “original” Islam. In fact, his interpretation of Islam is equally affected by the discourse of science to which his argument has to refer in order to be acknowledged. Thus, Shibli does not explicitly propagate a reform of Islam, as Khan does. Still, his interpretation of Islam is influenced by the discourse of science. Cf. Nayyar: *Urdū adab kī taškīl-i jadīd*, 321.

In another instance, Nayyar distinguishes Khan and Shibli respectively as *ḥikmat-i jadīdah se muṭābiqat* (creating a conformity with science) and *baṭlān* (a refutation) of science. However, from the above given explanations, it should be clear that Shibli is not at all trying to refute science but only trying to refute its association with Europe and link Islam into this lineage. Science and its truth-claim, nevertheless, are acknowledged. Cf. Nayyar: *Urdū adab kī taškīl-i jadīd*, 346.

claim to have any essential meaning which would allow for its unequivocal definition?

In this example of the encounter between Renan and Shibli, the representation of Islam is highly contested. Both of their conceptions are quite contradictory. In fact, their representations are fundamentally dependent on the respective counter-concept. In the case of Renan, he construes a dichotomy of rational Europe versus irrational Islam as its counter-culture with opposite properties. His perception of Islam is rather a negative projection of Europe. By contrast, Shibli aims to contest Renan's overly simplistic representation of Islam and presents a definition which entirely depends on the demarcation of Islam (or religion in general) in relation to rationalism/science. His Islam acquires meaning only through the assertion of distinct spheres of religion and science. Comparing both representations, one can discern a transition from a regional or cultural definition by Renan towards a definition in relation to science by Shibli. This trajectory implies the displacement of mundane and investigative matters from the realm of religion for the sake of an internalised concept of the same. That said, what is it that remains essentially the same in Islam? Does Islam (as signifier) have a referent allowing for one to ultimately define it?

The relative process of obtaining meaning rather implies a lack of positive signification: Islam does not refer to any referent, nor to anything signified. Its meaning is, in fact, fundamentally dependent on its correlative counter-concept. Ernesto Laclau argues that an empty signifier does not have any positive relation to a signified. This relation is rather a retroactive creation of a unity, which was non-existent prior:

The basic problem of antidescriptivism is to determine what constitutes the identity of the designated object beyond the ever-changing cluster of descriptive features – what makes the object identical-to-itself even if all its properties have changed; in other words, how to conceive the objective correlative of the 'rigid designator', to the name in so far as it denotes the same object in all possible worlds, in all counterfactual situations. What is overlooked, at least in the standard version of antidescriptivism, is that this guaranteeing the identity of an object in all counterfactual situations – *through a change of all its descriptive features* – is the retroactive effect of naming itself: it is the name itself, the signifier, which supports the identity of the object.⁷⁶

76 Slavoj Žižek: *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 2008), 95f.

An empty signifier therefore does not have any fixed meaning, as it lacks any positive relation to a signified. Meaning is only obtained relationally by its distinction from an antagonist signifier. Only out of this negativity can a unity be constructed in conjunction with a shared representative signifier.⁷⁷

This relationship exemplifies the contingency of those definitions which fundamentally depend on discursive arrangement. Islam cannot be defined positively by reference to a real or “original” referent, but inevitably remains a contingent construction of unity. It always depends on the demarcation of an antagonistic signifier. The association of properties is not a preceding, but rather a subsequent, act. Hence, the definition constitutes its object only retroactively.

Consequently, even though Shibli claims to merely put philosophy and science in the right perspective in order to demonstrate Islam’s capacity for rationalism and, in fact, its integral role in the development of these spheres, Islam does not remain unaffected by this movement. His reinterpretation of Islam is rather performed through the back door of science. For, in the moment, Shibli demonstrates a revised view of science while simultaneously acknowledging science as a fundamental point of distinction in the concept of religion. Islam thus experiences an equal shift in notion: Renan’s contradiction of Islam and rationalism is reversed into a relationship of conformity, which nonetheless implies Shibli’s acknowledgement of Renan’s presumption of the distinction between religion and science as separate spheres of knowledge. Shibli thus aims to legitimate this narrowed notion of Islam by naturalising this dichotomy and projecting it back onto Islam as inherent and original. Hence, Shibli’s revision of rationalism and his back-door reinterpretation of Islam is fundamentally related to a reversal of Renan, while nonetheless adopting some of his crucial presumptions.

3. Metaphysics

In the previous paragraph, Shibli’s conception of religion was presented as being fundamentally based on its delimitation to science as a distinct, separate sphere. Consequently, religion and science are distinguished on a horizontal level as spheres of equal value. However, Shibli does not confine his approach to this conclusion. In his later work, *Savāniḥ-i Maulānā Rūm* (1904), he criticises an approach

⁷⁷ Ernesto Laclau: “Populism: What’s in a Name?,” in *Empire and Terror: Nationalism Postnationalism in the New Millenium*, ed. Begoña Aretxaga, 103–14 (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2004), 106.

which solely recognises the observation of matter as legitimate, thus overrating the sphere of science, as this approach dismisses arguments which lie outside its own realm, while its single proof is an absence of knowledge. As Shibli states:

The answer to this critique [i.e. that only perceptions which are verifiable by observation can provide certain knowledge] is that those people who deny the existence of a faculty to metaphysical perceptions [*hāsah-i gāibī*] can prove this only on the basis of unawareness of this faculty. But unawareness cannot suffice as a proof.⁷⁸

Shibli criticises an overemphasis on observational investigation as the sole means of knowledge, in other words science, as well as any approach which neglects to move beyond this realm. He questions the assertion that knowledge can be achieved solely by experience and the observation of sense perceptions. Instead, he aims to introduce a counter-approach which is based on the inner (*'ilm-i bāṭinī*) experience instead of externally acquired knowledge (*zāhir*).⁷⁹

The former is related to *rūḥ-i insānī* (the human soul), which enables man in distinction to any other creature to transgress the merely observational approach of *'aql* (reason) and reach for divine knowledge. Shibli depicts the *rūḥ-i insānī* as arranged in an evolutionary order and perceives it as the highest faculty of perception (*idrāk*). In his reading of Rūmī's poetry, he recognises thoughts reminiscent of Darwin's evolutionary theory, which in his opinion has, in fact, been anticipated by Rūmī.⁸⁰ In Shibli's interpretation, Rūmī describes an evolutionary progress of the creatures that culminates finally in man, who alone possesses the faculty of *rūḥ-i insānī*.⁸¹

[T]he things present in the world vary heavily in their stages. The lowest is the stage of primary elements [*'anāṣir*], i.e. those things which are not organised [in any form] [*tarkīb*] at all [...]. This stage is called minerals [*jamād*]. After this, organisation begins; this stage can be called the first one of evolution [*taraqqī*] in the natural world [*'ālam-i fiṭrat*]. The first stage of organisation is called plants [*nabātāt*]. [...] [S]ince they do not possess any faculty of perception [*idrāk*], they

78 Shibli Nomani: *Savānih-i Maulānā Rūm* (Lāhaur: *Majlis-i Taraqqī-i Adab*, 1961), 155.

79 Ibid., 211f. Still Nayyar perceives Shibli's *Savānih* as a part of his engagement with *kalām*. Yet, the above given statements by Shibli should make clear that Shibli is trying to introduce here another approach which is independent of the observational knowledge, as he refuses an overemphasis of reason and observation. Cf. Nayyar: *Urdū adab kī taškīl-i jadīd*, 347.

80 Elsewhere, Shibli argues that Darwin must undoubtedly be seen as the originator of the evolutionary theory. Yet, Rumi has already indicated this theory much earlier in his poetry. Ibid., 240.

81 Nomani: *al-Kalām*, 17; Nomani: *Savānih-i Maulānā Rūm*, 176-179.

cannot transgress a specific stage. After plants, follows the stage of animals which are characterised by the faculty of perception; from here starts the stage of soul.⁸²

This stage is called the animal soul [*rūh-i ḥaivānī*]. The following stage is the human soul [*rūh-i insānī*].⁸³

By pointing out that *rūh* is neither physical nor material, Shibli aims to establish *rūh* as a faculty of perception which allows one to acquire knowledge by a means other than observation, as the *rūh* is connected with a higher stage:

[T]he soul [*rūh*] is a reflection of the Divine World [*‘ālam-i quds*].⁸⁴

Rūh is thus a mediating faculty which connects the human being with the divine world. Above, Shibli reinterprets Darwin’s theory of evolution by means of Rūmī’s poetry. He states that Rūmī’s ideas resemble Darwin’s theory. Both assume that the world has passed through an evolutionary process of advancing stages. However, if in Darwin’s theory this process culminates in the human being as its *telos*, Rūmī describes this process in regard to a soul which Darwin does not acknowledge. As a result, Darwin does not recognise any qualitative difference between man and animals. Rūmī, by contrast, bases his entire assertion of evolution on the progressing development of the soul in Above, Shibli stages. Consequently, he comes to a clear distinction between man and animal on the basis of their stages of *rūh*.⁸⁵

Shibli interweaves and correlates these two approaches: by reading Rūmī in the light of Darwin, he ahistorically projects the theory of evolution onto Rūmī’s writings, enabling him to reinterpret Darwin. Rūmī’s evolutionary progress of the soul allows Shibli to integrate the soul as a crucial and distinctive element of momentum in this process. Thus, Shibli establishes the soul as a distinct entity and a unique faculty solely belonging to the human being, which allows for an approach to knowledge outside the realm of observation and deduction. Darwin’s theory is hence presented in a “spiritualised,” metaphysical garment. Evolutionary theory is reinterpreted in such a fashion that it no longer denies spiritual experiences, but is, in fact, fundamentally based on the soul. Thus, the threat of evolution, which apparently inspires atheism or agnosticism in that it does not acknowledge any divine influence and denies the existence of the soul, is dismissed – according to Shibli –

82 Nomani: *Savānīḥ-i Maulānā Rūm*, 176.

83 Ibid., 178.

84 Ibid., 180.

85 Ibid., 188.

by denying a lack of knowledge as sufficient and legitimate proof.⁸⁶ However, the structural premises of an evolutionary process of stages through which the world developed is acknowledged and reinterpreted in such a manner that it reverses the initial hypothesis of Darwin. The theory of evolution is translated into an Islamic framework, consequently transforming its initial implications.

Shibli does not further define this inner approach to knowledge. However, following his reference to Sufism, it appears to be reasonable to say that he hints to Sufi practices as providing such an approach:

The Sufis say that as there are specific regulations [*ṭarīqah*] to learn the [practice of] external knowledge [*‘ulūm-i zāhirī*] without which this knowledge cannot be acquired, in the same way there are specific regulations for this knowledge [i.e. inner knowledge] as well [...].⁸⁷

Shibli here emphasises that that this approach is embedded in a framework of regulations and, from this, aims to imply a structural conformity of Sufi metaphysics with science. This allows him to present it as a legitimate counter-approach to science.

However, Shibli does not intend to replace science with this approach, but rather aims to question science's exclusive authority as a legitimate approach to knowledge. He attempts to broaden the variety of approaches beyond the materialist approach focusing solely on observation.

He further argues that any refutation of this counter-approach can again only be based on the argument of a lack of knowledge:

As long as this approach is not experienced, there is no reason to deny it.⁸⁸
[I]f the people of external knowledge [*arbāb-i zāhirī*] deny this [i.e. inner knowledge], it compares to a child that denies the issues of philosophy or is unable to understand it.⁸⁹

This puts his counter-approach on a level which excludes it from the realm of science and observation. By further emphasising that a lack of knowledge cannot suffice as disproof, it becomes irrefutable, for the Sufi approach of inner knowledge cannot be grasped by scientific or observational means. Consequently, inner knowledge cannot be disclaimed on the basis of rational or scientific reasons. Shibli hence presents an approach to a different kind of knowledge than that which

86 Nomani: *al-Kalām*, 51, 54f.; Nomani: *Savāniḥ-i Maulānā Rūm*, 176.

87 Nomani: *Savāniḥ-i Maulānā Rūm*, 212.

88 Ibid., 212.

89 Ibid., 212f.

science can produce. Yet, Shibli denies an opponent's refutation of this inner knowledge on the basis of structural premises that mirror a scientific approach. Shibli's approach to inner knowledge, then, is both part of the realm of religion and equally legitimate as science. It is perhaps even superior to science, given that it cannot be disproved by means of scientific reason.

If Shibli presented an equal distinction of science and religion on a horizontal level in his earlier texts, he subordinates science to his spiritual counter-approach of inner knowledge in his *Savānih-i Maulānā Rūm*. Religion is, therefore, presented not only as a sphere distinct from science, but also as a superior approach to knowledge. While religion and science remain distinguished into two distinct spheres, Shibli now tilts their formerly horizontal orientation and elevates religion to a position somewhere between a horizontal and vertical orientation to science. Furthermore, because religion does not engage in the realm of science, its inaccessibility to scientific reasoning solves religion's former dependency on scientific sanction. Furthermore, because religion does not engage in the realm of science, its inaccessibility to scientific reasoning solves religion's former dependency on scientific sanction. By loosening this dependency, Shibli allows religion to take a superior stance which in turn undermines the necessity of interpreting religion entirely from a scientific framework, as Khan did before him. Shibli thus challenges science's uncontested sole authority, and presents religion as an equally legitimate approach.

Shibli therefore observes the distinction between the two spheres even more rigidly – which allows him to degrade science and confine it to its respective sphere. On this basis, the Sufic approach to knowledge is presented as an equally legitimate counter-approach to science which, moreover, transcends the realm of science.

Shibli thus releases religion from its dichotomous relation with science whereupon its definition is fundamentally based. His approach allows religion to obtain a self-sufficient and self-referential character, which is uncoupled from science. Yet, Shibli's view of metaphysics as an autonomous discipline cannot completely release itself from the role of counter-concept to science: while metaphysics is argued as being a discipline equal to science, Shibli has to base his thesis on structural parallels with science. The latter still reappears as the defining paradigm, however, but is projected onto metaphysics. Science is merely substituted by a discipline that incorporates the dichotomy of science and religion solely within the latter. The premises of science are, conversely, integrated into the sphere of religion. The dichotomy with science is thus dissolved, while its paradigms are reintegrated into metaphysics.

Furthermore, this attempt to establish a counter-approach to science on the basis of metaphysics reminds one to a certain extent of parallel Hindu reformist agendas: among them, first and foremost, is Vivekananda's distinction of a scientific, analytical body of knowledge versus a spiritual body of knowledge. He proposed a mutual complementation of Western, i.e. scientific, knowledge with Eastern, i.e. spiritual. The unrestricted authority of science was thus limited to external, observational knowledge, while, simultaneously, religious knowledge was elevated on a par with science:

[E]uropeans [are recognized] as superior explorers of the external, physical world, but [...] the Indians [are represented] as greater and equally scientific experts of the inner, mental sphere, the realm of consciousness and the self.⁹⁰

Similarly, Shibli and Vivekananda delegitimize science's claim for single authority by confronting it with a counter-type of religious knowledge. Both types of knowledge require supplementation, which grants religion and spirituality a position of authority equivalent to that of science.⁹¹

Conclusion

Shibli makes one more important contribution to the debate surrounding the relationship of science and Islam. His position stands in contrast to Afghani, who took up quite an affirmative stance towards Renan's critique of Islam, and religion in general, as an obstruction and even a contradiction to rationalism. In his lecture, *L'Islamisme et la science*, Renan assumes a perennial conflict between science and religion. He universalises the category of science and perceives ancient Greek philosophy as its respective expression at the time of early Islam. Science, philosophy, and rationalism are used as interchangeable synonyms, thus implying their perennial conflict with religion. Renan further argues that there is no kind of rationalism genuine to Islam. He asserts that any philosophical aspirations in Islam are mere imitation or, strictly speaking, a corruption of Greek philosophy. Renan thus construes a strict dichotomy of Islam and rationalism as mutually contradictory.

90 Halbfass: *India and Europe*, 399.

91 Ibid., 225f.

Shibli questions this critique of the inherent incapacity for rationalism in Islam. First, he rejects the thesis of irrationality by emphasising a natural distinction between the spheres of science and religion. These spheres do not clash because of their divergent objectives. According to Shibli, Islam is the single religion which affirms this distinction and furthermore proves its doctrines based on rational arguments. Having dismissed the thesis of an inherent hostility towards rationalism in Islam, Shibli thus proceeds in challenging the fixed association of Greek philosophy and science as European achievements. Islam and Muslim philosophy are instead presented as an integral phase between Greek philosophy and the development of modern science. Muslim philosophy thus paved the way for science with fundamental improvements of Greek philosophy. Shibli thus refutes the claim for a close association of Greek philosophy with the modern European discipline of science. By integrating Muslim philosophy as a crucial link in this chain, he argues that science loses its character of a radical rupture. Furthermore, in adopting Renan's terminology of a synonymy of science, philosophy, and rationalism, Shibli reverses the former's conflict thesis into an emphasis on continuity. Greek philosophy and science are stripped of their fixed ties to Europe. Their exclusive character is abandoned, which allows for the integration of Islam into the dominant discourse of science.

At first sight, Shibli's approach differs tremendously from Khan's. The latter accepts science as a referential touchstone on which he orients his reformation of Islam. By adjusting Islam, he aims to harmonise it with science. In contrast, Shibli proposes Islam as its invariable touchstone. Islam is not understood as requiring adjustment or adaption. In fact, the understanding of science, as it is put forward by European critics, requires some revision in order for one to put Islam in the right perspective – for neither is Islam hostile to science, nor can science be described merely as a European achievement. As Shibli suggests, this reversal of Renan's conflict thesis into a continuity of Islam with science, with Muslim philosophy an indispensable contributor, does not leave Islam untouched, however. Even though a conflict of science and religion is refuted, the reversal compels Shibli to adopt the crucial thesis of science and religion as two distinct sphere of knowledge. Science as a counterpoint, consequently, also becomes a touchstone for defining Islam. Only in its negative distinction to science does Islam receive meaning. Shibli describes this dichotomy as a natural distinction and projects this understanding onto his view of "original" Islam.

Islam, in this approach, is thus a retroactive construction which cannot refer to a real or "original" referent. It is fundamentally based on its counter-concept of science. Consequently, when Shibli claims to merely revise the conception of science in order to demonstrate Islam's crucial part in this discourse, Islam is not left

untouched. Shibli's approach is rather a reinterpretation of Islam through the back door of science: the contradiction of Islam and science is reversed into a relation of conformity. But, as a result, the distinction of religion and science in separate spheres must be acknowledged, and reinforced as a natural distinction which was originally present in Islam.

If this understanding is compared to Khan's, Shibli deals with the encounter of science in a rather confrontational way. Khan aims for an approximation of science by interpreting Islam in a rational way which is appropriate to scientific premises, and thus acknowledges the discursive premises to a great extent. Shibli, however, starts from the angle of science and criticises the critique. Yet, this critical approach is equally reflected in his conception of Islam, for the relational dependence of religion and science as counter-concepts implies also a divergence of the concept of Islam.⁹²

In his *Savānih-i Maulānā Rūm*, Shibli takes up a different stance towards science and aims to undermine its superiority. In proposing a counter-approach to scientific knowledge, he questions the exceptional authority of the observational approach of science. Sufi practices are proposed as an approach to another kind of knowledge which, however, is structurally similar to science and thus equally as legitimate as science. Because Shibli's discipline of metaphysics is structured on the paradigm of science, however, his desired goal of releasing religion from its dependency on its counter-concept of science as a self-referential and autonomous category is undermined. The dichotomy of science and religion is thus perpetuated, but within the sphere of religion.

In Shibli's presentation of metaphysics as an equally legitimate sphere of knowledge, we can trace the first indications of turning away from Khan's thought by reformist authors. While the first part of the present chapter presented Shibli's

92 Wilfred Cantwell Smith distinguishes Khan's approach from Shibli's in the following way: "Sir Sayyid approached Isām from the values of the modern West; Shibli approaches Western values from the view-point of Islām. His programme was not to reform Islām with some new criterion, but to revive it from within, his ambitious vision including the rehabilitation of Islamic learning in its entirety [...]" (Smith: *Modern Islām in India*, 38).

His analysis can be accepted to a great extent. Yet, the specificity of Shibli's approach lies rather in his emphasis on a continuity, which allows him to inscribe Islam or Muslim philosophy within the tradition of science. On the other hand, Khan perceives science rather as a rupture requiring a reorientation to Islam. Nevertheless, as can be shown, this difference is rather nominal. For, despite Shibli's emphasis on a preservative view of Islam, neglecting any necessity of reform, his investment in the discourse of science and religion compels him to inevitably acknowledge its crucial premises. Hence, Islam, now being inextricably tied to its counter-concept of science, does not remain unaffected. Still, a more preservative view in Shibli cannot be denied in several respects, as for example in his stance towards miracles.

response to Renan an approach of countering the critique of science in a manner rather similar to what we have seen in the preceding chapter in Khan, the second part discussed Shibli’s representation of metaphysics as a counter-approach to knowledge in opposition to science. This can be read as a critique of an overemphasis on reason and indicates the first signs of a divergence from or at least expansion of Khan’s thought. This development shall be further discussed in Chapter 8 with the example of another author from the Aligarh circle, Nazir Ahmad, in whose texts Khan’s thought seems to be referred to as fundamental point of reference, yet does not go unquestioned. Khan’s thought thus acquires the status of a sedimented and hence legitimised interpretation of Islam.

But already the first part of the present chapter presented a certain divergence from Khan’s writings in Shibli’s response to Renan. Both Shibli and Khan differ in their respective viewpoints and focus on different aspects of the counter-concepts of science and religion. Yet, these are rather questions of the perspective, while their fundamental concern was largely consistent. While Khan argued from the point of view taking science as stable point of reference in order to reinterpret Islam, Shibli took Islam as his point of reference. It became obvious that neither of these concepts, science or religion, work as a stable point of reference for redefining its respective counterpoint. While Shibli questions the referential character of science, Khan takes it as a stable basis. Yet, in the same way as Shibli’s conception of Islam was affected by his redefinition of science – due to the referential relation of science and religion as counter-concepts – it can reasonably be assumed also that Khan’s conception of science is not a fixed entity which he adopted from Europe or elsewhere, but is equally affected by his representation of Islam. The following chapter shall, thus, analyse the concepts of science and reason in the writings of Khan and Shibli and question the impact of the impact of their methods of interpretation on their respective conceptions of religion, and particularly Islam.

VII. Reason and Science

In the preceding chapters, science and religion have been argued to be dichotomous categories. Their conception fundamentally depends on the methods of their distinction from their counter-concept. In my analysis of Khan's works, I discussed an approach which took religion and, in particular, Islam as its point of departure, while science was perceived as a touchstone. Shibli, on the other hand, argues that Islam be seen as the unaltered touchstone. Yet, neither author explicitly defines his conception of science. Khan seems to surmise that science is a universal category which does not require any introduction. Even Shibli, whose approach originates from the discussion and questioning of science, does not define the subject matter of science, but merely its associations. He does not seek a shift in the definition of science, but rather a shift in its sole attribution to Europe.

As stated prior, both of these approaches respond to the thesis of conflict between science and religion. Khan as well as Shibli aim to disprove this claim by presenting Islam in such a way that conflict may be transformed via the delineation of distinct spheres. That said, I have argued above that this bifurcation of the spheres of science and religion is inconsistent. As discussed, the religious sphere rather tended to transgress its own realm while the scientific sphere was rather subordinated as a subcategory or, at least, supporting category of and within religion.

Because the preceding chapters have refrained from specifying what the counter-concepts of religion precisely entail for Khan and Shibli, the present chapter will closely examine their conceptions of science. With regard to these two authors' writings, my aim here is to analyse whether or not, and to what extent, science is a concept in a process of negotiation, and, as equally contested as religion. Neither Khan nor Shibli, however, discuss this topic explicitly, and rather seem to presuppose science as a universal which does not require further specification. I will thus examine excerpts of their texts in which they develop their epistemology. On this basis, I hope to draw conclusions regarding their conceptions of science, which shall provide further insights into their conceptions of religion.

1. Epistemology

Both, Khan and Shibli emphasise observation (*mušāhadah*) and experience (*tajribah*) as a means to gain knowledge. They herewith aim to distance themselves from Greek philosophy, which Shibli describes as a mere “jugglery of words” (*lafzī ulat p̄her*) without a connection to reality.¹ In the following sections, I will relate the work of two epistemological theorists to the authors’ critique of Greek philosophy.

