

## 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.<sup>1</sup>

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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.”<sup>2</sup> Iftikhar Ahmad Siddiqi (Iftihār Aḥmad Ṣiddīqī) describes his family background in relation to Sufi-masters (*pīr-zādoṅ ke gharāne se*).<sup>3</sup> 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.”<sup>4</sup> 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:<sup>5</sup> “[...] it is quite possible that he later presented this stage of his life in too gloomy colours, perhaps for the sake of dramatic effect.”<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup>

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

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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.<sup>8</sup>

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,”<sup>9</sup> 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.”<sup>10</sup> 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 18<sup>th</sup> 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 *ḥadīṣ*-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.<sup>11</sup>

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.<sup>12</sup>

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8 Sayyid Iftihār ‘Ālam Bilgrāmī: *Ḥayāt 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.<sup>13</sup>

## 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.”<sup>14</sup> 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

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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.<sup>15</sup>

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).<sup>16</sup>

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

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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.<sup>17</sup>

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 Nasuh<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup>

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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.<sup>20</sup> 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,”<sup>21</sup> 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.<sup>22</sup>

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

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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.<sup>23</sup> The story of this “novel” revolves around the protagonist of the same name.<sup>24</sup> 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”:<sup>25</sup>

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.<sup>26</sup>

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:

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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.<sup>27</sup>

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.<sup>28</sup>

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.<sup>29</sup>

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].<sup>30</sup>

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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.<sup>31</sup>

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.<sup>32</sup> 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.<sup>33</sup>

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.

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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*].<sup>34</sup>

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.<sup>35</sup>

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.<sup>36</sup> Thus, Hujjat can criticise Ibn’s reform approach as too radical, entailing an entire loss of

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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*].<sup>37</sup>

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.<sup>38</sup>

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.<sup>39</sup>

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

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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.<sup>40</sup> 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.<sup>41</sup> 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 18<sup>th</sup> 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.

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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*).<sup>42</sup> 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.<sup>43</sup>

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 Naẓīr 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*) [...]”<sup>44</sup> 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.”

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42 Ṣiddīqī: *Maulvī Naẓīr 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*].<sup>45</sup>

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.<sup>46</sup>

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45 Nazir Ahmad: *Ijtihād* (Dihlī: *Afzal*, 1908), 4.

46 *Ibid.*, 4f.

## Individualising Religion

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*].<sup>47</sup>

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?<sup>48</sup>

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.<sup>49</sup>

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,

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47 Ibid., 6.

48 Ibid., 7.

49 Ibid., 19. “*Sabab kī justujū meñ ham ne cahār ṭaraf nazar ḍaurā ī ham ko to kahīn dikhā ī dīyā nahīn aur hone meñ šakk bhī nahīn.*”



conclude that they are motionless or will you agree on the deficiency of the visual faculty.<sup>50</sup>

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*.<sup>51</sup> 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*].<sup>52</sup>

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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:<sup>53</sup>

[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.<sup>54</sup>

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 khā*].<sup>55</sup>

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.<sup>56</sup> 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*]."<sup>57</sup>

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.<sup>58</sup> 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*

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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.<sup>59</sup>

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.<sup>60</sup>

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).<sup>61</sup>

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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.<sup>62</sup> 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.<sup>63</sup> 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.<sup>64</sup>

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

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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*]?<sup>65</sup>

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.<sup>66</sup>

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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.<sup>67</sup> 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.<sup>68</sup>

The discussion then turns to the verification of this assertion and a comparison with Christianity and Hinduism.<sup>69</sup> 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*

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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.<sup>70</sup> 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 fitrat hai*).”<sup>71</sup>

Ahmad's emphasis on the knowledge of God as surpassing logic or reason clearly demonstrates an internalisation of *fitrat*. 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 *fitrat* 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 *fitrat* 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 fitrat*] and synonymous to humanity [*murādīf-i insānīyat*].<sup>72</sup>

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 *fitrat* 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 *fitrat* 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

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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.<sup>73</sup>

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*].<sup>74</sup>

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*):

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<sup>73</sup> 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.

<sup>74</sup> Ahmad: *Ijtihād*, 23.



Oh please, let this be! They are all like me mere *taqlīdī* Muslims.<sup>75</sup>

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:<sup>76</sup>

Sadiq: “If one wants to learn about religion [*dīn*], then from whom should he learn it and how?”

Elder: “From oneself [*apne nafs se*].”<sup>77</sup>

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.”<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>76</sup> 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 haiṣiyat*) – 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* (Dihli: *Afzal al-Maṭābi'*, 1906), 21f.

<sup>77</sup> Ahmad: *Majmū'ah*: 1100.

<sup>78</sup> 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.<sup>79</sup>

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?<sup>80</sup>

*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 19<sup>th</sup> century north western South Asia. As has been discussed in several places in this study, since the second quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> 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 19<sup>th</sup> century, this being a situation described by *Rūyā*'s protagonist, Sadiq, as religious wrangling (*mazhabī cher chār*).<sup>81</sup>

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

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*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.

<sup>79</sup> Ahmad: *Majmū'ah*, 1121f.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 1122.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 1043.

controversies that followed must have been a further reason for him to develop a pronounced aversion to religious disputation.<sup>82</sup>

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.<sup>83</sup> Quite differently, Ahmad criticises the identificatory abuse of religion instead serving as a national identity (*logon ne mazhab ko qaumiyat banā rakhā hai*).<sup>84</sup> 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.<sup>85</sup>

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.<sup>86</sup>

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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.<sup>87</sup>

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*.<sup>88</sup> 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*.<sup>89</sup>

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'."<sup>90</sup>

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,

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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.<sup>91</sup> 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.<sup>92</sup> What is more, the seeker of his *Ijtihād* even states his explicit denial of extending his search to religions other than Islam.<sup>93</sup> 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,

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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.<sup>94</sup>

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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 19<sup>th</sup> 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 uniting 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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.