1.1 Khan

In his article “*Aqa`id-i mazhab-i Islām*” (*The Tenets of Islam*), Khan presents a concise description of the steps to knowledge and certainty. He distinguishes between two causes evoking thought or ideas (*hayāl*) in the mind. The first is described as self-produced in the mind, lacking any external trigger or reference. Such ideas are disproved as illegitimate, for these thoughts cannot be verified through experience (*tajribah*) and are thus a mere imagining – (*hamārī tabī`aton ne paidā kiyā ho*) without external and, hence, verifiable reference (*asbāb-i gair-muḥaqqaqah se*). Yet, this kind of thought is not declared as inherently and necessarily wrong; it is, however, inappropriate for gaining certainty, as this type of thought can potentially be proven wrong after attempts at verification through experience. The second type of thought, on the other hand, is evoked by an external trigger. This type is verifiable through experience: it is not mere imagining, but rather refers to external perception.²

According to Khan, this kind of thought cannot be proven wrong, as it is, in contrast to the first type, “after experience” (*ba`d tajribe ke*), which he does not tire of repeating:

But the ideas of the second kind, that is those which neither our nature produces spontaneously nor are born in us by the [merely] ideal, unauthenticated causes, rather which other authenticated realities (*ḥaqā`iq-i muḥaqqaqah*) have brought forth – these are enduring and are “after experience,” totally in accordance with fact.³

1 Nomani: *Maqālāt-i Šiblī* (A`zamgarh), Vol. VII, 38f.

2 Khan: *Maqālāt*, Vol. I, 11f.

3 Trol: *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 261 / Khan: *Maqālāt*, Vol. I, 11f.

Consequently, the decisive difference between the two types of thought is found in their relative connection with experience and an external reality allowing for verifiability, as mere imagination cannot necessarily be linked to and verified in reality. Because imagination is free-floating, it can thus be proven wrong after attempts toward verification.

With regard to human reason, Khan defines the medium used for acquiring knowledge and certainty as *'aql*. Thus, he defines *'aql* in another text as the investigation of nature or natural sciences (*taḥqīqāt-i 'ulūm-i ṭabī'at*).⁴ But while Khan proposes sensory perception as the faculty for gaining knowledge, the effective activity of *'aql* still remains hazy. Khan does not define the exact function of *'aql*, nor the role it plays in the process of gaining knowledge. The process of cognition itself is not further described. One possible conclusion of the process presented above, which Khan himself presents as rational, suggests that we identify the role of *'aql* as the process of verifying a thought in its conformity to external reality. Therefore, the role of *'aql* is not the spontaneous advent of an idea, but the active process of probing and linking the thought with external reality. Khan thus distinguishes the process of gaining knowledge and certainty from the spontaneous advent of a thought of the first kind. Due to its verifiability, the second type of thought is described as rational.

On this basis, Khan describes the acknowledgement of God as the one Creator of the world as a rational insight. For, according to Khan, an investigation into nature doubtlessly suggests the existence of an order and arrangement in the world which cannot be coincidental. As the argument goes, if a structure is perceived anywhere, the conclusion will consequently be that the structure does not exist coincidentally, but has rather been arranged by someone. Khan thus proposes the acknowledgement of God as a rational conclusion drawn from his perception that such a structure exists in the world:

Whenever we find several things in one place arranged in order and adorned beautifully we are certain that there is someone responsible for doing this. Accordingly when we see all the existing things in such wonderful order, made by such wisdom and moulded in such beauty, then we can believe with certainty that there is an Arranger and Maker.⁵

The acknowledgement of God's existence is, thus, according to Khan, not of the first category of thought or, in other words, a thought unrelated to the observation of external facts evoked merely in the human mind. It is rather of the second category: for only the perception of an arrangement in the world triggers the idea of

4 Khan: *Maqālāt*, Vol. III, 234.

5 Troll: *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 261 / Khan: *Maqālāt*, Vol. I, 12.

someone's creation rather than the idea of mere coincidence. This acknowledgement is evoked only "after experience" and, thus, is verifiable. Consequently, it is an ascertained thought which can be relied on with certainty:

Our idea of God's existence has been brought forth by things which are a reality, which are, in other words, authenticated truths. Ideas of this kind [i.e. the second kind of thought, verifiable on external facts] are always found to be correct and, "after experience," in conformity with fact. Therefore, we, too, believe firmly in this idea and maintain that since and insofar as it is "after experience," this our idea will be fully according to fact and for this reason we do not call it an "idea," but rather a certain fact.⁶

To conclude, Khan distinguishes between two types of thought, the first one being unrelated to external facts and a mere imagining of the mind which can be dismissed as uncertain. Only the second type, however, can ensure certainty through its link to observed experience. In distinguishing these two types of thought, Khan aims to prove the acknowledgement of God's existence as a rational and ascertained insight, verifiable through external facts.

1.2 Shibli Nomani

In his article "*Ulūm-i jadīdah: 'ilm kī ḥaqīqat*" (Modern Science: An Account on Knowledge), Shibli introduces his epistemology by criticising the conception of knowledge proposed in Greek philosophy. According to Shibli, Greek philosophy conceives of knowledge as the Idea or Form of something (*kisī cīz kī šūrat*) which appears in one's mind. This Form is perceived as a mental imagining of a particular thing and serves as a reference point.⁷

Shibli then criticises the assertion of the Forms as self-contained entities and, instead, argues that they are a composite of former (i.e. individual) perceptions. These perceptions are remembered and form the basis for the imagining of Forms. Thus, he distinguishes three types of perception: the first type, *iḥsās bi-al-fi'l*, is the immediate sensory perception of an object. The second type, however, is a combination of direct (*iḥsās bi-al-fi'l*) and recalled (*iḥsās-i sābiq*) perceptions related to a former sensory input. In this case, only some qualities of an object are

⁶ Troll: *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 261f. / Khan: *Maqālāt*, Vol. I, 12f.

⁷ Nomani: *Maqālāt* (Lakhna'ū), Vol. I, 54f. This vague terminology plainly referring to Greek philosophy as a whole is owed to Shibli's explanations and will be critically discussed in the following analysis.

perceived immediately while the remaining qualities are complemented through remembrance of former sensory perceptions. Shibli gives the example of *seeing* an apple, which evokes one to remember the *taste* and *smell* of such an apple from previous perceptions of other apples. Thus, the visual quality of the object is perceived immediately while the qualities of taste and smell are recalled perceptions, not directly related to the present object. The third type is an entirely recalled perception (*ihsās-i sābiq*) and, thus, a mere imagining (*maḥẓ taṣavvur*).⁸

While Shibli acknowledges direct sensory perception (*ihsās bi-al-fi'l*) as certain and definitive (*qaṭ'ī aur yaqīnī*), he dismisses recalled perceptions (*ihsās-i sābiq*) as uncertain, for the recalling of former perceptions is potentially wrong due to erroneous remembrance. This dismisses not only the third type, but also the second type of combined perception:

A common misunderstanding concerning the character of perception and sensation is that when we, for example, see an apple and state to have become aware [*'ilm hū ā*] of the [category] apple, we assume that this knowledge is self-evident, since we have gained it by means of external sensation [i.e. vision]. But the error in this assertion is that the knowledge has not been gained only by sensation. The senses have perceived only colour and shape. Since the remaining [sensory impressions], taste and smell, had already been perceived once before, we assumed [*qiyās*] that if the shape and colour is the same, then analogously the taste and smell will be the same as well. Thus, only shape and colour have been perceived sensually whereas the remaining perceptions are only recalled.⁹

Thus, he refutes the Greek philosophers' assertion that the self-contained entity of a Form or Idea (*ṣūrat*) in one's mind can be described as knowledge, as it is not certain. It is, rather, an imagining (*taṣavvur*) recalled from memory – potentially resulting in a distorted remembrance.¹⁰

In a second step, Shibli aims to point out one more error related to the Greek conception of knowledge and their theory of cognition. He emphasises that the mind's imagination is no material entity, lacking any autonomous existence. The initial assertion of independent, self-contained Forms (*ṣūrat*) in Greek philosophy as a source of knowledge is thus dismissed, for Form is a mere abstraction derived from material objects.

On the basis of these imagined Forms, general categories (*kulliyāt*) are established. In perceiving several objects which share commonalities, they are conceived of as particulars of a common category. Remembered perceptions are thus

8 Ibid., 55.

9 Ibid., 55f.

10 Ibid., 56.

compound. From this, Shibli argues that the Greek Forms are, in fact, not even imaginings (*taṣavvur*), but rather constructs of human reason (*ta‘aqqul*):

General categories [*kulliyāt*] are in this way perceived so that we see several particulars [*juz‘iyāt*], in them we will observe some commonalities – these similarities are no separate entity [*maujūd-i ḥārijī*] [of their own] nor do they conform to any external entity [*maujūd-i ḥārijī*], but [this process] is rather a cognisance [*vajdān*] which is established in observing several particulars and their mutual commonalities. This cognisance is called *ta‘aqqul* and facilitates the perception of general categories.¹¹

Shibli here again emphasises that commonalities cannot be perceived from any external entity but inevitably have to be drawn from the particulars. Thus, no spontaneous inspiration facilitated by abstract Ideas or Forms can provide the cognisance of general categories, but only the observation of particulars and the extraction of their mutual commonalities after one has separated the particular’s individualities.¹²

In summary, Shibli’s theory of cognition emphasises two insights which he excavated in his criticism of Greek philosophy. Firstly, he proposes that the human being gains knowledge only by access to the material world, for, secondly, the Greek concept of universal categories or forms in fact offers constructs of the human mind without their having any separate existence of their own. Thus, general categories cannot be perceived as self-evident observations, but must be drawn from the observation of particular entities and their commonalities.

1.3 *Qiyās*

In the preceding paragraphs, I have discussed two theories of cognition which are in some respects similar. Khan, distinguishing between two types of thought – the first being evoked merely in the mind without any point of reference in reality, and the second being triggered by a perception and, thus, verifiable – emphasises the necessity of an experiential point of reference. For Khan, only “after-experience” perceptions are acknowledged as certain. Shibli, in a similar vein, generally identifies two types of perception: *iḥsās bi-al-ḥi‘l* being the active perception of things present and *iḥsās-i sābiq* being the remembrance of past perceptions. He, too, dismisses the latter type as uncertain due to a possibly inaccurate remembrance and

11 Ibid., 57.

12 Ibid.

instead emphasises the perception of the material world as the sole means of certain cognisance. Thus, both criticise remembered perceptions or self-produced thoughts as uncertain and instead acknowledge the certainty only of sensory impressions related to the material world. That said, Shibli also introduces an intermediate category in his theory, which combines the aforementioned general types. The *iḥsās-i murakkab* merges the *iḥsās bi-al-fi'l* and *iḥsās-i sābiq*. This process and its criticism will be the topic of the next paragraph.

Shibli defines the *iḥsās-i murakkab* (compound perception) as the partial perception of a present object (*iḥsās bi-al-fi'l*). However, not all perceivable qualities are, in fact, perceived in this process. The remaining qualities are not actively perceived, but only remembered from past perceptions (*iḥsās-i sābiq*). In *iḥsās-i murakkab*, only syllogism (*qiyās*) allows one to combine the partial perceptions with past perceptions in order to receive a complete perception of an object. The partially active perception of a present object is assigned to a general category (*kulliyāt*). This general category has been formed by filtering for the mutual commonalities of particulars. These commonalities, then, are imagined as a general category. Through the assignment of the qualities of a partial perception to a specific category, the missing qualities can be analogously recalled from the past perceptions preserved in the composite general category:¹³

Now if an object is not present in front of us, but we have already perceived its different properties once before, and if it, thus, evokes an idea (*ḥayāl*) of the object in our mind, then this is imagination [*taṣavvur*].¹⁴

However, as has been described above, Shibli dismisses the certainty of imaginings, as they do not have an existence in and of themselves, but rather offer recalled, former perceptions which are, thus, not separately perceivable. They are a mere remembrance. Thus, for Shibli, the unique, certain source of perception can be assigned only to material objects which are perceivable both actively and immediately.

Moreover, Shibli perceives a decisive distinction between modern science and philosophy which is marked by their respective reasoning. The main point of his critique against Greek philosophy is *qiyās*:

[N]owadays it is claimed that ancient philosophy rested on syllogism and suspicion [*qiyāsāt aur ḥanniyāt*]. [...] In contrast, modern philosophy [*falsafah-i jadīdah*, i.e.

¹³ Ibid., 55f.; cf. also *EI*: “*qiyās*.”

¹⁴ Nomani: *Maqālāt* (Lakhna'ū), Vol. I, 56.

in Shibli's terminology modern science¹⁵] is based entirely on experience and observation [*tajribē aur mušāhade par mabnī*].¹⁶

Shibli therefore contrasts science and philosophy on the basis of their respective methods of reasoning. He criticises ancient philosophy for resting entirely on syllogism and, thus, suspicion. His critique explains that certain knowledge cannot be gained by means of *qiyās*, as it rests on former, remembered perceptions. By contrast, the reasoning of science rests, according to Shibli, entirely on observation and, consequently, on active instead of past perception.

Similarly, Khan criticises Greek philosophy for its lack of reference to experienced reality:

The philosophy which is still left with us is, in reality, taken from the Greeks who were idolaters. The topic of this philosophy is mostly concerned with unknown things and a great extent pertains to imagined topics. [...] No ascertained knowledge can be gained from it.¹⁷

In his opinion, Greek philosophy is ensnared in imagined problems and arguments unrelated to reality. Instead, Khan recommends the study of modern science as a means to gain certain knowledge:

The new sciences which came to India with the Englishmen are not merely rational [*'aqlī*] nor do they concern theology [*ilāhīyāt*]. They investigate in the essence [*haqīqat*] of things present [*ašiyā-i maujūdah*] [...].¹⁸

Khan, not unlike Shibli, thus criticises the lack of reality in Greek philosophy and, instead, advocates modern science's reference to things present. However, Khan's notion of *'aql* in this quote is quite striking. For, in this context, *'aql* apparently turns out to be the object of distinction between Greek philosophy and science. Khan advocates for science on the grounds that it is "not merely rational" (*'aqlī*). This conflicts with Khan's entire argument from his other texts, where he explicitly argues for Islam's rationality in order to present the conformity of science with Islam. Science is, therefore, inextricably related to rational reasoning. In the following quote, for example, Khan describes the function of *'aql* – quite in contrast to the above quoted paragraph – as the observation of nature:

15 Cf. Chapter 6.

16 Nomani: *al-Kalām*, 7.

17 Khan: *Maqālāt*, Vol. I, 271.

18 Ibid., 150.

[B]y *'aql* are meant those concerns which have been discovered by means of rational argumentation [*mubāḥaṣ-i 'aqlī*] or the investigation of natural science [*tahqīqāt-i 'ulūm-i ṭabī'iyāt*].¹⁹

The above quoted employment of the term rather implies a concept of *'aql* which comes to conclusions unrelated to the material world while the latter quote and the majority of references suggest an investigative character of reason. *'Aql* has apparently experienced a shift in meaning.

The following paragraphs will, thus, seek to disentangle this overlap of contradictory notions attached to *'aql* in the course of confrontations with science, the goal being to excavate both Khan's and Shibli's view of science.

Considering the above presented critique of syllogism (*qiyās*) as the most crucial characteristic of reasoning in Greek philosophy, Khan as well as Shibli aim to present an epistemology that allows for a link with scientific reasoning. The following paragraphs attempt to put their concepts of scientific reasoning in a historical context and locate their approaches within this context.

2. Rationalities

The task of further qualifying the different rationalities of science versus ancient/Greek philosophy – as mentioned in the texts of Khan and Shibli – is not an easy one, as both authors tend to mention their sources only sparingly. In particular, Khan keeps the reader in the dark regarding his sources. His later texts make virtually no source references. Even though Shibli gives more references, still the identification of his sources often remains a very difficult task. Though he mentions some names, he tends to give no further details about the authors or their works, which raises questions as to the extent to which he was acquainted with the authors' texts and theses. This complicates any assessment of the impact of such theses as well as the evaluation of Shibli's interpretations. Nevertheless, the goal here shall be to concretise the threat of science to which both Khan and Shibli felt obliged to respond.

Shibli, at least, mentions one concrete source, Francis Bacon (1561-1626), whom he apparently identifies as a personification of the threat of science:

19 Ibid., Vol. III, 234.

The attack by Greek philosophy which confronted Islam obviously has been repelled with great strength. Now, is Islam not even more in danger in view of Bacon's philosophy?²⁰

Shibli compares the threat of Greek philosophy, which Islam had to face in its early history, with Bacon's philosophy. That said, he does not give any further remarks about Bacon's philosophy or in what sense it confronts Islam:

The destruction of Ibn Rushd and not only Ibn Rushd but rather of Greek and ancient philosophy, in general, has been brought by Bacon whose works were published in 1597. Ancient philosophy was based on syllogism [*qiyāsāt*] and suspicion [*mauhūmāt*]. Bacon declared this way [of reasoning] as null and void and built the basis of knowledge on the ground of observation [*mušāhadāt*] and experience [*tajribāt*].²¹

Shibli here once again emphasises the key words of observation and experience versus the syllogism and imaginative character of Greek/ancient philosophy.

Even though Khan does not explicitly refer to any source for his conception of science, his striking use of the same key words as Shibli – and a very similar theory of cognition – makes it reasonable to assume that he, too, takes Bacon as his point of reference. Troll affirms this assertion in his book *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, wherein he mentions the book, *Risālah-i in 'āmī*, written by 'Ubaidallāh 'Ubaidī in 1866, which was included in Khan's personal property. Therein, according to Troll, the author gives – among other things – an outline of Bacon's *Novum Organum* and contrasts Bacon's experimental method with the syllogistic approach of ancient philosophy.²²

In order to qualify this contrast between ancient philosophy and modern science, and concretise the conceptual background which is implied by the ubiquitous key words of *qiyās* (syllogism) versus *mušāhadah* (observation) and *tajribah* (experience), I will give a concise outline of Greek philosophy in the following paragraphs. This outline will offer a more differentiated presentation of the oversimplified definitions of the discipline employed by Khan and Shibli. Furthermore, this section shall provide the basis on which to present Bacon's approach, as his approach to some extent lies within the tradition of Greek philosophy that he simultaneously heavily criticises.

20 Shibli Nomani: *Bāqiyāt-i Šiblī* (Lāhaur: *Majlis-i Taraqqī-i Adab*, 1965), 16.

21 Nomani: *Maqālāt* (A'zamgarh), Vol. V, 60f.

22 Troll: *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, Fn. 93, 168. Unfortunately, I could not include the mentioned book.

2.1 Rationalism in Greek and Muslim Philosophy

The philosophical tradition in Islam is, among various other influences, to a large extent based on Plato's and Aristotle's philosophy. Each are commonly described as claiming two contradictory epistemologies. However, when the first Muslims came in contact with Greek philosophy, they found in Neoplatonism – the hitherto most prominent still-extant school of ancient philosophy – a long tradition of the reception of both philosophers. Neoplatonism is characterised by its effort to reconcile the conflict in Platonic and Aristotelian epistemology which was pursued by most Muslim philosophers.²³ Since it is not possible to give a comprehensive overview of the entire tradition and various interpretations of Muslim philosophy within this project's scope, and because neither Khan nor Shibli refer to any particular source in their texts, this outline will be very general. However, since both frequently refer to Ibn Rushd as their eminent source in the philosophical tradition – if in other contexts – it seems reasonable to assume the impact of his thought in this area of their writings, as well. Thus, after presenting a concise outline of the Platonic and Aristotelian epistemology, Ibn Rushd's interpretation shall be summarised accordingly.

2.1.1 Plato

Plato distinguishes between two types of knowledge: δόξα and ἐπιστήμη. δόξα is perceived as true belief. The person having δόξα knows something, but without being able to explain a particular case from his own experience. He has to refer to someone else's knowledge. Thus, Plato disclaims this kind of knowledge as mere belief which, nevertheless, might be true. But only individual comprehension can be called knowledge. The latter type ἐπιστήμη is characterised by the ability to explain and define a particular case through reference to a standard.²⁴ However, Plato emphasises that this standard cannot be derived through sensation of the material world, but only through reason, for natural things never conform perfectly to the abstract and immaterial standard which he calls Form. Natural things are thus treated with suspicion:

²³ Peter Adamson, and Richard C. Taylor: "Introduction," in *The Cambridge Companion to Arabic Philosophy*, ed. Peter Adamson and Richard C. Taylor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 4.

²⁴ Mary Tiles, and Jim E. Tiles: *An Introduction to Historical Epistemology: The Authority of Knowledge* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 16.

This standard is not to be found by examining particular things in the natural world. [H]e would insist that however round an object may be, it will always be possible to find one which is more (perfectly) round.²⁵

Based on the assumption of the geometry of his time that geometrical forms can be defined exactly, Plato claims that the approach to geometry can be transferred to a general practice for identifying forms as standards for any kind of knowledge. In his opinion, mathematicians arrived at general definitions via a dialectic approach of hypothesising and the gradually modifying such a hypothesis, consequently coming to an agreement which satisfies all raised objections so that all mathematicians could acknowledge a universal definition. Plato claims that this possibility of exactitude and universality in definition is not confined to geometry, but can be achieved by means of the dialectic approach in any field of knowledge.²⁶

However, this approach raises concern about the reliability of a definition arrived at through dialectic. One could discount the definition as a mere convention which lacks any entitlement to universality. Plato repels these doubts by introducing the Form of the Good:

This Form of the Good stands in a unique relationship to all the other Forms and a grasp of the Good itself is needed to underwrite any account given of any other Form.²⁷

Any definition, Plato claims, which does not refer to the Form of the Good cannot claim to be complete. To understand the Good of a thing implies that one grasp its purpose and “how it is supposed to be so that it fulfils its function.”²⁸

In his famous allegory of the cave, Plato further clarifies the role of the Form of the Good. In this allegory, people are imagined as being chained to a wall inside of a cave. On the opposite wall, they can see the shadows of objects placed outside the cave. Some of the prisoners can release themselves of their chains and leave the cave. Outside, they catch sight of the actual objects, the shadows of which they saw in the cave, and realise that the knowledge they acquired while chained to the wall was not related to the real objects, but only to their shadows. Plato compares this to knowledge of the material world acquired through sensation. This

25 Ibid., 17.

26 Ibid., 21f.

27 Ibid., 23.

28 Ibid., 23.

knowledge does not reach the realm of ἐπιστήμη, but is only the reflection of the real knowledge of the Forms.²⁹

Continuing with the allegory, Plato mentions a fire which is placed behind the objects and, in this way, makes the shadows in the cave visible. He identifies this fire with the Form of the Good which enables one to comprehend the other Forms. The objects of the material world, however, are merely hazy reflections of the immaterial and perfect Forms:

The Good is said to be the source of the “being and reality” of the objects of understanding [...].³⁰

This linkage of the Forms to a singular and universal principle allows for the closure of the system and the limitation of possible definitions by detaching the Forms from the individual and attaching them to the singularity of the Form of the Good. This allows for the assumption of a universal structuring of the system, consequently singularising and universalising the Forms. It is not that the individual concludes or mentally creates the Forms, but that he recognises them, or rather remembers them. For, according to Plato’s theory of the soul, the soul was acquainted with the Forms before its conjunction with the body and its transference to the material world.

2.1.2 Aristotle

The preceding section showed that Plato’s epistemology has a top-down orientation. The material world is regarded as misleading, whereas only the pure, immaterial Forms allow one to achieve true knowledge. However, the process of reaching those Forms through reason must not be misunderstood as an active or creative reasoning of the human mind, but can rather be compared to remembrance. Forms are, thus, conceived as separate entities which can be observed.

Aristotle, unlike Plato, doubts the self-contained existence of the Forms and states that knowledge is always based on the material world as the single means which is approachable for men. Every insight inevitably begins with observation. Aristotle divides this inductive approach into four stages. In the first stage, perception is preserved, hence, generating memory. In the second stage, memory then allows an individual to recall previous perceptions independently of their material

²⁹ Ibid., 18.

³⁰ Ibid., 23.

appearance. However, the decisive third stage is experience (ἐμπειρία, from which the English “empiricism” is derived). This is the momentum of unity: the remembrance of repeated perceptions of similar objects is unified in a single, generalised abstraction. This empirical knowledge affects future behaviour patterns. But it must not be misconceived as conceptualisation, which occurs only in the fourth stage. In this stage of art, as Aristotle calls it, the empirical knowledge of the remembered, repeated perceptions is examined with regard to mutual commonalities. This last stage differs from the preceding insofar as that the third stage of experience provides mere factual knowledge of repeated occurrences or perceptions, whereas only the fourth stage can reveal the shared causality:

Aristotle illustrates the difference between experience and art on the example of disease: The experience teaches that several people have been cured of a particular disease with a particular drug. However, it does not reveal by which shared quality of the drug the medication was effective. [...] The knowledge of this relationship characterises art in comparison to empirical knowledge.³¹

Thus, knowledge of the fourth stage conceptually grasps the multiplicity of empirical knowledge by isolating the mutual commonalities and unifying them in a single intelligible.³²

In contrast to Plato’s Forms, Aristotle hence conceives of intelligibles not as self-contained entities, but rather as abstractions fundamentally dependent on the observation of the material world. Only bottom-up induction provides access to knowledge. This, however, culminates in a problem similar to that mentioned above in Plato’s epistemology concerning the universality of conception. For, if no common Forms exist and if the intelligibles are a product of the human mind, an abstraction of its perceptions, is knowledge then, consequently, the individual result of an entirely individual process of perception? Is knowledge possible at all if there is no uniformity in cognition?

Aristotle would answer this difficulty with a reference to his distinction of two kinds of knowledge: argumentative knowledge (ἐπιστήμη) and intuitive comprehension (νοῦς). The former is based on *a priori* presumptions and can thus serve only for approval or disapproval within an enclosed system. It does not explain, however, how knowledge is possible beyond a merely individual limit.³³ In this context, Aristotle’s concept of intuitive comprehension (νοῦς) and his presumption of primary principles is crucial. He argues that the generality of intelligibles

31 Christian Jung: “Prinzipienerkenntnis nach Aristoteles: Zur Deutung von *Analytica Posteriora* II 19,” *Salzburger Jahrbuch für Philosophie* 60 (2016): 83.

32 *Ibid.*, 83ff.

33 *Ibid.*, 93.

cannot be a natural, prenatal awareness, as Plato would argue. Aristotle instead states that any object inherently contains the potential of generality. The world is thus arranged via a structure which is intuitively perceived by means of νοῦς. The above described process of induction is, hence, the gradual process of awareness caused by the repeated perception of similar objects and the separation of their commonalities by means of memory.³⁴

Aristotle argues that no wrong perception can exist, as the process of perception is no individual act of reasoning, but rather guided by νοῦς and the universal structure of the cosmos. νοῦς perceives the generality in the observation of material objects – no individual interpretation can misguide this process. Hence, perception cannot be wrong – either something has been perceived or it has not. Only conclusions drawn from such intelligibles can be individually misleading.³⁵

By unlinking the act of perception from the individual, Aristotle maintains the possibility of acquiring knowledge, as only universal intelligibles provide the possibility of interaction and communication. Yet his approach differs from Plato's assertion of self-contained Forms being separate from the material world. On the contrary, Aristotle emphasises the material world as the single means of obtaining access to knowledge. In further contrast to Plato, however, he maintains the necessary universality in the structure of the cosmos, according to which the material world is perceived by means of νοῦς. This bypasses subjectivity in the process of perception and provides its universality. The access to truth is, thus, similar to Plato's depiction of the same: singularised, as individual reasoning is governed by an external faculty.

The question of the possibility of knowledge is, however, answered only with a circular argument: Aristotle argues that first principles are intrinsic to the possibility of knowledge. Nevertheless, the effort to prove them would unavoidably result in infinite recourse, as the argumentative knowledge (ἐπιστήμη) of such proofs can only be effective within an enclosed system in which first principles already been approved, as has been shown above. Consequently, he argues, the first principles must be beyond argumentative knowledge (ἐπιστήμη) and can be proved only with respect to their supply of true results. This, however, singles out νοῦς from the possibility of verifiability and puts it in the position of *a priori* presumptions which have to be acknowledged in order to close the system. Only after providing an enclosed system can νοῦς be argued as inevitable. This necessarily culminates in a circular argument.³⁶

34 Ibid., 91.

35 Ibid., 95.

36 Ibid., 91-94.

2.1.3 Ibn Rushd (1126-1198)

As has been highlighted earlier, it is quite probable that Khan and Shibli were influenced by Ibn Rushd's theory of the intellect. For, in other contexts, they each mention Ibn Rushd as a crucial source. However, in their respective theories of cognition, neither man gives any references regarding their sources. Thus, even if Ibn Rushd might have been an important source for their theories of cognition, the extent to which they were acquainted with his texts remains unclear. Additionally, the fact that Ibn Rushd's work is not entirely consistent internally further complicates a definitive conclusion. Thus, due to limitations within this scope, Ibn Rushd's works shall be introduced only very concisely with respect to two aspects of his teaching relevant for the present study.

Ibn Rushd's work can be divided into stages beginning from a continuation of his predecessors in Muslim philosophy, in particular Ibn Sina and Ibn Bajja, and moving gradually towards a return to the texts of Aristotle.³⁷ It will not be possible to demonstrate this shift in its complexity here, but I will instead illustrate this development with respect to his theories of intellect and emanation.

Like Aristotle, Ibn Rushd criticises Plato's concept of self-contained Forms independent of the material world, and emphasises the inevitable reference to the inductive process of observation. Only through a universal principle, the active or agent intellect (*'aql fa'āl*, parallel to νοῦς), is the acquisition of knowledge deemed to be possible. In addition to this universal type of intellect, Ibn Rushd distinguishes one more type, the material, which he identifies as passive or potential intellect perceived as an individual human faculty.³⁸ The role of these two types, however, varies during the different stages of the development of his thought. In his article "Averroes," Richard C. Taylor distinguishes three stages of Ibn Rushd's theory of intellect. The first stage is still very much influenced by Ibn Bajja's interpretation, emphasising the individual's propensity to achieve knowledge of the intelligibles by means of the material intellect, which perceives the potential Forms through sensation. In his later stages, Ibn Rushd dismisses this interpretation, for situating the production of the intelligibles in the individual material intellect raises the question of the possibility of the intelligibles' universality.

37 Herbert A. Davidson: *Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes, on Intellect: Their Cosmologies, Theories of the Active Intellect, and Theories of Human Intellect* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 220.

38 Arthur Hyman: "Averroes' Theory of the Intellect and the Ancient Commentators," in *Averroes and the Aristotelian Tradition: Sources Constitution and Reception of the Philosophy of Ibn Rushd (1126 - 1198); proceedings of the Fourth Symposium Averroicum (Cologne 1996)*, ed. Gerhard Endress (Leiden, Boston, Köln: Brill, 1999), 368f.

Thus, he returns to an interpretation more in concordance with Aristotle and transfers the process of conceptualisation to a universal and eternal principle, subsequently refusing his former assertion of the individuality of the material intellect.³⁹

The final position of Averroes on intellect is found in his *Long Commentary* (ca. 1190), where he rejects the notion of a plurality of individual material intellects, argues for a single eternal material intellect for all humankind [...].⁴⁰

Consequently, Ibn Rushd abandons the emphasis on individuality from his earlier stage in favour of acknowledging the universality of the process of cognition, thus ensuring the generality of the intelligibles:

The problem with the accounts of the earlier commentaries was that their plurality of immaterial receptive intellects meant a plurality of intelligibles in act without the same intelligible being understood by each human being. If two humans are thinking of the same intelligible, for example, a teacher and a student, then they cannot be thinking about two different intelligibles.⁴¹

Likewise, Ibn Rushd turns against his predecessors, in particular Ibn Sina, with respect to the theory of emanation. Emanation is a widely acknowledged theory inherited from Neoplatonism to explain the plurality in the world out of the One, the originator of the cosmos, which is identified as God in Muslim philosophy. The theory of emanation is based on the distinction of two realms: the material and the immaterial world. Both are, however, perceived as being linked. This link is the subject matter of metaphysics introduced through Aristotle's *Metaphysics* – which, however, remains quite vague, thus generating vigorous debates on its interpretation.⁴² These two realms are not conceived of as entirely separate, for this would imply a duality of eternal principles. Thus, the world cannot be perceived as a distinct entity, but must be originated in the One. Without expanding on the theory and its various interpretations, Ibn Rushd's general assertion is that “from the First all other beings and the heavenly world in the first place derive by a pro-

39 Richard C. Taylor: “Averroes: Religious Dialectic and Aristotelian Philosophical Thought,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Arabic Philosophy*, ed. Peter Adamson and Richard C. Taylor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 190-194.

40 Ibid., 192.

41 Ibid., 192.

42 Charles Genequand: “Metaphysics,” in *History of Islamic Philosophy*, ed. Seyyed H. Nasr and Oliver Leaman (London: Routledge, 1996), 1383f.

cess generally designated by the name of emanation (fayḍ lit. ‘flowing’ or ‘overflowing’). This emanation results from the mere existence of the First [...].”⁴³ The process is described as follows:

From the First emanates the Second (intellect); by thinking the First, it gives rise to the Third, and by thinking itself it gives rise to the first heaven. The Third in turn, by thinking the First, produces the Fourth and by thinking itself produces the second sphere, that of the fixed stars. The same process repeats itself ten times, thus giving rise to the ten heavenly spheres and to the ten entities (intellects) following the first. The tenth intellect is the so-called Active Intellect (al-’aql al-fa’al) which is the last of the immaterial entities. It has not only a cognitive function as in the Greek tradition, but also physical and cosmological ones. By implanting the forms in matter it constitutes the final link between the heavens and the world of nature.⁴⁴

Crucial in this quote is the emanation of the Forms in matter, which maintains the universality of perception by enclosing the system circularly.

However, Ibn Rushd later rejects this theory of emanation and instead refers to the theory of causality. As described in the preceding chapters, causation assumes that any occurrence must be caused by any preceding cause. This implies that causal chains must have a primary origin. Since any efficient cause, as Ibn Rushd argues, can proceed from only one causal agent, the chains can be retraced to the First Mover or Unmoved Mover. Nevertheless, if “from one only one proceeds”, the question arises as to how plurality can emerge out of this mono-causal chain. Ibn Rushd replies:⁴⁵

Since the rule that from one only one proceeds applies solely to efficient causes, and the First Cause is not an efficient cause, the rule does not apply to it.⁴⁶

Thus, he abandons the theory of emanation with the argument that the First Cause can have more than one effect. This, however, does not affect his theory of different intellects:

He still identifies the active intellect as the last in the series of incorporeal intelligences, although the active intellect is no longer the outgrowth of a process of emanation.⁴⁷

43 Ibid., 1386f.

44 Ibid., 1387.

45 Davidson: *Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes, on Intellect*, 256.

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid.

Hence, Ibn Rushd's philosophy is characterised by a shift from initially Neo-Platonist tendencies towards a focus on Aristotle: he abandons the thesis of emanation and perceives the intellect as universal.

In summary, it can be said that the epistemologies of Plato and Aristotle, in the first place, appear to be fundamentally contradictory. Plato, on the one hand, proposes a deductive epistemology disregarding sensory perception and the material as a point of departure for acquiring knowledge. In fact, observation is dismissed as being misleading on the way to higher, i.e. abstract and immaterial, knowledge of the essences – or, as Plato puts it – the Forms. On the other hand, Aristotle discounts the deductive procedure of pure reason and argues for an inductive approach. In his opinion, Plato's Forms are not self-contained entities which can be perceived by the application of reason. Only the material world can provide information about the intelligibles. Those are, however, derived from material objects, which, as parts of the universal structure of the cosmos, potentially contain the intelligibles. A universal sense of reason enables men to perceive the intelligibles out of material objects.

Herein lies the commonality between the two primarily contradictory approaches. From the perspective of universality, both approaches share some crucial aspects. Both presume the existence of a universal arrangement, a metaphysical structure which organises the cosmos according to a uniform and consistent system. They argue that only the assertion of universal, general concepts requiring an enclosed system provides the possibility of communication without a clash of individually derived intelligibles culminating in miscommunication. They therefore do not perceive the acquisition of knowledge as an individual process of reasoning, hence disclaiming subjectivity in experience, as the reason which enables one to gain knowledge is not an individual but rather a universal faculty. Reason is positioned outside of the realm of individuality, thus allowing for universally general concepts. These are derived by means of the universal reason deducing the uniform structure of the cosmos out of material objects, which inherently contain their essences.

Consequently, the access to truth is conceived of as singular in Plato's thought as well as in Aristotle's. Although both consider the acquisition of knowledge to be a gradual process, this does not pertain equally to truth. A better insight into the Forms, in Plato, or an augmented experience of material objects, in Aristotle, likewise implicates an increase of knowledge. This increase must be understood, however, merely as gradual approximation of the wholeness of the singular truth, for sensation and experience can reveal only one result. Moreover, perception cannot be wrong – either something is perceived or it is not. Thus, an increase of

knowledge can never mean the obsolescence of the preceding knowledge; it can only mean the additive enhancement and a closer proximity to the wholeness of truth. Hence, truth and its means of access are perceived as rigid and immutable.

2.2 Francis Bacon (1561-1626)

Bacon's philosophy, as has been shown above, is perceived as a crisis for ancient philosophy by Shibli and, presumably, by Khan, as well. Furthermore, both criticise the speculative character of ancient philosophy and emphasise observation and experience as the counter-approach of science, very likely drawing from the work of Bacon, a pioneer of the scientific approach. Thus, in the following, I will briefly examine Bacon's philosophy in order to obtain an idea of the character of science which Khan and Shibli were confronted with. Nevertheless, this analysis can only provide speculation on their conceptions of science, as it is not possible to assess their true acquaintance with Bacon given that the few indications in their texts which refer to Bacon as representative of modern science cannot be retraced. Their views on Bacon's work must remain hazy, as their sources could not be located in the archives frequented during the research for this study.

Bacon criticises the idealisation of antiquity in his time and argues that blind belief in tradition prevents progress.⁴⁸ In comparing the character of human understanding to the functions of a mechanical engine, he turns against Plato's Forms as well as Aristotle's inductive approach. The latter is criticised for basing broad, speculative claims on merely marginal observation. Based on minimal inductive observation, the entire Aristotelian system proceeds, according to Bacon, on merely deductive assumptions. Thus, rejecting the deductive as well as the inductive approach of antiquity as mere speculation, Bacon establishes an approach which is more so related to practically applicable knowledge.⁴⁹ He turns away from questioning the essence and process of cognisance towards knowledge itself and its improvement:

48 Wolfgang Krohn: *Francis Bacon* (München: Beck, 1987), 71.

49 Jatinder K. Bajaj: "Francis Bacon, the First Philosopher of Modern Science: A Non-Western View," in *Science, Hegemony and Violence: A Requiem for Modernity*, ed. Ashis Nandy (Tokyo: United Nations University [et al.], 1990), 28; Tiles and Tiles: *An Introduction to Historical Epistemology*, 30f., 40.

[The] goal of natural philosophy is not that of building speculative systems, but acquiring practically applicable understanding of the way the world works.⁵⁰

Thus, Bacon was no longer interested in Plato's Forms and essences. What excited him was rather the discovery of laws in nature, which allowed direct applicability:⁵¹

What counted as scientific knowledge (*epistêmê*) of nature was for Aristotle knowledge of forms which give us the ability to provide, above all, formal and final explanations of what we observe around us. For Bacon knowledge of forms consisted in a grasp not of ends and capacities of kinds of things, but of the laws of natural action, of how things work and of how to do things, that extend our mastery over the natural world.⁵²

Bacon's aim for the improvement of knowledge furthermore implies a relational structure of knowledge, thus attacking Aristotle's aforementioned assertion of the impossibility of wrong perception. Bacon further doubts the immediate (albeit gradual) insight found in the essences of objects in the material world. He rather argues that the essences always remain obscured and have to be excavated gradually:

Bacon insisted that it is not possible to leap in one step from observations to first principles and essences. The essences, or forms, of natural things are not open to view, are not outwardly displayed but, being hidden, must be gradually and methodically revealed.⁵³

Bacon thus acknowledges the impact of the individual on the process of perception and cognisance, and disclaims the assertion of self-evident and self-revealing essences. In this respect, he defines four crucial aspects that conceal and obscure the essences – he speaks of “four idols” – as per Bajaj:

Bacon is quite aware that the human understanding, left to itself, does not act as a mechanical engine. Man sees the world in his own image. And this image derives its features *from the nature of the mind in general, from the idiosyncrasies of the individual, from the individual's interaction with others, and from the philosophical*

50 Tiles and Tiles: *An Introduction to Historical Epistemology*, 40.

51 Ibid., 109; Krohn: *Francis Bacon*, 78.

52 Tiles and Tiles: *An Introduction to Historical Epistemology*, 109.

53 Ibid., 91.

dogmas current at the time. Bacon realized that these aspects of the human condition which intervene between the world and man's understanding of it are important constraints on human knowledge.⁵⁴ [Italics added]

Considering the four reasons obscuring the essences, Bacon compares the human mind to a "distorting mirror" which is unable to accurately represent the essences of material objects. He furthermore argues that an entire emancipation of these idols is impossible.⁵⁵ Thus, mere observation can never be definitive and certain. Rather, knowledge must always include the possibility that it be revised on the basis of experience. Considering Bacon's refusal of immediate access to knowledge and its inevitable obscuration through the human mind, truth and knowledge experience the reproach of suspicion. Thus, knowledge cannot be acquired definitively, but has to pass through continuous revision. As a consequence, Bacon criticises ancient philosophy and its unquestioned assertion of *a priori* premises, be it in Plato's presumption of the existence of Forms or in Aristotle's philosophy which, according to Bacon, is based on marginal observations that serve as the foundation for his whole system of deduction. Plato's first principles, which structure the cosmos and can be perceived by means of universal reason (νοῦς), are dismissed by Bacon as assumptions which are made prior to experience. They therefore merely pave the way for perception, which consequently excludes them from criticism through observation. This observation is circularly perceived and structured only by such first principles. Bacon thus vehemently argues against such *a priori* presumptions, as Bajaj writes:

If Bacon's insistence on the unavailability of *a priori* first principles and on using practical success as the mark of truth is pushed rigorously, we would have to acknowledge that whatever conception of the object of knowledge guides inquiry, - whether it be speculative coherence, material well-being or whatever - it too must be regarded as revisable in the light of experience. To treat it otherwise would be to have created another Idol of the Theater.⁵⁶

In his *Novum Organum*, Bacon therefore outlines an approach that takes into account men's inability to immediately acquire exact and final knowledge. Herein he argues that the abstracted results of the induction of particulars must always be recursive. Abstraction has to be deductively probed in particulars and, if necessary, be discarded. Bacon's approach is thus circular, however, without setting the abstract as absolute and while allowing for the option to revise it:

54 Bajaj: "Francis Bacon," 28.

55 Tiles and Tiles: *An Introduction to Historical Epistemology*, 102, 125.

56 Ibid. 125.

This method involved collection of particulars through observation and systematic experimentation, [...] deriving axioms by certain method and rules from the above particulars, and finally deriving new particulars from these axioms so that the axioms could confirm their own extent and generality. [...] observation, induction of axioms from the observed and testing those axioms in further observation.⁵⁷

As a result of acknowledging human subjectivity and fallibility in cognisance, Bacon argues that abstract knowledge cannot be perceived as certain and has to be verified upon the re-examination of particulars.⁵⁸ Nonetheless, Bacon utilises this methodology as a means to finally reach certain knowledge by exclusion of wrong hypotheses. Thus, his eliminative induction can reveal the true theory within a finite group of hypotheses:

One of hypotheses h_1, \dots, h_i is true; hypotheses h_1, \dots, h_{i-1} are false; *therefore* hypothesis h_i is true. The capacity of eliminative induction to deliver knowledge of its conclusion depends on our ability to know that the first premise is true, i.e. to know of some suitably limited range of hypotheses, that the true hypothesis is among them.⁵⁹

Thus, Bacon assumes that, despite men's inability to gain immediate access to essences through observation, his methodology provides a procedure of exclusion of wrong hypotheses owed to the obscuring nature of the human mind. Hence, truth is for Bacon not immediately accessible, but his methodology still allows for an exclusive approach excavating truth – based on the premise of a limitation of hypotheses. The assertion of a limited amount of hypotheses permits one to positively define truth and reach to a definitive conclusion.

3. Multiple Rationalities

In the preceding paragraphs, varying epistemological approaches have been discussed. But irrespective of their different points of departure, the most crucial aspect to crystallise for this study is the premise of a limitation of the system. In this respect, Platonic deduction as well as Aristotelian induction share – despite their contradicting points of departure in the study of cognisance – the limited approach

57 Bajaj: "Francis Bacon," 30.

58 Krohn: *Francis Bacon*, 92.

59 Alexander Bird: "Inductive Knowledge," in *The Routledge Companion to Epistemology*, ed. Sven Bernecker (London: Routledge, 2011), 281.

of an enclosed system. Further, even while Bacon criticises their universalistic claim for the recognition of essences, he still retains the closed character of the system, as he contends that a limited number of hypotheses culminate in the possibility of excavating the single true one by eliminative induction. The assertion of universality is therefore retained.

Moreover, the central question of the following paragraphs will be the location of Khan's and Shibli's epistemologies. How do they position themselves within these three approaches and in what sense are their critiques of Greek philosophy to be read? As has been discussed before, both propose a rigid dichotomy between science and ancient philosophy. They view ancient Greek philosophy as mere syllogism (*qiyās*) and with suspicion (*ẓanniyāt*) – keywords criticising the merely deductive character of both Plato's and Aristotle's arguments. On the other hand, Shibli and Khan characterise science by its inductive approach, which emphasises observation or experiment (*mušāhadah*) and experience (*tajribah*). Suspicion is thus contrasted with empiricism. These dichotomous keywords demonstrate Khan's and Shibli's rejection of deduction in favour of induction as a scientific approach. Yet, as has been shown with regard to Bacon, induction does not neglect *a priori* premises *per se*.

3.1 Shibli

Formulating his epistemology, Shibli criticises the assertion of Platonic Forms (*ṣūrat*) as self-contained entities which can be perceived. He further criticises the continuation of this assertion, namely the acknowledgement of the imagining (*taṣavvur*) of former sensory perceptions as a point of departure for knowledge, and disclaims its universal character, as well. This imagining is rather a product of the reason and the human mind (*ta' aqqul*). He consequently perceives general categories (*kulliyāt*) to be a conjunction of remembered perceptions and their commonalities, thus lacking any independence of human imagination and remembrance, as per Plato's Forms:

General categories [*kulliyāt*] are in this way perceived so that we see several particulars [*juz' iyāt*], in them we will observe some commonalities – these similarities are no separate entity [*maujūd-i ḥārijī*] [of their own] nor do they conform to any external entity [*maujūd-i ḥārijī*], but [this process] is rather a cognisance [*vajdān*]

which is established in observing several particulars and their mutual commonalities. This cognisance is called *ta' aqqul* and comprises the perception of general categories.⁶⁰

By emphasising that imaginings are merely products of the individual human mind, and possibly obscured by remembrance which is included in the process of conceptualisation, Shibli thus dismisses the claim for the universality of imaginings. In this way, Shibli pinpoints inductive observation as a singularly reliable source. Still, he does not deny a necessity of general categories (*kulliyāt*) for structuring sensory perceptions. But his efforts are directed to the assertion of Platonic Forms as self-contained entities, thus referring to the imaginative character of general categories. In this case, Shibli appears to address Bacon's critique of the Aristotelian approach which proceeds from marginal inductive reasoning with huge deductive syllogisms. Shibli therefore presents induction as the exclusively certain method.

He then proceeds to describe the conceptualisation of those general categories and states that the imagined categories are a product of the repeated perceptions of objects which bear commonalities. This, however, raises the question of how commonalities can be perceived even before the process of conceptualisation has taken place. If categories are denied a prior existence and are perceived as a purely inductive abstraction of particulars, the perception of commonalities (as an essential factor of identification) cannot precede the category itself. Commonalities can rather only be thought of after an unstructured, borderless continuum of material objects has been classified and structured within a limited framework, culminating in the distinction of groups of objects with commonalities among each other and differences with respect to objects outside of the respective group sharing commonalities. This is the case, according to Shibli, because a borderless continuum cannot self-evidently reveal commonalities between different objects. This implicates a preceding structuring process. Thus, an external force must be responsible for the pre-structuring of the material objects which makes commonalities appear to be self-revealing. Shibli vehemently rejects any pre-existence of the general categories or Forms which could be remembered or perceived outside of their particulars, or potentially contain the objects of the category, as "these similarities are no separate entity [*maujūd-i ḥārijī*] [of their own] nor do they conform to any external entity [*maujūd-i ḥārijī*]."⁶¹

Shibli's vigorous emphasis on general categories being derived from particulars inductively suggests that any external force must infuse the recognition of

60 Nomani: *Maqālāt* (Lakhna'ū), Vol. I, 57.

61 Ibid.

commonalities and, consequently and simultaneously, its demarcation from other categories. Shibli's description of the process of conceptualisation as *ta'aqqul* implies that this process is performed by 'aql, as *ta'aqqul* is a derivative of 'aql. Consequently, 'aql cannot be perceived as an individual faculty, as this faculty infuses the material world with a pre-structuring of categories. But since the categories are, then, a construct of a supra-individual faculty, Shibli perceives the universality of concepts as an individual abstraction through inductive observation. That said, the process of conceptualisation is, in fact, governed by the external faculty 'aql maintaining the pre-structuring and pre-conceptualisation of perception. Consequently, neither perception nor conceptualisation is the creative process of an individual. The individual rather applies an external means of perception.⁶²

Thus far, it is not evident, however, what sense of 'aql Shibli employs. It is only obvious that it cannot be conceived of as an individual faculty, but must be of an external character. Is it, consequently, a universal faculty which governs every individual's perception homogeneously? An excerpt of Shibli's *Savānih-i Maulānā Rūm*, a biography of the Sufi mystic Jalāl-ad-Dīn Rūmī (1207-1273) that encompasses an interpretation of his thought, gives a hint in this respect. Here, Shibli first equates 'aql with wisdom (*viždam*) and then further explains:

'Aql is imbued in every thing like the spirit [*jān*] in the human body. 'Aql causes the perception of structure and order [*tartīb va nizām*] in every part of the cosmos [*silsilah-i kā'ināt*]. In short, the whole universe is one single individual [*šahs-i vāhid*] and the 'aql, which is in this single individual, is God. As man is conceived of as a single individual despite his multiplicity of body parts, likewise is the world conceived of as a single entity despite the apparent multiplicity and as in man there is only one 'aql, likewise there is only one 'aql in the world and this is called God.⁶³

Thus, Shibli describes an interpretation of the aforementioned Neoplatonic concept of emanation which perceives the whole universe as a multiplication of God's unity. 'Aql is in this interpretation singularised and equalised with God. Shibli describes it as the force imbuing the material world and thus structuring it, while, simultaneously, it is also the faculty making the structure and arrangement of the world perceivable and comprehensible for man. Thus, 'aql is not conceived of as an individual human faculty, but is rather characterised as a universal faculty of perception. This explains the aforementioned pre-structured perception of men

62 This concealed top-down structure is perhaps already implied with the term *vajdān* in the above given quote, denoting a type of intuition from a Divine source. The term is derived from *vajd* which is a common *terminus technicus* in Sufism, describing a state of ecstasy in the love of God. Thus, Shibli perhaps uses *vajdān* to refer to an immediate, deductively acquired knowledge, independent of induction from the material world.

63 Nomani: *Savānih-i Maulānā Rūm*, 222f.

which presumes implicit categories in recognising commonalities in an apparently borderless continuum. But according to this universalised conception of *'aql*, the continuum must, in fact, be understood as a pre-structured system. Human activity is thus limited to the realisation of this structure governed by *'aql*. Consequently, according to Shibli, wrong conceptualisations cannot occur, as the factor of subjectivity is abolished through detaching the faculty of conceptualisation from the individual and hence universalising perception. The only avenue for human impact is thus the aforementioned abstraction of perception into general categories which can potentially be obscured through erroneous remembrance. The immediate access to the essences of material objects aided by *'aql*, however, remains unaffected.

3.2 Khan

In a similar manner, Khan also initially dismisses the existence of Platonic Forms which can be perceived irrespective of observation or experience. Thus, he distinguishes two types of ideas which appear in the human mind. The first, being a product of merely free-floating reason without any reference to the material world, is perceived as illegitimate as a source for certain knowledge. Instead, Khan emphasises the necessity of a verification of thoughts based on the material world:

But the ideas of the second kind, that is those which neither our nature produces spontaneously nor are born in us by the [merely] ideal, unauthenticated causes, rather which other authenticated realities (*ḥaqā'iq-i muḥaqqaqah*) have brought forth – these are enduring and are “after experience,” totally in accordance with fact.⁶⁴

Khan does not, in contrast to Shibli, detail this process of conceptualisation, but restricts his explanations merely to a self-evident perception evoked by an external occurrence. He seems to presume that an occurrence is naturally perceived in its essence:⁶⁵

64 Troll: *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 261 / Khan: *Maqālāt*, Vol. I, 11f.

65 Strikingly, his terminology of *muṣāhadah* and *tajribah* seems to hint already at this intuitional insight of an object's essence, for *muṣāhadah* is a common *terminus technicus* in Sufism, denoting for example in Suhrawardi's terminology the “witnessing’ of metaphysical truths” (Roxanne D. Marcotte: “Reason (*'aql*) and Direct Intuition (*mushāhada*) in the Works of Shihāb al-Dīn al-Suhrawardī (d. 587/1191),” in *Reason and Inspiration in Islam: Theology Philosophy and Mysticism in Muslim Thought; Essays in Honour of Hermann Landolt*, ed. Todd Lawson and Hermann Landolt (London: Tauris, 2005), 223). The object is thus perceived by means of a metaphysical power or faculty in its essence.

Whenever we hear a voice or see smoke we think that over there is someone who produces the voice, or, over there is a fire.⁶⁶

Thus, Khan's approach does not include a process of conceptualisation or structuring of sensory perceptions. They are rather perceived naturally and in their essence. The question of classifying sensory perceptions according to general categories does not arise for him. He instead presents the general categories as self-revealing. Thus, mere observation is perceived as sufficient. The verification of the authenticity of the emerged thought is, furthermore, only directed to the elimination of the first, unauthenticated type of thought and can therefore be described as a mere reassurance. As Troll writes:

Our thinking is a [mere] idea, yet not of the kind that comes about in our nature spontaneously or which, unauthenticated, merely ideal causes create in us. Rather it is an idea which is brought forth by other authenticated truths. Such an idea of ours is always correct and "after experience," in full accordance with fact, provided we ourselves make not a mistake concerning the thing which brings about in us such an idea.⁶⁷

Even though Khan leaves in the end of the paragraph a gap for error in perception, he does not further elaborate on this. Instead, he emphasises the impossibility of erroneous perception – if of the second kind and "after experience." Thus, the deductive verification of the inductively evoked thought is merely circular, and reassures the effective source of the perception without, however, implying the possibility of an erroneous perception. This possibility would require a revision of Khan's approach, as "such an idea of ours is always correct and 'after experience,' in full accordance with fact."⁶⁸ This assertion of immediate access to the essences through universally homogeneous perception suggests that Khan, too, presumes a conceptual pre-structuring which man merely realises through an external, universal faculty – as he does not mention an individual impact in the process of conceptualisation.

66 Troll: *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 261 / Khan: *Maqālāt*, Vol. I, 12.

67 Troll: *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 261 / Khan: *Maqālāt*, Vol. I, 12.

68 Troll: *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 261 / Khan: *Maqālāt*, Vol. I, 12.

3.3 Metaphysical Signifier

Consequently, both Khan as well as Shibli advocate for the undeniable existence of God on the basis of an enclosed system with the *a priori* premises of a structuring force which simultaneously enables man to perceive this structure. Within their enclosed systems of pre-structured conceptualisations, contingent convictions are presented as necessary insights. As discussed above, both authors refer to Ibn Rushd's conception of the First Unmoved Mover as a self-evident proof of the existence of God. Both argue that the obviously visible arrangement of the world suggests only one conclusion – that someone must have arranged this structure. [New sentence:] As Shibli writes:

One of the self-evident [*badīhī*] and sensual insights which man [...] learns is that when one finds something arranged, structured and organised [*murattab, bā-qā'idah aur muntaẓam*], then one knows for certain that someone wise has arranged those things. If we find somewhere things in disorder, then it is possible to think of those things that they came together by themselves. But if they are chosen in accordance with such a method and structure [*is tarīb aur salīqe se*] [...], then the idea that this arrangement appeared by itself cannot come up.⁶⁹

Khan, in a very similar manner, aims to prove the existence of God with the acknowledgment of a law of nature:

Their [i.e. the *necarīs* to whom Khan counts himself] proof is as follows: according to the law of nature, that is *qānūn-i fiṭrat* and *a'īn-i fiṭrat*, all beings in the world [...] are found to form one solidly knit chain of cause and effect. Whatever exists is the effect of some cause and this effect itself is the cause of some further effect. This chain of [cause and effect] works exactly in this way and it necessarily ends – according to nature – at a first cause. [...] Therefore it is, according to the law of nature, necessary that the final cause of the world should also actually exist and that it should not be the effect of some further cause.⁷⁰

Thus, Khan perceives his concept of *dīn* as the structuring force of the cosmos which maintains universally homogeneous perception and immediate access to the essences of material objects. For, as has been discussed in previous chapters, Khan perceives *dīn* as a synonym of the laws of nature, thus providing a double meaning of *dīn* as the immaterial concept of religion, on the one hand, and world order on the other hand.⁷¹

69 Nomani: *al-Kalām*, 36f.

70 Troll: *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 334f. / Khan: *Maqālāt*, Vol. III, 303f.

71 Cf. Chapter 6.

Consequently, both Shibli and Khan conclude that religion and the acknowledgement of the existence of God is a natural insight which cannot be denied on any rational basis.⁷² These arguments are circular, however, for their lines of argument can only be coherent within an enclosed system as structured by a universal, metaphysical signifier. Only the structuring of the system around this metaphysical signifier – Shibli’s theory of ‘*aql*’ and Khan’s *dīn* – sustains their arguments as meaningful, reasonable, and rational. Only the closure of the system maintains the *a priori* premise of a universal structuring force which, consequently, provides the universally homogeneous perception of this structure.

In his article, “The Grip of Ideology,” Jason Glynos scrutinises enclosed systems as ideology. He argues against the definition of ideology as a misrepresentation of reality, for this implies, in his opinion, an essentialisation of truth and the possibility of its unequivocal definition positively:

No longer can the category of ideology be propped up by the traditional dichotomy which pits ‘misrecognition’ or ‘false-consciousness’ against a ‘true objective knowledge’ – a knowledge that can be grasped by means of a seemingly transparent linguistic medium.⁷³

In conceiving of truth as an empty signifier, he asserts that any claim for a wholeness of its representation will always be an insufficient and merely a partial claim pretending to represent its wholeness:

[A]ny signifier that claims to close off this field will never be adequate to the task, and will play the role of an impostor. Ideology describes the situation in which the social subject misrecognizes the lack in the symbolic Other by identifying a particular concrete content with what Laclau calls an empty signifier [...].⁷⁴

Thus, Glynos contends for an “impossibility of closure” in the representation of truth.⁷⁵ Any representation claiming wholeness, consequently, conceals this impossibility. On this basis, Glynos inverts the definition of ideology as a misrepresentation of an essentialised truth into an attempt at presenting an unambiguously true representation which disguises the fragility of such a representation.

Still, Glynos argues that a complete emptiness or *irrepresentation* of the empty signifier, i.e. complete disorder, is an impossible situation which must be resolved

72 Nomani: *al-Kalām*, 35, 37; Khan: *Maqālāt*, Vol. IV, 260; Vol. III, 18.

73 Jason Glynos: “The Grip of Ideology: A Lacanian Approach to the Theory of Ideology,” *Journal of Political Ideologies* 6, no. 2 (2001): 193.

74 *Ibid.*, 198.

75 *Ibid.*, 195.

by establishing *any* structuring signifier that can provide for the construction of meaning:

Let us consider the extreme situation of radical disorganization of the social fabric. In such conditions [...] people need *an* order, and the actual content of it becomes a secondary consideration. ‘Order’ as such has no content, because it only exists in the various forms in which it is actually realized, but in a situation of radical disorder ‘order’ is present as that which is absent; it becomes an empty signifier, as the signifier of that absence.⁷⁶

Since truth is defined as an empty signifier, any claim for imbuing it with any concrete meaning can only be a contingent order culminating from the closure of the system and the determination of the concrete content of the empty signifier. Thus, ideology is the attempt to conceal this contingency and present an alleged wholeness.⁷⁷

3.4 The Structure of Knowledge

With this perspective in mind, both Khan’s and Shibli’s epistemologies conceal their contingency and claim necessary insights, which, however, are only meaningful within their contingent order. In Shibli’s epistemology, his concept of *‘aql* occupies the empty signifier and claims the wholeness of its representation. From his *‘aql* emerges the closure of the system through the double binding of the structuring of the world and its perception and conceptualisation, both by means of *‘aql*. In a similar manner, Khan presents his interpretation of *dīn* as containing a closed world order with eternal and immutable natural laws, whereby perception is limited to the necessary conformity with this order. In his epistemology, essences are immediately accessible – so that erroneous perception is out of question.

Consequently, potential knowledge inevitably circulates around the perception of the structure arranged by the very same faculty which enables its realisation and comprehension: *‘aql*. For Khan’s example, the structure is, however, maintained by the world order of *dīn*, while the role of *‘aql* is not unequivocally defined. Since both authors presume an accessibility to essences in their epistemologies, any deviation from these natural insights, if thought of as possible, is dismissed either as

⁷⁶ Ernesto Laclau: *Emancipation(s)* (London: Verso, 2007), 44.

⁷⁷ Glynos: “The Grip of Ideology,” 198f.

“irrational,” or contradictory to *‘aql*. Thus, both claim that the acknowledgement of the existence of God is a natural and undeniable fact:

[I]t is entirely wrong to say that they [i.e. deniers of the existence of God] do not believe in the existence of God. For, this belief is a natural insight of man [*insān kā amr-i ʿtib ʿī*].⁷⁸

The contingent acknowledgement of the existence of God is thus proposed as a necessary insight within their enclosed systems. A denial is rather perceived as ignorance and reluctance to recognize an undeniable fact.⁷⁹ Consequently, knowledge is conceived of as merely limited to the circular movement of the realisation of the pre-structured perception made comprehensible through a supra-individual faculty, this itself being a part of the world order or, for Shibli, even its originator. Thus, *‘aql* cannot be perceived as a critical faculty which questions *a priori* premises through individual reasoning, but must be perceived as the affirmation of such premises or, in fact, even as their origin.

This results in an inflexible conception of knowledge, for truth is essentialised within their closed systems, implying the assertion of a singular, true knowledge. This suggests that Khan and Shibli employ their emphasis on observation (*mušāhadah*) and experience (*tajribah*) as mere keywords, enabling them to link their epistemologies to the inductive approach of science versus the deductive method of ancient Greek philosophy. However, a closer examination reveals that their epistemologies first apply a simplified interpretation of Greek philosophy. Already, the concise outlining of Plato and Aristotle alone demonstrates that their criticism is merely targeted against Plato and his assertion of self-contained Forms as a source of knowledge in emphasising an inductive approach originating from the sensory perception of material objects. Criticising Plato as a representative strawman for the whole of Greek philosophy, their – in fact – Aristotelian approach is then fashioned as purely inductive and scientific. Science, reduced to the keywords of induction and empiricism, is linked with Islam by emphasising observation (*mušāhadah*) and experience (*tajribah*) time and again. The strawman-critique of Plato allows them to disguise the Aristotelian outlook of their epistemologies while the influence of Bacon’s scepticism of pure induction remains limited to keywords.

One might interpret Shibli’s scepticism toward the abstracted general categories possibly obscured during remembrance as an attempt to link his approach to the work of Bacon. However, if Bacon is sceptical of man’s ability to immediately

⁷⁸ Khan: *Maqālāt*, Vol. III, 18; cf. also Nomani: *al-Kalām*, 36f.

⁷⁹ Khan: *Maqālāt*, Vol. III, 18.

access essences through observation, Shibli's scepticism of the abstract leaves this immediate access entirely unaffected. Likewise, Khan's assertion of ideas evoked by means of verification through experience does not imply a scepticism with respect to the immediate access to essences. Instead, his assertion appears to serve only as an indicator for distinguishing the two ways of gaining knowledge, while the perception of the essence is presumed to be self-evident *prior* to a subsequent verification.

In fact, both Khan's and Shibli's epistemologies are – despite their vigorous critique of Greek philosophy – very much Aristotelian, as they detach perception and the process of gaining knowledge from the individual by acknowledging an external faculty governing perception and, thus, allow for universally homogeneous conceptualisations within a circularly closed system. Consequently, they neglect the revision of the fundamental, metaphysical signifiers of *dīn* and '*aql*, which sustain the structure and meaningfulness of the entire system. *A priori* premises cannot be revised on the basis of *a posteriori* discoveries. Thus, the two authors dismiss a Baconian hypothetico-deductive approach allowing for adjustment of *a priori* premises. For it is not observation and experience which are guiding the construction of the system but, conversely, observation and experience are guided through *dīn* or '*aql*. Thus, their approach is rather pseudo-inductive.

Conclusion

The analysis of Khan's and Shibli's epistemologies could reveal several crucial insights about their conceptions of knowledge and reason. The present study originated in an analysis of their assertion of a rigid dichotomy of the epistemological approaches of ancient Greek philosophy and modern science. Both presumed a rather oversimplified definition, each conceiving of Greek philosophy as syllogism and suspicion as a result of its merely deductive approach. This was contrasted to the inductive approach of modern science. In order to link with modern science, both men presented their own epistemological approaches which vehemently emphasised observation and experience or experiment and empiricism as single sources for certain knowledge. This attempt to link with science resulted in an inconsistent terminology: '*aql* comes to represent both Greek philosophy's as well as science's approach in, nevertheless, differing notions. While the '*aql* of Greek philosophy is criticised for its speculative character, scientific reasoning is

equally related to *'aql*, but perceived as empirical reasoning on the basis of experience (*tajribah*) and observation (*mušāhadah*). As a result of these two divergent notions, an inconsistency and apparent contradiction emerges when Khan criticises the *'aqlī* approach of Greek philosophy and aims to simultaneously substitute it with the *'aql* of science. His criticism is rather directed towards analogy and syllogism versus induction and empiricism. In connection with science, the prior criticised notion of *'aql* is overlaid with a scientific notion of empiricism and induction.⁸⁰

Closer examination disclosed that both Khan's and Shibli's criticism of Greek philosophy is rather targeted against Plato's concept of Forms as self-contained entities being the source for knowledge. Their effort to link with modern science, however, turns out to be a reference to the keywords of observation and experience, indicating an inductive approach. Yet, their strawman critique of Plato as representing the whole of Greek philosophy permitted them to conceal the Aristotelian outlook of their epistemologies.

Despite Khan's and Shibli's emphasis on inductive devices as the sources of knowledge, the process of conceptualisation is, in fact, pre-structured by a supra-individual, universal faculty culminating in uniform perception. This circular perception of a preordained structure cannot be perceived differently due to the connection of the faculty of perception to the very same order. Furthermore, this link to a metaphysical signifier closing the system renders their claim for an inductive approach as mere pseudo-induction, which is deductively governed by an external faculty. The detachment of the perceiving faculty from the individual neglects individual reasoning and inevitably closes the system in an immutable, circular structure. Thus, the possibility of revising the structuring metaphysical signifier is dismissed, as is all perception, despite the authors' claims for inductive abstraction which is, in fact, predestined by the metaphysical signifier. Consequently, the contingency of the system is concealed through discounting any reasoning that conflicts with the metaphysical signifier as "irrational". This closed system further permits the proposal of contingent assertions as necessary insights, most prominently, in the argument for the universality of the acknowledgement of God's existence as an undeniable fact. Thus, both the deductive as well as inductive approaches that Khan and Shibli develop in their writings are governed overtly or

80 The dichotomy of *'aql* – as in *ma'qūlāt* ("rational" sciences of Greek philosophy and *'ilm al-kalām*) – in contrast to *manqūlāt* (traditional sciences based on the revealed texts and the *ḥadīṣ*) is turned into a dichotomy of the two notions of *'aql*, i.e. *qiyas* and *ẓanniyāt* vis-à-vis *tajribah* and *mušāhadah*. Scientific *'aql* is tied to nature as its referent, while Greek *'aql* is perceived as "levitating," without a link to the material world. This inconsistency can perhaps be perceived as a result of a thesis of continuity between philosophy and science, resulting in contradictory notions of reason.

covertly by a supra-individual, uniform faculty. For example, as we have seen above, Khan's human nature (*fiṭrat-i insānī*) mirrors God in a universally uniform way, thus asserting an invariable disposition in man to acknowledge God's existence. In a very similar vein, Shibli also develops his conception of *rūḥ* as a faculty of perception through its connection to the Divine World [*'ālam-i quds*].

In his book, *Another Reason*, Gyan Prakash's description of the impact of science on Hinduism is quite reminiscent of Khan's and Shibli's efforts to link Islam to modern science by proposing a continuity between the two. Prakash states that the gradual spread of science in the middle of the 19th century was accompanied by the attempts of reform movements to rediscover science in one's own religious tradition. However, Prakash argues that this must not be misunderstood as a mere adoption:

To think of science's authority in India and the modern Indian elite as products of a translation between the lines is to bring another history into view – a history of an irreducibly different Indian modernity forged in the interstitial spaces opened by the process of translation. Viewed as a product of translation, the elite does not appear as a copy of the original, but as a ghostly double that resists identification as a copy by asserting difference.⁸¹

Instead, he describes science in these contexts as a “grammar of transformation.”⁸² Thus, the indigenous South Asian confrontation with science triggered a transformation of religious traditions through its deployment as a model.

As we have seen, Khan and Shibli aim to link to science in different ways. While the latter attempted to present science as a continuation of Greek and, in particular, Muslim philosophy, thus implying continuity, Khan equalised Islam and science with Greek philosophy as the connective link. That said, Shibli's project, too, fundamentally bases itself on equalisation, for his assertion of continuity is reasoned on the grounds of the equation of *falsafah-i jadīdah* (modern philosophy) with *'ulūm-i jadīdah* (modern sciences), thus arranging science in a long tradition dependent on preceding philosophical traditions. Thus, both authors demonstrate a commensurability between Islam and science.

The present study demonstrates that a description of this translational process of equalisation as mere adoption falls short, as science's claim for universality simultaneously resulted in a dislocation of science and its related concepts. Allegedly universal concepts, such as reason, are equated with Arabic/Urdu-terminology in a manner that assumes their synonymy. This disregard for linguistic variation results, on the one hand, in a transformation and reinterpretation of science

⁸¹ Prakash: *Another Reason*, 51.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 54.

and its structure. On the other hand, this presumed synonymy provides a reference point for the translation of concepts culminating in a transformation and reinterpretation of Islam as well, through its equivocation with a transformed approximation of science (its base concepts now being read with differing notions).

Through the example of the central concepts of science, reason and religion, then, a comparison with their respective counterparts in the discourse of Islam shows tremendous differences. The most prominent example was the equation of reason and '*aql*'. The latter served, on the one hand, for a circular closure of both Khan's and Shibli's epistemology by detaching it from the individual, thus universalising the process of perception which is comprehended as unequivocally revealing essences. On the basis of this concept of reason as '*aql*', contingent claims can be presented as necessary and in conformity with science. Khan's and Shibli's inherent claim of synonymy between '*aql*' and reason allows them to integrate their Aristotelian epistemology into the discourse of modern science, and hence revert the thesis of conflict between science and religion because religious claims can be argued as rational

This throws some light on the commonly-recurring recurring accusation of the "Westernisation" of Khan and the Aligarh circle in general. As is evident here, their conception of science is rather based on basic keywords allowing to connect with scientific discourse, while the content is a translation of these keywords in an Islamic context. Thus, it is questionable as to how far their representation of Islam can be described as the product of merely "Western" influences.

This question of influence throws some light on the nature of the two counter-concepts of science and religion. The preceding two chapters have already questioned the assertion of fixed touchstones, as Shibli and Khan seem to suggest, referring to either science or Islam as stable entities. The present chapter demonstrated that not only is Islam redefined in confrontation with science, but science itself is exposed to a process of translation and equalisation into an Islamic context, culminating in tremendous epistemological changes. With this in mind, neither religion nor science – as presented in the works of Khan and Shibli – can be reasonably argued as originating in a "Western" context. These authors' conceptions of reason and science, which preceded their responses to the conflict thesis, are affected by the transformative processes outlined above. Thus, no origin can be identified and one rather has to assume various origins of these concepts, which cannot be retraced to a single source.

VIII. Individualising Religion

In taking Maulwi Deputy Nazir Ahmad Dihlawi (1836-1912) as its focus, this chapter will focus on another author in the arena of belles-lettres. The preceding chapters have discussed Shibli Nomani, who was, among other things, known for his critical studies of literature and, in particular, Hali, whose *Musaddas* had an extraordinary influence on Urdu poetry. Through the writings of Ahmad, I will further expand my analysis of the literary diffusion of ideas from the Aligarh circle. It will, however, be a goal of this chapter to also broaden the view on Ahmad: studies of his work have primarily focused on his accomplishments in the development of the novel in Urdu. Ahmad is praised for having penned *Mir'āt al-'urūs* (1869), the first novel of Urdu literature – which nonetheless stands in competition for this title with Mirza Muhammad Hadi Ruswa's (1857-1931) *Umrā'ō Jān Adā* (1899). It should be mentioned that Ahmad did not call his own prose works novels, but rather *qiṣṣah* (story). Yet, this debate is not of interest for the present study. Rather, my aim here is to include and discuss Ahmad's largely ignored works which engage with religious topics, providing an attempt to define Islam from within instead of through outward demarcations, a method discussed in each preceding chapter.¹

1 In his *The Pursuit of Urdu Literature*, Ralph Russell indicated the *desideratum* to study Ahmad's religious writings: "In my opinion Nazir Ahmad's religious writings need to be studied more thoroughly than they have been, and with much greater respect" (Ralph Russell: *The pursuit of Urdu literature: A select history* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992), 118). As an exception in this regard, Christina Oesterheld's studies on Ahmad are to be mentioned, wherein the author touches on some aspects of his religious thought. Yet, she also discerns a strong *desideratum* with regard to studying Ahmad's religious texts more thoroughly, cf. particularly Christina Oesterheld: "Deputy Nazir Ahmad and the Delhi College," in *The Delhi College: Traditional Elites, the Colonial State and Education Before 1857*, ed. Margrit Pernau (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006), but also Christina Oesterheld: "Die Begegnung mit dem Westen als kulturelle Herausforderung – ‚Ibnul-Vaqt' (Sohn der Zeit) von Naẓīr Aḥmad," in *Nānāvīdhaikatā: Festschrift für Hermann Berger*, ed. Dieter B. Kapp and Hermann Berger (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1996).

1. Nazir Ahmad

1.1 Educational Background

Ahmad was born in 1836 in a village of the Bijnor district of present-day Uttar Pradesh to a family living in rather poor conditions, but which was, however, “known for its learning and piety.”² Iftikhar Ahmad Siddiqi (Iftihār Aḥmad Ṣiddīqī) describes his family background in relation to Sufi-masters (*pīr-zādoṅ ke gharāne se*).³ Ahmad received his first lessons in Persian and Arabic from his father, Maulwi Saadat Ali Khan. He continued his studies for three years under Maulwi Nasrullah Khan Khurjwi, “a distinguished scholar in traditional Islamic learning” who must have made a long-lasting impression on Ahmad, as he describes him in one of his lectures as an exemplary person combining “all virtues of a religious scholar and a pious Muslim.”⁴ In 1842-43, his father brought him and his brother to nearby Delhi for further education in a *madrasa* adjoined to the Aurangabadi mosque where he stayed at the same time. He claims to have been dependent on begging for food from people of the neighbourhood. Though this was a common practice, Christina Oesterheld doubts the truth of this claim, as Ahmad tended to exaggerate in his self-portrayal:⁵ “[...] it is quite possible that he later presented this stage of his life in too gloomy colours, perhaps for the sake of dramatic effect.”⁶ In the *madrasa*, Ahmad studied under the supervision of Maulwi Abd al-Khaliq, a pupil of Shah Abd al-Aziz, and Allamah Sayyid Nazir Husain, a famous scholar of the Ahl-i Hadis, though he later complained of having received little education during these years.⁷

Only by chance did Ahmad come to be introduced to the Delhi College:

He had been attracted, we are told, to the Delhi College to watch the annual prize distribution; and as the crowd poured out of the building he fell down, receiving a few bruises. This accident proved the making of his life. So well did this mite of a

2 Abdul Qadir: “Maulvi Nazeer Ahmad,” in *Deputy Nazir Ahmad: A Biographical and Critical Appreciation*, ed. M. Ikram Chaghatai (Lahore: Pakistan Writers Cooperative Society, 2013), 13.

3 Iftihār Aḥmad Ṣiddīqī: *Maulvī Nazīr Aḥmad Dihlavī: aḥvāl va āṭār* (Lāhaur: Majlis-i Taraqqī-i Adab, 1971), 173.

4 Oesterheld: “Deputy Nazir Ahmad and the Delhi College,” 301.

5 Qadir: “Maulvi Nazeer Ahmad,” 13.

6 Oesterheld: “Deputy Nazir Ahmad and the Delhi College,” 301.

7 Ṣiddīqī: *Maulvī Nazīr Aḥmad Dihlavī*, 173; Oesterheld: “Deputy Nazir Ahmad and the Delhi College,” 301.

boy, rescued from the crush, impress the kindly Principal with his ready wit, that he decided to admit him to the College with a stipend.⁸

As has been discussed before, the Delhi College was founded in 1825 and triggered an influential “encounter between British and Indo-Muslim culture through the medium of Urdu,”⁹ both within and outside of the college through different publications. The college was distinguished by its two divisions, the Oriental and the English sections. Despite his keen interest, Ahmad was denied access to the English section by his father – a deficiency which he later remedied in autodidactically studying English. The year of his entrance into the college ranges in record from 1845 to 1847 – a time when protests against the college had largely diminished. Initially, its teaching of the English language, literature, and science had been deemed by the educated elite of the city as an attempt by the British to “depart from its policy of patronizing Oriental learning and upholding religious neutrality.”¹⁰ By the time Ahmad enrolled for the Arabic class, however, the Delhi College had become an established and distinguished institution, providing a platform for attaining good employment.

The syllabus of the Oriental section rested on the *dars-i nizāmī*, which was to a certain extent a standardised syllabus developed in the 18th century in the Farangi Mahall in Lucknow and which spread over wide areas of South Asia. The *dars-i nizāmī* was characterised by its emphasis on *ma‘qūlāt* (the rational sciences), i.e. logic and philosophy, over *manqūlāt* (the traditional sciences), i.e. exegesis and study of the *hadīs*-tradition. Over the course of time, the syllabus experienced several modifications and abridgements. Thus, the version taught in the Delhi College was also a modification – one with tremendous alterations, as the syllabus had been emptied of its theological texts and instead focused on classical Arabic belles-lettres.¹¹

This laid the basis for Ahmad’s profound acquaintance with Arabic, which enabled him to later tackle the task of translating the Quran into Urdu – though not the first translation of the Quran in Urdu, his was the first idiomatic rendering. At the same time, the modified *dars-i nizāmī* proved to be a weak point in his later theological engagements.¹²

8 Sayyid Iftihār ‘Ālam Bilgrāmī: *Hayāt an-Nazīr* as quoted by Sadiq, *A History of Urdu Literature*. 2nd edition. Delhi [et al.]: Oxford University Press, 1984, 405.

9 Margrit Pernau: “Entangled Translations: The History of the Delhi College,” in *The Delhi College: Traditional Elites, the Colonial State and Education Before 1857*, ed. Margrit Pernau (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006), 1.

10 Ibid., 12.

11 Oosterheld: “Deputy Nazir Ahmad and the Delhi College,” 303.

12 Ibid., 303f.

After leaving the college in 1853, Ahmad first taught at an elementary school in Punjab. However, being disappointed and fatigued by this barely challenging employment, he soon fiercely attempted to relinquish this post and eventually took the position of deputy inspector of schools in Kanpur. Nevertheless, being unsatisfied by this employment, too – particularly after a quarrel with his superior – he quit this job in 1857. When he rescued and hid an injured British woman during the upheaval of 1857, he was remunerated with a position as the deputy inspector of schools in Allahabad. During this time, he autodidactically learned English to a sufficient level, which qualified him for the task of translating several texts from English into Urdu on the initiative of William Muir. Among them was also his substantial contribution to the translation of the Indian Penal Code, which brought him a recommendation for the post of deputy collector, which he carried out from 1863 to 1877. After this period, Ahmad took up a position in the princely state of Hyderabad, which he occupied until 1884. Resigning from this employment only after intrigues at the court, he could still assure a reasonable pension for himself. He spent the following years addressing public gatherings as well as reading and writing. His public presence abruptly ended, however, when his book *Ummahāt al-ummah* (1909) provoked fierce protest over its irreverence towards the Prophet’s wives, this eventually culminating in the burning of the book.¹³

1.2 Nazir Ahmad – The Novelist

Ahmad is the author of seven novels, or *qiṣṣahs*, penned in the period from 1869 to 1894. His first novel, *Mir’āt al-urūs*, was, according to Ahmad, initially penned for the instruction of his daughter and only afterwards submitted for a competition initiated by the Lieutenant-Governor of the North-Western Provinces in 1868. *Mir’āt* won the full prize of 1000 rupees and was so appreciated by the Lieutenant-Governor that the “government purchased two thousand copies of the book for its institutions and recommended its inclusion in school syllabi.”¹⁴ Likewise, his following two “novels”, *Banāt an-na’š* (1872) and *Taubat an-Naṣūh* (1874), won him prizes – the former a prize of 500 rupees, while the latter again brought him the first prize and was so beloved that it was even translated into English in 1884. In this respect, C.M. Naim points to a crucial aspect of these competitions, which of

13 Ibid., 310-12.

14 C. M. Naim: “A Study of Five Urdu Books...,” in *Deputy Nazir Ahmad: A Biographical and Critical Appreciation*, ed. M. Ikram. Chaghatai (Lahore: Pakistan Writers Cooperative Society, 2013), 74.

course were not announced altruistically or as an end in and of themselves, but in pursuit of supporting “useful” literature – the measure of utility, however, being defined by the British:

It also established the fact that the Government of India was the new patron of learning, that the patronized learning was to be put to use for the general good as conceived by it, and that it had the power not only to approve certain ideas through rewards and disapprove others through neglect, but also to disseminate the approved ones through the educational system – the books so favored being purchased for libraries and prescribed for various examinations.¹⁵

The institutional backing provided an effective means of promoting the favoured books and, consequently, the respective ideas mediated through these stories. This shall, however, be only a side note, as the focus of this chapter does not lie with these three books that make up the early phase of Ahmad’s writing, characterised as it was by its instructive and didactic intentions:

Mir’at was intended to teach ethics (*akhlaq*) and good housekeeping (امور خانہ داری). This book [i.e. *Banāt*] does the same, but only secondarily; its primary concern is with scientific knowledge (معلومات علمی). Now remains the topic of religious piety (دین داری).¹⁶

The first two of his “novels” focused mostly on instructions for women and in the family sphere: *Mir’at* revolves around contrary sisters: Akbari, the elder sister, and Asghari, the younger one. The story commences with the description of the character of Akbari as an ill-tempered and disrespectful person who is soon married, but fails completely to manage the newly conferred responsibility of managing a household. In contrast, her younger sister Ashgari is married to the younger brother of Akbari’s husband and manages to turn his and the entire quarter’s life upside down. Ashgari seems to be Ahmad’s exemplar of a literate, educated, and cultivated *ṣarīf* woman. *Banāt* resumes this story and describes Asghari in the role of a teacher instructing, among others, the spoiled protagonist Husn Ara. In addition to the instructive style of *Mir’at* presenting the story of the inculcation of the values and good habits of a *ṣarīf* woman, *Banāt* describes lessons on geography, history, and science, as well as cooking, sewing, and the general abilities needed

15 C. M. Naim: “Prize-Winning *Adab*: A Study of Five Urdu Books Written in Response to the Allahabad Government Gazette Notification,” in *Moral Conduct and Authority: The Place of ‘adab’ in South Asian Islam*, ed. Barbara Daly Metcalf (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 292.

16 Naim: “A Study of Five Urdu Books,” 75.

for keeping a household in much detail, thus simultaneously instructing the reader.¹⁷

While *Mir'āt* and *Banāt* are focused on the instruction of women in the sphere of housekeeping as well as their education, two later “novels” also revolve around the position of women, yet in a broader social context: his *Fasānah-i Muḩṩalā* (1885) thematises the issue of polygamy while his *Ayyāmā* (1891) discusses the prevention of remarriage for widows.

Ahmad’s third “novel,” *Taubat an-Naṣūḩ*, shall also be concisely mentioned here. The plot revolves around the religious awakening of Nasuh¹⁸ after his recovery from Cholera. Before, in his delirious state, Nasuh had a dream of the Day of Judgement which he perceives as an admonition. Consequently, he not only mends his own lifestyle but also sees it as his responsibility to “reform” his own family, too. While his wife as well as the younger three children of the household can be convinced very easily, his grown-up children, Naima and Kalim, oppose the radical change taking place at home. Of particular interest is the role of Kalim, an educated enthusiast of Urdu and Persian poetry who spends his time on idle activities like chess or breeding pigeons. He comes to be an exemplary representative of the *navābī*-culture which Nasuh fiercely disdains after his shift to a rather rigid reformation of his family. The latter’s zeal even rises to the point where he eventually burns his son’s library, which consists of, in his view, obscene and licentious literature.

This book was received enthusiastically in its time of publication and is even today part of Urdu textbooks. Oesterheld argues that this kind of literature:

[...] may have served as a kind of guide for middle-class Muslims in times of disorientation and disruption. The invasion of new, culturally-alien ideas which colonial rule and western education had unleashed on the Muslims of India had ‘inaugurated a long period of disequilibrium.’ In such a situation Naṣūḩ’s clear-cut rules – for a pious life lived in accordance with the injunctions of Islam, for moral conduct, and for the development of a ‘Protestant’ ethos of labor and work – must have provided an anchor and moral support for the rising Muslim middle class.¹⁹

17 Ibid., 75-77.

18 Nayyar recognises several aspects of the *dāstān*-tradition in Ahmad’s *Taubat*, on the structural level in particular. But the names are also chosen on the basis of describing the qualities of the named (*ism-i bā musammā*), while the characters are types of these qualities rather than real persons. On the other hand, the novel is also said to be influenced by Daniel Defoe’s *The Family Instructor*. Cf. Nayyar: *Urdū adab kī taṣkīl-i jadīd*, 79, 90.

19 Oesterheld: “Nazir Ahmad and the Early Urdu Novel: Some Observations,” *The Annual of Urdu Studies* 16 (2001): 34.

She further argues that, with the increasing cessation of religious education – in particular in government schools and colleges – Muslim identity both inwardly and outwardly had to be preserved in the family sphere by living these values and integrating them into one’s own daily life.

Of particular interest for this study this study, furthermore, will be Ahmad’s *Ibn al-Vaqt* (1888) and, in particular, his last “novel,” *Rūyā-i Šādīqah* (1894). The latter’s labelling as a novel is indeed arguable, as the plot revolves first and foremost around a religious dream, it being more of a religious *risālah* (pamphlet) providing a substantial synopsis of Ahmad’s views on Islam.

2. Ibn al-Vaqt – Nazir Ahmad’s Relation to Ahmad Khan and Aligarh

In the first section here, I will discuss Ahmad’s *Ibn* with respect to his stance towards Khan’s reformist schemes and the Aligarh Movement in general. A hasty and single-sided answer will be avoided, as this has too often been proposed: either his “novels” have been too hastily ascribed to instructive intentions on the model of the Aligarh circle, or his disagreements with Khan with respect to their religious ideas have been overemphasised, construing a mutual conflict.²⁰ However, the relationship between Khan and Ahmad has to be viewed more critically.

Siddiqi states that Ahmad openly confessed his association with the Aligarh circle only very late, though he was perhaps one of the first to be acquainted with Khan through entanglements with the Delhi College at the time when Ahmad studied there. Siddiqi further states that Ahmad must have been significantly impressed by Khan. Though he claims to “never have been a subscriber to Sayyid Ahmad Khan’s writings,”²¹ Siddiqi doubts this claim and explains this as an attempt to escape the accusation of being a *necarī*. Only for this reason did Ahmad expose his disagreements with Khan, whereas their ideas prove to be in conformity to a great extent, and bear testimony to the fact that Ahmad – as Siddiqi argues – must have been acquainted with Khan’s writings from his *Tabyīn* onwards.²²

Likewise, Ahmad’s *Ibn* verifies that he engages in a dialogue with Khan’s ideas via his literary as well as his later theological writings. *Ibn* was his fourth “novel” and denotes a shift in his writing – away from his focus on the family

20 Siddiqī: *Maulvī Nazīr Aḥmad Dihlavī*, 173.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

sphere of his first three “novels” towards a more controversial topic: the relation between the British and their subjects. Thus, as Oesterheld argues, he turned to this topic only after quitting his position in government employment.²³ The story of this “novel” revolves around the protagonist of the same name.²⁴ The story is set in the year 1857 alongside the Indian uprising. Ibn al-Vaqt, an Indian Muslim with a keen interest in progressive views, saves the injured British officer, Noble *ṣāhib*. In reward for this courageous act, he is offered employment as the assistant of Noble who, subsequently, introduces him to British society: Ibn soon abandons his style and aims to imitate the British lifestyle “not only in spirit but also in the externals of culture such as dress, table etiquette, mode of living”:²⁵

In summary, within one month of changing his style of clothing, there was no sign of Islam left in Ibn al-Vaqt nor in his way of living. If a stranger would have come to his house, he would not have been able to decide whether this is the home of an Englishman or an Indian.²⁶

Significantly, the narrator here construes a dichotomy between Ibn’s new mode of living and his Muslim identity. These are denied coexistence. Thus, Ibn’s adoption of the British life style is equated with discarding a Muslim way of life.

The narrator then proceeds to expose Ibn’s serious misjudgement, namely that his complete acclimation to and imitation of the British environment is advantageous and useful. As soon as Noble has to leave India, Ibn’s support breaks off and he finds himself left alone. He had, on the one hand, broken with his own community which did not tolerate his way of living, while, on the other hand, the British community had tolerated him only due to Noble’s support. With the latter’s departure, these circumstances come to light and compel Ibn to relinquish his position. Only through the intercession of his relative, Hujjat al-Islam, can Ibn regain his former status in the Muslim community. However, in negotiations with Ibn’s new superior, Sharp, the latter voices strong criticism against Ibn’s adoption of British clothing:

23 Oesterheld: “Die Begegnung mit dem Westen als kulturelle Herausforderung,” 206.

24 The book’s title is distinguished from the protagonist by presenting the title in italics.

25 S. M. Abdullah: “Nazir Ahmad,” in *Deputy Nazir Ahmad: A Biographical and Critical Appreciation*, ed. M. Ikram Chaghatai (Lahore: Pakistan Writers Cooperative Society, 2013), 369.

26 Nazir Ahmad: *Ibn al-Vaqt* (Dihli: *Kitābī Dunīyā*, 2015), 157. *Ibn* has also been translated into English by Muhammad Zakir as *The Son of the Moment*. This and the following translations, however, do not refer to Muhammad Zakir, but are the translations of the author.

This clothing is our national distinction and tradition [*qaumī šī ‘ār*] and if an Indian dresses in our vein, then we will apprehend that he is imitating and mocking us. What reason will there be for an Indian to dress in our clothing, which is not in any way comfortable for him, without any discernible reason except claiming equality with us? This aims at denigrating the British, weakening the Government and destroying their respect.²⁷

Sharp’s statement clarifies that his resentment towards Ibn was founded on identity conflicts and the threatened superiority of the British through Indians’ appropriation of Western styles of dress. The “novel” thus presents the confrontations and conflicts which young (on the European model), educated Muslims had to face. This negotiation of identity was, however, not limited to merely outward aspects of style, such as clothing – and not so in *Ibn*, either.

Ahmad depicts Ibn as a representative of the new Muslim middle class that was raised in a British-controlled educational system. This generation began to raise questions about the veracity of Islam in view of the current emphasis on rationalism, and Ahmad presents Ibn as a typified exponent of this thinking. In dialogue with Ibn, Noble exposes the terrible situation of the contemporary Muslim community and realises the urgent need of a reformer:

This nation required a reformer anyhow, but now its survival is dependent on the appearance of a reformer. I say, why do you not fulfil this role of a reformer.²⁸

Furthermore, however, Noble also presents a reform plan:

The kind of reform which is necessary for the progress of India can be summarised by the following: as far as possible, Indians have to be modelled on the example of the British – be it with respect to the diet, the clothing, the language, the habits, the housing or the mindset, in any way.²⁹

Noble acknowledges the dissemination of science (‘*ulūm-i jadīdah*) as a crucial means to improving the situation of the Indians:

If there is a means for the prosperity of the Indians, then it is to spread science [*‘ulūm-i jadīdah*] among them and to call their attention to apply their whole power to rational occurrences [*‘aqlī vāqi ‘āt*, i.e. those occurrences which can be comprehended on a rational basis].³⁰

27 Ibid., 225.

28 Ibid., 103.

29 Ibid., 108.

30 Ibid., 107.

Noble doubts, however, the utility of the orientalist approach of translating scientific texts into Urdu, as he takes Urdu to be an inadequate medium of conveyance that lacks the capacity (*vus'at*) to cover the range of English scientific language. Thus, translators of scientific books would not even manage to translate one line without using an English word in the translated text. Hence, he concludes with the aforementioned reform plan of adapting Indians as much as possible to the British model.³¹

Significantly, Ibn does not take up any subject position, but is rather presented as a recipient of foreign ideas which he merely absorbs – unquestioned and uncritically. While Noble leads the dialogue, Ibn appears only marginally when asking something or expressing his agreement. He appears to be Noble's pawn. When Ibn asks why Noble does not himself initiate reform, his response refers to his position as an outsider. Thus, Ibn eventually agrees to undertake this reform.³² The results have been described above: Ibn commences with his own life and models it entirely on the British prototype. Nevertheless, the implementation of this reform plan beyond Ibn's individual life is not to be, and comes to an abrupt end with Noble's departure and Ibn's subsequent degradation.

In the following passage, I will briefly examine the role of Hujjat, due to whose intercession Ibn regains his position. Hujjat aims to convince Ibn of the fallacy of his reformist approach. Hujjat is depicted as a practicing Muslim. When he comes to meet Ibn in the second part of the story, he has initially intended to stay at the latter's home. However, Ibn's way of life makes it impossible for him to obey to the rules of Islam:

What all will you arrange? First, there is no place for me to perform my prayer. Wherever one goes – one picture after the other. This is no house, it is rather an idol-temple. Furthermore, you have raised dogs in such an amount that one cannot give the *azān* and if I do not perform my prayer in company in the mosque, I do not find peace of mind.³³

Not only does Hujjat have difficulties in finding a proper place to perform his prayer, as the walls are hung with pictures and he is compelled to move onto the veranda, but he finds the English way of preparing food with alcohol to be intolerable. When Ibn tries to persuade Hujjat to at least stay for dinner, Hujjat equally denies this possibility, as he has seen a shelf of alcoholic beverages and cannot be convinced by the menu.

31 Ibid., 107f.

32 Ibid., 108f.

33 Ibid., 212f.

Following Ibn’s degradation, Hujjat and Ibn meet repeatedly and discuss different religious issues – even though Hujjat denies any religious debate (*maḏhabī mu-bāḥiṣ*) and argues that religion is a merely individual matter, which does not allow for any external critique. Religion is, in Hujjat’s view, intended as consolation (*tasallī*). Thus, Ibn’s reform approach with its emphasis on reason (*‘aql*) misses the essence of religion:

If you want to take my advice, then forget about a book of *‘ilm al-kalām* and do not even look at it. There is one great harm the seeker of religion [*ṭalabgār-i dīn*] will suffer from when he consults this type of books: he starts to doubt [and quarrel] in religious matters [*dīnīyāt men mutašakkī*].³⁴

Hujjat not only perceives the use of reason in the sphere of religion as cause for doubts and scepticism, but also sees reason as the actual root of religious quarrels and conflicts which are merely counterproductive and lead to no fruitful solution. Instead, such arguments miss the actual aim of religion.

Ibn counters this assertion in describing the present age as the time of reason. He recognises a conflict between reason and religion, subsequently assuming an eventual cessation of religion:

Oh, my dear, those innocent times [*bhole-bhāle zamāne*] have gone by when people readily believed in religious delusions. Now is the age of reason. [...] in Europe, one will barely find five out of 100 who are religious by heart.³⁵

Ibn’s reform approach is thus described as being driven by the attempt to improve the situation of Muslims in view of the new confrontation with science and reason. Reason seems to be inextricably linked to Europe as an external import that, in turn, obtains the position of both identity marker and counterpoint to indigenous religions. This is further reinforced by the fact that Ibn’s reform approach is the single-sided proposal of Noble, while Ibn takes up a merely passive role.³⁶ Thus, Hujjat can criticise Ibn’s reform approach as too radical, entailing an entire loss of

34 Ibid., 253.

35 Ibid., 269.

36 One has to bear in mind, however, that *‘aql* by itself cannot be described as an import which was formerly not present in Islam – and this would also not be Ahmad’s argument. He rather refers to the changed notion of *‘aql* which it takes up in the second half of the 19th century. While its early notion was related to Greek and Muslim philosophy, this very notion comes to be criticised in the 19th century as a mere analogy. Its new notion rather indicates observation and empiricism, and is perceived in relation to science and, thus, in *Ibn* as European. For a further discussion of this transformation of the notion of *‘aql*, cf. Chapter 7.

identity, hereby conjoining the two aspects of the story – Ibn’s outward appearance and his inner convictions (i.e. reason):

But if you might banish [by this reform], on the one hand, the Muslims’ barbarity [*vahšat*], on the other hand, you will make them atheists [*be-dīn*].³⁷

For,

[...] when a nation does not adhere to its religion, nor its clothing, mode of living, knowledge nor to its language, then its national identity [*qaumī intiyāz*] is lost. What kind of reform is this and to whose benefit? If we want to “reform” a house, then this does not mean to demolish it from its foundation and construct another building anew. Likewise, a reform of the Muslims can only then be called reform when Muslims remain Muslims.³⁸

Thus, Ibn’s reform proposes an entire negation of Muslim identity – on the outward level of clothing, etc., as well as with respect to the abandonment of religion for the sake of reason. The author merges the outward identity markers of clothing with a conflict of reason and religion: as the British and Muslim modes of life exclude one another, in the same way also does religion exclude reason, an identity marker of Britishness. Hujjat rather emphasises that reason has no access to religious matters, which surpass its sphere of knowledge.³⁹

I shall not further engage in Hujjat’s arguments, as Ahmad reproduces them in much more detail in the other two books to be analysed in the following paragraphs. At this point, I am rather more interested in the character of Ibn. As has been mentioned, Ahmad depicts him as an advocate of reason and an initiator of a Muslim reform. Thus, it has often been argued, initially by Khan’s son himself, that Ibn was mockingly modelled on the example of Khan – however, this is an accusation which Ahmad denied. He rather claimed that Ibn was autobiographically inspired. One cannot come to a final conclusion, yet it becomes obvious that Ahmad indeed presented the character of Ibn in deliberate resemblance of Khan – in particular in his preference for the British way of life and his religious ideas. But this was less aimed at ridiculing Khan than at the act of delineating those ideas

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid., 268f.

39 Ibid., 269f. It shall also be mentioned that *Ibn*’s characters have aptronyms mirroring their respective peculiarities. Thus, Ibn al-Waqt as the Son of the Time is characterised by his unrestricted adaption to the new situation of British reign. Hujjat al-Islam, Proof of Islam, is presented as the defender of Islam against Ibn’s reformist ideas.

to which Ahmad himself did not conform.⁴⁰ Thus, a reduction of *Ibn* to a mere satire of Khan would fall short of the work's intricacy.

Significantly, the works to be discussed in the following paragraphs also feature a debate between a character similar to Ibn and an elder dialogue partner. Yet, *Ibn* stands out insofar as it is not limited to a purely religious debate, but operates on two levels and also includes the level of outward appearance, housing, food, drinking, etc. *Ibn* thematises the position of Muslims in the tremendously altered situation of post-1857 India. In confrontation with the now undeniable predominance of the British, as well as the changed educational situation, Ahmad discusses the Aligarhian reformist approach—inclusive of its extensive adjustment to the British model—with respect to Islamic identity (among other issues). In a similar vein, other books by Ahmad engage in this question, however, with a greater emphasis on Islam. Hence, with respect to the other texts discussed in the preceding chapters, his books stand out insofar as Ahmad's engagement with Islam is not initiated as a response to a critique of Islam by an outsider, as has been seen in the examples of Pfander, Muir, or Renan, but rather presents an internal discussion of Khan.⁴¹ In the following section, I aim to more thoroughly analyse Ahmad's engagement with Khan's religious reformist thought on the basis of his "novel" *Rūyā-i Šādiqah* and his pamphlet *Ijtihād* (1908).

3. Religious Writings

Ahmad penned several books on the topic of Islam with an explicitly instructive intention, of which only the most influential will be concisely discussed here. In the first place, his translation of the Quran into Urdu, *Tarjumat al-Qur'ān* (1896), has to be mentioned. At this time, various translations of the Quran had been produced in South Asia, the former taboo having been broken long before. The first step had already been taken by Shah Waliullah in the 18th century with his translation into Persian, this to be complemented by his sons' Urdu translation. Thus, the honour of primacy is not due Ahmad. His translation rather stands out for its idiomatic use of Urdu.

40 Oesterheld: "Die Begegnung mit dem Westen als kulturelle Herausforderung," 207.

41 A discussion of Khan's reformist ideas has by itself, of course, no distinctiveness. In fact, Khan's ideas have provoked an immense number of fierce critiques. Ahmad's point of view stands out insofar that, despite his critical engagement, he still has a generally positive stance towards Khan's ideas.

His *Al-Ḥuqūq va al-farā'iz* (1902), comprising three volumes, can be described as a follow-up project of his *Tarjumat*, as he utilised much of the material he had gathered during research for his translation. The *Ḥuqūq* is designed as a comprehensive manual of Muslim jurisprudence (*fiqh*). It is divided into three parts discussing rights (*huqūq*) and obligations (*farā'iz*) – first, towards God (*huqūq Allāh*); second, regarding the worship (*huqūq al-'ibād*), however, also generally pertaining to life in society; and, third, regarding morals and ethics (*huqūq an-nafs*).⁴² The *Ḥuqūq* perfectly mirrors Ahmad's focus on the distribution of practical knowledge, thus providing an exhaustive overview of various matters from the perspective of the Quran and *ḥadīṣ*.

Apart from these two major works, his *Ummahāt al-ummah* (1908) must also be mentioned for the fierce reactions it provoked. *Ummahāt* was written in critical response to a work by Ameer Ali (entitled *Ummahāt-i mu'minīn* in its Urdu translation) wherein the author discusses the topic of polygamy with respect to Muhammad. Ali was himself accused of having used irreverent expressions regarding Muhammad and his wives. The protests following the *Ummahāt*'s publication made a significant incision in the public role Ahmad had exerted up until that point in time.⁴³

The following paragraphs will, however, primarily refer to Ahmad's *Rūyā* and *Ijtihād*: his series of seven “novels” which increasingly resorted to explicitly religious topics. Thus, the denomination of “novel” for his *Rūyā* is rather dubious, as the story serves merely as a loose background narrative framing a lengthy religious dream resembling a *risālah*. As Osterheld writes: “It came at a point when Nazīr Aḥmad had just begun to move away from fictional stories to strictly theological works. Hence the story is reduced to a mere frame for the elaborate religious instruction of a searching young man, Ṣādiq, by an elderly wise man (*buzurg*) [...]”⁴⁴ The frame story revolves around Sadiq and his marriage with Sadiqa, who is gifted with the ability to see dreams which all come true. Sadiq benefits from his wife's ability when he is devastated due to his insecurity regarding his religious convictions, this situation being further reinforced by an aggressive environment of religious disputes and conflicts. Eventually, he asks God to release him from the disturbing questions running through his head and haunting his sleep, which serves the author as pretext for the following extensive religious instruction: Sadiqa had a lengthy dream which she presents to Sadiq for what is nearly the rest of the “novel.”

42 Ṣiddīqī: *Maulvī Nazīr Aḥmad Dihlavī*, 281f.

43 *Ibid.*, 298.

44 Osterheld: “Nazir Ahmad and the Early Urdu Novel,” 38.

In a very similar vein, the dialogic style is also utilised in Ahmad's *Ijtihād*, which is designed as an inner dialogue triggered by the question of "why am I a Muslim?" ("*Main kyon musalmān hūn*"). The narrator begins the book by describing his internal conflict, hereby thematising various topics of his personal understanding of Islam. While the narrator presents the personal conclusions of his long struggle, his conversation with the interlocutor does not develop an individual character, but rather serves as an excuse for the narrator's explanations.

Both of these books are the basis for the following discussion of Ahmad's engagement with Khan's conceptual framework, as they provide a very condensed insight into the same.

3.1 Engaging in Khan's Concept of *fiṭrat*

The analysis of Ahmad's *Ibn* has shown that he stands in dialogue with Khan regarding his religious ideas. Most significant in this respect is Ahmad's reinterpretation of Khan's concept of *fiṭrat*. Ahmad deliberately refers to this conceptual framework and acknowledges the assertion of an equivalence between Islam and *fiṭrat*. However, his conception of the latter diverges from Khan's. In his *Ijtihād*, the elder dialogue partner describes his path to religious insight as motivated by his reflections on the character of the world:

First of all, I began to observe things attentively. Previously, I used to perceive whatever I saw only superficially and cursorily. But now I started to inquire in the depths of things and asked: "What is this? How did it come into existence? For which purpose was it created? Did it come into existence by itself or was it created by someone? [...]" Well, this is the foundation of religion [*dīn*].⁴⁵

These reflections lead the narrator to the insight that there must be a primary cause (*sabab-i aṣlī*). Initially, one can perceive the act of man. At first glance, man seems to be the creator, as he plants gardens, tills the fields, etc. However, thorough observation reveals that man doubtlessly has some power, but only to the extent of reshaping a given creation, while countless occurrences are beyond his power.⁴⁶

45 Nazir Ahmad: *Ijtihād* (Dihlī: *Afzal*, 1908), 4.

46 *Ibid.*, 4f.

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In a nutshell, only little reflection made me consent to the assertion that constantly endless types of occurrences [*taḡayyurāt*; literally: changes] are happening and none of them – be it large or small – happens without a cause [*be sabab ke nahīn*].⁴⁷

The elder interlocuter proceeds to reduce the universe to four initial elements, as anything existent in it can be described as an amalgamation of these elements. Yet, these elements cannot be the origin of the universe, as they do not evade the necessity of a preceding *sabab* (cause), either. But this exceeds the visible world and cannot be investigated by means of observation:

[T]he amalgamation of the elements surpasses man's access – except for what God wills – and if man does not have any access, then no one has in the visible world [*mar'iyāt aur mušāhadāt-i 'ālam*] [...]. Hence, the reason for the amalgamation of the elements cannot be identified and, what is more, [the same applies for] the reason of the origin of the elements. How did they come into existence? Who is their creator?⁴⁸

Any knowledge about the cause preceding the four elements is beyond man's access and cannot be investigated by means of observing the material world.

This observable world is, however, arranged as a system of cause and effect (*duniyā 'ālam-i asbāb hai*). Thus, the existence of God is a logical and necessary (*mustalzim*) consequence, for nothing can occur in the world without any reason. Thus, the world itself is evidence of His existence as creation itself requires a creator:

In search of this cause, we have turned to all directions, but it was not visible. Yet, in its existence, there was no doubt.⁴⁹

Despite its invisibility, the cause of existence is undoubted. However, this is not explained as a lack of learning and knowledge, but as an inherent limitation of man's perceptive faculties:

[O]ur five senses are like spectacles for us, however, a blurry [*dhundlī*] one. Let us take, for example, the visual faculty out of the five senses. Vision is a very powerful means of certitude. But vision has at the same time the deficiency that, for example, the hand of a clock moves, indeed; yet, we cannot discern its movement. In the same way, the shadow moves, yet, we cannot discern its movement. [...] Now we ask: if we cannot see the movement of a clock hand or of a shadow, will you, thus,

47 Ibid., 6.

48 Ibid., 7.

49 Ibid., 19. “*Sabab kī justujū meñ ham ne cahār ṭaraf nazar ḍaurā'ī ham ko to kahīñ dikhā'ī dīyā nahīñ aur hone meñ šakk bhī nahīñ.*”

conclude that they are motionless or will you agree on the deficiency of the visual faculty.⁵⁰

In the same vein, the narrator argues that despite His indiscernibility and invisibility, one cannot deny God's existence. Visual faculty and observation are denied final authority and instead relegated to the status of deficient human faculty.

In *Rūyā*, this topic is expressed with even more clearness when the discussion turns to the sect (*firqah*) of the *Necarīs*.⁵¹ The elder dialogue partner recognises this focus on visual verification as ultimate authority as a result of an *angrezī* (i.e. English) education. Although he recognises its great benefits for disciplines such as engineering and natural sciences, he denies its utility for religion:

Now disciplines like geometry [*handasah*], mathematics [*riyāzī*] and natural sciences [*tibī'āt*] are appreciated. Those revolve around observation [*badīhāt aur mušāhadāt*] and those are beneficial for mundane disciplines. Thanks to those disciplines, trains are moved, telegraphy is operated and thousands of machines have been invented. When one studies those disciplines, one's mind changes in such a way that one does not believe in anything without visual sight [*mušāhadah*].⁵²

50 Ibid., 19.

51 Apart from the *Necarīs*, Ahmad also briefly discusses the clash between *muqallid* and *ḡair-muqallid*, between Sunni and Shia, and, at some length, the sect of Sufis (*firqah-i šūfīyah*). The former are both dismissed as rather irrelevant topics for the contemporary times, as the debate between *muqallid* and *ḡair-muqallid* revolves around mere questions of detail in Islamic jurisprudence, including, for example, the dispute of whether the *āmīn* in ritual prayer has to be pronounced audibly or whether and where one should fold his hands during prayer, etc. In a similar vein, the clash between Sunni and Shia is dismissed as a matter lacking any connection to the pressing issues of contemporary times. The question of a deputy and successor of the prophet is deemed as extraneous, as it does not have any relation to the real purpose of religion.

It will not be possible to further expand on this within the scope of this project. But, with regard to the Sufis, it should be noted that Ahmad describes them as the true reformers who aimed at restoring a balance between inner and outer religious practice – in contrast, however, to those Sufis who plainly ignored the outer religious practice. They criticised the overemphasis of merely extraneous details, such as the length of one's beard, etc. Significantly, Ahmad here uses the English term for reformer. Thus, one might read this as a reference and allusion to Khan, again referring to his "westernisation." Ahmad critically discusses Khan's thought in the following section on the *Necarīs*. Ahmad's main critique is Khan's overvaluing of human reason, while the inner and intuitive knowledge is, according to Ahmad, neglected. Thus, those Sufis who have tried to combine both spheres are described as the true reformers. Cf. Nazir Ahmad: *Majmū'ah-i Dīptī Nazīr Aḡmad* (New Delhi: *Farīd Bukdīpo*), 2005, 1107, 1109, 1124.

52 Ahmad: *Majmū'ah*, 1149.

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Religion and God are nothing visible. Still, Ahmad states that the acknowledgment of God's existence is embedded in human nature, as a natural striving which leads man to inquire into the character of creation:⁵³

[M]an's situation regarding religion is [as follows]: his heart bears testimony to God's existence, for it hears His voice and discerns His acting [*āhaṭ*; literally: sounds of steps]. But He cannot be seen nor grasped.⁵⁴

Neither man's five senses nor his reason are of use in the sphere of religion, however. God exceeds both their limits:

In the end, human reason has overestimated itself [*'aql-i insānī kī parvāz ho cukī hai*], though he might be Plato's father. But it does not help [*korh meṅ khāḥ*].⁵⁵

Ahmad repeats this distinction between, on the one hand, the visible and observable world of reason or the world of causes (*'ālam-i asbāb*), as he repeatedly terms it, and, on the other hand, the sphere of religion, in several of his works.⁵⁶ Thus, Ibn's reform approach is commented upon by the narrator of that story as being based on an entirely wrong foundation (*mazhabī rifārm ki bismillāh hī galaṭ thī*), which fails to acknowledge the limitation of human perception and reason: "Ibn al-Vaqt did not commit a small fault when he tried to subject religion under the power of reason [*mazhab ko maḥkūm-i 'aql banānā cāhā*]."⁵⁷

This demonstrates Ahmad's clear refusal to view the entire world merely in the likeness of a gear wheel of Khan's *qānūn-i qudrat* (natural law), wherein God's role is reduced to a mere preserver of this order.⁵⁸ Khan's process of equation has been discussed at length in Chapter 5 and will thus be recalled here only very briefly. In his texts, Khan attempts to naturalise an equation of the terms *fiṭrat*

53 Cf. Ahmad: *Ijtihād*, 10: "[...] *yih ḥayāl ādmī kī fiṭrat meṅ dāḥil hai. Ādmī kā dil us ko is ḥayāl par majbūr kartā aur yih ḥayāl ḥud ba-ḥud us ke dil se paidā hotā hai.*"

54 Ahmad: *Majmū'ah*, 1149.

55 Ibid., 1149.

56 Ibid., 1072.

57 Ahmad: *Ibn al-Vaqt*, 162.

58 Khan discusses this very critique in his article, "*Kyā necar mānne se Ḥudā mu 'aṭṭal ho jātā hai?*" (Will God be replaced by the belief in nature?), arguing that God will by no means be replaced; nor will His existence be superfluous with His creation of the natural laws (*qānūn-i qudrat*). Khan views God as the sustainer of the causal chain of the world, for the causal chain of natural laws does not have any independent existence, or in his words: "One must not confuse *'illat* (cause) and *'illat al-'ilal* (cause of causes)." Thus, Khan argues for a continuous creation or maintenance of this causal world order. A cessation of God would consequently result in the dissolution of the natural laws and, in fact, the entire world at the same time. Cf. Khan: *Maqālāt*, Vol. III, 283-5.

(inner/human nature) and *necar* (the Urdu-isation of the English “nature”). His particular aim was to combine the double-meaning of *necar* as being comprised of inward as well as outward nature in the single term of *fiṭrat*, veiling the common distinction between these aspects in both Urdu and Arabic. Khan intended to converge them under the umbrella of *fiṭrat*, which allowed him to reinterpret a Quranic verse featuring *fiṭrat*’s Arabic root, *fiṭra*. The quranic *fiṭra* is thus read in the sense of an extended meaning equivalent to *necar*, thus including inner as well as outer nature. Khan refers to this as the crucial foundation of his conceptual framework and argues that the Quran confirms the assumption that God created the world according to an immutable order: the creation is ordered according to the invariable laws of nature – which he describes altogether as *dīn*. Khan’s concept of an extrapolated sense of religion (*dīn*) hence comprises an accordance to between inner/human nature and outer nature. These are perceived as both connected and conforming spheres. In Khan’s thought, nature in the form of science consequently comes to be viewed as the ultimate measure for religious matters, as well.⁵⁹

Ahmad denies such a mechanistic world view and aims to “re-mystify” what he sees as a disenchanting cosmology. The elder dialogue partner of his *Rūyā* thus harshly criticises the *necarīs* for having done a great harm by trying to discard this fundamental distinction between reason and religion:

[W]ho has reason (the reason of this age) knows that there has always been a conflict between reason and religion. Both were never reconciled and will never be reconciled. [...] We do not say that the *necarīs* did not see the conflict of reason and religion or the necessity to separate them. They saw it and understood it well. But they combined sphere number 1 [i.e. religion] with sphere number 2 [i.e. reason]. This was a big fault: thus, their conflict remains forever.⁶⁰

Ahmad’s critique turns against an inclusion and inscription of reason and its derivatives of observational knowledge in religion. We have seen above that, as a result, religion comes to be subjected to reason. Rational constructs and mechanistic world views in the form of the world of causes (*‘ālam-i asbāb*) and its inherent natural laws (*qānūn-i qudrat*) are imposed on religion. Ahmad thus pronounces in his works, time and again, the necessity of *ḥadd-bandī*, the demarcation of separate spheres, restricting reason to merely mundane matters. Hence, he distinguishes the spheres (*‘alāqah*) of *mazhab*, of *‘aql*, and third, of *aḥlāq* (morals, manners).⁶¹

59 Cf. Chapter IV.

60 Ahmad: *Majmū‘ah*, 1151.

61 Ibid., 1151f.

Furthermore, Ahmad punctures Khan's all-pervasive *necar* and its laws (*qānūn-i qudrat*) when it comes to the issue of miracles, this being a stumbling block in Khan's conceptual framework for several of his associates. Khan tries to explain away miracles by tracing them back to exceptional constellations in nature, as for example in the event of *šaqq-i qamar*, the splitting of the moon affected by Muhammad, or by reinterpreting miracles as allegory, as with regard to angels being viewed as mere powers.⁶² Yet, Shibli did not follow Khan in this respect and argues in a manner similar to Ahmad with reference to the concept of *harq-i ādat* (abandonment of the usual order), thus denying a complete subordination under invariable natural laws, which leaves no space for any metaphysical exceptions and, moreover, for God's position as a mere maintainer of such laws.⁶³ Thus, when the narrator of *Ibn* bemoans the imposition of reason over religion, Ahmad perhaps also articulates his discontent with the constraints of the *qānūn-i qudrat* imposed on God. Nevertheless, both Shibli and Ahmad do not attach any particular importance to the actual occurrence of miracles. Yet, the mere allowance for the possibility that the natural laws can be abandoned temporarily is important for the conception of God, as this clearly shows the attempt to restore God's omnipotence, within the realm of a basically consistent order of natural laws:

People get convinced of God's power by a violation of nature [i.e. miracles; *hilāf-i fiṭrat*], whereas I get convinced through [the correspondence with] nature. The violation of nature is the exception, while the conformity is usual. Why should I search for evidence in the unusual instead of the usual? There are two things which do not allow me to deny the possibility of miracles: First, his omnipotence [...] and, second, it bears testimony of hubris to interfere in God's affairs. [...] It might be possible that God suspends the law of nature [*qānūn-i fiṭrat*] for any good reason. Hence, I do not deny the possibility of miracles, but I do not acknowledge them as a means of certainty, while I can recur to [the conformity with] nature.⁶⁴

This statement clearly shows Ahmad's attempt to adopt a *via media* of restoring God's omnipotence, evading a subordination of religion beneath the burden of reason. A separation of the independent, all-embracing laws of nature, autonomous of God and restricting His omnipotence, is thus avoided. Still, Ahmad emphasises the maintenance of a consistent world order in accordance with the laws of nature.

Significant, in this respect, is the elder disputant's reference to and conformity with Khan's terminology – to an extent not replicated in other parts of Ahmad's

62 Khan: *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, 6; Khan, *Maqālāt*, Vol. I, 132-5.

63 Nomani: *al-Kalām*, 63-65.

64 Ahmad: *Ijtihād*, 89.

works, and not even in the very same “novel”: the elder interlocutor aims to measure Islam against the touchstone of nature (*fiṭrat kī kasoṭī par*), as he perceives Islam to be a synonym of nature (*Islām ṭhahrā ‘ain fiṭrat*). Reminiscent of Khan’s terminology, *fiṭrat* is viewed as outward nature or *natura naturans*. Yet, this discussion of the possibility of miracles is the single place – as far as the author of this study could discern from his reading – where Ahmad applies *fiṭrat* in this meaning. This exception can perhaps be understood as Ahmad’s deliberate citation of Khan with the intention of presenting his approach in a reinterpreted way: that is, the affirmation of consistent natural laws that do not constrain God’s omnipotence, which – in turn – potentially exceeds these laws only on rare occasions.

Thus, Ahmad by no means aims to abandon the concept of the causal arrangement of the world as *‘ālam-i asbāb*, as his protagonists consider this order to be a crucial means of gaining knowledge about God’s existence. For Ahmad, inquiry into the cosmos and its character inevitably leads one to the necessary insight of God’s existence:

[G]od’s existence is a necessary inference [*mustalzim*] of the existence of the world. For, we can discern that the world is arranged according to a causal chain [*duniyā ‘ālam-i asbāb hai*]. Not even a single occurrence appears without a cause. Well, let us leave aside other occurrences, as the most significant one is the genesis of the world. Who is its mover [*muḥarrik*], its originator [*bā‘is*], its cause [*sabab*]?⁶⁵

But as his interlocutor gets confused in this argumentation, the elder presents a more obvious demonstration, initiated by the claim that, in fact, the denial of God’s existence is impossible. Atheism is traced back to a mere misunderstanding of the details:

I believe that man cannot deny the existence of God. Even when man takes in the darkness a rope for a snake and runs away for fear, then he is, indeed, misled. But he does not deny the existence of the snake. If he had denied its existence, then why would he have run away? Thus, what people perceive as denial, is, in fact, affirmation.⁶⁶

65 Ibid., 19.

66 Ibid., 20f. This demonstration is first of all directed towards the misguidance of idolaters, who do not deny the existence of God, but attach His potency to particular objects. Thus, while they are merely misled in aspects of the character of God, they do not deny His existence. Yet, a few lines later, this argument is equally transferred to atheists (*dahrī*), who fail to correctly perceive the entire character of God’s essence, but still cannot deny His existence, cf. Ibid., 21.

Thus, Khan naturalises the acknowledgement of God's existence, while its denial is nothing more than mere misperceptions about the nature of God. Whether He is perceived as present in different objects, as idolaters believe, or His potency is perceived in a different form than a personalised God, as perhaps in the form of the autonomous, all-embracing laws of nature, Ahmad argues that God's existence is no disputable affair. Yet, the identification of His qualities surpasses rational and logical inference, resulting in conflict – a topic to be discussed at a later point in some detail.⁶⁷ First, I will further examine Ahmad's reinterpretation of Khan's *fiṭrat*.

When the elder disputant summarises the narrator's hitherto stated thoughts in order to verify his correct understanding – namely that the struggle for the perception of God, despite varying inferences and details, is a natural human yearning and the basis of all religions (*mazāhib*) – the narrator eventually asks whether further aspects of religion are natural, too. In his answer, the elder presents his concept of *fiṭrat*, which reappears in Ahmad's works as the foundation of his thought:

This is exactly the situation in Islam and the reason which attracted me in Islam. For, otherwise I would run away from the constraints of [the systematised form] of religion [*mazhab*]. But when I inquired in the impositions of [Islamic] religious law [*ṣar' ʿi takālīf*], I found them entirely in concordance with human nature [*fiṭrat*] and understood that these impositions are, in fact, ease and relief [*rāḥat*] and these constraints are, in fact, freedom.⁶⁸

The discussion then turns to the verification of this assertion and a comparison with Christianity and Hinduism.⁶⁹ Yet, the elder does not present any further argument regarding the ease of worship in Islam. He rather states this assertion as an undisputed fact and continues with a discussion of Christianity and Hinduism. In it, he distinguishes between two types of impositions or hardships (*takālīf*): physical (*jismānī*) and spiritual/mental (*rūḥānī*). Regarding the latter, the elder presents the example of the Trinity and describes it equally as *rūḥānī* and *'aqlī*

67 Ibid., 13, 22f.

68 Ibid., 31.

69 The elder remarks that his knowledge of religions other than Islam is very restricted, and that only Christianity and Hinduism are familiar to him to a certain extent, as they are practiced in India. Yet, at the same time, he notes that his primary focus of inquiry revolved around Islam, as this was the religion he was born into and which proves to be in conformity with nature and provides him tranquillity. Thus, other religions are beyond his area of interest, as Islam has already proved to be the correct religion. This shows a clear neglect of an engagement in inter-religious discourse or dispute, as was crucial for Khan and his project of positioning Islam in contrast with the Christian mission and particularly for his comparative approach with reason as a universal touchstone. Cf. Ibid., 64.

hardship, as it conflicts with the logical inference of the world's arrangement according to causal chains, thus requiring a *single* primary cause. However, the elder does not explicitly follow through with this argument. This adds to the abovementioned denial of reason as a method of acquiring knowledge of the nature of God and presents the inference on His unity as a logical insight as well.⁷⁰ Following this, examples of physical hardships in Christianity and Hinduism are briefly discussed, which can be summarised as the unnaturalness of Christian celibacy (*rahbānīyat*) and of Hindu *yogis* and *sannyasins*. Both “claim for retirement from the world (*tark-i duniyā*) but are not able to practice this effectively. Why? Because it conflicts with nature (*hilāf-i fīṭrat hai*).”⁷¹

Ahmad's emphasis on the knowledge of God as surpassing logic or reason clearly demonstrates an internalisation of *fīṭrat*. The elder refers to nature as the touchstone of a correct religion and thus describes, time and again, Islam as being fully in concordance with *human* nature, while the abovementioned example of *fīṭrat* in the sense of outer nature was a unique exception, albeit with the apparent intention of reinterpreting Khan's terminology through emulation and re-inscription in a different sense. In the same way, Ahmad describes Islam as conforming to nature, applying *fīṭrat* in the sense of *human* nature. Sometimes, this re-inscription is also unequivocally disclosed. So, the *Ijtihād*'s elder presents his personal view of Islam:

After countless years of reflection and consideration, my belief came to rest and I believed in Islam as in the fact of two plus two being four. But not that Islam, as it is usually known, but that Islam which is a mirror of nature [*‘ain-i fīṭrat*] and synonymous to humanity [*murādīf-i insānīyat*].⁷²

Thus, the elder's personal conception of Islam revolves around the naturalness of Islam, and also its comparison to other religions with respect to the acknowledgment of God and His oneness as well as His worship, all of which the elder takes to be embedded within human nature. Khan's extended concept of *fīṭrat* equivocating inner with outer nature is thus abandoned. Yet, Ahmad seems to deliberately cite Khan's terminology, first in his reference to the causal arrangement of the cosmos in the all-encompassing laws of nature, which in turn provide Ahmad with a means to naturalise the perception of God as well as His unity, and, second, in his reference to *fīṭrat* as a touchstone to identify the true religion. Thus, again, we see that Ahmad's works show close references to Khan's projects. However, the aspect of an all-embracing world order, to a certain extent autonomous of God's

70 Ibid., 35.

71 Ibid., 36.

72 Ibid., 174. Cf. also Ahmad: *Majmū'ah*, 1077.

potency or at least restricting His omnipotence in the constraints of a natural law, is eliminated from Khan's conceptual framework – for this aspect was the crucial impetus for critics identifying Khan as *dahrī* or an atheist. In all his works, Ahmad's protagonists aim to release God and religion from the constraints of reason and, instead, draw clear boundaries between each, demarcating them as two distinct spheres. The overlap was confined to a moderated causal order of the world, as this was crucial for the rational/logical and, thus, natural perception of God.⁷³

However, when it comes to a precise definition of what makes up *fiṭrat*, the elder disputant is unable to give a concrete answer. For, if the insight of God's existence and His unity is natural, then how is it possible that people differ so much in their religions and views about God?

Human nature is influenced by one's education, upbringing, society, environment, food, age and other things, for which reason human nature does not remain stable on its balanced initial position [*ḥālat-i i'tidāl*].⁷⁴

Thus, it becomes dubious how *fiṭrat* can serve as a universal touchstone if its balanced position cannot be presupposed in any person. Yet, this aspect is not further elaborated upon.

3.2 Religious Controversies and Individual *taqlīd*

In the preceding discussion of Ahmad's engagement with and re-inscription of Khan's conceptual framework, which originated from a reduction of his extended concept of *fiṭrat*, we see that Ahmad develops a very personal access to Islam for his elder disputants both in his *Rūyā* as well as in his *Ijtihād*. Both present their own view of what Islam is and insist on independent inquiry. Thus, *Ijtihād* comes to the point right at the beginning, arguing that most Muslims today are mere *muqallid*, i.e. persons conducting *taqlīd*. With reference to the matter of perceiving God's existence, the elder discusses the profit of consulting any scholar (*'ālim, vā'iz, ṣūfī, mašā'ih*):

⁷³ Despite his critique of the *Necarīs*, Ahmad still concludes that one must be appreciative of their efforts, as they saved Western educated Muslims from apostasy and relieved them of their doubts, as he argues. Cf. Ahmad: *Majmū'ah*, 1150.

⁷⁴ Ahmad: *Ijtihād*, 23.

Oh please, let this be! They are all like me mere *taqlīdī* Muslims.⁷⁵

He virtually makes a general designation of the Muslims of his time as *taqlīdī*. Yet, his conception of *taqlīd* differs significantly from the common notion as being propagated by representatives of the Wahhabis or the lineage of Shah Waliullah (as in the *Tariqah-i Muhammadiyah*). They conceived of *taqlīd* as the imitation of the four schools of Islamic law. Both *Rūyā* and *Ijtihād* present a rather individual form of *taqlīd* which even refuses the individual consultation of a scholar. Instead, individual *ijtihad* (inquiry) is vehemently enforced:⁷⁶

Sadiq: “If one wants to learn about religion [*dīn*], then from whom should he learn it and how?”

Elder: “From oneself [*apne nafs se*].”⁷⁷

What is more, even if one does not understand something in the Quran, one should not consult someone else:

S: “[...] Please tell me, if someone who only knows Urdu is unable to understand something in the translation [of the Quran], whom should he consult?”

M: “He should not disclose his doubts to other people and keep it in his heart and repeat the translation continuously. If God wills, He will one day inspire his heart with such a thought that all his doubt will disappear itself.”⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Ibid., 17.

⁷⁶ In his *Al-Ḥuqūq va al-farā'iz*, Ahmad also discusses the imitation of the Prophet's *sunnat* and refers to the repeatedly cited “*date-hadis*”, arguing that the Prophet's deeds have to be distinguished from religious and mundane matters. As has been argued by different authors discussed in this study, Ahmad likewise argues for a discarding of the obedience of the latter. Significant, however, is his designation of those traditions as bearing merely historical value (*tārīhī ḥaiṣiyat*) – a denomination which describes much of Khan's historical approach, as presented in his *Essays*, albeit in such an outspoken and explicit way that Khan himself did not dare to use. Cf. Nazīr Ahmad: *Al-Ḥuqūq va al-farā'iz* (Dihlī: *Afzal al-Maṭābi'*, 1906), 21f.

⁷⁷ Ahmad: *Majmū'ah*: 1100.

⁷⁸ Ahmad: *Ijtihād*, 168. This strong emphasis on an individual approach to the Quran reminds one also of the Ahl-i Hadis's emphasis on individual's *ijtihad*. They too denied any “intermediaries and guides other than that of the text itself” (Metcalf: *Islamic Revival in British India*, 272). This approach was also applied by Sanaullah Amritsari (1868-1948), an influential scholar of the Ahl-i Hadis, in his commentary on the Quran. His effort to interpret the Quran self-explanatorily led him to distance his approach from Khan's, who equally aimed at dispensing of established readings of the Quran.

With this in mind, it appears plausible that contemporaries frequently viewed Khan and perhaps the entire Aligarh circle as “*ghair-muqallid*” (Metcalf: *Islamic Revival in British*

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On this basis, Ahmad promotes an individual form of religion or belief in contrast to a standardised form of religion:

My personal belief [*mat*] is that except mine, no one's religion [*mazhab*] is true and everyone's is true.⁷⁹

In the following, he further explains this contradiction:

In my opinion, religion [*mazhab*] is an individual affair. For, any person holds his own religion. [...] someone's belief [*'aqīdah*] or conduct is not anyone else's responsibility. My religion is correct for me. For, it gives me tranquillity and I hope to achieve salvation through it in the hereafter. Concerning other people, I do not feel any necessity to object to their religion and since their religion is of no advantage for me, how should I call them correct?⁸⁰

Mazhab is here not conceived of on the level of belief systems, but on an entirely personal level. For Ahmad, every individual is allowed his own personal belief, independent of any identifying affiliation to any sect or movement. This statement has to be read with reference to the context of 19th century north western South Asia. As has been discussed in several places in this study, since the second quarter of the 19th century, the Christian mission created an aggressive atmosphere of religious clashes. This atmosphere was further escalated by the emergence of the Arya Samaj (founded in 1875), which had a significant effect in the Punjab, as well as by the inner-Islamic debates among various reform movements that were also popping up around the third quarter of the 19th century, this being a situation described by *Rūyā*'s protagonist, Sadiq, as religious wrangling (*mazhabī cher chār*).⁸¹

Moreover, Ahmad had his own personal experience with the charged atmosphere of religious conflict during his time in Delhi College when his teacher Ramchandar's conversion to Christianity provoked fierce reactions, perhaps laying the foundation for his disapproval of any kind of religious dispute:

We may take it for certain that Nazir Ahmad's strong indictment of sectarian strife and agitation was to a large extent based on the experience of religious disputations in Delhi during his time at the college. Master Ram Chandra's conversion and the

India, 323), as has been mentioned prior. Nazir Ahmad's emphasis on bypassing any intermediation as well as Khan's effort to interpret the Quran independently of established readings resembles significant aspects of Ahl-i Hadis thought. Cf. Riexinger: Riexinger: *Sanā'ullāh Amritsarī (1868-1948) und die Ahl-i Hadīs im Punjab*, 364.

⁷⁹ Ahmad: *Majmū'ah*, 1121f.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 1122.

⁸¹ Ibid., 1043.

controversies that followed must have been a further reason for him to develop a pronounced aversion to religious disputation.⁸²

Thus, the protagonists of *Rūyā* and *Ijtihād* repeatedly note their dislike of any form of religious dispute. Yet, ironically, both books revolve around nothing else but a religious debate.

With his individualised concept of *mazhab*, Ahmad presents a differentiation of the category of Islam which is unparalleled among the authors discussed in this study. In fact, most present a rather monolithic – though, abstract – conception of Islam which is based on their aims to propagate their own views of Islam. Only Ameer Ali presented a diachronic differentiation of Islam, including different schools or spirits such as Sufism, Mutazilism, etc. Yet, this differentiation, too, was merely aimed at disregarding particular sects as deviations from the original spirit of Islam, thus resulting once again in a singularised perspective of the faith.⁸³ Quite differently, Ahmad criticises the identificatory abuse of religion instead serving as a national identity (*logon ne mazhab ko qaumīyat banā rakhā hai*).⁸⁴ Likewise, he states that the propagation of one's own point of view is not owed to merely noble intentions:

For, anyone who aims at spreading his own belief among the entire world, does he do this as an impulse of his benevolence or in order to save people from the punishment of hell? [...] the only reason for this is nothing else than religious resentment. It is self-conceit that man when he accepts an opinion about religion, wants others to acknowledge and adopt the same opinion.⁸⁵

Apart from this, Ahmad recognises 'aql as the greatest cause for religious conflicts, as man attempts to gain knowledge about things which are beyond the sphere of reason:

As many religious conflicts as you can see, most of them are based on usually two reasons. Either man attempts to apply reason where it is futile. Any person makes his own considerations and the first one's belief does not correspond with the second's. Whenever you see such a situation, stay away and understand that there is no benefit of reflecting on such things.⁸⁶

82 Oesterheld: "Deputy Nazir Ahmad and the Delhi College," 322.

83 Cf. Chapter 3.

84 Ahmad: *Ijtihād*, 9.

85 Ahmad: *Majmū'ah*, 1098.

86 Ibid., 1106.

This denial of reason as a source of knowledge in the comparison of religious beliefs can perhaps be read as a hint towards Khan's project of establishing reason as a universal touchstone for religion, thus aiming to identify one single, true religion. Ahmad's protagonists deny such a universalism and rather present disagreements regarding religious beliefs as inevitable and natural, as religion is an individual affair. In particular, individual beliefs are nothing to be overcome for the sake of any universally sanctioned religion. For, as has been demonstrated in the aforementioned quotes, Ahmad's protagonists vehemently refuse any imposition of religious beliefs. Any person has to develop his own personal path.⁸⁷

This radically individualised concept of religion poses, however, some ambiguities also, which Ahmad's works do not resolve. Obviously, Ahmad does not aim for an abandonment of the identificatory category of Islam, as his protagonists rather intend to prove the veracity of Islam in view of its conformity with human nature. Yet, Ahmad presents a *logic* of differentiation within Islam with an emphasis on individual beliefs. However, a counter-*logic* which gathers these individual positions around a mutual identity marker, in distinction to other religions, is not explicitly stated. The latter aspect is almost entirely disregarded in Ahmad's texts and confined merely to the very concise comparison with Christianity and Hinduism. Herein, Islam solely revolved around its conformity with nature.

The only mutual identity marker which appears in Ahmad's texts is the *šahādah* (confession of faith) certifying the oneness of God and the prophethood of Muhammad. This is the elder's answer to the initial question regarding his affiliation with Islam in *Ijtihād*.⁸⁸ In particular, God's unity seems to be presented as the essence of Islam from which everything else emerges:

[T]he essence [*lubb-i lubāb*] of the Quran is *lā ilāha ilā Allāh* [i.e. the first part of the *šahādah*: there is no god but Allah]. Apart from that, what is written in the Quran, is merely an evidence of this *lā ilāha ilā Allāh*. [...] It is [a compilation] of those things which are derived from this *lā ilāha ilā Allāh*.⁸⁹

Ahmad further argues that *dīn*, in the sense of Islam, can be summarised only with this testimony to God's unity. In one of his lectures, he presents "*tauḥid* (unity) as a basis for a 'universal religion' and a 'common brotherhood'."⁹⁰

Another contradiction pertains to the consistency of the propagation of an individual's belief, for his *Ḥuqūq* presents a comprehensive compendium of various matters of daily life from the perspective of the Quran and *ḥadīṣ*. Significantly,

87 Ibid., 1122.

88 Ahmad: *Ijtihād*, 2.

89 Ahmad: *Majmū'ah*, 1079.

90 Oesterheld: "Deputy Nazir Ahmad and the Delhi College," 323.

topics of worship are also discussed therein, describing, for example, the method of Islamic prayer in great detail. It must be noted that the discussion about whether one has to fold his hands over the belly or the breast was a fiercely debated affair between different movements of South Asia.⁹¹ Ahmad here takes an unequivocal stand and thus contradicts his protagonists' insistence on refraining from religious disputes as he propagates his own view of Islam. This point, however, applies equally to all texts discussed in this chapter. These texts nonetheless thematise Islam from a rather abstract perspective, however. After all, one must also bear in mind that one cannot equate the author with his fictional characters – for these two texts are still Ahmad's fictional representations of religious thought.

Conclusion

Ahmad's approach to his discussion of Islam has proved to be distinct in comparison to the authors previously discussed in this study. While all the other authors' examinations of Islam were characterised by an external trigger, a critique of Islam by the Christian mission or an Orientalist, Ahmad is distinguished by taking his impetus from within Islam, in basing his discussion on a critical review of Khan's ideas.⁹² What is more, the seeker of his *Ijtihād* even states his explicit denial of extending his search to religions other than Islam.⁹³ Ahmad is disinterested in Khan's comparative approach and, furthermore, denies the latter's attempt to establish reason as ultimate measure for the various religions. In fact, this denial of access to reason for the sphere of religion is the crucial crossroads where Ahmad departs from Khan.

Ahmad refuses to accept Khan's cosmology and concept of God, which perceives of nature as an invariable mechanism reducing God to a mere preserver,

91 Metcalf: *Islamic Revival in British India*, 275.

92 That Ahmad bases his line of argument merely on an internal discussion of Khan must not be misunderstood as a lack of knowledge of the ongoing inter-religious debates and the conflict with science. Ahmad was surely acquainted with these debates, as occasional references prove. Thus, for example, the positive role of a missionary pamphlet in his *Taubat*: Nasuh lauds the positive effect on morals of this pamphlet (cf. Nazir Ahmad: *Taubat an-Naṣūḥ* (Na'ī Dihlī: *Maktabah-i Jāmi'ah Milliyyah*, 2013), 108f.). Furthermore, Ahmad's discussion of Khan's concept of nature indicates his acquaintance with the contemporary debate around the thesis of conflict between science and religion. Only within this context is his distinction of spheres made comprehensible.

93 Ahmad: *Ijtihād*, 64.

and aims at a *via media*. This becomes most obvious in the way he deals with the issue of miracles: Ahmad maintains the general laws of nature, but refuses the impossibility of their temporary suspension through God. Yet, miracles are only an exception, and thus are of no worth for the consolidation of faith. Rather, the general complicity of nature and religion is critical. In discussing this point, Ahmad's discussants are closest to Khan's terminology when they argue for the conformity of nature (*fitrat*) and Islam. But, at the same time, they deliberately refer to Khan's conceptual approach. This deliberate citation of Khan proves to be a reinscription of Ahmad's interpretation into Khan's terminology: Khan's *fitrat* in the double-sense of inward and outward nature is – with the single exception of the example of miracles – reduced in Ahmad's view to its mere inward aspect as human nature.

Thus, Ahmad tries to “re-mystify” Khan's disenchanting concept of religion and to establish a clear distinction between the sphere of religion and the sphere of reason or science, for both spheres are – despite their nominal distinction – combined under the umbrella of *dīn* in Khan's approach. Ahmad unequivocally draws a line between these spheres and merely allows reason and the visual observation the ability to acknowledge God's existence as a logically necessary inference. Perhaps this is the reason that Ahmad so vehemently maintains the general order of the world as cause and effect in the form of natural laws, as it naturalises the logical insight of a primary cause, i.e. God. Yet, any further insight about religion and the properties of God is refused access to reason. Thus, Ahmad maintains the compliance with nature as a touchstone for religion. However, his concept of nature does not focus on scientific and observational proofs, but rather on the compliance with human nature. Reason is denied access to religion because the latter exceeds the capacity of reason.

This close reference to Khan's terminology and Ahmad's re-inscription of Khan's reinterpreted conception can be described as the second movement in a helix of sedimentation. The preceding chapters discussed authors who themselves reacted to critical positions towards Islam with reinterpretations of the triggering positions. This resulted in an adaption of this position in a different context and, consequently, a transformation of the original critique. The preceding position thereby becomes sedimented and its discursive entanglements are gradually veiled as an integral position within Islam. Through repetition, formerly contingent truth-claims are integrated as apparently uncontested.⁹⁴

94 Jürgen Schaflechner: *Hinglaj Devi: Identity Change and Solidification at a Hindu Temple in Pakistan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 32f.

Apart from this point, Ahmad's text also presents an exceptionally individualised concept of religion. All of his protagonists in his religious texts emphasise individual inquiry to develop one's own personal idea of Islam. The consultation and adoption of foreign opinions is strictly denied. Ahmad's view thus has to be read in the context of 19th century South Asia, which was characterised by religious debates between the Christian mission, Hindu reform movements, and also among various Muslim reform movements. Thus, Ahmad's protagonists emphasise restraint from any kind of religious dispute. Ironically, however, these claims are stated in nothing less than a religious dispute.

On the basis of this individual inquiry, Ahmad's protagonists, in particular in his *Rūyā*, develop an individualised concept of Islam. His aim is not to propagate a particular view of Islam, however. He declares any standardised form of Islam as useless, while only acknowledging individually developed convictions. This claim, however, is violated by Ahmad's detailed compendium of a Muslim way of life from the perspective of the Quran and *ḥadīṣ*.

Yet, this also prompts another question – the question of identity which seems to have occupied Ahmad explicitly in his *Ibn*. While *Ibn* still maintains Islam as an identity category, to a great extent based on the reference point of the British, his individualised concept of Islam lacks any unequivocal marker which would allow for the demarcation of a unifying identity. Ahmad does not see this as problematic, and thus does not provide any explicit answer. Nevertheless, *tauḥīd*, the unity of God, shines through as the distinctive marker of Islam. As has been discussed, Ahmad does not engage in a comparative approach, and thus avoids any demarcation from other religions. His reference to Christianity and Hinduism is restricted to his critique that both contradict and violate human nature, while Islam is presented as complying entirely with the human nature.

Even though Ahmad by no means abandons Islam as an identity category, his individualisation of Islam is indifferent to establishing a unifying marker, which would at the same time allow for its demarcation from other religions. While in his *Ibn* cultural aspects such as dress assume an equally important role as identity markers, those aspects seem to disappear in his later texts. This factor, in combination with his individualisation of religion, might be read as an attempt to avoid a rigidity in religion which might daunt the young, Western educated generation of the Muslim middle class. Ahmad, thus, seems to refuse the tendency of uniformisation which we may observe as a general development during the second half of 19th century in the works of Khan, as well as in Hali and Ameer Ali, all of whom turn away from inner-Islamic debates towards a unified representation of Islam against external critique. Instead, Ahmad argues for an individualised Islam,

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even though his work does not overarchingly apply this claim at times when he presents particular interpretations of Islam and its practice.

Conclusion

This study has been introduced with the question of “What is religion?” I do not, however, provide a definition of religion, nor did I intend to do so. It was not the aim of this book to present an unequivocal definition. It was rather to depict the varying and shifting applications of this concept in the context of 19th and early 20th century South Asia. This time period has been chosen deliberately for its intensifying contact between the British coloniser and the Indian colonised. Due to the power imbalance in this relationship, it has oftentimes assumed a dominant European, and particularly Protestant, concept of religion which “travelled” from Europe not only to South Asia but also spread on a global level:

An abstract and universal concept of religion is a product of European, in particular, Protestant intellectuals of the 19th century. [...] This concept of religion immigrated to other cultural worlds [...].¹

Thus, one central concern of this study was to question and further qualify this assertion. For, can there really be assumed a dissemination of a “Western” concept of religion?

Uniformisation

In his *Die Verwandlung der Welt*, Jürgen Osterhammel argues that the Protestant, European concept of religion has frequently been applied as a prototype for presenting one’s own tradition in a similar vein. Since Islam already applied to many of the criteria outlined within this concept of religion, Muslims rather had to face another accompanying development: the emphasis on macro-categories which implied a process of uniformization. European orientalists put forward large categories of standardised religions like Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam. Those categories were adopted by representatives of the particular tradition, implying a unified

¹ Jürgen Osterhammel: *Die Verwandlung der Welt: Eine Geschichte des 19. Jahrhunderts* (München: C.H. Beck, 2010), 1241f.

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representation of traditions which were formerly not or only loosely perceived as a unity.

In South Asia, several factors – including the Christian mission, orientalism, historiography, and science – compelled Muslims to take a stand in these contexts. The 19th century in South Asia is thus characterised by the formation of various reform movements with varying responses to these challenges, oscillating from mere refusal to engage in these debates to an intensive engagement and attempt to make those new developments comply with an Islamic framework. In this study, I have focussed on the Aligarh movement – not as a rejection of the importance of rather traditionalist movements but for its explicit and active participation in this discourse and effort of creating a mutual commensurability. Other movements, like the Deobandis, Barelwis, or Ahl-i Hadith, rather aimed at preserving different tendencies of South Asian Islam as far as possible, without however being entirely able to ignore these developments. Yet, the question of how far other movements with a rather rejective stance and concept of religion have been affected by the confrontation with the aforementioned challenges but also and much more with the Aligarh movement deserves a study of its own.

The work of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan, founder of the Aligarh movement, mirrors a long process of negotiating the relationship of his conception of Islam to other belief systems under an overarching concept of religion. His contact with the Christian mission, orientalist critique, and eventually science triggered significant changes in this regard. In this study, the aim has been to trace these developments back to their particular triggering moment in order to scrutinise to what extent this confrontation, with its different understandings of religion, informed the authors' presentation of Islam and to what extent these responses can be described as unique contributions or mere adoptions. Khan's works is outstanding, insofar as it allows him to depict the different threads of debate compelling him to change his stance.

Constructing Orthodox Islam

The present study was introduced with a focus on Khan's early writings of the 1840s and 1850s in their context of early reformist approaches. Three significant influences have been determined albeit with parallel intentions and simultaneously mutual entanglements. On the one hand, Khan's family background provided him

a strong tie with Sufism, in particular the Naqshbandi order and its reformist efforts to counter superstitious practices and an excessive saint and *pīr* veneration, violating the unity of God. But his family was also related to the family of Shah Waliullah, whose work proved to be influential for Khan. Yet, the most significant influence on Khan's early texts was perhaps the *Tariqah-i Muhammadiyah* with its restorative approach to history arguing for a verbatim maintenance of the *sunnat* of Muhammad. These influences crucially shaped Khan's early religious writings, which were limited to a merely inner-Islamic discourse.²

In his later reviews of these texts, Khan himself termed this phase his period of "Wahhabi" thought. As has been argued repeatedly in this study, the term "Wahhabism" is highly problematic: it has been applied by British officials as an umbrella term for reformist tendencies criticising the *taqlīd* of the juridical schools of Islam as well as emphasising a reliance upon the *ḥadīṣ*-tradition as a crucial source for the life and personality of Muhammad. The latter came to be stressed as the ultimate role model to be imitated. Yet, the denomination of South Asian tendencies like Shah Waliullah or the *Tariqah-i Muhammadiyah* as "Wahhabis" implies an equation with the Wahhabi tendencies of the Arabian Peninsula, which writes Sufism out of this discourse. It cannot, however, be denied that the reliance on Sufi thought was a significant characteristic in Shah Waliullah's approach, as he particularly aimed for a conciliation of Sufism and the legal tradition of Islam – an effort to be referred to equally in the *Tariqah-i Muhammadiyah*, Khan's early writings, and to some extent even by early Ahl-i Hadis members. Thus, Khan argues in his *Kalimat al-ḥaqq* that Muhammad is the sole *pīr*, with *shariat* and his *sunnat* being the only elements of guidance on one's path to God. Khan does not negate Sufi thought here, nor the aim of reaching God in this world, but rather aims to reintegrate Sufism into the exoteric sphere of Islam by fusing *shariat* with *ṭarīqat*, legal Islam with Sufism as mutually synonymous.³ These aspects seem to have been ignored in the British designation of "Wahhabi."

Jamal Malik notices an entanglement between representatives of this early reformist thought and the European perception of Islam: those representatives, among them Shah Abdul Aziz, significantly shaped the European view of Islam. Social grievances bemoaned and criticised by Muslim reformists were adopted and resulted in a "traditionalization" ("Tradionalisierung") of South Asia.⁴ Two

2 Falāḥī: *Sar Sayyid kā dīnī šu'ūr*, 25.

3 Hermansen, "Wahhabis, Fakirs and Others," 32.

4 Jamal Malik: *Islamische Gelehrtenkultur in Nordindien: Entwicklungsgeschichte und Tendenzen am Beispiel von Lucknow* (Leiden, Köln: Brill, 1997), 196f. "Die 'Tradionalisierung' Indiens war Ergebnis sowohl der wissenschaftlichen Beschäftigung mit der neu-

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examples of this shift have also been discussed in the present study with Ernest Renan and William Muir, both personally favouring “Wahhabi” tendencies, as well as a point of reference to define “orthodox” Islam.⁵ Yet, as indicated through the equation with the Wahhabi thought of the Arabian Peninsula, Sufi aspects of those alleged South Asian equivalents were overlooked in their construction of an orthodox Islam.⁶

In her article, “Wahhabis, Fakirs and Others,” Marcia Hermansen notes the construction of a bifurcation between Sufism and *shariat*-based Islam within British characterisations of South Asian Islam in the 18th and early 19th centuries. Sufis came to be perceived as “freethinkers who had little to do with the stern faith of the Arabian Prophet.”⁷ Sufism was thus generally viewed as standing outside of the system of *shariat* (*be-šar*’).⁸ Hermansen argues that this development was also gradually mirrored in Muslim discourse:

[I]t is clear that *tariqa* and *shari*’a categories are simultaneously operational within terms of the Indian Muwahhidun movement, whereas in subsequent movements which incorporate the Wahhabi category into British and Indian Muslim discourse, the *tariqa* element increasingly drops out. [...] The reformists increasingly identify Sufism with “popular” religion and “superstition.”⁹

Hermansen thus argues that, initially, Sufism and *shariat* were not perceived as conflicting, but as separate systems which were not mixed up in argumentation. Nevertheless, later reformists gradually came to view Sufism more critically as being exclusive of “orthodox” Islam – which was to some extent a result of adopting the British preference of “Wahhabism” in its Arabian notion, according to Hermansen. Sufism loses its legitimacy as authoritative knowledge, while, on the

entdeckten Region als auch der Rezeption, ja *bis zu einem gewissen Grade sogar der Übernahme des Gedankengutes indischer Pietisten*” (Malik: *Islamische Gelehrtenkultur in Nordindien*, 197; Italics added).

5 Schäbler, Birgit: *Moderne Muslime*: 31f.; Powell: *Scottish Orientalists*, 166.

6 The neglect of Sufi aspects seems to have been indicated also for Indians with the term “Wahhabi,” as Hermansen argues: “The *bad nāmī* or defamatory connotation of the term ‘Wahhabi’ however, works both in British and Indian Muslim systems. For the British, because Wahhabis are fanatic and *bad khwah* (disloyal and seditious), for the Indian Hanafi Muslims Wahhabis follow only the legal school of Ibn Hanbal and reject the mediation of the saints and the Prophet [...]” (Hermansen, “Wahhabis, Fakirs and Others,” 33). This, however, seems to be a development only in the second half of the 19th century.

7 Hermansen, “Wahhabis, Fakirs and Others,” 36f.

8 Ibid., 38f.

9 Ibid., 45.

other hand, text-based Islam recurring to the Quran and *hadīṣ* acquires the position of “orthodox” Islam in the British perspective.¹⁰

This also seems to correspond with a general tendency of a “victory of more orthodox forms of belief,” as Bayly argues in his *The Birth of a Modern World*. We can observe this tendency in the work of all the authors discussed in this study, and can describe it as a general implication of the effort to uniform one’s religion. But in contrast to Bayly who argues that former sectarian conflicts were not resolved but rather reinforced as a result of the “print revolution,” outright pamphlet and newspaper wars occurred between different sects.¹¹ In this respect, however, the authors of the Aligarh-circle apparently took a rather inclusivist position. Khan shifted from his early writings of a merely inner-Islamic perspective towards the representation of a unified Islam with sectarian discrepancies being omitted. What is more, Amir Ali stands out by leaving behind his Shia background and presenting a history of Islam which attempts to be neutral particularly with regard to those discrepancies whereupon sectarian conflicts were based. In a similar vein, Nazir Ahmad, too, vehemently argued against any kind of religious debate and, furthermore, declared sectarian conflicts as irrelevant to contemporary times. In this regard, one can observe a process of abstraction which tries to conceal minor sectarian discrepancies in ritual practices and historical events for the benefit of presenting a unified Islam. This approach results, however, in an interpretation of Islam that largely ignores the discussion of practical and ritual issues.¹²

Sufism Behind the Veil

This construction of an “orthodox” Islam and an exclusion of Sufism from this realm seems to have had its effect also on Khan. While his early writings show a strong recurrence to Sufi thought, this is apparently not followed up in his later texts, as Troll argues.¹³ In fact, Khan’s explicit references to Sufi thought are very rare, if non-existent. Yet, an analysis of his sources – among them first of all Shah

10 Ibid., 45, 47.

11 Christopher Alan Bayly: *The Birth of a Modern World: 1780-1914, Global Connections and Comparisons* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 335-339; cf. also Osterhammel: *Die Verwandlung der Welt*, 1260.

12 Nazir Ahmad is a great exception in this regard, as he also penned the voluminous *Al-Huqūq va al-farāʿ*, a manual of Muslim jurisprudence. This, however, appeared as an obvious contradiction to his refusal to take a position in debates on sectarian discrepancies.

13 Troll: *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 220f.

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Waliullah and al-Ghazali – shows that this assertion requires closer examination. We have seen that Khan describes his understanding of *dīn* as an abstract and eternal type of religion which found its expressions in the various prophetic revelations, Muhammad's being the last and universal one. This conception of *dīn* shows crucial parallels with the Sufi idea of Muhammad's light (*nūr-i Muḥammadī*): Muhammad's pre-existence in the form of light is assumed while all prophets preceding him are perceived as a particular, time-bound expression of this light. In Khan's *dīn*, this eternal message is detached from the person of Muhammad and extrapolated as universal religion – this being an interpretation, however, which is not explicitly uttered by Khan.

In a similar vein, this point can also be transferred to Khan's understanding of the Quran going back to his *A Series of Essays on the Life of Muhammad and Subjects Subsidiary Thereto*: here he argues for a forward-thinking view of history, allowing for a contextualisation and historicisation of the Quran which is perceived rather as a particular manifestation of its inherent universal principles. He argues for a continuous reinterpretation by adapting Quranic principles to a particular context. The Quran thus comes to be perceived as a context-related manifestation of the eternal message of *dīn*. One could perhaps, however, also recognise Khan's view as dependent on a recognition of the Quran as being a mere manifestation of the uncreated message of the original, heavenly Quran (*umm al-kitāb*). Again, any explicit reference by Khan on this matter could not be identified.

The last parallel to Sufi thought pertains to Khan's conception of *fiṭrat*. With human nature, man is bestowed with a direct link to God, enabling him to naturally acknowledge God's existence. The human aspect of Khan's *fiṭrat* resembles Sufi conceptions of the human soul (*rūḥ*) being linked directly with God, which thus enables immediate knowledge or insight. By contrast, Khan subsumes outer nature as *natura naturans* in his *fiṭrat*, too. Thus, nature comes to be perceived as a reflection of God, as it shows resemblance in the doctrine of *vaḥdat al-vujūd* as well as *vaḥdat aš-šuhūd* with varying nuances. Furthermore, nature allows for the inference of knowledge about God in Khan's conception. The merely top-down reflection of God in nature is extended to a bottom-up access to knowledge through this mirroring relation.

In addition, Sufi concepts still showed a significant impact on Khan's development of his later thought as well. Nevertheless, the above-mentioned process of excluding Sufism in European understandings of "orthodox" Islam apparently shaped Khan's representation of Islam, as well. Since his representation was partially designed as a direct response to European critique of Islam, he must have felt compelled to formulate his thought in a way that would be acceptable to this

view. The most prominent example of this would be his response to the aforementioned Muir, who strongly favoured “Wahhabi” tendencies as a reference for “orthodox” Islam. Nevertheless, Khan, whose background and early thought was so immersed in Sufi thought, did not abandon this framework, but rather concealed it by detaching unequivocally Sufi tags and integrating it into a rationalistic framework. Concepts are renamed (e.g. *fiṭrat* instead of *rūḥ*) or abstracted (e.g. *dīn* instead of *nūr-i Muḥammadī*) and explicit references are avoided.

Westernisation & a Radical Break

This discussion directly relates to the assertion of a radical break in Khan’s thought in the aftermath of the uprising of 1857. This thesis is inextricably linked with the charge of “Westernisation” made against Khan and the Aligarh circle in general. In juxtaposing Khan’s early writings with his later thought, I have argued that, contrary to the charge of “Westernisation,” Khan’s thought showed more continuities than direct adoptions from “European” thought. His veiled maintenance of Sufi concepts is only one aspect of this predominating continuity. On the particular example of his conception of history, it could be shown that Muir’s historical understanding in his biography *The Life of Mahomet* instead resembles early Muslim reformist approaches to history. Khan’s response to Muir, however, rather rearranges existing discourses in order to refute Muir’s critique in a vein consistent with the latter’s framework. To describe Khan’s engagement with Muir’s approach as a mere adoption would, thus, be unreasonable.

In his *Essays*, Khan maintains a generally restorative approach towards the origin of Islam, as can be found in his early writings as well as in Muir: both recognise the “origin” as a shelter of an irretrievable point of reference in history – namely, early Islam as lived in the days of Muhammad as the expression of unadulterated Islam. The progress of time, however, resulted inevitably in a loss and decay of this golden age. Thus, only the “origin” can reveal the essence of Islam. In his *Essays*, Khan resorts to this essential Islam, too. Yet, stimulated by Muir’s critique of Islam as an ossified entity incapable of reform, Khan rearranges Muir’s discourses in order to view this essence of Islam as a rather flexible one: the Quran comes to be historicised and contextualised, while its eternal principles must be revealed by detaching its understanding from fossilised, human interpretations. Thus, Khan’s view significantly exceeds Muir’s approach, as his work can be located more so in concurrency with early reformist thought. In fact, Muir is rather

Conclusion

accorded the role of a triggering point evoking a rearrangement and reinterpretation of already existing discourses. “Western” thought, therefore, cannot be reasonably argued to inhere such a crucial position as is implied by the charge of “Westernisation.” It would be a strong exaggeration to dismiss Khan’s thought as a mere “aping of the West.”¹⁴ The contact with European critique rather triggered a process of negotiation wherein present concepts were rearranged and reinterpreted in order to fit into a new context. This context, however, is considerably predefined through the framework of the critique.

In his *Die Verwandlung der Welt*, Osterhammel describes this phenomenon of European critique as “historicisation” (Historisierung), which confronted Indian religious traditions with serious challenges, as had been seen in Bible criticism. Religious traditions had to take a stand with regard to the assertion of history and temporality implicating a distanced stance towards sacred texts. This development did not remain confined to the Bible and Christianity, but was applied to other traditions and sacred texts, which was frequently recognised as a challenge of desecularisation.¹⁵ As we have seen in the example of Khan, this challenge was responded to on the same grounds by extrapolating one’s own tradition and examining it from an external position. This allowed for an abstraction and reformulation of the sacred texts with regard to their temporality and their interpretation for contemporary times. Reading texts as documents of their particular time, apparently deprived them of their universality in the first instance. The universality is, however, restored in a dynamic reading transferring an abstracted message into the contemporary context.

In a similar vein, Altaf Husain Hali’s, as well as Ameer Ali’s, historical reinterpretations of how “original” Islam has to be understood is crucially predefined by prior European critique, which they aim to refute. Hali, however, tried to construct his “original” Islam in complete accordance with this critique, presenting the entirety of the criticised elements as deviations from “original” Islam. On the other hand, Ameer Ali reverses the critique to a positive in disclaiming the critic’s point of view – that is, that Christianity is deficient and, hence, inappropriate. Still, he cannot evade the elevation of the critic’s perspective to the crucial point of reference, as his reversal cannot bypass its referential character and remains dependent on it as a negative projection.

14 Habib: “Reconciling Science with Islam,” 53.

15 Osterhammel: *Die Verwandlung der Welt*, 1273f.

Translating Science

In a similar vein, Muslim reformist authors have responded to the confrontation with science, which has dominated the scene of debate at least since the 1870s. The thesis of a conflict between science and religion confronted not only Islam but religion in general. Khan aimed to tackle this debate through a reinterpretation of Islam that, for one, emphasised a relation of conformity between the Work and the Word of God. Both were perceived to be encompassed under the umbrella category of *dīn*, thus inherently excluding any potential conflict. If there should appear any such apparent inconsistency, Khan argues, this has to be traced to human misinterpretation of the Word of God.

Shibli Nomani, on the other hand, emphasised the necessity of distinguishing between reason and religion in separate spheres which treat rather unrelated questions. While science pertains to questions of nature, religion engages in moral issues. Still, Shibli, too, does not leave the charge of a conflict undiscussed and aims for a historical integration of science into the sphere of Islam. He argues that Muslim philosophy was the main catalyst for the development of modern science and had always been a crucial part of Islam – or at least that no conflict had ever been perceived: their relation nonetheless remains obscure in his texts.

Khan's and Shibli's approaches seem to differ tremendously at first glance. While Khan presents Islam from the perspective of science and reinterprets the Quran and Islamic concepts accordingly, Shibli argues rather from the perspective of Islam, denying reason and science such a crucial role. Instead, the European conception of science requires revision in order to acknowledge Islam's/Muslims' central role in its development. Yet, Shibli, too, is compelled to revise his view of Islam, but through a backdoor approach. For, in acknowledging the distinction of science and religion as separate spheres, as proposed by the conflict thesis, he also acknowledges them as mutually related counter-concepts. Thus, Islam is reinterpreted in distinction to science – an assertion which Shibli finds to be a natural distinction, backed up by the Quran.

A scrutiny of both Khan's and Shibli's conceptions of science and reason reveals further intriguing insights about the negotiation and translation of concepts, as their responses to science and reason were rather based on previously existing discourses: the confrontation with science was rather re-translated in terms of the conflict with Greek philosophy, which resulted in the development of *'ilm al-kalām*, a Muslim theological framework based to a great extent on Greek philosophy. Their equation of these confrontations already becomes obvious from both of their demands to develop a new *'ilm al-kalām*.

Conclusion

Science then comes to be identified with an experimental and empirical approach based on experience (*tajribah*) and observation (*mušāhadah*). Yet, the epistemology – allowing one to infer results from this empirical approach – is based on an Aristotelian type of reason, while their critique of the speculative Greek philosophy refers merely to the strawman argument of Plato and the assumption of pre-existing Forms. Both Shibli and Khan instead argue for an inductive approach to perception originating from matter. Yet, their induction proves to be merely pseudo-inductive, for reason is perceived as a universal faculty. Consequently, merely contingent insights can be argued as necessary ones – the most crucial being the acknowledgment of God as a rational insight. Science therefore comes to be translated in the discourse of *‘ilm al-kalām*.

Transforming Concepts

Returning to the initial question of “Westernisation” and, in more general terms, the question of whether religion is a Western concept which has been imposed on non-Western cultures, the present study rather presents a much more differentiated answer to this question. Muslim contact with the Christian mission, European orientalism, and eventually science had an undeniable impact on this process of negotiation. But the example of Khan, and the Aligarh circle in general, show that their responses were compelled to acknowledge the critique’s premises and even its conceptual framework to a certain extent. Nevertheless, the critique is translated into existent categories and responded to from within existing discourses, however rearranged and reinterpreted. These authors internalise European critique and integrate it into an existing Muslim framework which allows each to make sense of it. Hence, religion (and in the same way science) is translated and transformed, while the assertion of an imposed “Western” concept of religion becomes highly problematic, as it dismisses the innovative character of this process of negotiation.

Changes in religious contexts through colonialism and its subsequent asymmetry of power are mirrored in the Indian adaptation to the categories of the dominant discourse of the coloniser. Only this adaptation allowed for agency within this new context. One significant requirement is perhaps a tendency towards uniformization, the representation of Islam as a whole: while earlier reformist discourses engaged in intra-Islamic debates between different sects or tendencies, one significant parallel between the authors discussed in this study is that they aim to

speak for a unified Islam. Sectarian differences are negated and reduced to a deviation of the original Islam. Thus, Ameer Ali, who himself had a Shii background, reduces the spirit of Islam to a singularity in his historical presentation – the variety of sects is, in his description, framed as deviation. Likewise, Khan abandons his early approach that argues for a conformity between *shariat* and *ṭarīqat* and represents Islam as a whole in his later texts. Intra-Islamic distinctions are dropped as a result of encounters with Christian missionaries and orientalist critique, who in turn direct their critique against Islam as a whole and in its original manifestation. Thus, we can observe a shift from inner-Islamic and inter-sectarian debate towards inter-religious debate, which required Muslim reformists to argue on a macro-level with such uniform and abstracted categories as Islam, Christianity, Hinduism etc.

Participation in this new discourse necessitated the employment of commensurable categories, which, however, cannot be described as the adoption and dissemination of homogeneous concepts. Still, crucial premises, as for example a distinction of science and religion in different spheres, had to be acknowledged in order for the Muslim author to be appreciated as a participant of this discourse. As has been shown with the example of Nazir Ahmad, these contingent constellations which emerged only in a process of negotiation came to be sedimented as integral parts of the discourse of Islam. Thus, even today, these premises are mirrored in rather “orthodox” discourses of Islam: a distinction between the spheres of Islam and science is still acknowledged. Furthermore, as has been indicated in this study, even arguments of the Aligarh circle have been adopted and detached from their link to liberal Islam. Yet, such links to Aligarhian discourse and its re-integration into subsequent positions has so far not been examined in any detail and would require another full-length study.

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Religion is commonly perceived as an unequivocally defined concept. However, a historic perspective raises questions about this understanding and reveals religion as a concept that developed only in a process of negotiation with other religions. In particular, the 19th century is of special interest in this regard, as the colonial encounter intensifies tremendously in South Asia. The religions of South Asia are scrutinised, categorised and compared to Christianity by Europeans, which leads to the development of religion as abstractum. Missionary and orientalist critique as well as modern science pose to be an entirely new confrontation for the Muslims of South Asia. This book aims to analyse Muslim responses to this confrontation, which imply a translation of Islam as a religion as well as an adaption of the concept of religion itself. The Aligarh Movement is of particular interest in this regard, as it intensively engages in these debates, trying to integrate a re-interpretation of Islam in these discourses.

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